



For better cycling conditions in Brent and to help more people cycle

An open letter to Brent Council's Chief Executive, Carolyn Downs, Strategic Directors, Phil Porter (Community Wellbeing) and Amar Dave (Regeneration and Environment).

As the country is slowly moving towards relaxing the lockdown restrictions, we continue to support the Council's effort to ensure Brent residents and businesses are kept safe and looked after in these exceptionally challenging times of Covid-19.

Soon, we will be allowed to travel back to work, to open shops, to check on friends, family some of whom are most at risk, and children may return to school. Inevitably, physical distancing will still have to be observed. This was confirmed by the Government's Chief Medical Officer, Dr Chris Whitty who recently said that distancing may be in place until the end of 2020. It may very well prevail until an unfailing vaccine is found, which may take years.

We are asking Brent Council to work with Transport for London in implementing the necessary measures, through a Local Transport Action Plan, to provide the space we need to comply with distancing safely. We need space to protect ourselves from road danger, passive travel, and pollution. If no steps are taken now, these issues will decrease the ability of NHS and Council to cope in the long term.

Active Travel and Road Danger

The World Health Organisation is recommending "*riding bicycles or walking*" as a means of reducing physical contact with other commuters and opportunity for daily physical exercise". Both travel modes, (supported by 84% of respondents)¹ are low impact forms of transportation and well-suited with the current crisis.

The urgency to re-allocate road space to walking and cycling is driven by the fact that whilst Public Transport will continue to play a key role post-lockdown, patronage will be lower due to requirements around physical distancing². Reports emerging also highlight a risk of the system being overwhelmed³. It therefore stands to reason that the Council must enable active travel and provide suitable and safe walking and cycling infrastructure for this across the borough. Such an approach will benefit the Council which is under immense financial and logistics pressure.

Air Quality and Health

In Brent, road transport is one of the main causes of illegal air quality environments that prevails in many areas across the borough. There is new evidence that pollution worsens the impact of Covid-19⁴ and "*sharply raise the chances of dying from the virus*". This is especially true for those suffering from respiratory conditions such as asthma and lung cancer. These groups are at a huge disadvantage in their fight for life against Covid-19.

¹ Brent's Long-Term Transport Strategy, 2015-2035 ([Link](#))

² 60% would be uncomfortable using public transport, Ipsos/Mori poll ([Link](#))

³ Coronavirus: Tube may be 'overwhelmed' when lockdown is lifted, report warns, BBC, 30/04/2020 ([Link](#))

⁴ Pollution made Covid-19 worse. Now, lockdowns are clearing the air, [The National Geographic](#), April 2020



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Given the treacherous link between air quality induced illnesses and Covid-19, we urge the council to do everything possible to prevent a surge in people driving for their local mobility needs now and post lockdown.

In July 2019, Brent Council declared a Climate Environmental and Ecological Emergency. In its response to the Air Quality Inquiry Scrutiny Report, the Cabinet indicated that “a focus on sustainable travel and a healthy streets approach”⁵ would support the vision set out in the Local Borough Plan 2020⁶. In its Long-Term Strategy, the Council found that 89% of respondents supported improving air quality.

Since one of the objectives the Council has set for itself is to reduce road danger and polluting road transport, measures implemented now, will simply accelerate the Council meeting its own targets.

A Shared Future

Drawn on the experience from other countries and other boroughs, we would like to see Brent take the following actions, using the Council’s existing powers and in cooperation with the newly announced Transport for London, StreetSpace plan⁷:

Immediately

‘Market Streets’: Widening the pavement in crowded local shopping destinations, allowing people to safely walk, to their local shops and space out. This would support the local high streets and businesses⁸ who have been badly impacted by this crisis. This would rebalance our public places into a more inclusive space. This can be achieved by removing parking or by reallocating road space to footways with temporary infrastructure.

Pop-up Cycle Lanes: Create safe space for cycling and support key workers. People have embraced cycling during lockdown. Plenty of new and existing users (young and Disabled people included) who, having experienced streets with less traffic want to continue and do not want to go back to mixing with heavy traffic. This will support people going back to work, support local shops and enable all ability cycling. Priority should be on ‘key worker corridors’⁹, local transport, dangerous junctions and access to green spaces.

Traffic lights: There is a need to change the phases of signalled crossings to prioritise pedestrians. This would prevent bottlenecks of pedestrians waiting, all in close contact at the light. Traffic is down so it would simply support a modal change, already happening.

Suspend half-way pavement parking: This was already an issue but with the need for distancing this has become an even bigger problem. Disabled people, families need more space for their mobility needs within the context of distancing and for doing so safely. On already narrow pavements.

⁵ Executive [Response](#) to the Air Quality Scrutiny Report and Recommendations of the Resources and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee, 20 April 2020.

⁶ Local Borough Plan, 2019-2023 ([Link](#))

⁷ Mayor’s Streetspace Plan could see cycling increased tenfold post-lockdown ([Link](#))

⁸ The Street Appeal Report. Active travel and the high street, Transport for London/UCL ([Link](#))

⁹ 40% of key workers “planning to take up cycling” due to COVID-19 ([Link](#))

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All these measures will help residents and the Council with facing together the huge challenges ahead.

Later

Create Safe Residential Streets: It is unlikely that playgrounds will re-open any time soon and children still need to play to maintain good physical and mental health. Preferably outside, but this is not possible for many families without outside space. Filtering out through motor traffic in residential areas, only permitting residents to access their own neighbourhood, will create space for play whilst distancing, reduce road danger and pollution from rat-runs. Across all wards.

School Streets: When school re-open, it is imperative to prevent more families from driving to schools. The Council needs to support them by offering active travel as a better choice, the obvious choice. A timed access restriction for motor vehicles, around school times, outside school gates would reassure families, school staff and the wider school community that school traffic will not worsen air quality and road danger. The Council has already started a School Streets programme, this measure would simply accelerate what was already planned.

This crisis is affecting us all but in different ways, and it is time to re-examine what we want together to create a shared future:

- **We have an equal right to clean air** – An increase of only $1\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ in $\text{PM}_{2.5}$ is associated with a 15% increase in the Covid-19 death rate. In Brent, road transport is a large contributor to toxic air which killed 8% nationally prior to the pandemic. The poorest areas are the most affected with pollution. Enabling active travel will benefit us all.
- **We have an equal right to safe roads** – if keeping our distance means we need to step onto the highway, we expose ourselves to road danger. Speeding has shockingly deteriorated during lockdown which increases the risk of road danger.¹⁰
- **We have an equal right to good physical and mental health** – active travel is the easiest way to embed the required amount of physical exercise in our daily lives. Mental health is linked to good physical health. Brent is the second worst hit borough in England and Wales, with Covid-19¹¹. Exercise should not be a privilege.
- **We have an equal right to mobility** – walking and cycling are the most affordable modes of transport, and with the right approach, accessible to all. This will become even more important now that so many people have lost their job, or saw their income dramatically reduced. Key workers are often the lowest paid and less likely to afford a car. These measures will support them as a recent survey found that 40% of key workers are planning to take up cycling due to Covid-19.
- **We have an equal right to a connected community** – Public spaces that prioritise people over motor traffic breathe better. They work better. After living apart through lockdown, and despite physical distancing, we now know our neighbours better, our local shopkeepers. Our own

¹⁰ Detective Superintendent Andy Cox of the Road Crimes Team, reported an 8 fold increase, on last year, in speeding offences in London. ([Link](#))

¹¹ Brent has the second worst mortality rate, in England and Wales, with 141.5 deaths per 100,000 people ([Link](#))



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neighbourhood, as quieter and safer streets opened it up and we got to discover it. We do not want to go back to noisy, polluted, and disconnected roads, due to the prevalence of motor traffic.

Yours sincerely,
Sylvia Gauthereau (Coordinator)

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We want Brent to be a healthier, cleaner and happier place to live, where cycling is a choice available to anyone. [Guide to Low Traffic Neighbourhoods](#)

