

Zoom Meeting Report

We held a Zoom meeting on 05-09-2020 for supporters of our campaign against road closures in Lewisham. There were about 50 people attended and most of them were clearly from the local area from their complaints. There was not a single person who spoke at the meeting who was supportive of the road closures when I thought there might be.

The meeting went reasonably well considering this was the first Zoom meeting I have managed in person (or if you think not, send me your comments so we can improve next time).

I opened the meeting with a summary of why we are running this campaign and some of the basic facts. This was the note I prepared beforehand which I covered:

1. Who are the ABD and why we are opposing the road closures?

The Alliance of British Drivers is a national organisation founded 30 years ago. We are a “not-for-profit” membership organisation and most of our active members and directors are unpaid, like me. I represent it in the London area and have run multiple campaigns against irrational anti-driver policies in the last 20 years – for example against a proposed congestion charge for Greenwich when Ken Livingstone was Mayor. You might say I am an experienced campaigner. We have consistently opposed the current Mayor’s Transport Strategy which has damaged London’s road network and cost us all a lot of money. I live in the London Borough of Bromley and regularly visit Lewisham but I cannot say I am an expert on all parts of the Borough although I know Lee Green quite well (there are 32 London boroughs so there are lots of other issues I have to handle).

As you are probably well aware, the road closures have caused massively increased journey times, additional traffic congestion, more air pollution and delays to emergency service vehicles. They have been justified based on the Covid-19 emergency and the need to enhance social distancing but in reality do nothing to assist and actually force people to use public transport where they are more vulnerable. The policy of deterring traffic by simply closing roads does not work, and people will not move to cycling or walking everywhere – indeed many cannot due to health or disability. The problems of air pollution and road safety in Lewisham have been grossly exaggerated and the road closures will not improve matters.

2. Status of campaign (leaflets distributed and responses, petition signatures, comments received).

We started our campaign in Lewisham in January when the “Healthy Neighbourhoods” proposals first came to my attention. We have distributed over 30,000 leaflets – some by me personally, mainly in Lee Green but also other wards.

I set up a petition against the road closures on change.org to which we now have over 5,500 signatures, and we also have 750 direct contacts from leaflet responses and other sources. Most of these signatures and responses are from within Lewisham or adjacent boroughs – they are not from people driving through the borough from Kent and elsewhere as Councillors allege. The council simply does not know who the drivers are on the closed roads or where they come from. The alleged “rat runners” are probably a myth and that phrase is very objectionable. Most of the drivers on roads such as Manor Park and Upwood Road are probably local residents.

3. Possible legal action.

As you may know, we have taken some legal advice on whether it would be possible to stop the use of the “Temporary Traffic Orders” that have closed the roads without any public consultation. We consider they are outside the law for a number of reasons, but there were a number of difficulties with pursuing immediate action. Firstly it would probably require a “Judicial Review” – a High Court action which is very expensive – and it also takes a long time to get it into court. We probably need to raise as much as £100,000 to be certain of success and that will take time. The ABD does not have that much money in the bank so we need to raise the funds and are intending to launch a campaign to do so soon. I do have experience of judicial reviews and they are typically not easy legal proceedings. We need to be in a position, and have the necessary funds, to launch legal action when the current “temporary” road closures are made permanent. In the meantime, it is necessary to work on the political front to persuade councillors to change their minds.

4. Committee formation.

Note that we are forming a committee of local residents to take this matter forward – we have 4 members already but would like more. Anyone who would like to contribute actively to stop the road closures should contact me (number below).

4. After the introduction, there were a number of questions posed by the audience, as well as them recounting their personal difficulties with the road closures such as massively increased journey times. These are just a few of the points raised:

A – Local councillors are not responding to emails including questions. This is indeed most unfortunate, but may be partly due to them being overwhelmed by complaints I suggested. I hope that is the explanation because councillors should do so.

B – Why were not councillors invited? This was primarily an initial meeting for supporters and councillors might simply repeat their dogma if allowed to speak. We may invite them to future meetings. But for any real “engagement” with councillors it is necessary to do it in a smaller forum.

C – There was some discussion of possible legal action, including from businesses who have been badly affected by the closures (such as on the Chiltonian Industrial Estate). Clearly there are more avenues to be pursued here.

D – The failure to consult in advance was a particular gripe of many people.

E – Did Lewisham have to do the road closures, i.e. were they required by Transport for London (TfL) or the Mayor of London? The answer to this is no. Some London boroughs are doing closures but many are not. TfL may provide the funding but local boroughs and their councillors have the ultimate say.

F – It was emphasised that Lee Green was a pilot scheme and if successful it would very likely be extended across the whole of Lewisham. There are already road closures of other roads and more being planned.

G – The influence of Members of Parliament for the area was discussed. They may assist but in essence they only have some influence over local councillors. However, the dictates and guidance from central Government are part of the problem so complaining to your M.P. may help.

H – A possible campaign of “direct action” was discussed and was not ruled out. Likewise public demonstrations such as those organised in Lewisham may help, although the Covid-19 restrictions on public gatherings may limit what we can do, or limit attendance (that is of course why this event was run using Zoom). The Committee will consider these options.

I – Media coverage was discussed. I reported we already had some but more could be done in that area. Likewise social media are important and I encouraged everyone to spread the word on their favourite social media.

K – I covered how to complain to Lewisham Council and pointed out it was important to send in written complaints to the Temporary Traffic Orders. One I submitted is here: <https://www.freedomfordrivers.org/ABD-Objection-Letter.pdf> . You can copy the words but it's best to use your own words and cover your specific complaints as much as possible (template letters are easy to ignore). If there are any public consultations in future, it is important to respond to them. In the meantime post your comments on Commonplace (<https://lewishamcovidresidentialstreets.commonplace.is/>).

L – What will cause Councillors to change their minds? From my experience only if they look like losing votes as a result. We have already considered putting forward council candidates but the next borough elections are not until 2022.

M – It was suggested that pressure on the Council could be raised by withholding Council Tax payments. This is something our Committee will consider as it might have a big impact particularly as Lewisham Council may already be having budget difficulties (many councils are).

N – One attendee complained that there was no cost/benefit justification for the road closures. There certainly have not been any published and the council have not given any costs for the modal filters even (or the cost for removing them if that was later decided upon, although clearly the intention is to make them permanent).

O – I did point out that there were many other things that could be done to meet the concerns of residents over traffic, or to encourage walking or cycling, as opposed to closing roads which will not solve the problems but is just making life worse for many people.

The meeting closed after 90 minutes. Any questions not covered above can be sent to the ABD via the Contact Page: <https://www.freedomfordrivers.org/contact.htm>

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Campaign Web Page: <https://www.freedomfordrivers.org/lewisham.htm>

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