

Low Traffic Neighbourhoods



Low Traffic Neighbourhoods – usually known as LTNs – are places where there are area-wide restrictions on through-traffic. The stated aim is to make an area more pleasant to live in, reduce casualties, encourage walking and cycling, reduce traffic and promote modal shift away from cars.

Why are they so controversial?

There is no evidence that they reduce overall levels of traffic. They relocate it to nearby roads – usually the already busy ‘main’ roads (and larger, often poorer residential roads). Many drivers – including disabled drivers – don’t like them because they add to their journey times.

Weren’t people consulted about them?

Many of the most controversial LTNs were introduced during Covid or in the immediate post-Covid period. The Prime Minister of the day, Boris Johnson, eager to encourage people to walk and cycle to prevent the spread of Covid, relaxed the rules on consultation. The Times (21/2/25) reported that of 90 low-traffic neighbourhoods it reviewed, locals opposed the scheme in 87% of cases where polling was conducted. The majority went ahead anyway.¹

Do LTNs match up their billing?

Traffic reduction Traffic levels are cut within LTNs but there is no evidence that they cut overall levels of traffic. In 2025 Transport for London had to pull the funding from an £80,000 study it had commissioned from the University of Westminster as it failed to show LTNs cut car use.²

Walking and cycling LTNs may result in small increases in walking and cycling but a causal link has not necessarily been proven.

Emissions and pollution These are generally cut within the LTN. However, because the relocated traffic usually adds to congestion on already busy roads, it is likely to add to levels of pollution and emissions. A few years ago, some councils started calling LTNs ‘*climate streets*’. But they no longer do so as LTNs almost certainly increase emissions overall as a result of the increased congestion and longer journey times for which they are responsible.

Road Safety The studies undertaken so far, in general, show there has been a small reduction in deaths and injuries within some LTNs with no corresponding increase on the surrounding roads. However, more research needs to be done in this area. Furthermore, there are many road safety professionals who argue that the focus should be on reducing casualties where they are most likely – on ‘main’ roads, rather than on cutting casualties on LTN roads where casualties are far fewer and much less serious.

Security Many women say that the absence of traffic within LTNs makes them more fearful of attack, particularly after dark.

Disabled People While some disabled people appreciate having less traffic in their neighbourhood, others are fiercely opposed to LTNs. For those dependent on a vehicle (their own or somebody else's) LTNs can mean longer and, depending on the disability, more painful journeys.

'Main' Road Residents Most main roads in British cities are heavily residential. On many of these roads the number of low-income households is disproportionately high and in some parts of our cities the number of black and global majority residents is much higher than average. Moreover, lower-income residents spend a lot of time on their local high street. They are more likely to use local shops and markets rather than order from Ocado. And of course, their children will attend school locally, often on the busy main community road.

'Main' Road Users Main roads are usually key bus thoroughfares. Buses are impacted by the extra congestion on the roads. In London, which has the most congested streets in Europe,³ average bus speeds, at just over 9mph, are at a record low, according to the official watchdog London TravelWatch.⁴ Of course, LTNs are not the only cause of the congestion but they add to it.

The congestion also impacts those who rely on their vehicles to earn their living such as tradespeople, cabbies, carers, delivery drivers, & some small businesses. And it impacts those who need vehicles to get about including many disabled people. According to the English National Travel Survey disabled people make up to 84% more taxi or minicab trips and up to 19% more trips as a passenger in a car or van compared to people with no reported disability.

Doesn't the traffic evaporate?

While improvements in public transport, making it more reliable and less costly, have been shown to reduce car usage, there is a dearth of studies into whether traffic displaced by LTNs is evaporating. People living, working, taking buses and attending schools & nurseries on roads negatively impacted by the displaced traffic argue strongly that it is not.

Conclusions

Although some LTNs may result in small increases in walking and cycling, there is no compelling evidence that they encourage a modal shift away from cars or contribute to reducing overall vehicle mileage or emissions.

Most, if not all, of these socially unjust schemes divert traffic onto surrounding roads, worsening the often already hostile conditions for the many people living, working, attending school, walking, wheeling, cycling, and travelling by bus on them.

A greener future must be a just one!

References:

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