CHALLENGING THE CAR'S DOMINANCE TO BRING LIFE BACK TO RESIDENTIAL STREETS AND SUPPORT HIGH STREETS AND TOWN CENTRES

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All over the world communities are grappling with the impact of motor traffic. For more than 100 years cities, towns and villages across the globe have been in retreat as the imperative to enable journeys by motor vehicle has dominated transport and urban planning. The needs of local people and communities have been subordinated to the convenience of those travelling by private motor vehicle, whether within or through an area. Recently, however, communities have been pushing back. The COVID-19 pandemic brought things to a head, making people aware of the huge difference it can make to life in an urban setting when a fair balance exists between the needs of those who live in a place and those who drive through. Here, we look at examples of this pushback in the United Kingdom and London in particular, where the number of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs) has expanded rapidly in the wake of the COVID-19 lockdowns.

I. Traffic growth on neighbourhood streets

A number of attempts have been made to reduce the impact of traffic in London, most notably the introduction of congestion charging in 2003, which was linked to a huge increase in the quality and frequency of bus-based public transport. The picture in London had been one of generally stable traffic levels across the 1990s and the first decade of this century, but the arrival of satellite navigation technology changed the picture dramatically. As the chart below shows, traffic volumes on neighbourhood streets and residential roads ("C" and "Unclassified") rose dramatically as journeys and routes that were previously only known to professional drivers (e.g. cab drivers) and locals suddenly became accessible to anyone with a satellite navigation system. While traffic volumes remained stable on London's main roads, they jumped by 72% in just ten years on "C" and "Unclassified" roads. By 2019 these roads were carrying almost as much traffic in total as the main "A" roads.

Inevitably, communities were slow to react, as they only gradually became aware that what were once quiet neighbourhood streets were now subject to large volumes of traffic. Increasing the impact of this traffic was the fact

that it was no longer just local people driving around the area. Now it was often people in a hurry seeking to shave seconds off their journey with little or no concern for the impact of speed on the neighbourhoods they passed through.

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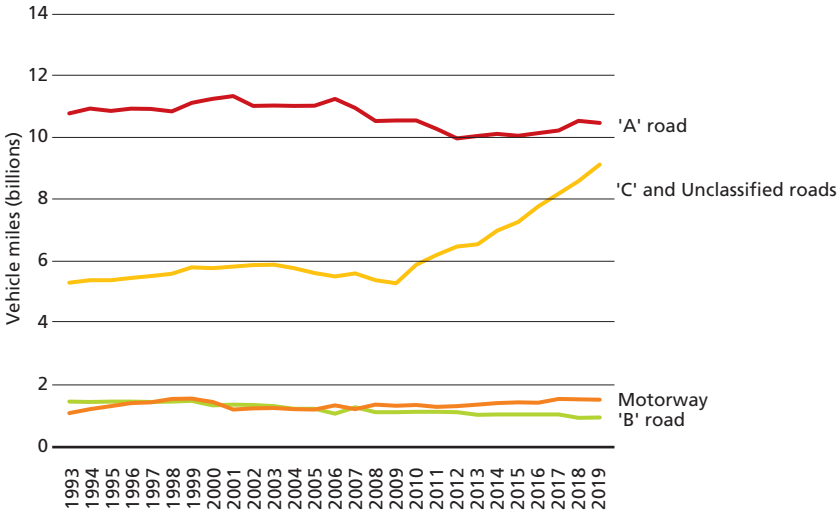
Annual traffic by road type in London. Traffic in Great Britain from 1993 to 2019 by road type in vehicle miles (billions).



II. The origins of the Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs)

By 2013 the impact of all this extra traffic was beginning to dawn and communities were starting to respond. LTNs were born out of the Mayor of London's *Vision for Cycling* and the proposals to create three "mini-Hollands" in outer London boroughs.[1] In Waltham Forest, the development of an initial LTN around Walthamstow Village experimented with removing through traffic from the area. The principle behind an LTN is to remove through traffic by introducing barriers (e.g. bollards, planters or camera-enforced closures) while still allowing all vehicles to access any location (even though the journey to them may sometimes be a little less direct). Everyone is still able to reach their home or business by motor vehicle, but it is no longer possible to drive through. Although initially controversial, this programme was implemented successfully through a combination of strong political will, communities seeing huge benefits from the changes and a body of research showing that people were walking and cycling more,[2] becoming more active and less reliant on their cars. This research also found that overall traffic was not displaced to surrounding main roads or adjacent neighbourhoods.

III. Creating LTNs: the essentials

So, what are the main ingredients of a Low Traffic Neighbourhood? Ideally it should be about 1 km² to ensure the distances to the boundary roads are not too great. Two other key indicators of likely success are the density of the area and levels of car ownership. In densely inhabited areas, distances

1. https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/cycling_vision_gla_template_final.pdf
2. https://doi.org/10.32866/001c.17128

to local shops and other amenities will tend to be short and therefore easier to walk or cycle. Lower levels of car ownership mean the improvements to the walking and cycling environment that the LTN offers immediately benefit a greater proportion of the local community. Transport for London (TfL) set out the interplay of these different factors well in its June 2020 *Strategic Neighbourhood Analysis*.[3]

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As the first lockdown ended in summer 2020, LTNs were introduced at pace with many of the 33 London boroughs keen to protect the gains that communities had seen due to the huge falls in traffic of the previous three months. Instead of a full consultation process, the LTNs were introduced using emergency traffic orders. While this fast introduction helped many to retain the benefits of a low traffic environment, it left others feeling that they had not been consulted and that these changes were being imposed on them.

Ideally, the process of developing and implementing LTNs would follow that developed in Waltham Forest, which goes something like this. Step one is to identify an appropriate area for a LTN in terms of size and setting the boundary roads. A number of London boroughs have mapped their whole borough in terms of all potential LTNs, and the strategic analysis by TfL breaks up London into an array of potential LTNs. Once we have an idea of the area, the next step is to find out what issues residents, workers and visitors face in relation to travel within that area. Platforms such as Commonplace and Placebuilder from The Future Fox can be useful at this stage, with people able to pop ideas and issues onto an online map. This should of course be supplemented wherever possible with face-to-face engagement with local people. With the information gathered from this we move onto stage three, where initial designs for the LTN can be developed. These can then be tested and improved through engagement and consultation with local people. Once changes have been made to these designs to incorporate feedback, it is time to move on to implementation followed by monitoring and further adjustments based on what does and doesn't work.

IV. The impact of LTNs

What have we learned about the impact of LTNs from those introduced in Waltham Forest since 2015 and those implemented in response to the pandemic? Significant formal research has been undertaken on the Waltham Forest schemes. The impact of the more recent initiatives introduced in 2020 has been made less clear by the fluctuations in traffic volumes that have resulted from lockdowns coupled, especially in London, with the huge fall in public transport usage.

However, it looks like we can say the following with some certainty:[4]

- **People walk and cycle more.** As Waltham Forest's first LTNs were implemented in 2015, there has been time to study them in detail. Residents within an LTN walked 115 minutes more per week and cycled 20 minutes more. More recently, Lambeth found that cycling increased by 51% within the Railton LTN and 32% across the area. Additionally, cycling increased by 65% and 84% on Railton Road and Shakespeare Road, two through roads that are now filtered.

3. content.tfl.gov.uk/lsp-app-six-b-strategic-neighbourhoods-analysis-v1.pdf
4. The following conclusions and data are drawn from: https://www.betterstreetsforsouthwark.org.uk/all-about-ltns/#WalkCycleMore

LTNs reduce traffic volume and car ownership.

- **LTNs reduce traffic volume and car ownership.** Evidence from Hackney and Waltham Forest shows that LTNs reduce car journeys and car ownership. It is not the case that traffic is just displaced: overall traffic falls across the area. There are claims that LTN trials have increased congestion on boundary roads, but both Lambeth and Hackney have released monitoring data on LTNs as part of their COVID-19 transport response showing that LTNs did not increase overall traffic on surrounding main roads. Additional monitoring in Lambeth has shown a 31% decrease in traffic and 23% fewer heavy goods vehicles in and around the Railton LTN. By reducing road capacity for motor vehicles, traffic decreases. This phenomenon, known as "traffic evaporation", has been seen in many places around the world. Researchers in Waltham Forest also found that car ownership within LTNs dropped 6% after two years – a much larger fall than in areas where other walking and cycling schemes were implemented. Surveys also show evidence of lower car ownership after an LTN is implemented.

- **LTNs improve road safety.** Reducing traffic volume improves road safety within an LTN. Motor traffic on minor roads has been found to involve a higher degree of risk of casualty than on main roads, especially for people walking and cycling. More recently, according to data from TfL, collisions on minor roads have been increasing at a higher rate than on major roads. Waltham Forest saw a 70% reduction in road traffic injury per trip on roads within the LTN for people walking, cycling and in motor vehicles. There was also no negative impact on boundary roads.

V. Don't forget the main roads

Addressing through traffic in neighbourhood streets is however not enough. Huge problems remain with main road traffic that London and other cities need to address. It is estimated that more than a third of driven journeys in London are less than 2km in length,[5] and a range of measures are needed to begin tackling this main road traffic. To date, a price has never been put on the true cost of driving, especially in cities, particularly the impact that motor vehicles have on air quality, climate changing emissions, community and casualties. It is time for road pricing to be introduced for all driven journeys with the cost of a journey potentially taking into account the emissions of the vehicle, the time of day and the ability to substitute a driven journey with public transport. It is also time for those who own a vehicle to pay a fair price for parking it. Again, some kind of comprehensive emissions-based charging for parking coupled with universal controlled parking zones would be a much-needed start.

VI. A fairer balance for people and motor vehicles

LTNs are not a perfect solution, but they are a key building block for any city which aims to balance the needs of local people with those of people who choose to and have to drive. Unless through traffic is restricted on neighbourhood streets it will not be possible to tackle traffic on the main roads. Ever since they emerged in cities, motor vehicles have pushed people to the margins of urban life. The present debate about whether they should be permitted to use all streets at all times and the introduction of measures to limit through traffic in towns and cities shows that we are finally ready to struggle to regain our place.

5. https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/health_impact_of_cars_in_london-sept_2015_final.pdf