

# ‘LITTLE NINJA’ INTERVIEW

An exclusive interview with David Smith who has become one of the most prominent and articulate opponents of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs)

Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs), which have sprung up in many UK cities over the last two years, have caused considerable controversy. By blocking through-traffic on side roads, they have reduced still further the noise and air pollution on these roads; made them easier for cyclists and pedestrians and, generally more pleasant to live on (though some women in particular say they feel less secure due to their deserted nature). But they have pushed extra traffic on to many of the adjacent roads, a lot of which are main roads. Most of these ‘main’



roads are also residential; and some of them are local high streets. It is these ‘main’ roads where traffic levels are already at their highest and noise and air pollution at its worst. LTNs are backed by many, perhaps most, environmental organizations. And groups such as the London Cycling Campaign and Living Streets (representing pedestrians) have worked closely with local authorities and national Government in promoting, planning and implementing them. During COVID the Government backed them as a way of encouraging active travel. They met opposition from many motorists but also from residents living on the boundary roads, including the main roads - with that opposition often led by members of the BAME communities concerned about the impact of the extra traffic and increased air pollution on the health of

their children. One of the most prominent of these voices is ‘Little Ninja’, an environmentalist who doesn’t own a car; a non-driver who transports his children around in a cargo bike. I was intrigued to meet him. I started by asking David Smith about the name ‘Little Ninja’. He told me Little Ninja represents his young son and the other children growing up in highly-polluted areas. It was a sudden realization of what air pollution was doing his son’s health that

**‘Little Ninja’ is an environmentalist who doesn’t own a car; a non-driver who transports his children around in a cargo bike. I was intrigued to meet him.**

brought David into campaigning five years ago, long before the current LTNs were in place.

David lives on the A3 in Wandsworth in South West London. He would take his son to Stockwell’s skate park. They would wait for a bus on the busy South Circular, move through its congested traffic to Lambeth Town Hall before walking along Brixton Road – regularly named the most polluted street in the UK – to the skate park, itself surrounded by heavily-trafficked roads.

One day it hit David – what are all these fumes doing to my little boy’s health? He had been oblivious to air pollution before that. What he did next was impressive. He contacted his local council for information about air pollution on the streets in his area. They couldn’t tell him. So he bought his own pollution monitor, at a cost of £6,500 (using the money saved for a family holiday). The results were dramatic. They showed that for the entire journey to the skate park pollution was 2/3 times over the legal limit.

It is this which drives David. He told me that once you become so motivated, the option of remaining silent is not there. Initially, he was welcomed as a speaker by environmental organizations and local authorities. He spoke at schools (where he shared his comic strip creation – right); at meetings of local councils and at City Hall (the home of London’s Government); to groups like Extinction Rebellion and Global Action Plan. All unpaid. The other notable black speaker at many of these events was Rosamund Adoo-kissi-Debrah who created legal history when a judge ruled that the death of her young daughter, Ella, was partly due to air pollution from the South Circular. But when they started criticizing low traffic neighbourhoods the invitations simply dried up. He no longer fitted the agenda. There was a tendency to blame him for biting the hand that fed him. People unfollowed him on twitter. And some became abusive.



He spoke at schools, to councils and environmental organisations about air pollution but when he started criticizing low traffic neighbourhoods the invitations simply dried up.

**David tells his whole story with no malice at all but has powerful criticisms of the organizations which helped draw up the LTNs;** and of the London Cycling Campaign in particular. He cites the downsides of the LTNs which so many of their supporters choose to ignore. Poor & BAME communities are more likely to live, walk, wait for buses, learn and play on the ‘main’ roads where levels of traffic, noise and air pollution are highest. And he goes on to explain that people of colour are bearing the brunt of the respiratory diseases associated with air pollution, just as they have been disproportionately the victims of COVID.

David argues that the people behind LTNs largely designed them for people like themselves. It was not necessarily deliberate: it simply reflected their mind-set. He said that LTNs are largely promoted by people who may cycle but also retain their car. 80% of cyclists hold a driving licence. LTNs don’t require residents within them to change their lifestyle. They re-enforce it. They can have their cars and their bikes and now their deliveries without changing anything.

He asked: how many members of the London Cycling Campaign drive for a living? How many are carers who need to get about by car? How many within an LTN would be prepared to lose their car parking space, even to make room for a bicycle hangar?

He was also very clear that groups like the London Cycling Campaign were intent on pushing through LTNs come what may. He understood why and didn’t begrudge them better cycling conditions which for far too long had been far too poor. But the fact remained that those losing out were largely poor people, ethnic minority communities, and bus users. He speculated on how often an LTN resident, with a car and a bike, actually uses the bus.



Poor & BAME communities are most likely to live, walk, wait for buses, learn & play on the ‘main’ roads where levels of traffic, noise and pollution are highest

He went further, condemning the way some of the campaign groups and local authorities were now employing the unsavory techniques pioneered by the multinational oil and motor companies. Headlines were used that 'low traffic schemes benefit everyone' and 'low traffic schemes benefit the most deprived Londoners' when the research only looked at who benefited within LTNs, ignoring the impact they have on people on adjacent main roads and high streets where so many poor and BAME communities live. The headlines could only be justified by, very often, averaging out traffic figures and by glossing over the fact that some people were losing out badly. The groups knew most people were likely just to read the headline figures and the media to focus on them. People were therefore being intentionally misled.



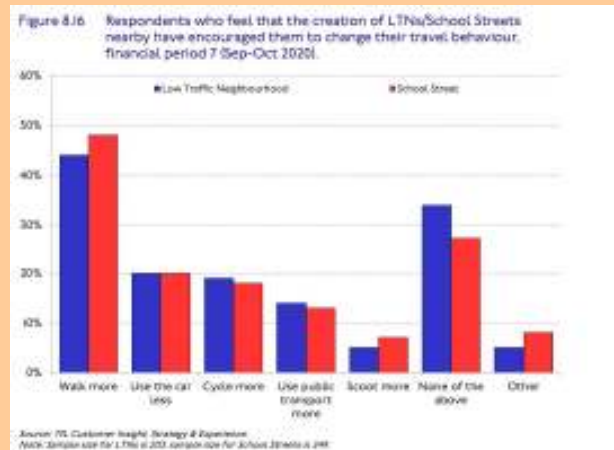
**On twitter David had talked about racism in the LTN debate. I asked him about it.** He makes his argument carefully, without ever resorting to polemic. He cites some examples of where local authorities and campaigners have backed LTNs fully aware of their impact on BAME communities. But, on the whole, he believes the tendency to exclude BAME voices more reflects a mind-set that hasn't thought it through rather than a deliberate policy. He believes much of it is systemic. He gave the example of a particular local authority that when discussing the issue invited Mums for Lungs, the London Cycling Campaign and Living Streets to the table. It meant that a borough where a high proportion of the population came from BAME communities was talking with organizations that were predominately white. This sort of approach means the environmental issues facing BAME communities can get overlooked. Thus systemic racism can lead to environmental racism. David argues that LTNs are a stark example of this. He does not brand the individuals as racist but believes that their decision-making can be part of systemic racism.

**In Greater London BAME people are 26.9% more likely to live on a main road or high street than white people**

**I put to David the charge that is often levelled at opponents of LTNs – what is your alternative?** His very clear starting point was that LTNs are not part of the solution; they are damaging public health; they need to go. He said there is no-one size-fits-all solution but he carefully analysed what LTNs set out to achieve and came up with alternative solutions.

**He started with school streets.** A quarter of the traffic in the morning rush hour is doing the school run. He envisages a network of school streets and clean air routes which would operate for just an hour during drop-off and pick-up, Monday to Friday only, just during term. This would improve children's health without closing roads to through-traffic permanently. Where school streets have been introduced support has been around 90%. And they result in behaviour change. He outlined why he believes school streets reduce children's exposure to air pollution in contrast to LTNs which can make it worse. LTNs push extra traffic and more air pollution on to main roads at a time when many children are at school on these main roads or travelling to and from school.

**David moved on to speed.** Lower speed limits, traffic calming and cycle lanes, together with enforcement cameras, would make the side roads safe. Less car storage would make it easier to bring in these measures. He returned to the point that the creators of LTNs have refused to challenge the lifestyles of most of their residents. The car owners amongst them want safe streets, a shed for their bicycle *and* their car parking spaces. But where do you park your bike, far less a cargo bike, if you live in a flat or shared house on either a side street or main road? Councils refuse to tackle car parking on side roads, something under their control.



**Although he outlined alternatives, David said: If a trial or experiment increased suffering for those least responsible and most at risk, you don't need an alternative. You end the trial.**

**David was sceptical about the role of LTN's in tackling climate emissions.** LTN supporters argue that CO2 levels will fall because traffic will be cut as more people will cycle and walk for short journeys. David doesn't dispute that some of that may happen but argues that is far from the full picture. LTNs are also forcing many car drivers to make longer journeys to reach their destinations. And they result in more idling and fuel burn as yet more traffic is diverted on to main and boundary roads. He says there is a danger of conflating more cycling with reduced climate emissions while ignoring the wider picture.

The results from this study indicate that during the monitoring period, across all schools, the children that walked to and from school through busy main roads were exposed to higher levels of air pollution (NO<sub>2</sub>) than those that chose to travel through back streets (Figure 11). Air pollution levels for PM<sub>2.5</sub> presented a similar pattern (Figure 12).

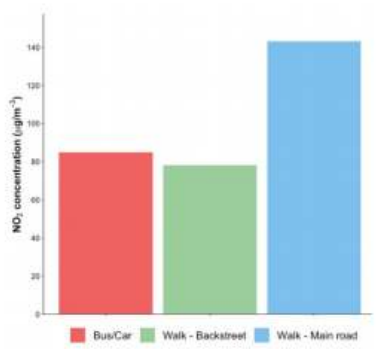


Figure 11. Average NO<sub>2</sub> concentrations across all schools, according to mode of transport.

**He returned to his air pollution theme.** And to the fact that LTNs are harming children who use main roads and/or live or go to school on them – see chart, left, from *Breathe London*). These children spend a lot of time on main roads; the very roads where air pollution levels are most likely to be above safe levels. David reminded me of the words of Professor Munzel: “If the long-term exposure to air pollution and infection with the COVID-19 virus come together, then we have additive adverse effect on health....which leads to greater vulnerability and less resilience to COVID-19.” (1) How ironic that the Government backed LTNs in part as a way to combat Covid. A double whammy against many poor and BAME communities.

**He argued we need a solution based on social, environmental and climate justice.** LTNs which benefit some while sacrificing others, cannot be the way forward. He said that ‘good people’ supported them, often for the reason that ‘we must do something’. And for many people LTNs tick so many personal and campaigning boxes. But if other voices – the voices of

the little ninjas – had been invited to the table, the solutions would have been very different. I’ve been around transport and environment for forty years. For many decades environmental organizations have debated the lack of ethnic minority voices within their ranks. It is ironic that when an environmentalist as passionate and articulate as David Smith comes along key environmental organizations push him away. It is their loss.

(1). <https://www.escardio.org/The-ESC/Press-Office/Press-releases/study-estimates-exposure-to-air-pollution-increases-covid-19-deaths-by-15-world>

**Interviewed by John Stewart, chair of UK Noise Association**