

A discussion paper about traffic in London

# Low Traffic Neighbourhoods: There *has* to be a better way



Two worlds: in and out of low traffic  
neighbourhoods



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## Introduction

**Few would disagree that London's traffic problems need sorting.** Congestion is choking business. Levels of noise and air pollution are too high. The roads are still too dangerous. Many Londoners would welcome less traffic, while not wanting to penalise those who depend on cars or vans for their livelihood or to get about.

Current conditions on both 'main' and 'residential' streets are in the interest of few users but children and disabled people are perhaps the biggest losers. Children because parents can be reluctant to let them move around the streets, fearful of speeding traffic, cars parked on pavements or blocking junctions; disabled people because of the state of the pavements, including parked cars, awkward junctions, floating bus stops, inaccessible stations and specialized vehicles like Dial-A-Ride being stuck in traffic.

**But low traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs) are not the way forward.** I've got form in this area. For more than 30 years I've been uneasy about policies which push traffic from side roads on to 'main' roads. In 1998 I published *Poor Show* (1), a report which looked at the impact of transport policies on low-income communities. One of its recommendations was:

*Transport policy must reject the growing tendency to traffic calm 'residential' roads by increasing the amount of traffic on main roads.*

In 2001, I wrote a publication for the Fabians, *Roads for People: Policies for Liveable Streets* (2), which argued that in developing a strategy for liveable streets, Government may be tempted to settle for a new approach to 'residential' roads only:

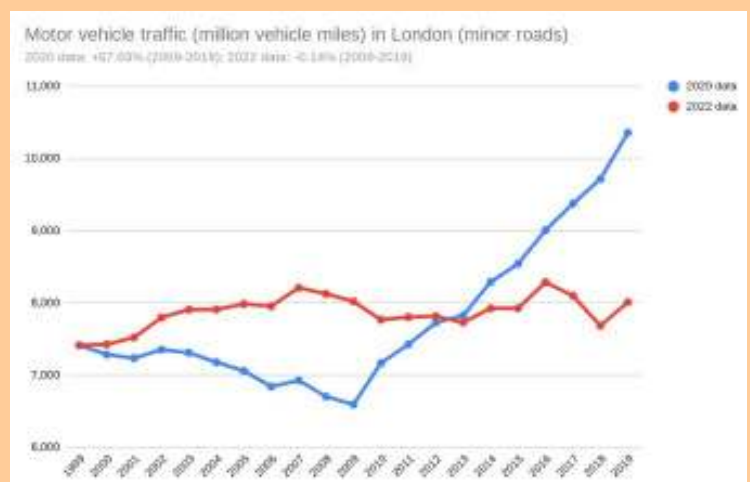
*To do so would be to misunderstand and water down the concept of liveable streets. Most main roads, particularly those in urban areas, are not just important traffic arteries, but are key places where people work, shop, socialise and live. In particular, for many low-income households, 'main' roads are their 'residential' roads. To leave main roads out of the equation would simply result in the creation of cells of liveable streets slotted into towns and cities still dominated by heavily-trafficked thoroughfares.*

In 2011, in my book *Why Noise Matters* (3) (published by Earthscan), I wrote:

*The policy in the UK, and in many other European countries, has been to direct through traffic away from so-called 'residential' roads on to the 'main' roads. I would suggest that this is deeply inequitable, made more so by the fact that it is people living on main roads who are less likely to own and drive cars or to be able to move away. They are victims of other people's noise.*

You can begin to see why the spate of Covid-related LTNs was my worst nightmare!

**Traffic levels on London's roads have hardly changed since 2000** (4). The revised data issued by the Department for Transport in 2022, after its realised its mistake, showed minor road traffic at the same level in 2019 as 2002. Individual roads will have seen an increase, as have parts of Outer London, but the argument of significant increases on side roads used as part of the justification for LTNs doesn't stand up. During this period, traffic on main roads stayed much the same or slightly fell – again, there will have been exceptions.



**I do not deny there are problems on side roads which need sorting.** Busy rat-runs can be a nightmare. Parents have said to me they feel their children are safer walking on main roads than side roads because these days main roads usually have safe, signalled places for them to cross. They welcome LTNs because they enable children to walk and cycle on their local streets much more safely. This may be particularly true of low-income households within LTNs since their children are likely to spend more time in their own neighbourhoods. LTNs can also bring other benefits. Typically, they reduce traffic, air pollution and noise for those living within them. They *can* deal effectively with the hated rat-runs. They can be introduced pretty quickly. These benefits are important and should not be taken away lightly. Later in the paper I put forward suggestions of how many of these things can be achieved without creating LTNs.

**But some perspective is required.**

**1. The volume of traffic on a typical main road is a lot higher than on a typical side road.** Rat-runs *must* be dealt with but some LTNs seem to be designed to remove *all* through-traffic from an area. I take issue with that idea. It is not equitable that all of London's through traffic should be forced on to the main roads. Around 92% of London residents live on a side road. Even allowing for the fact that in some areas of London car ownership is low, they are by definition responsible for many more car journeys than the 8% who live on main roads. Should the 8% take everybody else's traffic? I am not suggesting a free-for-all. I am suggesting that to block all through traffic in an LTN area is inequitable.

**2. It is main roads where noise and air pollution is worst;** where congestion can be chronic; and where far too many road crashes take place. If the priority was to cut the health impacts of noise and pollution, the place to start would be main roads. LTNs do not do that since, typically, they push more traffic on to main roads. Recent LTNs have been sold as bringing health benefits if they encouraged people to switch to 'active travel' to make their journeys. But any health benefits that occur need to be balanced against the health disbenefits from extra traffic for those on main and other affected roads.

**Geeks look away right now!**

**What this paper won't do is provide detailed planning and engineering solutions.** I appreciate that will disappoint some of you. There are two reasons for not doing so. First, I'm not qualified to do that. But, secondly, I firmly believe it is not the place to start. The first building block in sorting out an area's transport policy must come from the ideas of the local community. They are the experts in their own area. They are interested in making it a better place. As I write further on, a huge criticism of the more recent LTNs is that they have been imposed on communities by outsiders: local authorities, planners, engineers, environmental pressure groups. Caroline Pidgeon, deputy chair of the London Assembly transport committee, said in 2021 people felt LTNs were "being done to them rather than *for* them."

**So, I do not set out a blueprint for change because local communities, including those on main roads, must be the drivers for change in their own areas.** I do, though, look at the broader framework which might be required for London's traffic to reduce in an effective, but also equitable, way.

First, though, I examine why LTNs are a flawed solution.

**John Stewart**

(written in a personal capacity)

## Low Traffic Neighbourhoods: a flawed approach

LTNs have four overarching flaws:

- They relocate traffic on to other roads
- They disrupt many of the established community patterns of those living in them
- They fail to address the needs of those whose livelihoods depend on cars
- They are not part of a joined-up solution to our transport problems

### 1. LTNs relocate traffic on to other roads

This is not disputed. There can be debate about the extent of the displacement but the fact it happens is accepted. Indeed, part of the purpose of LTNs is to move traffic around. The surveys commissioned by the various local authorities show a consistent pattern: less traffic within LTNs but an increase on many, but not all, boundary roads. There can also be an increase further afield. And of course a lot of the roads which get extra traffic are those which are already the busiest. If these roads are also bus routes, bus journey times and reliability are likely to be affected.

**The Centre for London published a London-wide study (5) which found a mixed picture but that ‘in some cases boundary roads have seen big increases in traffic’:**

*Overall the evidence shows big reductions in car traffic inside LTNs, but a more mixed picture for boundary roads – some seeing increases in traffic and others seeing decreases. How much traffic is displaced onto nearby roads can vary hugely – not only from scheme to scheme but from street to street. In some cases boundary roads have seen big increases in traffic.*

**The traffic evaporation we were told would take place is, at best, limited.** LTN supporters say much less about it now. It was never going to be as widespread as the supporters claimed. The report on which the claims were based was hedged with caveats (6). It said that significant evaporation would only take place in very specific circumstances. Some LTN supporters accept this but argue that the way to ensure major evaporation happens is to put all side streets in London within an LTN. The argument is that road space for through traffic would become so restricted people will turn to other modes of transport to get about. There is obviously some logic to this but it assumes that there are no problems with this vision of boxing people into zones and dictating how they move about. It would interfere with people’s natural patterns of movement. I expand on this further on. It would alter the way Londoners have travelled down the ages. It would be a revolution.....by stealth. Shouldn’t the people of London be asked for their views on such a fundamental change? I suspect a London covered with LTNs is the ultimate objective of many climate campaigners. They must know there is no hard evidence that the current LTNs cut CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. They largely relocate rather reduce traffic, increase congestion on some roads and add to bus journey times (which may persuade some passengers to switch to cars). I see no evidence they reduce overall car mileage. For now, ‘climate streets’ is no more than a marketing slogan.

**Some LTN supporters argue that, to counter limited evaporation, LTNs should be built everywhere. But that would alter how Londoners have travelled down the ages. Shouldn’t they be asked for their views on such a fundamental change?**

**The theory that the more pleasant conditions within LTNs would encourage residents to walk and cycle instead of using their cars looks shaky.** A recent study by Dr Rachel Aldred for Transport for London found was that, while there was an increase in walking, and a lower increase in cycling, within LTNs, there was only ‘limited’ evidence of a switch from car use and only ‘some evidence’ of decreased car ownership (7).



## 2. LTNs disrupt many of the established community patterns of those living in them

Many living within them welcome LTNs, but others find them disruptive. The allegation is that the LTN agenda is being imposed on communities. Their neighbourhoods are being reorganised without their consent; long-established travel patterns disrupted; some of their businesses threatened with closure.

**Mohammad Rakib, born and bred in the East London Borough of Tower Hamlets, put it like this:**

*These plans decimated on so many levels and leave large parts of our community behind. We need to be realistic and understanding of the needs and concerns around access, around reducing pollution and in promoting healthier and more pollution-conscious lives while not destroying community support structures, hampering mobility and pushing projects that only benefit a privileged minority. Such schemes were never based on the reality of a thriving, multi-cultural and bustling working city.*

**David Smith, a long-time opponent of LTNs and who tweets as Little Ninja, argues that BAME communities in particular have been impacted.** He says this tendency to exclude BAME voices is not so much a deliberate policy, more a reflection of a mind-set that hasn't thought it through. But it means the environmental issues facing BAME communities can get overlooked. Given this it is hardly surprising, in my view, that some of the most articulate voices critical of LTNs are coming from the BAME communities.

**Both Mohammad and David have identified one of one of the key reasons LTNs do not work: they interfere with people's natural patterns of movement.** I'll give an example of what I mean. Some LTN supporters would like to see Central London divided into lots of zones with no through car and van traffic in them. The only permitted way of getting to another zone would be via a main road. I would argue that this goes against the natural flow of how people travel. In Central London, for example, a van driver may have a pick-up point in one zone to delivery it to a venue in the adjacent zone. The driver will resent having to take a detour via a main road. In my view, any transport planning has to work with people's natural patterns of movement. They are messy. That is how we move about. This is not an argument for unfettered driving or rat-runs all over the place but it is to argue that, unless traffic policies and plans go with the flow of people's travel, they will not succeed.

**Transport planning needs to recognise different communities have different travel patterns. It also needs to acknowledge different groups of people have different travel needs which have to be catered for. The rigid nature of LTNs, one almost indistinguishable from another, fails to do this.**

Many **disabled people** rely on vehicles to get about. Some drive. Others require taxis, school buses or special vehicles. The extra congestion, where it occurs, and the more circuitous routes which LTNs often require have lengthened journey times which can be painful for people with particular types of disability. A father of a disabled son, based in Haringey, tweeted this (@DifficultParent):

*And what's soooo important to make absolutely clear is we already faced considerable accessibility issues before LTNs (and cyclists did not) and you've made life better for cyclists and worse for paraplegic people and their families*



### 3. LTNs fail to address the needs of those whose livelihoods depend on cars

London may have too many cars on its roads but London without cars would die. LTNs have given little or no thought to those who need a car for their job: cabbies, carers, many trades people and small businesses. They are often expected to drive further because of the road restrictions, costing them time and money. And where congestion is made worse by LTNs, they are the people stuck in the traffic, while simply trying to go about their day-to-day business. LTNs take from these drivers and give them nothing in return. They are the victims of somebody else's idea. Road Pricing, or road user charging as it is probably better called, if it is introduced, *will* be controversial. But at least it has the potential to give back to people whose livelihood depends on their car something in return for paying the charge. It should provide them with clearer roads, the opportunity to visit more clients in a day and the chance to move around goods more quickly. Low traffic neighbourhoods deliver none of that. Their record so far is of adding to congestion on many key thoroughfares and increasing journey times.



### 4. LTNs are not part of a joined-up solution to our transport problems

LTNs are intended to cut traffic levels and reduce road danger. But both objectives require a wider, more holistic approach. The focus on low traffic neighbourhoods is problematic. It is in danger of drowning out other measures which can cut traffic and reduce road danger: cheaper, better public transport; safe walking & cycling conditions; tougher penalties for dangerous driving; properly-enforced lower speeds; new tram lines; updated parking policies; prioritising town centres; dealing with rat-runs; cargo bikes; mobility hubs; road user charging (if it can shown to be fair). Many LTNs, and particularly those introduced around Covid, were not part of any wider transport strategy. The Covid LTNs were brought in specifically to encourage 'active travel' during the pandemic; not to achieve wider transport objectives. (Incidentally, I feel it is a mistake to lump pedestrians and cyclists together under 'active travel'. They are different modes of transport and should be assessed separately, as they were for decades. I view 'active travel' as little more than another marketing slogan).

**The focus on LTNs is in danger of drowning out other measures which can cut traffic and reduce road danger**

### My conclusion

***'Low Traffic Neighbourhoods do not work, regardless of the alternatives'***

(posted on twitter by @AMotorcyclist)

LTNs, certainly those installed more recently, are so flawed, divisive and, I would argue, unethical that they must go, 'regardless of the alternatives'. I am often asked about historic LTNs. My preference would be to remove them but I recognise that may be difficult. However, if road user charging, which aims to cut traffic on all roads, were to come to London it would become increasingly difficult to defend them. Incidentally, I'm not talking about cul-de-sacs or estates built around car-free spaces. When pro-LTNers raise these they are merely being mischievous!

## Community Zones: a possible way forward

These are not offered as *the* definitive way forward but, within a wider transport framework, they may have a role to play. They may sound like Low Traffic Neighbourhoods but, as I will show, they are very different. Again, I will probably disappoint many technical transport experts. What I am not doing is providing detailed traffic modelling or any statistical analysis. I am outlining a concept which I think is worth exploring further.

**I first floated the idea of community zones in 2001** in *Roads for People: Policies for Liveable Streets*, the publication I wrote for the Fabian Society. Here is a key section from it:

*“So what would a transformed streets look like? It would not, as a rule, be a place from where cars are banned. We are not arguing against the car. It will continue to be a feature on our roads. But a transformed street will not be ruled by the car. It will be a place where children can move around in safety; older people can walk down to the local shops; neighbours will want to spend time talking to each other; the constant noise of traffic will be reduced; pollution levels will have fallen; more people will choose to walk and cycle; and the threat of speeding traffic will have been removed.”*

*“Main roads present the biggest challenge. These are streets where the car has become most dominant, where the interests of other users have been comprehensively sidelined. In developing a strategy for liveable streets, Government may be tempted to settle for a new approach to ‘residential’ roads only. To do so would be to misunderstand and water down the concept of liveable streets.*

**Community Zones are different from Low Traffic Neighbourhoods in four key ways:**

- They are part of wider transport policies
- They are designed by communities
- They include main roads
- They don't force people into artificial zones

### **1. They are part of wider transport policy**

I laid out some of these wider policies earlier on so won't repeat them but just to emphasise the starting point for traffic reduction is not community zones or low-traffic neighbourhoods. It is looking at the origins and destinations of the car journeys people make. This is the essential starting point of any evidenced-based policy. It is one of the reasons Greenwich removed its LTNs. As an Outer London borough it recognised that a fair proportion of its traffic was passing through, coming from beyond its borders. It therefore made no sense to set local communities at odds with each other over traffic that was not theirs. Only once origins and destinations are known can the process begin of assessing what measures might be required to tempt a proportion of people to move from their car or van to another mode of transport. This might include a whole gamut of measures from the sticks of tougher parking policies and road user charging to the carrots of cheaper public transport, new tram lines or easier arrangements for car sharing. It is only as part of this wider framework that community zones would be developed. The pop-up low traffic neighbourhoods that emerged during Covid make a mockery of serious transport planning.

**The starting point for traffic reduction is not community zones or low-traffic neighbourhoods. It is looking at the origins and destinations of the car journeys people make.**



## 2. They are designed by communities

A huge criticism of the more recent LTNs is they have been imposed on communities by outsiders: local authorities, planners, engineers, environmental pressure groups. Yes, there was consultation but the results were often ignored. And those on the surrounding roads which would take the traffic were rarely consulted. The first building block of any consultation must be ideas generated by the community. *That will be chaotic and unworkable*, I get told. Not so! There are proven ways of engaging a community - indeed of engaging the whole community; the glorious diversity within a community. And most people are keen to take part. They want a say in what their community looks like. They are keen to shape it. And, because they understand their own community, they recognise that solutions will not be simple and there will need to be compromises. The essence of the idea is that communities will not be asked to comment on, or buy into, somebody else's proposal, very often somebody else's agenda. Rather, the underlying plan comes from the community. The role of engineers and planners will be to operate under the direction of the community, working up their ideas. There are a range of established, inclusive consultation methods which communities could use, such as those pioneered by Kris Beuret and Social Research Associates or the collaborative planning developed by Podaris or the older 'Planning for Real' exercise, around a model of the area, which its originator Tony Gibson described as ensuring that "the talkers don't always win".

## 3. They include main roads

Most 'main' roads in London are 'residential' roads and community high streets. Moreover, people who live on the side streets *regard* the main roads as part of their community; not distinct from it. The High Street is where the community shops, socialises, walks, works, cycles, drives along, waits for buses, jumps into cabs, goes to school, church and the mosque. It would be quite natural for people, in drawing up traffic plans, to include their High Street. Indeed, it is artificial not to do so. Although only 8% of people live on main roads, many, many more use them or live close to them. In a lot of areas of London community high streets are particularly important for poorer people and members of the BAME communities: lacking the means to travel away on a regular basis (except perhaps for work), they will spend more time on them than their peers. I can hear the screams of the professionals right now! *It will never work. The London Boroughs are not responsible for the main roads. Transport for London is.* That is not an insuperable obstacle. Or, *you can't have local people involved in deciding where bus lanes, taxi ranks or parking spaces go on main roads.* Yes, you can! It happened when the Red Routes were installed in the 1990s under the enlightened leadership of Derek Turner, the Traffic Director, and Steve Norris, the Transport Minister. I remember walking stretches of the A23 and A24 in Lambeth with Derek Turner, and representatives of communities, cyclists, bus companies and local businesses, suggesting where bus stops, bus lanes and parking spaces should go. He welcomed our community knowledge and incorporated it into his plans. That is what I mean by community design. It can be done again.....including on main roads.



#### 4. They don't force people into artificial zones

I regret now using the word 'zones' when I wrote the Fabian publication in 2001. Zone has now come to imply something enclosed; something a bit separate; different from the world around it. In fact, unlike the very clearly defined LTNs, community zones are not about zonal boundaries. They include main roads and, with the possible exemption of heavily-trafficked rat-runs, don't restrict access. They are certainly not about dividing London into a myriad of tight little boxes, separated by 'main' roads, with people being told how to travel from one box to the other. They aim to work with people's natural patterns of movement.

#### So what might a Community Zone look like?

**The focus will be on reducing traffic but each zone will be different reflecting its own community. The community would have a choice of a number of measures. Here are some of them:**

**Leave things exactly as they are!** This is not as daft as it may sound. A number of people, most of them parents, who lived on side streets contacted me when an LTN was proposed. They felt their road was fine as it was. They saw the LTN as an artificial construct that would make things worse. However, my sense is that, while this might be true now, any growth in traffic generally might require action in the future.

**20mph speed limit:** People like it on their own street even if they resent it on other streets they drive along! But it is becoming the norm, including on many community high streets. The Police are much more accepting of it than 20 years ago but enforcement can still be a problem. In-car speed limiters would be the most effective enforcement tool. They are likely to become commonplace over the coming years. The EU is expected to make them mandatory in new cars from 2024.

**School Streets:** These are popular even with many who oppose LTNs. Residents recognise the safety and pollution case for giving children priority over cars in roads around their schools at key times of the day.

**Safe Routes to School:** The local schools could work with the communities and the local council to develop safe routes to school for children from their catchment areas. These could include strategically placed pedestrian crossings, pedestrian lights at key junctions and the school organising 'cycle buses' from different parts of their catchment area.

**Traffic Calming:** When I suggest this on social media, some people sound off as if I was still using an Amstrad or fax machine! They scorn it as a 1990s idea that has been surpassed by the superior low traffic neighbourhood. I feel they exaggerate the ineffectiveness of traffic calming, perhaps in order to boost their belief in LTNs as the only answer. Traffic calming is not the sole answer, but measures like well-placed speed tables or strategic pavement build-outs to create twists and turns in the road do have an effect.

**One Way Streets:** These can deter through traffic but can increase speed and road danger. The latter problem can be dealt with through the use of speed restrictions and traffic calming.

**Parking Restrictions:** These can be toxic! People do tend to see the parking space on the street outside their house as theirs, and will fight to keep it. It may be very hard to get community agreement on parking, particularly if you throw into the mix the growing demand for on-street cycle parking facilities. A root and branch review of parking policy is required at all levels of Government.

**Road Closures:** To my mind, these are a very last resort. But on busy rat-runs there may be a case for a no right turn or a no left turn to stop through traffic. This is very different from area-wide closures. The definition of 'rat-run' needs looking at. There is a huge difference between constant, fast traffic all day long and an increase in traffic during the rush hour. Only the former is likely to justify a road closure.

## [For the community High Street:](#)

**Provision for car traffic:** I start here to emphasise that community high streets are not envisaged as car-free. They are important thoroughfares. They are not pedestrianised areas.

**Better/ cheaper bus services and bus priority** (some of this has disappeared and been replaced by cycle lanes!),

**Quieter road surfaces:** Quieter surfaces – things like porous asphalt – can reduce noise by almost half.

**Improved sound insulation** for main road residents could also be part of any package.

**A target to cut air pollution each year:** Such a target would drive policy.

### **Good conditions cyclists and pedestrians**

**Adequate parking:** for both local shoppers and those who depend on a car for their livelihood: small businesses; taxis; carers etc.

### **Well-planned deliveries for shops**

#### **Walworth Road: involved local people in its redesign**

Walworth Road in South East London was a traditional main road, dominated by car traffic. About 20 years ago it was redesigned, involving local people. It is still an important thoroughfare for car traffic but it now much more fully includes the needs of other users.



**I've included examples of measures for main roads in this list to emphasise how very different this approach is from designing an LTN.** My list for both side streets and main is not exhaustive. But I hope it suggests there are a wide variety of measures which can be taken to tackle traffic without the need to resort to divisive low traffic neighbourhoods.

## **In conclusion**

***'Low Traffic Neighbourhoods do not work, regardless of the alternatives'***

(posted on twitter by @AMotorcyclist)

**I agree with that. There *has* to be a better way. Community zones may be part of the answer. They are worth looking at.**

## References:

- (1). *Poor Show*, Stewart, published by ALARM UK, 1998
- (2). *Roads for People: Policies for Liveable Streets*, Stewart, published by Fabians, 2001
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**John Stewart** has spent 40 years working or campaigning in the field of transport; and 25 years on noise. He co-ordinated Lambeth Public Transport Group. He chaired ALARM, the London-wide community campaign which successfully opposed the £13bn programme of roads in the 1980s. In the 1990s he chaired RoadPeace, the road victim charity, and was a founder of, and chaired, the Slower Speeds Initiative. For 20 years until 2020 he was the chair of HACAN, the community organisation which gives a voice to residents impacted by Heathrow. He still does work on aviation. He currently chairs the Campaign for Better Transport and the UK Noise Association. He is a director of SEJ (Social & Environmental Justice). He is a member of the EU Noise Expert Group.

**This paper is written in a personal capacity.**