

The Governance of Controversies in the Allocation of Road Space: The Case of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods

Executive Summary of Principal Findings

Geoffrey Dudley, David Banister and Tim Schwanen

Transport Studies Unit, University of Oxford

Low traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs) remove through traffic from residential streets, often through modal filters, such as bollards, planters, or cameras, while leaving streets ‘permeable’ to pedestrians and cyclists. They exist as a concept in their own right, but over the past two years in the UK their numbers have expanded rapidly, and with high controversy, through being linked to the promotion of active travel. The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, and the subsequent lockdowns, provided a key opportunity for the UK Government to introduce the £220 million (originally Emergency) Active Travel Fund (ATF), to reallocate residential road space to pedestrians and cyclists.

A key element of the ATF involved the widespread implementation of LTNs, and the Government has adopted a strong top-down supervisory role on the funding and implementation of ATF schemes. This has created serious central-local tensions, with many local authorities finding it difficult to fulfil the Government’s demands. Where this top-down dirigiste approach is adopted, there is little scope for debate with the local authorities on the practical problems of implementation, and the lessons that can be learned. These governance tensions in turn heighten the debate on the allocation of road space for suburban residential streets.

The Government’s prescriptive regulatory framework for active travel schemes, including LTNs, is enforced by Active Travel England, which commenced work in 2022. It has the powers to inspect finished schemes, and to ask for funds to be returned for any which have not been completed as promised, or which have not started or finished by stipulated times. Local authorities are also now required to publish detailed consultation plans, and to show ‘reasonable evidence’ of consultation before schemes can be introduced. This is despite the Government encouraging local authorities to introduce LTNs by means of Experimental Traffic Regulation Orders, where consultation takes place only after implementation of the scheme.

By the end of 2021, over 150 LTNs had been implemented since the onset of the pandemic in early 2020, but they have proved to be highly controversial in many areas. Critics of LTNs argue that they divert traffic on to neighbouring roads, with the residents of these areas suffering increased congestion and pollution. LTNs also expose the tensions between vehicle owners who believe that they have the right to use public roads, and proponents of cycling and walking who argue that LTNs can enable the benefits of active travel to become more widely accessible. Regardless of the data produced about the impacts of an LTN, the emotions aroused can cause a ‘dialogue of the deaf’ in which opposing sides become entrenched and leave little scope for compromise. These tensions place a major onus on the political leadership and expertise of local authorities, which can become vulnerable and exposed politically by the implementation of LTNs.

Nevertheless, the Government needs the local authorities to actually deliver the schemes. The lack of trust on the part of Government that the local authorities are actually capable of achieving these goals has produced a framework that left little scope for local discretion. Every city and town has its own distinctive character, and tight control and micro-management of every scheme cannot be practical or efficient as a long-term strategy. As illustrated by the case of highly controversial issues such as LTNs, there is no magic formula that can ensure successful implementation. Where opposing views become entrenched, it can provide a complex test of political leadership to press on with LTN schemes, or to make decisions to cut losses and cancel them. In these situations, strict regulatory demands from central Government are unlikely to offer much positive assistance.

In terms of implementation pressures for local authorities, as stated above, the principal danger is that opposing sides become polarised and entrenched, leaving little scope for compromise. This has proved to be the case for both project case studies, for Cowley in Oxford, and Levenshulme and Burnage in Greater Manchester. In the case of Cowley, the highway authority Oxfordshire County Council undertook an extensive consultation process prior to implementation that included letters being sent to residents within the LTN, and an online questionnaire. The responses produced majorities in favour of each of the three LTNs proposed. However, many people outside Cowley remained unaware of the full implications of LTN implementation. There was therefore a significant element of ‘preaching to the converted’ in the consultation process, which made the County unprepared for the response to implementation of the Cowley LTNs in March 2021.

From the time of implementation, there was strong resistance to the LTNs, with residents complaining about the lack of signs showing alternative routes to the LTNs, while in some cases drivers took vehicles on to pavements to avoid bollards and planters at the entrances to LTNs. In other cases, planters and bollards were vandalised. A petition was launched opposing the LTNs that collected over 2,000 signatures, and in the summer of 2021 protest marches were held opposing any further expansion of the LTNs. There were of course also those who strongly supported the LTNs for the environmental and community benefits they provided, but the two sides had become entrenched, with little communication between them. However, in July 2022 the County Council made a decision to make the Cowley LTNs permanent, with a commitment to undertake further community and stakeholder engagement in order to refine and improve the scheme.

For the second case study of Levenshulme and Burnage in Greater Manchester, in 2018 the preparation and implementation of the LTNs was delegated by Manchester City Council to a community group, the Levenshulme Bee Network (LBN). Extensive consultation processes took place over the next two years without significant protest, but when detailed LTN maps were published by LBN in May 2020, intensive protests followed. These included abuse and death threats against members of LBN, so that in July 2020 Manchester City Council took direct control of planning for the LTN itself. A section of the proposed LTN network was implemented in January 2021, and as in Cowley, the response included drivers encroaching on pavements and vandalism of bollards and planters. A consultation process took place in early 2022, with a view to decisions being made on the long-term future of the LTNs.

A significant problem for those commissioning consultation processes is in accurately identifying ‘winners’ and ‘losers.’ For example, a majority of those living within an LTN area might define themselves as ‘winners’ in terms of improvements to their local quality of life. On the other hand, those living on the boundaries of an LTN can define themselves as ‘losers’ with regard to the extra traffic generated, while those living in adjacent neighbourhoods can perceive themselves to be ‘losers’ in terms of being diverted away from through routes that they formerly used but are now within LTNs. It is therefore not just a matter of inviting responses to a proposed LTN, but of considering from the outset the full implications of its impacts and entering into a dialogue with the wider community about exactly what an LTN entails in practical terms, and its long-term impacts for both ‘winners’ and ‘losers.’ A key to future progress is also to determine how personal views can be reconciled with societal outcomes. For example, residents of an LTN unable to take the same route in a motor vehicle as previously, could be categorised as both ‘winners’ and ‘losers.’ The understanding of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ therefore needs to be nuanced and based on an overall balance of costs and benefits.

In a wider and more long-term context, it can be argued that LTN controversies do bring a political focus on the issue of allocation of road space for suburban residential streets. Hitherto, this type of focus has tended to be on town and city streets, but issues of traffic on residential streets, and the dynamics of local communities, can have profound impacts on large population areas. Consequently, particularly in a post Covid-19 pandemic world, the highly charged issue of LTNs brings a salience to planning for the future of residential areas. In this respect, LTNs can act as a trigger for a wider discourse on the character and function of residential areas. This debate could include a consideration of the future governance and viability of LTNs themselves.