

LTNs and lefebvre



Over the last couple of years, we have seen some innovative experiments in street space reallocation in London, including ‘low-traffic neighbourhoods’ (LTNs). One of the largest of these was West Ealing – South (LTN21). This sought to take advantage of the COVID-19 lockdown to quickly implement more space for walking and cycling on residential streets. LTNs were also perceived as a key response to reducing traffic in Outer London, to help reduce transport carbon dioxide emissions and improve the social equity of travel and access to activities. Or, at least, that was the plan.

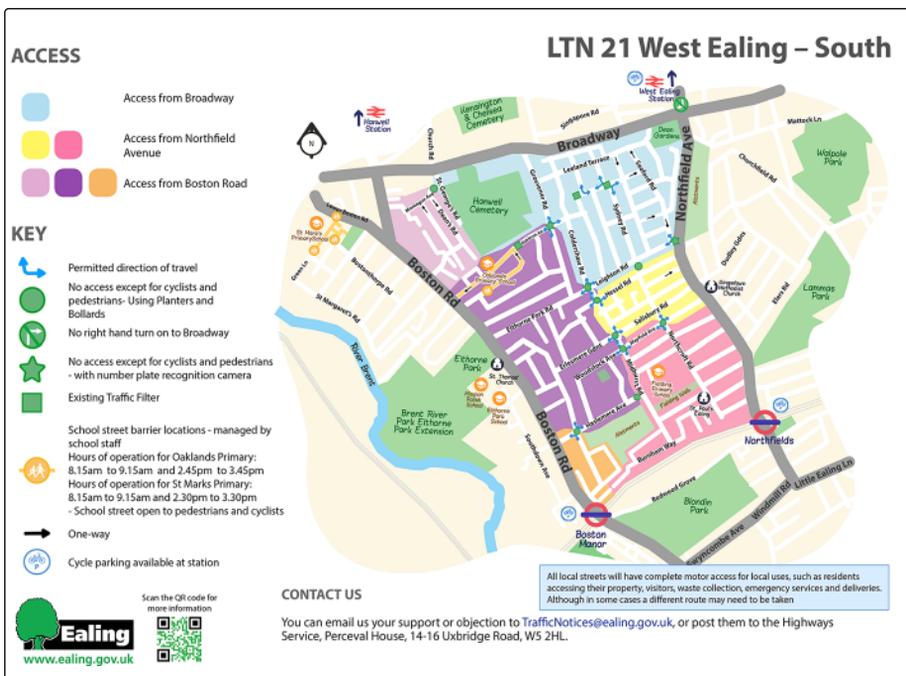
LTN21 suffered from a tortuous implementation process, despite involving fairly marginal changes to the streetscape, and proved very controversial with sections of the local population. LTN21 was

introduced, in August 2020, in a mainly residential neighbourhood, but also included a little retailing and employment space. The area is 2.5 kilometres to the west of Ealing Broadway town centre (a 30-minute walk and 9-minute cycle ride). There are Underground and rail stations immediately surrounding the LTN: Northfields and Boston Manor on the Piccadilly line and West Ealing and Hanwell on the main line into Paddington.

The LTN covered a relatively large area, 2 kilometres north to south (a 24-minute walk and 6-minute cycle ride) and 1 kilometre east to west (a 12-minute walk and 3-minute cycle ride). It was divided into cells, giving access from the nearest perimeter road, and through-traffic was restricted using so-called ‘modal filters’,¹ such as planted boxes and bollards. Walking and cycling were given through access; hence the area had ‘filtered permeability’.

The production of new street space

Every society produces its own space and, unfortunately, our contemporary society has produced many car-dependent spaces. Redesigning these at the neighbourhood level is more problematic than



West Ealing – South (LTN21)

Source: Ealing Council - www.ealing.gov.uk/downloads/download/5783/ltn_21_west_ealing_south_low_traffic_neighbourhood_plan

might be envisaged. As Lefebvre suggests,² space is produced, rather than simply existing; i.e. it is a product of contemporary social structures. Once people have become used to the shape and functioning of their local streetscape, its restructuring becomes highly controversial. It is useful to examine the production of LTN21 in these terms.

First, we can consider conceived space (representation). This has largely been the narrative given by the borough council (Ealing Council), including in the design and implementation of the LTN. The stated objectives of the LTN were to reduce through-traffic or 'rat running' and to improve the environment for walking and cycling, allowing more people to choose these modes rather than the private car or taxi.³ Even the terminology is difficult here – the pejorative label for through-traffic gives prominence to this, raises objections, and downplays the resident-originating traffic that also needs to decrease.

The LTN was introduced through an Experimental Traffic Order (ETO), which allowed a quick installation of measures during the COVID lockdown. Residents were informed of the LTN a week in advance of implementation, as required with an ETO. The project was carried out on an experimental basis, envisaged for six months, with residents and others able to respond to a statutory consultation at the end of this period. Hence the idea was to implement in an experimental manner, so that residents would see the project in action, and presumably view it more favourably after a few months.

Second, perceived space can be seen as the understanding and use of space. There were many differing views on the LTN, including those held by local residents, employees, Ealing Cycling Campaign, and resident groups set up to oppose or support the LTN, such as One Ealing, Ealing Better Streets, and Coldershaw and Midhurst Traffic Action Group (CAMTAG).

The protagonists enjoyed the reduced traffic volumes and air pollution, the quiet streets, and the improved conditions for pedestrians, cyclists and children playing out in the streets. There were many more people walking and cycling through the neighbourhood. The antagonists were concerned about longer journeys and difficulties in accessing activities across the borough, such as health appointments and employment or leisure trips. There were concerns over displaced traffic and congestion on the adjacent roads, that the consultation was ineffective, and that the project had been imposed on the population. The more stringent antagonists argued that more streetspace was not needed for pedestrians and cyclists, and that

children would not want to use this new space – and even that the project was implemented primarily to increase local authority revenue via traffic fines, and that the quiet streets had become too quiet and unsafe for pedestrians, particularly for women.

Third, the lived space (representational) includes the meaning, value and depiction of space by users. It covers the emotions of using space, and can include resistance to the given space. There were varied positive and negative reactions to the LTN and the space produced. The protagonists supported the project and changed the 'road closure' signs to show 'road open for pedestrians, cyclists', highlighting the importance of language even in the signing of the project. Some residents attempted to collect data to show how traffic volumes had decreased and the numbers of pedestrians and cyclists had increased, in the absence of data being collected or released by the local authority. Some of the antagonists vandalised the planters and poured oil on the cycle routes, to deter the cyclists. The protagonists repaired the planters and tended the plants.

The project became hugely controversial, antagonising a vocal minority of residents, and was subject to legal challenge by some, with demonstrations held at the council offices. Ealing Council issued new LTN Orders in February 2021, revising restrictions on emergency services and for disabled residents. The consultation period was extended to August 2021. In May 2021, the Ealing Council (Labour) Leader, Julian Bell, was replaced in the local elections, with the LTNs acting as a very significant factor in the voting. The new (Labour) Leader, Peter Mason, won by promising to listen to the residents. He stated that the council would be 'open, transparent and inclusive [...] that the people were to be given control over change in their neighbourhoods'.

A survey was undertaken, using SurveyMonkey software, resulting in 22,000 responses – with 4,000 reporting that they lived in the LTN and 1,000 on the adjacent roads; 17,000 were non-LTN residents. This was an unsampled survey with a very low response rate (6%) relative to the 345,000 residents in the borough, and indeed it is not known exactly where respondents were located. The survey asked: 'Would you like the LTN to be made permanent once the trial period ends?', and 82% of respondents said 'No'.⁴ On this basis, the LTN trial was abandoned by Ealing Council and the planters and barriers have been removed. The neighbourhood streets have been returned to the cars and traffic.



Ealing LTN21 has been removed - and traffic has returned to the residential neighbourhood

A well intentioned project, aimed at reducing traffic levels in suburban Outer London, had been poorly implemented and was perceived to have gone badly wrong. But this type of neighbourhood is exactly where traffic levels are too high and travel behaviours are environmentally unsustainable. As Lefebvre suggests,² decades of capitalism have affected our perception and use of space. We have given our streets over to the car, and pedestrians and cyclists have lost the opportunity to use the street. The motor manufacturers and associated organisations have persuaded us that we need to travel around in their product, and we have shaped the built environment accordingly. Many residents have become used to this way of life, and the car is embedded in and facilitates it.

The hegemony here is in two forms. First, in terms of governance, central government removes itself from the practice of any form of significant intervention at this scale, while investing billions in increased strategic highway capacity and making motoring cheaper through reduced taxes. Further, it hosts climate change summits and postulates on the need to reduce climate change. Alongside this, it asks local authorities to implement sustainable travel initiatives at the neighbourhood level, but gives little by way of resources to implement projects carefully and robustly. There is insufficient funding provided for wider public transport,

including for buses; there are few orbital public transport connections; cycling facilities in Outer London are woeful; and cycling remains too unsafe for the vast majority of people.

Second, a vocal minority of the population strongly believes that the car is crucial in their lives, enabling their participation in social and economic life. They perceive that car access and usage are matters of right for the individual, irrespective of societal impact, of which they are unaware or about which they do not care. They conflate the use of the car with a defence of their freedoms, rooted in their own perception of the world and reality. One powerful cohort, in this case the car owners and drivers, are using space for their own ends over other users of space. The pedestrians and cyclists, the young and old, who do not have access or only partial access to the car, are marginalised from the use of the street. This is the societal context to LTN implementation: the production and use of street space incorporates social actions, individual and collective, including expression and suppression.

In the end, we have an unmitigated disaster – one that will be difficult to revisit for another decade given the controversy. But if societal framing is produced in this way, what else do we expect? LTNs were set up to fail, if implemented in this manner and with so little participatory resource, and few are likely to survive if they are aimed at changing travel behaviours to any significant degree. Meanwhile, transport carbon dioxide emissions continue to rise, and travel and access to activities remain socially inequitable in Outer London.

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Notes

- 1 *A Guide to Low Traffic Neighbourhoods*. Living Streets, London Cycle Campaign, and Rosehill Highways, 2020. www.livingstreets.org.uk/media/3844/lcc021-low-traffic-neighbourhoods-detail-v9.pdf
- 2 H Lefebvre: *The Production of Space*. Anthropos, 1974
- 3 *FAQs – Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTN) to Support Social Distancing*. Ealing Council. https://www.ealing.gov.uk/download/downloads/id/15182/low_traffic_neighbourhood_faqs.pdf
- 4 *Low Traffic Neighbourhood Consultation Analysis*. Steer, for London Borough of Ealing, 2021