

Low traffic neighbourhoods



PHOTO: ELAINE KRAMER

What, why, how?

What “low traffic neighbourhoods” are, why you should be considering them in your borough and how to make sure they work well – the five minute guide for decision makers...

This guide is from London Cycling Campaign and Living Streets and draws on expertise from those who’ve designed, implemented and campaigned for award-winning low traffic neighbourhoods.

You’ve probably heard it from many of your residents already. Motor traffic cutting through their streets has a serious impact on the health and quality of life of people living there – too much traffic, too fast, too noisy, too much pollution.

Issues of air and noise pollution are very real. But the biggest negative of through or “ratrun” traffic is the strangling effect it has on people spending time on their streets. In the space of two generations, we’ve seen children’s roaming distance collapse as motor vehicle volumes on residential streets have rocketed. Kids don’t play out any more, and neighbours don’t chat to each other.

We've known for decades that the lower the traffic on a street, the more community interaction and healthy physical activity we see. Because of that more and more councils and residents are now working together to make residential streets work better for the people who live on them.

Places where through motor vehicle traffic has been removed or reduced – so only residents and a few deliveries and services have access – are great for everyone. These are networks of quieter streets where children play out, neighbours catch up, air pollution is lower, and walking and cycling are the natural choice for everyday journeys. And it turns out that cutting through traffic on side streets doesn't add significantly to congestion on main roads (see evidence from Waltham Forest's mini-Holland schemes for instance). It's cheap to do too.

Little wonder low traffic neighbourhoods in London and elsewhere are winning awards, being touted internationally; these schemes are inspired by those in Dutch cities including Groningen, Utrecht and Amsterdam and stand alongside approaches such as Barcelona's "Superblocks".

While introducing low traffic neighbourhoods is not without its challenges, examples from across London have shown they do work and once in, are incredibly popular.



PHOTO: WALTHAM FOREST COUNCIL

What does a low traffic neighbourhood look like?

“Low traffic neighbourhoods” are groups of residential streets, bordered by main or “distributor” roads (the places where buses, lorries, non-local traffic should be), where “through” motor vehicle traffic is discouraged or removed. There's lots of ways you can make a low traffic neighbourhood, but the main principle is that every resident can drive onto their street, get deliveries etc., but it's harder or impossible to drive straight through from one main road to the next.

With through traffic gone, the streets in a low traffic neighbourhood see dramatic reductions in motor traffic levels and often speeds too. And it's not just the passing traffic that tends to go down. While residents in a low traffic neighbourhood can still do all their journeys by car if they want or need to, some trips will be a bit more circuitous. This, combined with far quieter, safer-feeling streets, enables residents to switch to more healthy ways of getting around, particularly for short journeys.

Why low traffic neighbourhoods should be a priority for you



PHOTO: PAUL.GASSON@GMAIL.COM

- To reduce air pollution, lower collision rates, increase community activity and increase the physical activity of residents, we need to enable a lot more people to walk and cycle. These 'active' modes of travel become the default in low traffic neighbourhoods partly because they feel very easy, safe and comfortable.
- Active travel also goes up in low traffic neighbourhoods by making car use a bit less convenient. If car use is really convenient, people use the car (this is called "induced demand"), but by making some driving journeys a bit more inconvenient (while making other modes feel safe and comfortable), people switch modes, yet the main roads don't suffer (this is called "traffic evaporation").
- The cost of putting in infrastructure is very cheap – entire neighbourhoods can often be calmed with a few well-placed bollards, planters, or signs. This also means you can experiment and adapt schemes at very low cost. More walking and cycling-friendly neighbourhoods are good for local business and can help local high streets thrive too.
- These neighbourhoods align directly with the new Mayor's Transport Strategy. So funding and support from TfL and City Hall should be easier to access – and cutting motor traffic from your neighbourhoods will help your borough fulfil its targets in the Transport Strategy.
- Technology such as sat-nav apps like Waze and Google Maps, or services like Uber, increasingly route cars off main roads and onto residential streets to shave 30 seconds off a journey. That means many previously quiet roads are becoming increasingly busy and hostile for the people who live on them.

How to make a low traffic neighbourhood

There are lots of ways to get a low traffic neighbourhood, but the best is arguably using “modal filters” that stop motor traffic driving beyond a certain point, placed at strategic points around the neighbourhood. “Modal filters” can be bollards or gate road closures that don’t let any motor traffic through; or “bus gates” to let some public transport through; or even width restrictions to just keep the biggest vehicles out.



PHOTO: @E17MODALFILTERS

Once you’ve set up one low traffic neighbourhood, by placing main road crossings cleverly, you can join it to the next one and the next one, so anyone can walk or cycle easily across several low traffic neighbourhoods, from home to school, or work, or the station. And where filters go in, there’s often a bit of extra space around them for public realm improvements too – “pocket parklets”, tree planting, planters, seats etc.

Making a low traffic neighbourhoods happen starts by you having a conversation with your residents. Ask them whether they are happy with the levels of traffic on their street, whether they want less or more, slower or faster, and whether they want their kids to be able to play safely as they did when they were children? From there, you can start to have a conversation about what most residential streets are for – places kids can play and neighbours can chat, or overspill for main roads.

What next?

Our separate document “Low traffic neighbourhoods, the detail” lays out the pros and cons of different approaches for those of you looking for more information, and for officers. It also lays out the basics of an engagement and consultation strategy for officers to adapt to ensure these schemes move forward with resident support and without (much) controversy.

Both this document and its more detailed sibling draw on combined expertise from those who’ve designed, implemented and steered past public opposition real, large-scale, award-winning low traffic neighbourhood schemes.



PHOTO: @E17MODALFILTERS

London Cycling Campaign and Living Streets independently offer consultancy services. Both teams have joined forces to offer cycling and walking consultancy to help boroughs with Liveable Neighbourhood bids and on Low Traffic Neighbourhoods.

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