

The Case Against LTNs in Islington

Preamble

Over the past couple of years Islington Council has introduced a widespread and deeply divisive “Low Traffic Neighbourhood” (LTN) programme. The case **for** LTNs has been extensively and forcefully promulgated by the Council and other factions, particularly a well organised cycling lobby, but to date there has been little coordinated articulation of the case **against**. This document aims to redress the balance.

The Islington LTN programme

The Islington LTN programme is part of a larger initiative known as “People Friendly Streets”. This slogan is intended to encapsulate the main aims of the programme and the intended benefits. Specifically, the argument is that car traffic on many “residential” streets has reached levels which adversely affect residents’ quality of life. The main solution is to use “filtering” (bollards, planters, signs, cameras etc) to close off many streets to “cut through” car traffic. This is in parallel with an intensification of ongoing measures to discourage driving generally (taxes, fines, speed limits, speed bumps etc) and other measures to encourage cycling, in particular dedicated cycle lanes. The LTN programme was introduced somewhat abruptly, on a ward-by-ward basis, with minimal consultation, on the grounds that it was a trial implementation made necessary by Covid.

The next three sections deal with the Why, What, Who and How of the programme in more detail.

Why? Is there really a problem?

Prior to the introduction of LTNs, most residents appeared to regard Islington as a perfectly pleasant place. The nature of the problem which LTNs are purported to solve remains rather obscure. The Council tell us that there are “too many cars”, but this begs a number of questions. What is too many? Exactly where and for whom are there too many? Why are motor vehicles necessarily a bad thing? Can we or should we try to do anything about it? If there is a problem, are LTNs an appropriate solution? Or will the unintended consequences prove to be a worse problem?

Since its earliest beginnings in the 18th century, Islington has always been a busy transport hub and it has always had traffic problems of one kind or another, first in terms of cattle, then horses, then horse-drawn vehicles, then cars. By adapting pragmatically to this fact of life, Islington has evolved into the thriving, economically active, buzzy inner city neighbourhood we know and love today, with freedom of mobility, by whatever form of transport, one of its most attractive features. An ancient and complex network of roads and streets has evolved to support the relatively high traffic levels and residents have over many years adapted their behaviour to maximise the effectiveness of this network. Any Council-imposed, top-down “solution” threatens to destroy the very characteristics which make Islington a great place to live and work, especially if it is introduced rapidly, without proper consultation.

Drilling down a little, the problem is typically presented in terms of “residential streets” subject to increasing levels of vehicle traffic, with drivers using the streets as “cut throughs” (usually

demonised as “rat-runs”) between the main “boundary” or arterial roads in the borough. The argument is that blocking the residential streets to through traffic will enable them and the surrounding neighbourhood to become *“friendlier places that are easier for everyone to use, to enjoy being outside in clean air, to make it safer for walking, cycling, using buggies and wheelchairs, and to relax or play.”* Whether or not one is convinced by this fanciful rhetoric, the argument is subject to a massive flaw: blocking off streets will merely divert traffic elsewhere. In particular, the boundary roads become impossibly congested and journey times in general become longer, often a lot longer. This in turn means that total “car hours” across the borough increases, as does pollution, CO₂ levels, the risk of accidents and most importantly the frustration of most residents and tradespeople. This solution exacerbates precisely those problems it aims to solve. The fact is that some streets in Islington have, over time, become important routes for drivers as the traffic network as a whole adapts organically to increased traffic. One may sympathise with those who live on such streets but the needs of a small minority in the grand scheme of things cannot be allowed to drive a solution which adversely affects the vast majority.

Perhaps the aim of the Council is to reduce the absolute number of cars in Islington as a whole, by making driving as difficult and inconvenient as possible, as part of a “war on cars”. If so, several counterarguments apply. Firstly, merely forcing traffic from one place to another will not work, as noted above. Secondly, the Council is already discouraging car traffic via a huge range of measures including taxes, speed limits, speed bumps, cameras, fines, parking charges, and the rest. No-one in their right mind drives in Islington unless they genuinely have to (for reasons discussed below). Current traffic levels reflect an equilibrium between demand (for mobility) and supply (of a road network). Reducing supply is bad economics and bad government. Thirdly, restricting freedom of mobility will in time devalue Islington as a neighbourhood, as already argued. Fourthly, the “problem” of “too many cars” is already being vigorously addressed by central government and by TfL via controversial measures such as congestion charges and ULEZ. For Islington Council to add a third level of top-down management will almost certainly end in tears!

Finally, the Council implicitly justifies the LTN programme on a variety of environmental grounds, especially pollution reduction. This is misleading and unhelpful. To the extent that Islington has environmental problems, these should be addressed specifically by environmental solutions. “Islington Greener Together” is the Council’s current programme in this respect. To the extent that Islington has traffic problems, these should be addressed by a traffic solutions. To conflate the two is fundamentally bad practice which will almost certainly undermine both programmes. The unfortunate situation in Highbury, where the LTN has caused pollution levels to **rise**, is a classic example of this (see below).

What? The Effects of LTNs

Any traffic solution has benefits and costs. Arguably, LTNs bring rather nebulous and relatively minor benefits of the “People Friendly Streets” variety to those residents now living in streets either closed to through traffic or so inaccessible that few vehicles venture there, although many such residents will fall into categories which suffer a net disadvantage (see below). And the relatively small number of Islington cyclists may perceive some benefits, although it is questionable whether they were disadvantaged to any significant extent before LTNs.

Against these marginal benefits enjoyed by a relatively small number of residents, the **costs** are significant and are by and large suffered by **all** residents:

- **Congestion on boundary roads**, caused by diverted traffic, and exacerbated by other “car-unfriendly” features (such as cycle lanes). Such congestion is particularly apparent on and around the notorious Highbury Roundabout and all the roads which connect with it (Holloway Road, St Pauls / Balls Pond Road, Upper Street).
- **Longer journey times**, both within and also into and out of Islington, which is particularly costly for those relying on driving for a living (taxis, tradespeople, delivery drivers etc).
- **Increased pollution**, as a result. The most notorious example of this is in Highbury where the Council’s own figures revealed a huge **rise** in noxious NO₂ levels as a result of the LTN. Worryingly, the Council at first presented this as a success, before apologising.
- **More cyclists**. Increasingly, cyclists in Islington, typically young men, tend to flout traffic rules by, for example, riding on pavements, jumping red lights, breaking speed limits and sometimes engaging in criminal activity; and the Council appears to turn a blind eye. This behaviour is particularly unpleasant for pedestrians, as well as motorists and other cyclists. There has also been an alarming rise in cycle-like vehicles such as scooters, electric bikes, cargo bikes and the like, which are even more dangerous.
- **Ugliness**. The extensive and largely unnecessary signage and “street furniture” associated with LTNs and cycle lanes is turning Islington into an increasingly unattractive borough.
- **Divided community**. Before LTNs, no-one cared much about traffic in Islington. Now it is a deeply divisive issue which causes real anger and distress on both sides of the argument. This was all unnecessary.
- **Cultural decline**. Islington risks being transformed from a lively, exciting, mixed-economy inner city neighbourhood into a dull dormitory suburb.
- **Monetary costs**. These are huge and include:
 - Costs of implementation by the Council
 - Costs incurred by small businesses through a decline in trade or increased travelling time
 - Costs incurred by motorists in fines and higher fuel consumption

Who? Constituencies Disadvantaged by LTNs

What do the people of Islington actually want? To date, the pro-LTN lobby has been the most vociferous on this issue, at least as reported by the Council. But there is good evidence that actually the majority of residents oppose the programme. The key statistic here is the result of a Freedom of Information (FOI) request which revealed that an astounding **76%** of emails received by the Council were classified as negative towards LTNs with just 13% positive! Actually, this is not so surprising given the large and varied constituencies likely to be disadvantaged by the programme:

- **Motorists**, obviously. The Council frequently cites a statistic to the effect that only 30% of Islington residents have cars. This is misleading in two respects. Firstly, if the Council attempted to argue that the views of any other minority – an ethnic group for example – should be ignored because they “only” accounted for 30% of the community there would be outrage! Secondly, many constituents who do not own cars nevertheless rely on cars for various reasons.
- **People driving into or out of Islington**. One of the major attractions of Islington is that it is easy to visit and easy to leave. This is partly because it is a transport hub with excellent public transport links. But sometimes only a car will do, to drive out of London to the

country or on holiday for example. Or to enable friends or tradespeople to drive in from outside the borough.

- **Old people.** Another oft-quoted statistic is that 30% of London car journeys are less than 2km, the argument being that people should walk or cycle instead. This argument is frankly discriminatory and unkind towards old people, in particular, who in many cases are incapable of walking or cycling such distances, or quite rightly very unwilling to do so. Old people rely on cars to a huge extent for their freedom of mobility, either via cars which they own, or via taxis, ambulances, and other people's cars.
- **Disabled or at-risk people.** The same arguments apply in the case of disabled people, some of whom may be reluctant to use public transport, never mind cycling. The Council has responded to this argument with a complex proposal to allow "blue badge holders" to access LTNs in some circumstances. This is unlikely to work. The "at risk" category also includes vulnerable women, many of whom feel uncomfortable walking through the deserted streets of LTNs at night.
- **People living on main roads.** Residents on Islington's "boundary" roads, now congested as traffic is diverted from LTNs, are particularly disadvantaged. Of course they tend to be the most disadvantaged of Islington's residents already.
- **People who need to drive for a living.** There is a huge population of people who rely on cars or vans to make a living: taxi drivers, deliverymen, all household tradespeople such as builders, plumbers, window cleaners etc. Sometimes they can use cycles or public transport but often they can't. LTNs often mean longer journey times, which means higher fuel costs and lower efficiency. Increasingly they will stop operating in Islington which is bad for them and bad for their customers.
- **Local businesses** (shops, pubs, restaurants etc). Islington has always been a place where people work as well as live. This is one of its charms and one of its strengths as an economically thriving neighbourhood. Most businesses rely on motor vehicles to some extent, for supplies, or to serve customers or to drive to work. Once again, LTNs disadvantage both the businesses and residents who value having such businesses on their doorsteps.
- **Emergency services.** Closing off streets to ambulances, police cars and fire engines is obviously a bad idea. The Council claim to be "working with the emergency services" but sooner or later a tragedy will occur.
- **Schoolchildren and their parents.** If the statistic quoted above, that 30% of car journeys are less than 2 km, is really true, then a large proportion of that percentage is probably accounted for parents driving their children to school as part of the "school run". In this case, the argument that such children should instead walk or cycle is more understandable. The school run also results in unacceptable congestion and pollution at "drop off" times. However, the Council's preferred solution under the umbrella of the LTN programme, of actually closing off streets outside schools at certain times, is almost certainly suboptimal. In the first place it penalises those parents who actually need to drive large distances to the school (although one may ask why this is the case). Secondly, it has the usual set of unintended consequences, including blocking off non-school traffic which needs to use the street, causing congestion in neighbouring streets as parents attempt to circumvent the restrictions, and the most appalling signage. In this case there must surely be a better solution, perhaps by enlisting the help of the schools to simply discourage the offending parents.

- **Islington as a whole**, as a vibrant, industrious, thriving inner city area. This theme, which has been addressed at length above, needs no further elaboration.

How? A Flawed Implementation Process

Islington's LTN programme was implemented in a top-down process under the pretext of Covid, purportedly as a trial scheme. There was very little consultation initially, as the Council admits. Instead, the programme appears to have been driven by an almost messianic prior belief in LTNs supported by a small but extremely well-organised and articulate cycling lobby. Subsequently, the consultation and reporting process has been seriously flawed. There has been a disappointing lack of objectivity and an apparent reluctance to listen to any negative feedback.

Consultation has mainly been via online surveys. Typically the survey will be presented with a preamble explaining why LTNs are a good thing. Respondents are then invited to tick boxes which exclusively refer to claimed benefits – there is little opportunity to highlight perceived drawbacks of LTNs. At no point are residents asked the key question “are you for or against LTNs”. As mentioned earlier, the answer revealed by an FOI request appears to be a huge 76% **against!**

In parallel with this “consultation” exercise, the Council has conducted various monitoring exercises. Given the experience with Highbury pollution levels mentioned above, the objectivity and accuracy of such exercises must also be questioned. In any case, the detailed results tend to be uninspiring or very much open to interpretation (for example, lower levels of traffic on a street which has been closed to through traffic is not surprising; lower levels on a neighbouring boundary road may simply mean that traffic there is at a standstill!)

Nevertheless, the Council has concluded each LTN trial with a report which hugely over-emphasises the perceived positive results and downplays or denies the negative. This severely undermines confidence and trust in the Council's LTN programme and raises the question of whether there was any intention to carry out a trial, as such, in the first place.

Worryingly, despite all the concerns raised here, it appears the Council is resolute in pressing ahead with extending its LTN programme to other wards within Islington, this time with the added complication that traffic management objectives are to be conflated with environmental aims, as discussed above. For the sake of residents as well as the Council itself, it is hoped that that in these cases the implementation process is delayed, preferably halted, but at the very least improved.

Conclusion: the Islington LTN programme is a misguided initiative, poorly implemented, to address a problem which is at best exaggerated and at worst dangerously misconstrued. The costs of the programme, especially in terms of unintended consequences, hugely outweigh the benefits. Many of Islington's constituencies, including some of the most vulnerable, will be severely disadvantaged and the unique character of Islington itself will be compromised. The programme should now be halted, re-evaluated and if necessary reversed. It should not be extended to other wards, if at all, until such re-evaluation is complete.