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**Alastair Bonnett** - Contributor

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# The strange life and peculiar death of a 'low traffic neighbourhood'



Alastair Bonnett, a professor of social geography at Newcastle University and a resident of Heaton, is left scratching his head at the introduction and then the abandonment of a scheme to make streets in his area safer



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The low traffic neighbourhood restrictions in Heaton

It's a tale of mystery. Newcastle's 'low traffic neighbourhoods' (LTNs) came and then they went. After 18 months of effort — bollards, road markings and consultation — puff, they have vanished.

On April 23, 2024, nine men, with vans and two trucks, could be found labouring away on Heaton Park View, removing all trace that it was once a 'low traffic' road. There is nothing to see there now. Just as in similar spots across this part of Heaton. Nothing remains except the sound of heads being scratched.

Why was so much time and money poured into something — in Jesmond and Gosforth, as well in Heaton — that, from what I have learned, stood little chance of being judged a success?

According to Newcastle City Council these were decisions taken by its non-elected officers. According to the officers their hands were tied by the super-strict rules that came with funding the Government's experimental traffic order. If the scheme didn't see a significant increase in people walking or cycling and if the project didn't get majority support in the first (not the last, not the middle, but the very first) consultation exercise, it had to go.

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So, nothing to see here; no rubbernecking. But not so fast. If these restrictions were so strict, why indulge in the planning equivalent of high stakes poker? Why start something that was unlikely to be successful?

Let's take a step back a moment, a long way back, and head to the shores of the Aegean Sea. LTNs are as old as cities themselves.

While on holiday in Turkey I decided to go to the ruins of the ancient Greek city of Ephesus. It may sound perverse, but it reminded me of Heaton, the inner-city suburb I've lived in for 35 years. That's not just because it was raining, nor because it was in ruins. Ephesus has a similar hugger-mugger crowdedness, lots of narrow roads in which two vehicles can barely squeeze by; hardly any private gardens. The central road of this antique city was accessed through two stone pillars spaced to stop fast and large wagons belting through. Even back then people knew that too much traffic was bad news.

Some ancient locals would have grumbled. A few togas no doubt got into a twist: "You rant about clean air yet you close roads and bridges. It's the money you're after," or: "Yes, it was a rat run but they used to be called short cuts."



Before and after pictures show the low traffic neighbourhood in Jesmond appearing then disappearing again



In fact, I take those two quotes from Newcastle's 2023 Public Consultation Feedback report on the Heaton scheme. They were given pop-out prominence, an early sign that something peculiar was going on.

Governments, local or national, do not usually heed people who fundamentally disagree with everything they are trying to achieve. Newcastle City Council has signed up to numerous pledges supporting healthier, safer streets, places where communities can flourish. They have promised to 'ensure people rather than traffic take priority' and to create 'safe and accessible neighbourhoods where people choose active and sustainable travel modes'.

The council has been making such pledges for decades and, often, taking decisive action to achieve them. You don't have to fly to the Aegean to find 'low traffic' measures. You can stay in Heaton. Although it was called a neighbourhood, the new project covered just one block of terraced streets. On either side, many of Heaton's streets have long been blocked off and to the south you can find Byker Wall, purpose built to be safe and low traffic.



The ancient Greek city of Ephesus reminded Alastair of Heaton. Credit Rick LK/Unsplash

It used to be called 'traffic calming'. Traffic calming was neither controversial nor political. Conservatives were just as likely to support it as anyone else. With the help of *The Chronicle's* newspaper archive, I tried to find reports of protests against these earlier schemes. I gave up. There appear to have been none. What I did find is a huge number of reports of people demanding that they be introduced, often in the wake of a child being hit and, sometimes, killed by a car:

- 'Worried residents in Gateshead have made an astonishing 400 requests for traffic calming measures' (1993)
- '10-year-old Derek Hooks was knocked off his bike by a car last week. The accident sparked protests and appeals for traffic calming measures' (1995)

A consensus existed. It was assumed that most people prefer low traffic to high traffic outside their front door.

Umpteen such projects were built across Britain and considerable expertise — modelling and predicting traffic flows — must have built up. This makes it all the more strange that, in a letter I have

from Newcastle's principal transport planner, Mark Lague, he explains that the point of the scheme was 'to see in practice how restrictions work'. Is traffic that unpredictable? Have we learned so little?

There is only one sense in which the scheme was novel: for never before has such a lot of money, time and public goodwill been spent to achieve so little.

Lague tells us that the whole thing was a 'fundamental failure'. In large part this was because he found 'little evidence' for increased pedestrian and cycle activity. Yet is it likely that blocking off one end of a few roads would lead to a surge of walkers and cyclists? Of course not.

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The earliest residents' petition I have found that calls for Heaton Park View to be closed to through traffic is from 1975. Drive up it today and you'll see why that's still the obvious thing to do. It's so narrow that cars routinely confront each other head on, and drivers have to carefully reverse, pull over and negotiate their way as best they can. Now the 'low traffic' measures are gone, this scene is being replicated across Heaton and Jesmond.

The Heaton scheme was not a failure. We locals noticed the difference. It reduced traffic and made our lives better. Survey evidence from Space for Heaton, a community movement created by a group of residents, used data from permanent traffic counters to show that during the life of the scheme 'traffic was lower almost every week the trail was in place'.

It's true that the first public consultation on the scheme did show a slight majority of those surveyed opposed it. There was remarkable correlation with age: 80% of over 55s were against it, younger people much less so.

The consultations carried on and soon they gave a very different picture. A later consultation showed majority support for the scheme as did a survey by one of the area's Labour councillors.



A road narrowed in Jesmond

It was different in Jesmond: there were protests against the scheme there but in Heaton the only protests came when people found out it was being scrapped.

The consultations were, if nothing else, plentiful. They included online, in person and drop-in sessions. From what I can tell, in every case residents were told two options were on the table, both aimed at amending the scheme (to tackle 'rat running').

None of the options that were discussed during these consultations included axing it. Nor were people told that what they said didn't matter anyway because it was only the first consultation — the one with the marginal majority against the project — that counted.

We know this because Mark Lague, responding to the question of why the Heaton scheme was ditched despite local support, admits that the consultation was 'heavily weighted to the early part of the trial'. He goes on: "This is because the statutory legal process for Etro's (experimental traffic orders) allows for representations to be made during the first six months only'.

Let's summarise. A scheme was devised and built without any real chance of success and a consultation process was rolled out across almost two years without the intention to listen to it.

The elephant in the room is a flailing Conservative Government's attempt to politicise driving. Their

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