

Low-traffic zone success ‘based on inaccurate data’

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Traffic counters used to monitor the impact of low traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs) are not accurately recording vehicles during heavy congestion, The Times can reveal.

Research suggests that between 5 and 35 per cent of cars, vans and lorries in slow moving or stop-start traffic are not being counted, calling into question the claimed success of the controversial schemes.

Scores of LTNs were introduced during the pandemic and many more are planned. They use bollards, planters or camera enforcement to block through traffic in residential areas. The idea is to encourage people to walk or cycle instead of using their cars for short journeys. However, critics say the schemes force traffic on to a small number of surrounding roads, increasing congestion and pollution.

Councils that have introduced [LTNs](#) have mostly hailed them as a success, pointing to data showing they have cut traffic both inside the areas and on some of their boundary roads. However, local residents have often been baffled by these claims, saying they have witnessed significant increases in congestion on the boundary roads.

Now The Times can reveal that **MetroCount**, the manufacturer of the automatic roadside counters used by most councils to provide their data, advises against installing the rubber tubes on [heavily congested roads](#) because they under-record traffic.

The company says the counters are “not designed to work” in stop-start traffic and are recommended to be used in “free flowing conditions”.

It explained: “Vehicles travelling very slowly might not be classified correctly, either the axle hits are too far apart so it splits them and places them into an unknown vehicle class, which doesn’t get included by default, or it attaches those axle hits to a vehicle in front or behind.”

This means if there is little or no congestion at the measuring points before the LTN, the number of vehicles counted is likely to be accurate. However, if the LTN creates congestion at the count points, the post-implementation surveys will not record the true number of vehicles.

There are also fears some counters may not have recorded vehicles travelling under 6.2 mph at all. One north London council has already been forced to admit it under-reported congestion on the boundary roads surrounding one LTN.

Enfield council confessed that cars, vans and lorries travelling in congestion had not been recorded after the Fox Lane LTN was introduced because a software update had changed

the setting without its traffic engineers realising. MetroCount said the council's contractor appeared to have made "a deliberate choice to change the default setting, contrary to MetroCount documentation that advises caution when surveying slow-moving or congested traffic".

It added: "Every single report produced by our software lists all the parameters selected at the top of the report, including any speed range settings."

The Times approached eight inner London [councils that introduced LTNs](#) during the pandemic to ask what settings they had used on their counters, whether they had been adjusted after their schemes were implemented and whether they were confident in the accuracy of their data, but none of them answered. Almost all of the councils have presented their LTNs as a success, claiming traffic reductions even on some boundary roads.

Following the discovery of its error, Enfield council conducted a manual count of vehicles on four roads that also had automatic counters. This survey found that the automatic counters under-recorded nearly 3,000 vehicles — the equivalent of 5.4 per cent — over a 12-hour period.

Dozens of videos have emerged on social media of cars moving very slowly or being stationary over counters on LTNs' heavily congested boundary roads.

One resident of Enfield was so suspicious of the data recorded on his heavily congested road near the edge of [an LTN](#) that he trawled through 24 hours of CCTV to see how many vehicles had actually passed his home.

Ediz Mevrit, a bus driver from Palmers Green, said: "The council said only 1,845 cars a day passed through my road on average and congestion had reduced. But when I watched the CCTV back, I counted 2,523, that's about 30 per cent more — and I probably missed a few because I sped up the footage. I was so angry because they had been making me feel paranoid. It's the gaslighting, telling me traffic has reduced when it hasn't."

After Enfield council's recording error was discovered, it re-ran all the data without the 6.2 mph filter and recovered some of the undercounted vehicles. This changed its reported data from a 5.7 per cent increase on boundary roads to 8 per cent but critics say new data still did not record vehicles during heavy congestion because of the counters' inherent limitations.

In a report on Hackney council's LTNs, John Wilde, a director at Charles & Associates Consulting Engineers, said: "Automatic traffic count surveys cannot be considered as broadly accurate [on congested roads]. A CCTV method survey would be more robust, and would also capture the stationary or slow-moving traffic conditions, whilst also allowing for clearer assessment of the peak periods."

Automatic counters have also been the primary source of data used by academic studies suggesting that LTNs work. This week a petition demanding the government carry out an [independent review into LTNs](#) surpassed 10,000 signatures, forcing a response. It said the Department for Transport had already appointed the University of Westminster to “undertake an independent evaluation of active travel schemes funded in 2020-21”. The director of the University of Westminster’s Active Travel Academy is Professor Rachel Aldred, a former trustee of the London Cycling Campaign, which has been one of the most vociferous advocates of LTNs.

Enfield council said new traffic data on its boundary roads meant there was “no material change” to its previous conclusion that the Fox Lane LTN should be kept. It added that it did not rely on automatic counters alone and used other methods of assessment such as bus journey times to consider the impact of its schemes.

The council also said it was not appropriate to compare directly the data between the manual counts and the automatic count, or draw conclusions from the disparity because they were not conducted at exactly the same spots on the roads.

MetroCount said: “Our counters have been used for over 30 years, in over 130 countries, and all have their own conventions and standards, usually excluding lower and higher ranges of speeds. The physics of traffic counters of all varieties requires use within some ranges to achieve the usually very high accuracy.”

The residents feeling the impact of LTNs

It was a struggle for Christiane Comins to get to the protest outside Islington town hall this week but she got out her crutches and gritted her teeth. Comins, 53, has multiple sclerosis (Jack Malvern writes).

While she has a blue badge that gives her permission to drive through her neighbourhood, this is of no use for the delivery drivers she needs for essentials or the friends she relies on for help.

Her neighbourhood, in the Barnsbury area of Islington, is the latest in the north London borough to be proposed as a low-traffic neighbourhood (LTN). It prompted a protest of more than 100 residents outside the town hall on Tuesday.

“Because [I’m disabled](#), I’m not only reliant on taxi journeys to or from the hospital but also reliant on friends coming to visit me,” she said. “I’m reliant on food deliveries to the house. They won’t be able to come. I may just drown in a pool of my own tears. I used to say I should jump in the Thames, but I can’t climb the bridge any more.”

She said her MS comes and goes and that she dreads returning to a bedridden state. The last time, her friends were able to visit and even hold a party for her. “That can’t happen now if Barnsbury LTN goes ahead. I have MS and it’s a bugger. I go up and down.

“Of course I support cyclists, but do they need every street in the neighbourhood? No, they don’t.” She worries not only for other people with disabilities but for local shops.

“I worry a lot for some businesses like our butcher, who is feeling the pinch from [existing] LTNs. It’s quite frightening how little say you have.” Others at the protest complained that their daughters felt unsafe walking home at night through streets deserted of traffic.

Nicholas Mason, 78, a retired solicitor, said his journey time to pick up his granddaughter from school in Tottenham, north London, had tripled. Jonathan Harrison, 75, a retired architect, added that [the zones were frustrating](#) his journeys to hospital for cancer treatment.

A few weeks ago he received £480 in traffic fines for driving past a camera near his home. “I never saw a sign saying don’t come in this road. I had no idea they’d closed it. I think it’s totally outrageous. There’s been no consultation. None of this was in their manifesto, that they’re going to make it impossible to drive. It’s a pointless, ridiculous, vengeful policy.”