

**UK general election 2024**

## Low traffic neighbourhood schemes drive wedge between communities across UK

Vitriolic debate in Bath illustrates how reaction to anti-pollution measures has become increasingly polarised



Traffic queueing alongside a low traffic neighbourhood scheme in Bath © Tom Pilston/FT

**Robert Wright** in Bath JUNE 22 2024

In the elegant, hilly Lansdown district of Bath, Tim Spratt had a warning for Wera Hobhouse, the Liberal Democrat parliamentary candidate who has represented the city in western England since 2017.

The plan by the local Lib Dem-led council to introduce “low-traffic neighbourhoods” (LTNs), which would close some roads to through traffic had provoked a petition signed by nearly 2,000 opponents, Spratt said. Hobhouse, he added, should be “conscious” of intense opposition from some quarters in her bid to remain the city’s MP — a veiled warning that the issue would cost her votes.

The controversy in Lansdown is illustrative of how LTNs and other measures to control noise, pollution and danger from motor vehicles are splitting communities across the UK.

Hundreds of other LTNs have been introduced or proposed in places across England. They have stirred up particularly strong emotions in Oxford, Exeter and parts of London.





Tim Spratt said nearly 2,000 people had signed a petition opposing the introduction of a LTN in the area © Tom Pilston/FT  
The issue is particularly important for the ruling Conservative party which, after initially encouraging the widespread introduction of LTNs during the pandemic, has turned against them. The party has vowed to make it harder to introduce the schemes, which typically aim to reduce traffic levels on side streets by preventing drivers from using them as through routes.

The three linked schemes in Lansdown are among five LTNs due to be installed on an experimental basis this year in Bath, following the installation of previous trials, which are continuing.

Both transport secretary Mark Harper and Prime Minister Rishi Sunak have made their opposition to LTNs part of their general election [pitch to motorists](#).

“We’re on the side of drivers, and these latest measures show we’re getting on with . . . making their lives better, fairer and cheaper,” Harper said, when announcing the planned curbs on new LTNs earlier this year.

The Conservatives started opposing low traffic and anti-pollution schemes when they [unexpectedly won](#) a parliamentary by-election in Uxbridge and South Ruislip in July 2023. The Uxbridge campaign focused on opposing expansion to the constituency of London’s ultra-low emissions zone tax on polluting vehicles.

Tim Bale, professor of politics at Queen Mary University of London, said the new stance reflected the scepticism of some Conservative politicians about the need for measures against climate change.

“Some see opposition to anything they can label anti-motorist as a possible trump card they can play in constituencies up and down the land,” he said.

Yet there is also a considerable slice of the electorate that supports LTNs. The Conservatives lost seven of their 10 seats on Bath and North East Somerset council at last year’s local elections after making opposition to LTNs a core issue in their campaign.

The Lib Dems, who introduced the policy, gained five seats, ending up with 41 of the 59 total. A survey commissioned last year by the Department for Transport found that 45 per cent of residents in areas with LTNs supported them, with only 21 per cent opposed.

---

## Most people support low-traffic schemes in areas that have them

Survey responses (%)

Support      Oppose

Overall

London

The government’s report said the schemes seemed to work and had few knock-on effects on surrounding areas.



“The available evidence from the UK indicates that LTNs are effective in achieving outcomes of reducing traffic volumes within their zones,” it said. “Impacts (positive or negative) on boundary roads appear to be minimal.”

Installation of an experimental ban on through traffic in April on Sydney Place in Bath had a “huge positive impact”, one resident of the street said.

The street used to handle 600 to 800 motor vehicles an hour in the morning rush hour, a figure that has fallen to close to zero. The resident spoke on condition of anonymity because many LTN supporters have faced harassment.

“I’ve spoken to loads of people walking up and down the street,” the resident said. “They say, ‘This is absolutely amazing’.”



Guy Hodgson: 'I underestimated the level of vitriol that it [the LTN] would generate' © Tom Pilston/FT

But there is no mistaking the vehemence of some opponents. Spratt, speaking about how residents had reacted to the plans said many were “extremely upset.”

Guy Hodgson, chair of Walk Ride Bath, a pressure group supporting walking and cycling, said the level of anger had surprised him.

“I underestimated the level of vitriol that it would generate,” he said.

James Wright, the Conservative candidate hoping to overturn Hobhouse’s 12,322-vote majority, said the council was pursuing its “own ideology” and ignoring what was possible in Bath. It was inappropriately trying to force people towards the high levels of cycling of the Netherlands, he said.



“It’s a flat country,” Wright said of the Netherlands. “But in Bath we have huge hills.”



Wera Hobhouse: ‘I’m incredibly proud of what the council is trying to achieve because it’s very brave’ © Tom Pilston/FT

Hobhouse sounded nervous. “I’m incredibly proud of what the council is trying to achieve because it’s very brave,” she said, over coffee in the city centre. “My election comes in the middle of it. I swallow that.”

Hobhouse insisted the council would undertake a dispassionate analysis of Bath’s LTNs, which mostly remain temporary and could still be modified or removed. There has been particular concern that LTNs are pushing traffic on to neighbouring roads, worsening congestion there.

“The council will look at the evidence, see where the traffic is dispersing,” Hobhouse promised. “The decision should be data-driven.”

She called for the debate to be less polarised. “We should be able to disagree well,” she said.

Yet Hodgson pointed out that LTNs provoked the strong feelings associated with competing freedoms. On one side was the freedom to drive unhindered. On the other was the freedom to be free of the injury, noise and pollution that resulted from other people’s unhindered driving.

“There’s deep stuff there,” Hodgson said. “What price are you prepared to pay for one type of freedom versus another?”

*This article has been amended to correct the spelling of Lansdown*