DEMOS

DRIVING DISINFORMATION

DEMOCRATIC DEFICITS, DISINFORMATION AND LOW TRAFFIC NEIGHBOURHOODS - A PORTRAIT OF POLICY FAILURE

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In partnership with

PINF

MAY 2024

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Published by Demos May 2024
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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS PAGE 4

ABOUT THIS PROJECT PAGE 5

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY PAGE 6

INTRODUCTION PAGE 11

PART 1: KEY DEFINITIONS AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. DEFINING AN INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM PAGE 15

2. THE POLICY AGENDA: LOW TRAFFIC NEIGHBOURHOODS PAGE 18

3. OUR CASE STUDIES (IN A NUTSHELL) PAGE 22

PART 2: SOCIAL DIVISIONS AND THE AMPLIFYING ROLE OF DISINFORMATION

4. SOCIAL DIVISIONS SURROUNDING LTNS PAGE 27

5. DISINFORMATION DRIVING DIVISION? PAGE 50

PART 3: THE ROLE OF INFORMATION ECOSYSTEMS IN CHALLENGING DISINFORMATION

6. NATIONAL GOVERNMENT PAGE 61

7. LOCAL GOVERNMENT PAGE 64

8. NEWS MEDIA PAGE 82

9. LOCAL GROUPS AND PERSONAL NETWORKS PAGE 89

RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS PAGE 99

RECOMMENDATIONS PAGE 100

APPENDIX 1: METHODOLOGY PAGE 108

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project is a collaborative effort between Demos's digital policy team (CASM) and the Public Interest News Foundation.

Demos and PINF would like to thank the European Media and Information Fund for their generous support of this project. This programme of work has been funded via the EMIF workstream 'Investigations into Disinformation Dynamics.'

Thank you to the local residents, community leaders, activists, journalists, politicians and civil servants of Rochdale, Enfield and Oxford who have generously shared their perspectives, experiences and expertise.

Thank you also to the following organisations and experts for their generosity with their time and expertise in our project design stages, and for their feedback on our early findings: Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), Local Government Association (LGA), UK National Statistics Authority, Institute of Strategic Dialogue, Hope Not Hate, Antisemitism Policy Trust, and Trust for London.

At PINF and Demos, we would also like to deeply thank our impact, media and design team, Felix Arbenz-Caines, Kosta Marco Juri, Chloe Burke and Sumaya Akthar as well as Hani Barghouthi.

Both organisations would also like to warmly thank team members from the beginning of the programme. Ellen Judson, former Head of CASM at Demos, without whom none of this work would have been possible. Thank you also to Lucy Bush, Research Director at Demos, for all of your support and guidance in the initial stages of this project.

Thanks are also due for Polly Curtis, Andrew O'Brien, Elizabeth Seger and Miriam Levin at Demos for your expertise throughout.

Any errors remain the authors' responsibility.

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May 2024

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

Demos is Britain's leading cross-party think tank. We put people at the heart of policy-making to create bold ideas and a more collaborative democracy.

CASM, Demos's digital policy hub, works to investigate, articulate and advocate for an internet and technologies that protect democratic values and human rights. This project is part of our 'Strengthening Information Environments' programme. This programme looks at how we can build a more inclusive, truth-producing and resilient information environment for citizens in support of their democratic and digital rights.

The Public Interest News Foundation is the UK's first charity to support public interest news – ethical and impartial journalism that informs and empowers the public about the things that matter to all of us. We believe that everyone in the UK should benefit from public interest news that speaks to them, for them and with them. We believe that independent news providers with turnover below £2m have a crucial role to play in reaching communities that have been let down by other parts of the media and developing new, ethical models of journalism. Our mission is to ensure the social and financial sustainability of independent news providers in communities across the UK, through research, capacity-building and advocacy.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Over the last 18 months, disinformation surrounding Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs) has erupted with a marked rise of conspiracy theories online. Rumours swirl of shadowy elites forcing 15-minute city climate lockdowns in local communities and of councillors undemocratically installing surveillance regimes on motorists. This deterioration in quality of debate plays out offline too. In Rochdale planters have been set alight, while councillors in Enfield have received death threats and neo-Nazi groups in Oxford have joined rallies and called residents 'guinea pigs'.

It was with this backdrop that, in late 2023, Demos and the Public Interest News Foundation set out to explore what had driven such division. Over a 6-month research period, we explored:

- How do disinformation campaigns weaponise and amplify existing social divisions in local communities?
- What is the role of local information ecosystems in challenging this?

Our findings reveal that local divisions are not the result of disinformation and conspiracy theories, but rooted in the confronting nature of the policies themselves and the very real impact they are having on people's lives. They reveal the failures on the part of councils to understand and effectively engage with their communities that has amounted to a democratic chasm; and they illuminate how the actions of national politicians have made this even worse. To focus exclusively on disinformation campaigners is to ignore the fertile ground on which they thrive.

This is the most in depth study on the LTN rows in local neighbourhoods to date. It combines digital media analysis of over 570k posts along with offline face-to-face engagement with 47 residents and 24 interviews with local journalists, community leaders, activists and politicians in the three locations. We provide a deep-dive assessment of the drivers of disinformation online and where the fragilities in our policy design and local information ecosystems lie as well as recommendations for a fundamental overhaul of local democratic practices and news media ecosystems.

FINDINGS

Levels of LTN-related 'disinformation' online with significant engagement exploded between 2022 and 2023.

- The proportion that can be classified as disinformation (including conspiracy theories) rose from 5% in 2022 to 28% in 2023.[1]
- Councils are accused of being 'authoritarian' in their implementation of LTN schemes, comparing them to 'Nazi Germany' or 'Communist China'. Those who vandalise the barriers are celebrated as 'freedom fighters' while communities are the victim of a 'Great Reset'. These veer into conspiracy theory.
- Online campaigners against the policy, such as the Together Declaration, amplified local case studies with genuine and evidence-based grievances with the scheme to support a national overarching narrative of conspiracy in relation to LTNs. This single organisation reflects 27% of the anti-LTN posts receiving the highest engagement in 2023.

1 See Chapter 5 for how we define this term in relation to narratives surrounding LTNs.

Disinformation has flourished in the democratic chasm that is widening at a local level between councils and communities and in the vacuum left by the decimation of local news.

- The crater of division surrounding the LTN policy has widened in online spaces. Between 2021 and 2022, engagement with LTN posts online was initially stable and relatively balanced between the pro and anti-LTN position. Yet, opposition to the policy has hardened online. In 2023, the proportion of posts with high engagement that were anti-LTN rose from 48% to 79%.
- The strong dividing lines in attitudes to the policy have focused on the poor quality of information and frustrating democratic processes available to citizens:
    - Debates question the evidence of impact of LTNs and highlight the variety of sources available to prove multiple viewpoints.
    - Citizens fundamentally disagree on the value of the trade-offs associated with the policy, with pro-LTN respondents praising the impact on air quality and anti-LTN users stressing the disproportionate impact on the elderly, disabled and marginalised populations.
    - Anti-LTN commentators argue that the process of decision-making in communities has been "undemocratic" and "deceptive". Either "the majority" are anti-LTN or there's a "silent majority" in support of the policy.
    - Those who support and oppose the policy face a range of attacks online. Those who oppose are all described as "conspiracy theorists" and "SUV drivers", whereas those who support the policy are "anti-motorist" and "woke".
    - Councillors who choose to engage online receive significant levels of personal abuse from both sides of the debate.

Where disinformation has previously been blamed for vicious local rows over LTNs, this research turns that assumption on its head. Weaknesses at every level of our information ecosystems enable such disinformation campaigns to weaponize division.

- Both the national government and individual MPs destabilised the information environment at the national level:
    - Having required councils to act swiftly to make changes to their road network during lockdown in 2020, the national government's U-turn and attacks of the LTN policy in 2023 fractured and undermined trust in local government as a policy and information actor.
    - The engagement of national politicians in the LTN debate in 2023, including specifically making attacks on councils as 'anti-motorist' and with validation of conspiratorial references to 15-minute cities by Ministers, correlates with a rise in disinformation online in the same year.
- Residents across our three case studies, to varying degrees, suggest it is 'the Council' who is the driver of misinformation within local communities - underlining the severe damage done to relationships at a local level:
    - The fast introduction of the trial schemes and lack of comprehensive communication and consultation with communities created shock and frustration for some.
    - 'The Council' is perceived as relying on poor evidence and mischaracterizing the level of positive impact schemes are having leading to accusations of being deliberately deceptive.
    - The lack of proactive and offline consultation and the approach to presenting the results of such engagements has caused some residents to accuse their council of manipulation and "gaslighting".
    - The lack of pre-existing relationships with communities among some councils and funding is felt to have undermined local authorities' ability to effectively communicate and consult
    - Disinformation narratives clearly link to more mainstream critiques of the council's approach to policy implementation and consultation demonstrating an easy slide from constructive political debate to conspiracy online.

- The decimation of news ecosystems at a local level as well as increases in harassment of journalists has reduced capacity for local accountability and factual information available at a local level with residents turning to Facebook and, in some locations, Next Door groups for information.
    - The gaps and ambiguity left by national and local government and loss of diverse local news coverage, has been somewhat filled by civil society, but without the balance and rigour of high-quality journalism and only by those actors with significant political capital and private funding, and national activists, some of which play an active role in disseminating disinformation and conspiracy theories.
    - A lack of digital access and civic digital literacy excludes already marginalised communities engaging in web-based communication and consultation methods.
    - Some residents decry a loss of space to effectively deliberate with fellow citizens regarding crucial political issues that affect their lives, describing Facebook as a "cess-pit".

Overall, this study challenges the narrow conception that local rows over LTNs have been fuelled by wild conspiracy theories. Instead, it points to a failure of councils to properly understand and engage their communities; to national politicians stoking divisions for political gain; and to an absence of high quality local journalism. Here, we find a democratic chasm at a local level between councils and communities in which disinformation is flourishing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings demonstrate that the fragility in our information ecosystem, worsened by national politicians, will not only continue to fuel mis/disinformation, but will also provide significant barriers for a government seeking to lead and implement policies that require compromise within our communities. The scale of the challenge, if left unaddressed, will continue to deadlock meaningful progress at a local level - with councils at an impasse with their communities. Our research suggests that the more challenging policies will be abandoned at the gates and we will see worsening levels of disengagement from public participation in democratic life.

Our recommendations tackle the causes, not the symptoms of disinformation and in so doing seek to improve the levels of truth, inclusivity and resilience of our information ecosystems. They amount to significant reform of our local information ecosystems designed to rebuild trust and participation in local democracy. They target every layer of the ecosystem, from national government, to politicians, to local government, journalism and the disinformation research and funder community.

Our recommendations are broken down by key actors below:

ACTOR	RECOMMENDATION	RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY
Political parties	An anti-disinformation standard in public life	The Committee for Standards in Public Life and Labour's new independent Ethics and Integrity Commission should incorporate into its review the way in which politicians behave in relation to disinformation narratives online.

ACTOR	RECOMMENDATION	RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY
UK Government	A local democracy health monitor	Oflog to take on responsibility for activating a local democracy health monitor and enabling departments who award funding to local governments, such as Active Travel England, to utilise this information to determine which parts of the country are in a strong enough position to introduce policies that will require significant public support to be effective. This could include, for example, curating local democracy data via the Data Explorer tool and reporting on levels of participation in local democratic processes.
	A 'means match goals' rule for national government funding	Departments who are responsible for awarding funding to local governments, such as Active Travel England, must ensure that their evaluation criteria includes a 'means match goals' rule. This evaluation criteria will assess the extent to which a council has plans that align entirely with the stated goals of the funding and has identified possible risks for actual or perceived contradictions with plans to mitigate them. Any contradictions between the policy goals and the mechanisms for achieving them must be clearly and robustly substantiated before funding can be awarded.
Local government	A new 'Civic Accord' to restore trust in local democracy in our local communities.	A new 'Civic Accord' will restore trust in local democracy by ensuring councils have: a transparent 'local democracy' strategy, including, for example, procedures for the ways the council chooses to run different forms of engagement, consultation and participation exercises for policies with different thresholds of change for communities; the initiation of a regular community mapping 'census' exercise every three years to identify key community groups and leaders; a new set of commitments that are triggered when a policy meets a specific 'need to know' threshold, including, for example, utilising participatory methods; a mandate to always provide face-to-face methods as a means of engagement; voluntary adoption of the National Statistics Authority's Code of Practice for Statistics; a commitment to a 'Civic Rebate' when a council participation exercise to enable participation and ensure a reinvestment back into the community.
	Ditch the representative polling	Local government should not invest money in representative polling as a route to resolving issues of backlash.
News media	Local News Funds to ensure that local news serves local communities	Central government should provide a funding package to stimulate a new era of vibrant local news, starting at £50 million per year.
	Turn the democratic lights on	Local News Funds should include a guarantee that no local authority, court, tribunal or other local public body in the UK will go without professional scrutiny by local journalists.

ACTOR	RECOMMENDATION	RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY
Social media platforms	A fair deal for local news	Big tech platforms should be legally required to negotiate in good faith with the local news providers whose content they carry to ensure that these providers are treated on fair, reasonable and non-discriminatory terms, including in the distribution of relevant data and revenue.
	The Must Carry bridge into social media platforms for local news	Much like television broadcasting's Must Carry duties stipulated in the Communications Act 2003, UK policymakers and Ofcom should consider requiring big tech platforms to carry certain forms of local news, for example, news that meets people's critical information needs about local council consultations as well as emergencies, natural disasters, public health and so on.
	New digital terrain for local journalists	Journalists should be enabled to play an active role in online community forums such as those provided by nextdoor.com or Facebook. Journalists could actively fact-check claims and share accurate information to help support a productive democratic culture in these forums. Relevant platforms should be required to support local journalists in playing these roles.
Disinformation research and funder community	Self-censorship tracker	Investment and research is needed to thoroughly understand the problem of journalist self-censorship through research and evidence, including conducting an annual survey to understand the extent and severity of freedom-restricting harassment and its censorship impacts.
	Investment in understanding systemic local information ecosystem vulnerabilities	Disinformation funders and researchers should expand the scope of their research to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of local information ecosystems in order to identify possible vulnerabilities to and drivers of mis/disinformation, particularly by government actors, which may be specific to local context.

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

In 2024, governments face a range of global crises, from climate change and political conflict to energy and food shortages. Democracies are in decline globally and, within the UK, trust in democratic institutions is particularly low.[2] Over half of the population have either low or no trust in the UK government (57%) and the news media (66%).[3] Yet, it is mis/disinformation that is considered the biggest short-term risk facing global society.[4]

At Demos and the Public Interest News Foundation, we focus on the health of information ecosystems because we recognise how crucial they are to functioning democracies. The co-dependency is often ignored when seeking to tackle 'disinformation'. Instead, research has often focused on the disinformation itself - the volume and spread, our level of engagement and the threat this might pose to our institutions, particularly when spread by foreign malign actors.

But how is disinformation seeded, nurtured and spread at home in local contexts? What is the role of our democratic and information actors in preventing and challenging it? These questions are particularly important in the context of new government policies that seek to influence the behaviour of the public in order to prevent and respond to climate change. To be successful in their goals to, for example, increase active travel and reduce the air pollution contributed by motorised vehicles, government actors need to be effective communicators and facilitators of democratic deliberation and decision-making. If government actors are losing the battle of engagement to disinformation campaigners, then we risk our information lacking a factual basis that is so critical to effective democratic decision-making.

In this context, we investigated how disinformation threatens social cohesion in a specifically local context and the role information ecosystems can play to challenge this. We answered two questions as part of the European Media and Information Fund's workstream into 'Investigations in Disinformation Dynamics' in the UK:

1. How do disinformation campaigns weaponise and amplify existing social divisions in local communities?
2. What is the role of local information ecosystems in challenging this?

We explored these questions in relation to news, information and engagement surrounding a specific policy introduced in the UK that falls within the broader climate change and transport agenda between 2021 and 2024. The 'Low Traffic Neighbourhood' (LTN) policy refers to steps taken to restrict access to motorised through traffic within specific residential areas.[5] This policy has not been a dedicated national 'policy' in and of itself, but a measure proposed to help achieve a number of goals including: enabling social distancing, motivating active travel, including walking and cycling, and tackling air pollution.[6] The policy has been typically implemented by local governments in England and to an extent across the UK, but draws on funds

2 Vdem has reported in 2024 that 'almost all components of democracy are getting worse in more countries than they are getting better, compared to ten years ago.' Vdem, 2024, p6 https://v-dem.net/documents/43/v-dem_dr2024_lowres.pdf

3 ONS, 2023. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/trustingovernmentuk/2023#:~:text=Indicators%20from%20the%20Trust%20in,are%20official%20statistics%20in%20development.

4 World Economic Forum, 2024. https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_The_Global_Risks_Report_2024.pdf

5 These areas take on different names based on local government strategies. For example, some refer to them as 'Quiet Neighbourhoods'. Others refer to them as 'Active Neighbourhoods'.

6 This policy can and has been implemented in a variety of ways including the installation of barriers or 'filters', such as bollards, gates and planters, or by placing 'no motor vehicle' road signs on the road. This action may encourage those who use motorised vehicles to use an alternative form of transport, such as walking or cycling. It may also cause all remaining traffic to divert to what is frequently called 'boundary roads' - the roads that are at the boundary of a Low Traffic Neighbourhood. This approach creates space within an LTN where there is limited traffic and noise for the residents living there.

provided by the national or regional government in line with a broader national or regional strategy. As administrators over a devolved area, local governments can choose if and where to install these measures and with what specific mechanisms, speed and approach to communication and consultation with residents as well as success criteria and evidence.

The choice to focus on this policy in this study was also prompted by the considerable backlash it has received within certain local communities, but notably not all. There have been allegations both that those who oppose the policy have been mobilised by disinformation online and those who support the policy have made decisions undemocratically and without an accurate understanding of public attitudes to it. These accusations suggest considerable weaknesses in the quality of the information and engagement opportunities available to citizens which are having a knock-on impact on the legitimacy of democratic decision-making.

Our report does not seek to support a stronger implementation of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods or give comment on the value of the policy in and of itself. Instead, it seeks to illuminate the need for strengthened information ecosystems and public participation in policy-making, so that the public can rely on accurate information for their decision-making and trust that our democratic systems surrounding the design and implementation of policy have greater legitimacy at a local level. This is a need that we argue has been long overdue, but—given the goals of devolution and challenges of climate change—is also likely to become a particular impediment for governments in the years to come.

OUR APPROACH

Our methodology was designed to achieve a rich and in-depth understanding of both the offline and online information ecosystems in specific locations and to identify the types, levels and use of disinformation within it. We detail this approach fully in the Appendix. In summary, we conducted the following:

DIGITAL MEDIA ANALYSIS

Reviewed digital media and social media discussion of the LTN policy within the UK between January 2021 to January 2024, reflecting over 570,000 posts. We sampled 10 of the posts that received the highest online engagement, on a month by month basis, for the entire dataset between 01/01/2021 and 17/01/2024. Using this ranking and selection from each month, we produced a sub-sample of 370 posts. These posts totalled 152,905 engagements over this period (111,757 reposts and 41,147 replies), as well as over 2.9 million views (2,919,370).

LOCAL CASE STUDIES

Journalists, community leaders, politicians

Residents

Primary fieldwork including: interviews with 24 journalists, local politicians, civil servants and community leaders and face-to-face focus groups with 47 members of the public who reflected attitudes on all sides of the 'LTN debate'.

Desk research, including, but not limited to: completing a detailed analysis of Councils' website and social media presence as well as press releases and reviewing a sample of local news published during October 2023 to identify the prevalence of public interest news that could be deemed local as well as all stories that focused on LTNs specifically.

OX OXFORD

RO ROCHDALE

EN ENFIELD

NATIONAL STAKEHOLDER AND EXPERT ENGAGEMENT AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Our research was complemented by a detailed literature review of other relevant studies and a series of stakeholder engagements to discuss and refine our policy recommendations.

A NOTE ABOUT OUR CASE STUDIES AND HOW THIS IMPACTS OUR RESEARCH

Focusing our research within specific communities was crucial to understanding the variation of implementation of this policy by different local governments as well as to understand how different local information ecosystems responded to any mis/disinformation about it.

Our case studies were deliberately selected to reflect locations where there had been public resistance to the policy locally. Therefore, our results are skewed towards where mistakes had likely been made. We also opted for locations that reflected an overall regional balance and a mix of community size i.e. a city, a town and a borough within the capital city. Additionally, we sought to include a location with a significant proportion of under-represented communities e.g. minoritised ethnic communities, faith communities and/or communities from more impoverished socio-economic backgrounds. Finally, we opted for a mix of case studies in terms of the progression of the LTN policy implementation in the community i.e. a community where LTNs were still being trialled as well as a community where LTNs had been trialled and implemented.

Given the smaller sample and level of variation between communities, our findings will not represent what has happened in every area of the country, or for other communities. Instead, we seek to provide the themes and trends we observed in the case studies we could include in order to highlight the likely needs and gaps that could be found across the country to varying degrees.

NEXT STEPS

We, Demos and Public Internet News Foundation, plan to continue evolving and strengthening our approach to information ecosystem mapping throughout the UK with a view to identifying stronger and weaker ecosystems at a local level and evaluating effective strategies for building truth, inclusivity and resilience. We hope such maps and research will be useful for the targeting of interventions in the future that seek to tackle gaps and the prevention of mis/disinformation. We also plan to deepen our analysis of disinformation networks and strategies surrounding this debate online and across different platforms.

If you have any feedback on our report, approach or if you are interested in collaborating with us, please get in touch via: hannah.perry@demos.co.uk.

PART 1
KEY DEFINITIONS AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. DEFINING AN INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

In this chapter we outline the key terms and definitions used in this report.

Information ecosystem definition

A local information ecosystem is a network of institutions, collaborations and people on which a specific community relies for local news, information and engagement.[7]

In the UK context, a 'local' information ecosystem is one available to a local community living in a geographical area united by a specific local authority. The scope of a local ecosystem is defined by the community i.e. where they go for 'local' news, information and engagement.

PRINCIPLES OF A HEALTHY INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

A healthy information ecosystem should honour the following principles:

PRINCIPLE 1

Truth-producing and seeking

As much a necessity in politics as it is in science, law and business. The truth can act as a binding force for decision-making.[8] Without it, good quality deliberation and the legitimacy of decisions can be eroded.

PRINCIPLE 2

Inclusive

A lack of knowledge, information and skills is recognised as a key determiner of political inequality.[9] Political equality is a core value in democratic systems and therefore a lack of engagement by key groups within the political process due to systemic gaps in process and resources reflects a fundamentally undemocratic and unequal one. An inclusive information ecosystem enables the legitimacy of democratic decisions.

PRINCIPLE 3

Resilient

A healthy ecosystem is one that is stable and resilient to threats. Such threats can emerge in the evolution of our society, be they political, economic or technological.

7 Democracy Fund, 2024. https://ecosystems.democracyfund.org/what-is-a-news-ecosystem/
8 Susskind, 2019.
9 Dahl, R.A. 1989.

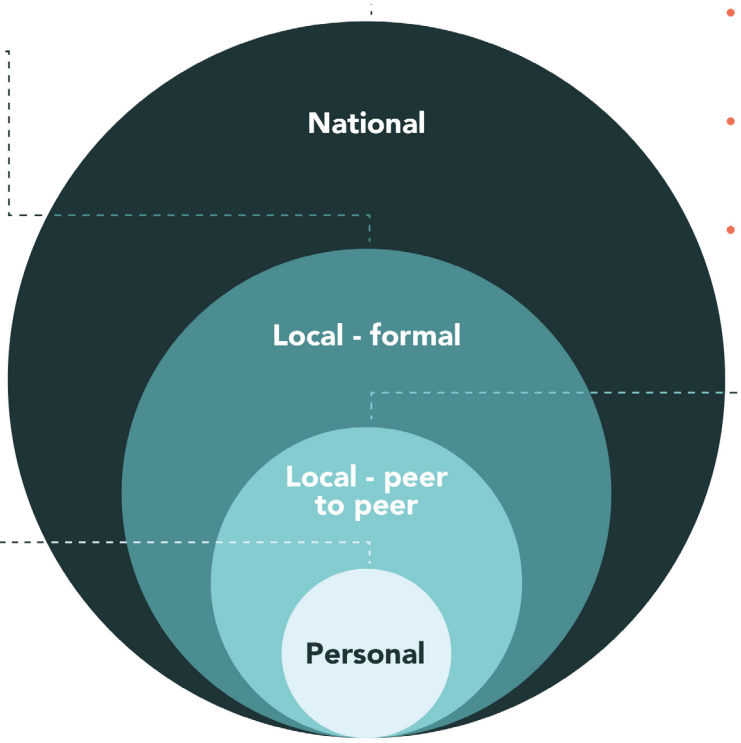
A healthy information ecosystem should therefore meet the following 11 criteria:[10]

PRINCIPLE	CRITERIA
Truth-producing and seeking	1. Produces knowledge based on true and factual information from multiple verifiable sources; 2. Helps correct and resolve mistakes in factual information and tackles incomplete understanding; 3. Considers the future and what may change; 4. Facilitates understanding of others' needs such that it enables a broader perspective on issues of common interest. Rational decisions are not just 'fact-regarding' and 'future-regarding', but also 'other-regarding'.[11]
Inclusive	5. A diverse range of information and news providers is capable of connecting with all groups and communities in the ecosystem area; 6. Accessible to all with provisions for safeguarding individual information producers and participants; 7. Tackles historical inequities in information-sharing and engagement; 8. Provides and protects space for mutually respectful moral disagreement.
Resilient	9. Draws on sustainable funding models for key information actors including news media and communication departments in local government; 10. Has mechanisms for assessing and highlighting where there are weaknesses and when there is a severe disruption and need for resolution; 11. Greater through the sum of its parts through clear organisation and interdependence in its use and deployment of networks and relationships between anchor institutions e.g. newsrooms, government actors, informal networks and infrastructure e.g. internet access.

10 Principles are drawn from Guttman, 'Why Deliberative Democracy?', Habermas and Landemore 2021, 'Open Democracy & Digital technology'
11 Offe and Preuss, 1991.

KEY INFORMATION ACTORS

Aside from citizens, within a local information ecosystem there are a number of key actors that have been grouped into four levels. This grouping is used to structure our findings in Part 3 of this report.



LOCAL - FORMAL

- Local government actors and institutions, including council online engagement;
- Local news media institutions, such as local TV, radio, newspapers and magazines.

PERSONAL

- Personal online and offline networks, such as friends and family who may share information publicly or privately via closed digital messaging services e.g. WhatsApp or face-to-face.

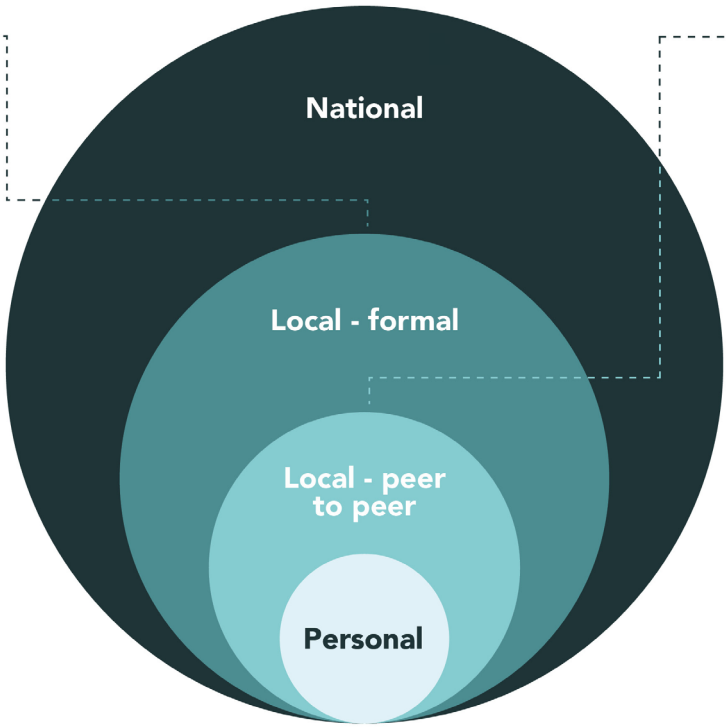
- National government actors and institutions, civil servants and politicians i.e. local MPs;
- National news media institutions, such as TV, radio, newspapers and magazines;
- National and open online platforms e.g. X, formerly known as Twitter.

LOCAL - PEER TO PEER

- Community groups, such as a cycling groups, disability charities or residents' associations;
- Businesses, such as local small business owner forums;
- Local online groups e.g. public or semi-open peer-to-peer networks such as general and interest-specific Facebook or Next Door groups specific to the local area.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE

The following is an example of a high-level information ecosystem map of Oxford. This map reflects the information sources highlighted by citizens when referring to where they received information about LTNs from. We have added circulation figures where these are available.



LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACTORS AND INSTITUTIONS:

- **Oxfordshire County Council** – 28000 followers; per 100,000: 3,860
- **Oxford City Council** – 27,000 followers; per 100,000: 3722
- *For example,* Oxford Mail - daily circulation 5,505; per 100,000 people: 759 per day; Oxford Mail website Visits Per Month: 6,071,263; per 100.000: 837

LOCAL - PEER TO PEER

- **Community groups:** Reconnecting Oxford, Cyclox, Coalition of Healthy Streets and Active Travel, Oxford Pedestrian Association, Oxfordshire Liveable Streets.
- **Businesses:** Oxford Business Action Group;
- **Local online groups:** Local Facebook groups e.g. the Blackbird Leys discussion group and Littlemore Live group.[12]

12 Blackbird Leys Facebook discussion group. https://www.facebook.com/groups/656236718050193/; Littlemore Live discussion group. https://www.facebook.com/groups/145170682198344/?locale=en_GB

2. THE POLICY AGENDA - LOW TRAFFIC NEIGHBOURHOODS

In this chapter, we introduce the Low Traffic Neighbourhood policy in detail. This detail is useful for interpreting the narratives and sources of division discussed in Parts 2 and 3.

WHAT IS THE LTN POLICY?

The 'Low Traffic Neighbourhood' (LTN) policy refers to steps taken to restrict access to motorised traffic within specific residential areas.[13] This policy has not been a dedicated national 'policy' in and of itself, but a measure proposed to help achieve a number of policy goals including: enabling social distancing, motivating active travel, including walking and cycling, and to tackle air pollution.

This policy can and has been implemented in a variety of ways including the installation of barriers or 'filters', such as bollards, gates and planters, or by placing 'no motor vehicle' road signs on the road. This action may encourage those who use motorised vehicles to use an alternative form of transport, such as walking or cycling. It may also cause all remaining traffic to divert to what is frequently called 'boundary roads' - the roads that are at the boundary of a Low Traffic Neighbourhood. This approach creates space within an LTN where there is limited traffic and noise for the residents living there.

WHOSE POLICY IS IT?

'Who is leading the LTN policy' is a crucial question given that a number of dominant conspiracy theories suggest the 'actor' is not who it seems [See Chapter 5]. However, the answer to this question is not straightforward. It has a history with a variety of policy actors involved.

European and local support

Before 2020, policies resembling Low Traffic Neighbourhoods i.e. traffic reduction schemes had a long history across Europe, from the progressive pedestrianisation of Nuremberg over the 1970s and 80s, to Mayor Anne Hidalgo's recent ramping up of restrictions on older, more polluting vehicles from the centre of Paris.[14] The concept of the '15-minute city' was initially proposed in 2016 by Carlos Moreno, a researcher who served as an advisor to Mayor Hidalgo's plans in Paris.[15] His ideas build on earlier movements in urban

13 These areas take on different names based on local government strategies. For example, some refer to them as 'Quiet Neighbourhoods'. Others refer to them as 'Active Neighbourhoods'.

14 We Are Possible, Car Free Megacities. https://interactive.wearepossible.org/carfreestories/; University of Leeds, Traffic Calming: Evidence on Performance https://www.its.leeds.ac.uk/projects/konsult/private/level2/instruments/instrument013/l2_013c.htm; Bloomberg UK, October 2018. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-10-10/how-paris-became-a-global-model-for-climate-adaptation.

15 Moreno, Carlos, et al., January 2021. https://www.mdpi.com/2624-6511/4/1/6; The Guardian, February 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/07/paris-mayor-unveils-15-minute-city-plan-in-re-election-campaign.

planning, including New Urbanism.[16] The concept is relatively simple: 'Most human needs and many desires' should be located within a travel distance of 15 minutes from home, with walking, cycling and public transit incentivised over car travel.[17]

However, with the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns spreading through cities across the globe, the concept of the 15-minute city saw an upsurge in popularity among policy-makers - combining the goal of public health and social distancing with an opportunity to reform approaches to traffic management. For example, Oxford County Council initially explored the idea of 15-minute cities as an inspiration for Oxford's Low Traffic Neighbourhoods.[18] However, when it became clear that 15-minute cities were becoming embroiled in controversy and conspiracy, in 2022 the council released a fact-checking statement clarifying the definition of these schemes and how its goals distinguished from this concept.[19] A key clarification was that the public would not be confined to their homes or a 15-minute radius, but instead that the initial goal was to enable the public to be able to access services within a 15-minute walk.

Prior to 2020, policies related to LTNs were also initiated at local and regional levels. For example, in 2014, Transport for London launched a 'Healthy Streets Approach' - a system of policies and strategies "to deliver a healthier, more inclusive city where people choose to walk, cycle and use public transport."[20] Local boroughs in London were encouraged to adopt this approach in order to receive funding as part of their 'Local Implementation Plan'.[21] In 2018, the Mayor of London Sadiq Khan advanced this approach further through the 'Transport Strategy' (MTS) programme which sets out targets for reducing car travel and in the same year, citizens in Enfield had launched a petition calling for an LTN in their local area.[22] Separately, in 2015, the Oxfordshire County and Oxford City Councils had also begun a strategy referred to as 'Connecting Oxford' for transforming how people travel in the city. Yet, the Low Traffic Neighbourhood measures in the two cities were not introduced until 2020.[23] Thus, prior to the national government's support for this policy, local and regional government policymakers as well as even some residents had taken up the idea - multiplying the number of actors leading the design or initiation of the policy.

UK national government take-up

Following the start of the pandemic, the ideas underpinning the policy were taken up by the government through the Department of Transport. In May 2020, then-Minister for Transport Grant Schapps announced the £2 billion 'Emergency Active Travel Fund'.[24] Guidance was issued that encouraged local authorities to take non-permanent measures "as swiftly as possible, and in any event within weeks…given the urgent need to change travel habits before the restart takes full effect".[25] Separately, and with consistency in the emphasis on the speed of spending, the Department for Transport also mandated Transport for London spend £55 million of an Extraordinary Funding package on "an ambitious Active Travel Plan to promote cycling and walking, including new segregated cycle lanes, closures of roads to through traffic, and pavement extensions" between May and October

> ***"[Local authorities should take non-permanent measures] as swiftly as possible, and in any event within weeks…given the urgent need to change travel habits before the restart takes full effect".***
>
> **- Department of Transport, May 2020**

16 Congress for the New Urbanism, The Charter of the New Urbanism. https://www.cnu.org/who-we-are/charter-new-urbanism.
17 Congress for the New Urbanism, February 2021. https://www.cnu.org/publicsquare/2021/02/08/defining-15-minute-city.
18 Oxford City Council, 15-minute Neighbourhoods Background Paper. https://www.oxford.gov.uk/downloads/file/2121/attachment_of_earnings_orders_guide_for_employers.
19 Oxfordshire County Council and Oxford City Council, December 2022. https://news.oxfordshire.gov.uk/joint-statement-from-oxfordshire-county-council-and-oxford-city-council-on-oxfords-traffic-filters/.
20 Transport for London, Healthy Streets Explained. https://content.tfl.gov.uk/healthy-streets-explained.pdf.
21 It was through this scheme that in 2014, Enfield was awarded £30 million by Transport for London "as part of the Mayor's aim to create so-called 'mini-Holland' areas in three outer London boroughs - Enfield, Kingston, and Waltham Forest" (Enfield Council 2023, p61). This scheme was also referenced as context for "the delivery of three Quieter Neighbourhood schemes" (ibid).
22 In 2019, Enfield also got additional TfL funding through the Liveable Neighbourhoods scheme. (TfL, Liveable Neighbourhoods. https://tfl.gov.uk/info-for/boroughs-and-communities/liveable-neighbourhoods) This scheme was also referenced as context for "the delivery of three Quieter Neighbourhood schemes" (Enfield Council, 2023).; Better Streets, 2018. http://betterstreets.co.uk/bowes-ward-petitions-for-a-low-traffic-neighbourhood/.
23 Connecting Oxford, Oxfordshire County Council and Oxford City Council, 2019. https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/sites/default/files/file/roads-and-transport-connecting-oxfordshire/connecting_oxford_brochure.pdf.
24 Department for Transport and The Rt Hon Grant Schapps MP, May 2020. https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/transport-secretarys-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-9-may-2020; Department for Transport, Office for Zero Emission Vehicles, Office for Low Emission Vehicles and the Rt Hon Grant Schapps MP, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/2-billion-package-to-create-new-era-for-cycling-and-walking.
25 Traffic Management Act 2004: network management in response to Covid-19, May 2020. https://web.archive.org/web/20200514130307/https:/www.gov.uk/government/publications/reallocating-road-space-in-response-to-covid-19-statutory-guidance-for-local-authorities/traffic-management-act-2004-network-management-in-response-to-covid-19.

2020.[26] These actions demonstrated a marked shift in the drive for local authorities to take up the policy underpinned by a broader national strategy and ministerial support. They also constitute an additional, more powerful and influential, actor leading the policy in the UK.

Local government implementation

In 2020, some, but not all local governments sought to gain funds and adopt the policy. A range of cash-strapped local authorities—some of whom had already demonstrated an alignment with this broader agenda as highlighted above—responded to the national Government's call for funding. On receipt of this funding, local authorities began 'swiftly' communicating and consulting before implementing 'trial' schemes.[27] Importantly, not all local authorities received the funding or the specific amounts they had requested. Furthermore, local governments were not mandated to implement the policy in a strict singular way. Instead, they were encouraged to nuance their approach to their local communities. As a result, whilst the funding may have come from the same pot, with the same broad goals, the approach taken may have felt very different from community to community. Again, the number of policy actors multiplies in tandem with a number of variations in the policy design.

National government U-turn

> ***"I'm slamming the brakes on the war on motorists"***
>
> **- Rishi Sunak, September 2023**

Since the launch of the Emergency Active Travel Fund in 2020 and delegation to local government, there has been a marked shift in support for the policy. In October 2023, ahead of Conservative party conference, Prime Minister Sunak told the Sun newspaper that he was "slamming the brakes" on what he described was "the war on motorists" by councils. The earlier statutory guidance in support of implementing the Active Travel Fund was subsequently withdrawn entirely, described as 'Covid-19 era guidance' and replaced in October 2023 with a new "plan for drivers".[28] In this plan, a review of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs) was launched and in March 2024 concluded that too often, Low Traffic Neighbourhoods had been "poorly thought-through and introduced with insufficient public engagement and support." Future schemes must follow their new statutory guidance as well as guidance by Active Travel England, Transport Analysis Guidance and the Local Government Association, particularly in relation to the evidence that should be used and approaches to consultation and communication with local communities.[29]

This clarification came nearly four years after the initial announcement of the fund and the call to move 'swiftly'. The late publication of such clarifications, including an emphasis on engagement with communities and monitoring and evaluation prior to the trial or implementation of the policy clashed directly with the initial emphasis to spend the money to achieve a specific outcome as quickly as possible.

WHAT WERE THE POLICY GOALS?

Establishing the primary and secondary goals of a policy and how its success is measured, particularly during trials of the policy, is crucial for coherence and clarity. For example, is the primary goal to reduce air pollution and therefore the intermediary goals are to increase cycling and reduce non-electric car usage, or is the primary goal to increase cycling to tackle obesity and a reduction in air pollution is simply a helpful added benefit? Is it acceptable if the trials of these schemes have differentiated outcomes across different communities based on the highly variable factors which may affect the success of a trial on air pollution or traffic levels? The answers to these questions are also not straightforward.

There was a drive at the national level for the implementation of strategies that reference traffic management restrictions with up to three different goals of: responding to and enabling the need to socially distance (in the context of the pandemic), encourage active travel (with the benefits of promoting good health) and to reduce air pollution (thus respond to climate change).

26 Department for Transport, May 2020. https://content.tfl.gov.uk/extraordinary-funding-and-financing-agreement-may-2020.pdf.
27 Traffic Management Act 2004: network management in response to Covid-19, May 2020. https://web.archive.org/web/20200514130307/https:/www.gov.uk/government/publications/reallocating-road-space-in-response-to-covid-19-statutory-guidance-for-local-authorities/traffic-management-act-2004-network-management-in-response-to-covid-19.
28 The Sun Newspaper, September 2023. https://www.thesun.co.uk/motors/24208749/rishi-sunak-car-drivers-ltn-speed-scheme/; Department for Transport, October 2023. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/plan-for-drivers/the-plan-for-drivers.
29 Statutory guidance - Implementing low traffic neighbourhoods. Department for Transport, 2024. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/implementing-low-traffic-neighbourhoods/implementing-low-traffic-neighbourhoods#introduction.

1. **In the initial public announcements by the government, part of the rationale for restricting traffic and creating more space for walking and cycling had been tied directly to the pandemic.**[30] There was a need for social distancing and so we needed space for alternative modes of transport, such as walking and cycling.

2. **The messaging to support a 'cycling revolution' and benefit the climate was also present and became more of an emphasis over time.** In 2020, Active Travel England was also launched to assess who should be given the grants.[31] This executive agency of the Department of Transport is "responsible for making walking, wheeling and cycling the preferred choice for everyone to get around in England."[32]

3. **The same £2 billion highlighted as the Emergency Travel Fund in 2020 was announced as part of the Net Zero Strategy in 2021** which committed to increasing the share of journeys taken by cycling and reducing car emissions.[33]

With these variable goals, success could be measured in a variety of ways. As highlighted in the government's most recent guidance, establishing these goals and a baseline for these measures is crucial to enabling a robust assessment of the effectiveness of the scheme.[34]

However, these goals were not clearly defined by the national government and instead could be set by local governments and therefore be responsive to their local community's needs and the likelihood of differentiated outcomes. This allowed for a highly variable set of goals to be identified and communicated by different local governments. For example, a survey of 42 local authorities who hosted 99 schemes found that justifications for individual LTNs included active travel uptake, air quality, road safety and Covid-19 social distancing as well as improving quality of life, mitigating flood risks, augmenting biodiversity, boosting local business and facilitating outdoor dining.[35] This variability is also reflected in the reasons why some authorities removed the schemes following trials, including: 'objections from residents' ,'lack of active travel uptake', 'political decision', and that it was 'no longer necessary following the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions'.[36] Even the more recent guidance published by Active Travel England facilitates local government targeting a broad range of goals including tackling cost of living, air quality and supporting local growth and employment.[37]

Furthermore, the evidence that could be used to determine whether these goals had been achieved and therefore if a policy could be deemed 'successful' was also up to local government to determine. Variations in evidence and interpretations of success allowed for ambiguity surrounding how the policy was interpreted and/or whether a policy is implemented. Whilst Active Travel England has indicated that they are currently seeking to understand 'what data is being collected across local transport for monitoring and evaluation purposes', a holistic framework remains outstanding.[38]

30 Department for Transport and The Rt Hon Grant Schapps MP, May 2020. https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/transport-secretarys-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-9-may-2020.
31 Department for Transport, 2020. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f1f59458fa8f53d39c0def9/gear-change-a-bold-vision-for-cycling-and-walking.pdf.
32 Active Travel England, 2024. https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/active-travel-england.
33 HM Government, 2021, p24. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6194dfa4d3bf7f0555071b1b/net-zero-strategy-beis.pdf.
34 Department for Transport, 2024. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/implementing-low-traffic-neighbourhoods/implementing-low-traffic-neighbourhoods#design-principles-for-effective-ltns.
35 Ipsos, 2024. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65f400adfa18510011011787/low-traffic-neighbourhoods-research-report.pdf.
36 Ipsos, 2024. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65f400adfa18510011011787/low-traffic-neighbourhoods-research-report.pdf.
37 Active Travel England, 2024. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-to-complete-the-active-travel-fund-4-proforma/guidance-note-for-local-authorities-to-support-completion-of-the-active-travel-fund-4-proforma.
38 Active Travel England, 2024. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-to-complete-the-active-travel-fund-4-proforma/guidance-note-for-local-authorities-to-support-completion-of-the-active-travel-fund-4-proforma#monitoring-and-evaluation.

3. OUR CASE STUDIES (IN A NUTSHELL)

Here we introduce key features of our individual case studies to situate findings shared throughout the study in context. Where results apply to individual case studies throughout the report, you will find the specific icons and colour.

EN ENFIELD

Enfield is a large borough in the north of London. With the M25 on its northern border, the annual average of vehicles flowing in and through Enfield is significantly higher than the England and London averages and has also steadily increased together with car ownership levels since 2010with no indication of slowing.[39] This led to calls by some community members for an LTN as early as 2018 highlighted by the Enfield Southgate MP in Parliament.[40]

Enfield is in the top 25% most deprived local authority areas in England. Like many neighbourhoods in London, a considerable proportion of the community (40%) were born overseas and nearly a fifth (18%) felt they could not speak English well. One in ten people (13.6%) report having a long term health problem or disability.

39 Enfield Council, 2023, p54. https://www.enfield.gov.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0023/44717/Borough-profile-2023-Your-council.pdf.
40 Hansard, 2018. https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2018-11-13/debates/3A368EB6-48A6-4044-A34C-4491311FED5F/LowTrafficNeighbourhoodInBowesWard.

In 2018, a group of citizens in Enfield launched a petition calling for an LTN in their local area.[41] In 2020, following receipt of funding, two LTNs were trialled in the fairly affluent areas of Fox Lane and Bowes Primary (South and South West of the borough) by Labour-led Enfield Council. The LTNs were permanently installed in early 2022. A trial of two further LTNs has since been launched in Bowes East and Edmonton Green in late 2023, areas notable for particularly high levels of deprivation as well as poor air quality.[42]

The council that introduced the LTNs has been Labour-controlled since 2006. The Conservatives have been actively fighting the policy with Tory leader Joane Laban stating that, *"there has never been a traffic or transport scheme that has divided the community as much as LTNs. It's put neighbour against neighbour. The anger is huge."*[43]

There is a strong cycling lobby in Enfield with one pro-LTN campaigner highlighting that they had been lobbying for traffic restrictions in their local area for over a decade. As one pro-LTN cycling activist told our researchers:

"We've been making the most noise for the longest, and there is a sort of educated middle class campaigning element; one of the first big low traffic neighbourhoods was in Enfield."

In response to LTNs, there has been vandalism of council CCTV cameras, protests in response to the Fox Lane LTN in November 2021 as well as one business-person challenging the traffic orders in court highlighting errors in the consultation process.[44]

OXFORD

Oxford is a small city that is internationally recognised for its historic university, but is known within the community as being highly variable demographically depending on where you live. Those associated with the university typically live more centrally and therefore have shorter distances to travel, with other residents competing heavily for the remaining housing and requiring longer journey times from the suburbs.

Oxford's demographics have changed considerably over the last decade. 29% of residents were from a minority ethnic background in 2021 - a proportion that has risen considerably over the previous decade (from 22% in 2011) and above the national average for England (19%).[45] Oxford's median age also rose by two years between the last two censuses with one in ten above the age of 65.[46]

Oxford's transport policy is led by the Oxfordshire County Council with the support of the Oxford City Council, henceforth simply referred to as 'the Council'. The council introduced six Low Traffic Neighbourhoods into Oxford: three in Cowley in the South East of Oxford and later three in East Oxford. These areas are seen as distinct parts of Oxford, sit between the most deprived communities, such as in Blackbird Leys, Littlemore and Rose Hill and the centre, and are also home to a significant proportion of the Muslim and South Asian community in Oxford.[47, 48]

Political support for the policy has been contentious. The proposal for Cowley was initially introduced when the council was Conservative-led, proposals for East-Oxford were then led by a newly elected coalition of Labour, Liberal Democrat and Green parties. The Conservatives have since opposed maintaining the schemes, though their opposition has been overthrown. Labour has also been reportedly 'divided' on the topic.[49]

41 In 2019, Enfield also got additional TfL funding through the Liveable Neighbourhoods scheme. (TfL, Liveable Neighbourhoods. https://tfl.gov.uk/info-for/boroughs-and-communities/liveable-neighbourhoods) This scheme was also referenced as context for "the delivery of three Quieter Neighbourhood schemes" (Enfield Council, 2023).; Better Streets, 2018. http://betterstreets.co.uk/bowes-ward-petitions-for-a-low-traffic-neighbourhood/.
42 Enfield Council, 2023.
43 Lydall, R. Evening Standard, April 2022. https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/london-local-elections-2022-ltn-low-traffic-neighbourhood-success-story-labour-enfield-b996875.html.
44 Cracknell, J. Enfield Dispatch, November 2021: https://enfielddispatch.co.uk/hundreds-protest-against-low-traffic-scheme/.
45 ONS, 2024. https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E07000178/.
46 Ibid.
47 Oxford City Council, Poverty and deprivation statistics. https://www.oxford.gov.uk/population-statistics/poverty-deprivation-statistics.
48 Oxford City Council, Poverty and deprivation statistics. https://www.oxford.gov.uk/population-statistics/poverty-deprivation-statistics.
49 ThisisOxfordshire, January 2024. https://www.oxfordshireliveablestreets.org/; MSN, October 2023. https://www.msn.com/en-gb/news/uknews/oxford-ltns-campaigners-fear-review-will-only-benefit-wealthier-areas/ar-AA1fAVI8.

Oxford is notable in the debate on LTNs because the public response to it has been at the centre of a number of news stories and online posts that have received high visibility. The traffic management measures such as bollards and wooden structures have been frequently vandalised. For example, the cost of fixing the plastic bollards after they had been vandalised, then replacing them with wooden structures and then repairing these from vandalism has so far cost the council over £180,000.[50] In 2023, there were also two significant anti-LTN protests including one outside County Hall in February 2023 where, reportedly, there was representation from the far right and conspiracy theorists, and another in October 2023 in East Oxford following a decision to keep the LTNs in this area.

Community members have highlighted their frustration with the perceived impact of the engagement of conspiracy theorists in debate:

"A lot of the disinformation has resulted in worries and fears that are utterly unfounded."
- Pro-LTN activist, Oxford

"The arguments from… the outside… kind of the Great Reset and all that kind of, you know, gubbins… It really doesn't help. It gives the councillors a stick to beat us with."
- Oxford Anti-LTN respondent

ROCHDALE

Rochdale is a town near Manchester in the north of England. With only a small town centre and many residents living on the outskirts, car use is fairly typical, particularly for travel to neighbouring Oldham and Bury. In Rochdale, the Low Traffic Neighbourhood is instead referred to as the Active Neighbourhood.[51]

Milkstone and Deeplish is home to a more deprived and predominantly Asian British Pakistani community relative to the rest of Rochdale and its outskirts.[52, 53] Local community leaders highlighted that digital poverty is a significant challenge for the community with a high proportion of households lacking devices to access the internet.[54] A comparatively high proportion (30%) of the community in Milkstone and Deeplish have English as a second language, with 9.5% who cannot speak English well.[55] Both digital poverty and barriers to English suggest specific needs in relation to government communications.

"There are more than 28 languages spoken in this neighbourhood. Our centre is full every day with English talking classes... For more than 50% of people English is not the first language, or if they are able to speak then able to understand the complex plans and details of the initiatives." - Community leader, Rochdale

"[In this area] people have not only socio-economic poverty but huge digital poverty.... the Deeplish Community Centre after the lockdown said okay, we are one of the poorest in digital poverty... young people don't have laptops and desktops computers to complete the whole class..." - Community leader, Rochdale

50 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-68276890, https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/23168053.cctv-ltn-vandalism-oxford-released-residents/, https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/23149295.vandals-set-light-bollard-protest-oxford-ltn-scheme/.
51 Rochdale Council, 2022. https://consultations.rochdale.gov.uk/research/milkstone-deeplish-active-neighbourhood-consultati/.
52 ONS, 2021
53 ONS, 2021.
54 Greater Manchester Authority, 2022. https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/what-we-do/digital/case-studies/case-study-using-infrastructure-to-tackle-digital-exclusion/.
55 Deeplish Children's Centre: https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/2360233. Deeplish Primary Academy: https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/2736679.

In February 2023, just one LTN was introduced in Milkstone and Deeplish by Labour via the Rochdale Borough Council, but the role of the Greater Manchester Transport Authority or Greater Manchester Combined Authority is unclear to residents.[56]

Rochdale is notable in the LTN debate because when the LTN was first installed, the planters were set alight, causing a fire and national media coverage of the incident. Many residents indicated that they felt shocked by the installation of the planters either because they had not been aware that they were due to be installed or because they had been aware, but felt the feedback they had given had been ignored. As a result, residents appeared sympathetic to the cause of the fire - reflecting that it symbolised the frustration of residents with the Council's actions. The council later removed the LTN entirely.

"[The fire] is a result of being really frustrated... people don't set things on fire for no reason."
- Anti-LTN resident, Rochdale

"I mean, the images of the planters being burnt, it just reminded me of, like, Northern Ireland or something. It was just, you know, to see this. It was for me personally very, very shocking." - Community leader, Rochdale

56 Transport for Greater Manchester has a specific strategy, Streets for All, which details its intention to develop Active Neighbourhoods - in collaboration with local authority leaders. See Streets for All. https://assets.ctfassets.net/nv7y93idf4jq/2jI7ApjSymHATQzRtObTT7/0cdfea7890fa7053ed80d0bfe19c063f/Streets_for_All_strategy.pdf;Rochdale Borough Council, 2024. https://democracy.rochdale.gov.uk/mgCommitteeMailingList.aspx?ID=536

PART 2
SOCIAL DIVISIONS AND THE AMPLIFYING ROLE OF DISINFORMATION

4. SOCIAL DIVISIONS SURROUNDING LTNS

In this chapter, we explain the different ways in which communities have been divided on the LTN policy. We introduce the range of narratives shared online and demonstrate how the balance of discourse became more anti-LTN between 2021-2024.

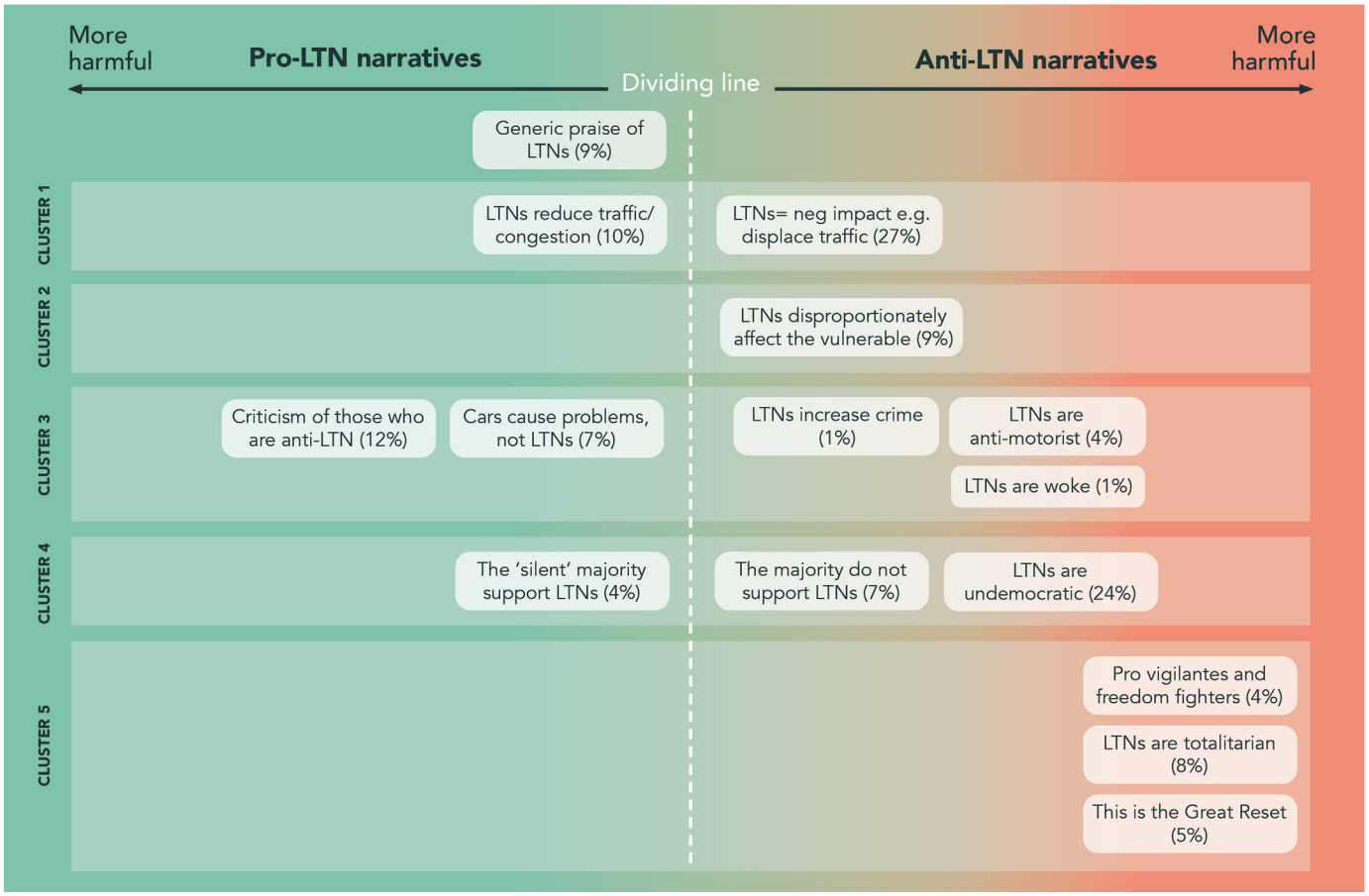
KEY FINDINGS SUMMARY

- Between 2021 and 2022, levels of engagement with LTN posts online were stable and initially relatively balanced between the pro and anti-LTN position. In 2023, the proportion of posts with high engagement that were anti-LTN rose from 48% to 79%.
- There were strong dividing lines in attitudes to the policy, including disagreement on its impact, disputes about the quality of evidence and the trade-offs including for those disproportionately negatively affected and an assertion and rejection that the majority support the policy.
- Nearly a quarter (24%) of posts in our sample describe the approach to the LTN policy as undemocratic.[57] A similar proportion (27%) describe the impact of LTNs on day-to-day life as ultimately negative.[58]
- Proponents on both sides of the debate attacked one another, with the anti-LTN side labelled SUV drivers and conspiracy theorists, and the pro-LTN side referred to as anti-motorist and woke. Councillors also faced considerable abuse online.
- More extreme arguments, such as that councils were totalitarian or authoritarian in their implementation of the schemes and could be compared to Nazi Germany (8% of posts), that we should celebrate the 'freedom fighters' who vandalised the barriers (4% of posts), or that communities have been the victims of a 'Great Reset' (5% of posts), veered into conspiracy theory.[59]
- 12% of the most engaged with posts in the debate reflect negative exchanges with councillors some of which were highly personal and abusive. Such exchanges are reflected on both sides of the debate.[60]
- The online picture gave the impression of a unilateral feeling of division and opposition in communities across the country, but levels of division and opposition varied from community to community.

57 Based on analysis of a sample of posts that received the most engagement over this period - not all posts. Please note that one post could be assigned to more than one narrative and so the percentages do not add up to 100%.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.

DIVISIONS OVERVIEW

The following chart summarises the different narratives along the 'dividing line' between those who support LTNs and those who oppose the policy. The table beneath then summarises each of the arguments. The percentages reflect the proportion of the debate online that referred to this topic.[61]



DIVISIONS KEY

The following table provides a brief description for each of the narratives across the divide.

PRO-LTN	
Praise of LTNs	Expressing straightforward approval of LTNs, without specifying a particular reason. i.e. 'I love my LTN' or 'LTNs are great, there should be more of them'.
LTNs reduce traffic / congestion	Arguing in favour of LTNs, as a policy intervention that reduces the level of traffic and congestion. Many of these narratives included links to evidence supporting this view.
Cars cause problems, not LTNs	Highlighting dangers of cars e.g. pollution, road deaths, to demonstrate that LTNs are beneficial. Often a response to anti-LTN arguments e.g. LTNs displace traffic and increase air pollution in poor neighbourhoods, to which a pro-LTN user responds that 'cars cause air pollution in the first place and LTNs reduce the number of cars on the road'.

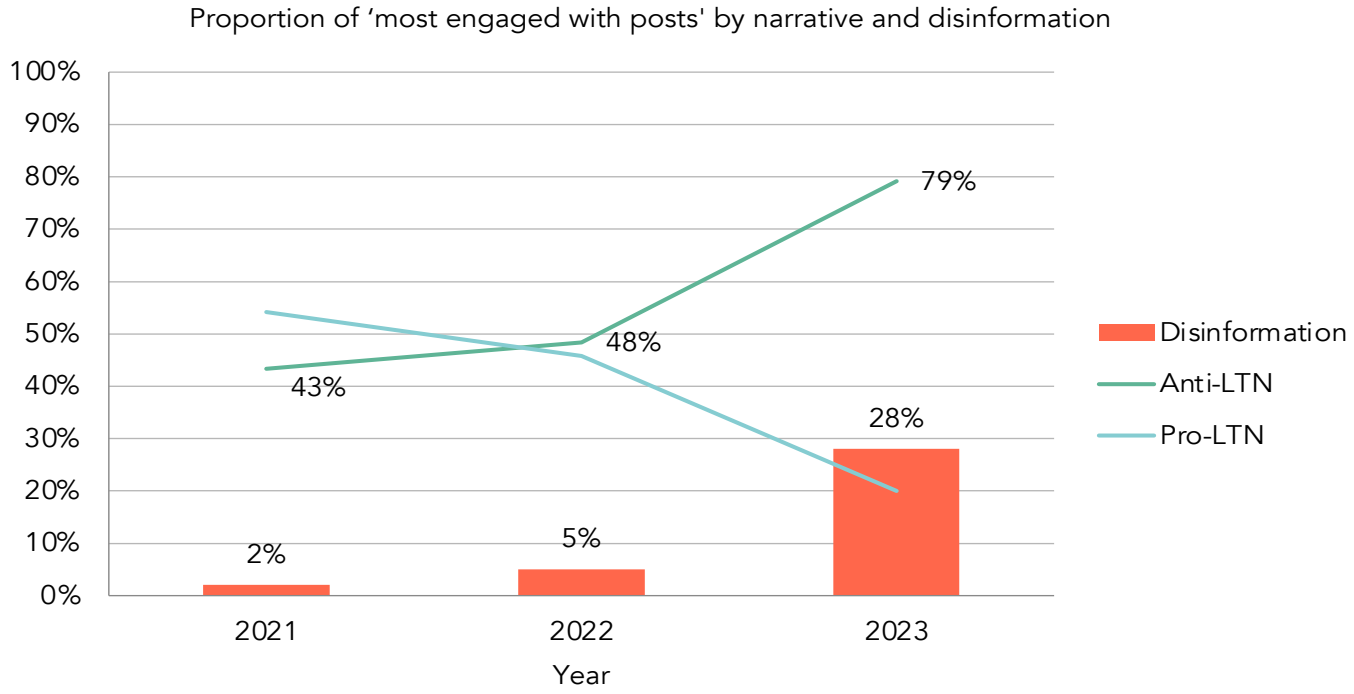
61 Ibid.

The majority of people support LTNs	Backing up one's own support for LTNs by claiming that LTNs are supported, and critics are in the minority. I.e. 'My council found that 78% of residents want to keep the LTN'.
Criticism of people who are anti-LTN	Personal criticism of people with an anti-LTN stance, rather than simply disagreeing with the anti-LTN position. I.e. 'opponents of LTNs are selfish and lazy for wanting to drive'.
ANTI-LTN	
Negative impact of LTNs	Arguing that LTNs worsen air pollution and congestion in particular areas due to displaced traffic, or exacerbate these problems in general.
Disproportionate impact of LTNs on vulnerable people	Highlighting the disproportionate impacts of LTNs on the elderly, disabled and/or low income, who may be unable to walk, cycle or take public transport, so require a car to travel, or may be disproportionately financially impacted by fines. I.e. 'LTNs are great for young, active middle classes, but what about the struggling single mum with 4 kids?'.
LTNs are anti-motorist	Suggesting that LTN policies are put in place and supported by people who actively dislike drivers and have a deliberate agenda to target car drivers. I.e. 'These angry cyclist councillors can't wait to kick you out of your car'.
LTNs are woke (as a negative)	Criticism which equates or associates LTNs with other 'woke' areas of policy, including trans rights and anti-racism.
LTNs increase crime	Arguing that by making previously busy streets quieter, LTNs will lead to more crime in those areas, such as muggings.
The majority of people do not support LTNs	Backing up one's own anti-LTN stance by claiming (often with evidence from polling) that LTNs are widely disapproved of. I.e. 'My council found that 78% of residents wanted to scrap the LTN'.
LTNs are undemocratic	Arguing that LTNs do not have a democratic mandate. This ranges from sharing polls showing that the public do not support LTN policies, to pointing out limitations in the citizen consultation process, to intersections with disinformation narratives. I.e. 'The people of Birmingham didn't vote for LTNs and do not support this scheme'.
Pro-vigilante action towards LTNs	Expressing approval of vandalism of LTNs, or encouraging others to vandalise LTNs. I.e. 'Well done brave freedom fighters'.
LTNs are totalitarian	Posts which associate LTNs and the policymakers behind them with authoritarian/totalitarian political regimes, ranging from Nazi Germany to the Chinese Communist Party. I.e. 'LTNs are fascist tactics of state control'.
Great Reset	Posts which feature one or more strands of the 'Great Reset' conspiracy theory, including 15-minute cities, the World Economic Forum, globalists/global elites, central bank digital currencies/digital identity and vaccine passports.

NEITHER PRO- NOR ANTI-LTN	
Other (Cuts across all three)	These posts may have mentioned LTNs, but did not express any viewpoint. I.e. 'Three cities have introduced new LTNs'.
Negative interaction with councillor	Directly addressing councillors by name and criticising their actions publicly. This can vary from legitimate criticism to outright harassment.

DIVISIONS SHIFT - AN INCREASE IN OPPOSITION OVER TIME

The following chart highlights how the balance of narratives between pro and Anti-LTNs shifted from being relatively balanced between pro and anti-LTN in proportion, to much more anti-LTN in 2023.



ONLINE DIVISIONS

In this section, we explore the key online narratives surrounding the policy in more detail.

Narrative cluster one: the search for definitive evidence of the impact of LTNs

The first of the online narratives we identified is concerned with disputes over the evidence of the impact of LTNs and the efficacy of the policy. Below we outline a number of the strands to this narrative.

Ongoing disputes about whether LTNs reduce or displace traffic

A search for high quality evidence of impact is at the heart of this debate. The opposing narratives, that the LTN measures actually reduce traffic (pro-LTN) or simply displace it to other roads just outside the boundary of the LTN (anti-LTN), reflect the highest proportion of online discussion. Over a quarter (27%) of posts reflect anti-LTN online commenters disputing the evidence that LTNs have a positive impact on traffic, whereas 10%

of posts reflect pro-LTN online commenters presenting evidence of its positive reductions in traffic.[62] Those in favour of the policy argue that the reduction in traffic has led to improvements in road safety, air pollution, child safety, active travel and overall quality of life. However, those who are against the policy rejected these claims and suggested that while there may be improvements in some specific locations, the problems have simply been displaced to other parts of the community. This fundamental disagreement appears to remain unresolved in the eyes of many commenters.

'Significant gaps in research… around key impacts' - Ipsos

In 2024, an Ipsos study published as part of the review of LTNs by the Department of Transport, concluded that "significant gaps in UK-based research around key impacts of LTNs are evident". Furthermore, of the evidence that does exist, Ipsos identified that "they are often not based on robust enough evidence to draw confident findings" and "as a result, there are gaps in what can be currently concluded about LTNs".[63] The recent Department of Transport review of LTNs concluded that whilst "the available evidence from the UK indicates that LTNs are effective in achieving outcomes of reducing traffic volumes within internal roads," results for boundary roads "are mixed, with some seeing increases in traffic volumes."[64] This evidence review confirms that results remain mixed on boundary roads comes four years after the measures were first proposed by the Department of Transport.

Citizens provided detailed critique of the quality of evidence available for the policy

The introduction of many LTNs during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, when so many communities were in lockdown, did not escape critics of the schemes.[65] The fact that evidence for a reduction in traffic was being collected during this period when the public was physically restricted from travelling, has led many to suggest that trials were not conducted under typical circumstances and therefore incorrectly attribute the cause of a reduction in traffic or pollution to the LTNs, instead of the lockdown.[66] This narrative was reflected not just online, but also offline by residents living in and around LTNs:

'A lot of this was introduced in lockdown where we were all stuck. Nobody went anywhere. [Of course] this test [of traffic volume] is going really well. We haven't gone anywhere for years!'
- Anti-LTN resident, Oxford

Online commentators have also scrutinised the location of air monitors, arguing that they had been placed in incorrect locations i.e. within LTNs and not on the boundary roads where traffic had arguably been displaced.[67] These criticisms of evidence served to support the argument that the evidence for the positive impact of LTNs was insufficient.

Oversimplification of evidence in communication by range of actors

Rather than acknowledge these weaknesses in evidence - as identified by Ipsos above - pro-LTN actors have shared evidence that could be positively and straightforwardly interpreted as a decrease in traffic. Only a minority of social media posts by pro-LTN actors specifically addressed the arguments made by anti-LTN actors about the different effects depending on the specific roads in question. Examples can be found among established mainstream news media publications as well as government actors on social media that miss opportunities to clarify the complexity of results in favour of highlighting a more positive and simple framing. This demonstrates that it was not just citizens who had a habit of oversimplifying complex evidence of results in favour of a particular, simpler position.

Councils would misrepresent evidence in online debates by sharing their own evidence of the policy with simple, but misleading summaries of results

62 Note the debate and specific online posts summarised here reflect the sample of posts that received the most engagement online over this period and not all posts that were published online..
63 Ipsos, 2024. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65f400adfa18510011011787/low-traffic-neighbourhoods-research-report.pdf
64 Ibid.
65 For example, a tweet by Heritage Party, April 2023. https://twitter.com/TerryKevinChar1/status/1642294405657767937.
66 Rosamund Adoo Kissi Debrah, January 2023. https://twitter.com/EllaRobertaFdn/status/1616545079908335619.
67 Reconnecting Oxford on X, November 2023. https://twitter.com/ReconnectingOx/status/1722594252033503466.

For example, a post by Hackney Council suggests in very simple terms that traffic had reduced both within the LTN and at the boundary road by sharing the overall average results, rather than how these results differ depending on the road. When you click on the link shared, it is clear that the original report is much more nuanced with much more variable results.[68] Despite declaring in the post that "traffic levels in November 2020 had decreased both inside the LTN and on boundary roads", there remain roads where traffic has increased and so the post is referring to the overall average. This demonstrates how posts by councils could overly simplify the evidence of successful results leaving room for disagreement and accusations that a council was misrepresenting the success of the policy.

Journalists also frequently oversimplified results drawing on evidence to support a claim that was misleading

For example, a Financial Times journalist shared a study from Transport for London and claimed that 'the evidence is that they don't displace traffic to neighbouring roads, but lead to all-round reductions'.[69] However, the report linked is actually much more nuanced. It instead states that 'of the 50 boundary roads surveyed, traffic had risen on 15 of them, and fallen on 35.'[70] This finding could be represented in a pro-LTN light, that overall traffic fell, or an anti-LTN light, that the distribution of traffic is being unfairly divided up, so that some streets benefit and others suffer. Another example includes a Guardian article that explained that traffic on boundary roads could be found to increase or decrease depending on whether the mean or median was used across a range of studies in different locations and highlights that researchers found "substantial variation in both directions"on boundary roads.[71] Yet the Guardian journalist's social media post summarising the article states that the study "indicates they [LTNs] notably reduce motor vehicles within the zone without seemingly increasing traffic on boundary roads."[72] In both of these examples, the journalists' choices to represent one overarching picture of the evidence oversimplifies the evidence in the reports.

Sharing, publishing and funding their own evidence

In the context of this disbelief in existing evidence, disputes between those on either side of the policy turn to whose authority was more credible. Pro-LTN posts online discussing traffic and congestion contained links to news stories or studies which post authors used to back up their claims that LTNs reduced traffic. The evidence cited tended to come from council documents (particularly Hackney, Lambeth, Hammersmith & Fulham, Tower Hamlets), as well as The Guardian. The evidence cited by the anti-LTN side would include other news media publications, such as, The Times, Daily Mail, Oxford Mail, The Telegraph and This is Oxfordshire, as well as research from Centre for London.[73] Thus, citizens on both sides of the debate could find some 'truth' in a credible source, be it an authoritative news publication or a local government actor, that supported their view, rather than finding one shared source with a definitive stance that citizens could trust would resolve the debate.

In addition to evidence reported by news media, academics and councils, residents also drew on their own personal experience to support their claims. Again, there were examples of this approach to evidencing arguments against the policy both in online narratives as well as offline through our focus groups. For example:

EN

"I think they [LTNs] just create more congestion. They present more challenges… you always have to find another way around. And it's difficult to get from one road to the next, you go to another road, and there's another LTN you have to go somewhere else. I think it's just challenging, time wasting, creating more congestion." - Anti-LTN resident, Enfield

Those supportive of the policy described experiencing the positive benefits of LTNs in their daily lives,

68 Hackney Council on X, May 2021. https://twitter.com/hackneycouncil/status/1397489253454647298.
69 Stephen Bush on X, October 2021. https://twitter.com/stephenkb/status/1454075239768465412.
70 Department for Transport, 2021. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1007815/gear-change-one-year-on.pdf.
71 The Guardian, January 2023. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jan/19/low-traffic-neighbourhoods-boundary-roads-london.
72 Peter Walker on Twitter, January 2023. https://twitter.com/peterwalker99/status/1615971918175158272.
73 Jon Stewart on X, June 2022. https://twitter.com/JohnJohnStewart/status/1534789570805616641; Centre for London, June 2022. https://www.centreforlondon.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/CFL-StreetShift-LTNs-Final.pdf.

commonly referring to how they now feel in relation to their children's safety or pleasure in active travel. Online posts highlighted that children had gained more 'freedom' as they were able to cycle and travel around their neighbourhood independently, including to school, as well as the ability to safely play in the street.[74] Several posts also highlighted that LTNs had given them a greater sense of 'choice', as quieter, safer streets gave them the confidence to cycle where previously they may have driven or used public transport.[75] Such sentiments were also echoed offline in our focus groups:

"I feel much more confident with the kids. I mean, my kids are walking and cycling. You can hear the birds—it's absolutely amazing. So that transformation has happened." - Pro-LTN resident, Oxford

Furthermore, some actors went as far as commissioning their own research to counter others' such was their dissatisfaction in the available evidence.

"Some of the research that has been commissioned… by some of the pressure groups, it's been similarly pretty partial. Again, in my view, it hasn't painted the whole picture. We've spoken with some of the researchers. And, you know, they'll admit that everything's not quite as it ought to be. And so when basically the research which they produce is, it's dodgy, then there's no trust. And the other thing is, if you as a an individual, or a new group, like SEJ, point to what you think are flaws in the research, suddenly, you get a lot of pro-LTNers saying, well, who are you to question, you know, Professor, so and so and what have you… [The London Cycling Campaign] has got an income of over a million pounds… So when they say, 'Well, you commission research', it's a ridiculous question. Until we get our millions, we're not going to commission research, we can't commission research."
- Anti-LTN activist, London

Differentiated results depending on location

Whilst it is clear that the quality and interpretation of evidence created challenges and discrepancies in the quality of the debate, when you compare the variety of evidence shared by pro- and anti-LTN actors online, it's clear that there is evidence circulating within the public domain to support both arguments. The difference often appears to depend on which location - i.e. on a highly local level - was being referred to and reflects the variety of factors that might influence whether and the extent to which the measures are having an impact. This highlights that one set of measures can have very differentiated outcomes depending on the specific area it is being introduced in as well as the approach taken to implementation as well as how the community responds to it. However, what appears to be lacking in the information ecosystem is explicit and vocal explanation for why these variations might be occurring including an explanation for these contextual variable factors. The absence of this explanation appears to be contributing to a circular discussion about the policy as a whole.

Overall, the online discourse, echoed offline, reflected fundamental concerns with both the quality of the evidence available and with how that evidence was being communicated. Discrepancies or alignment between evidence and their own personal experiences drove either greater doubt in the evidence or affirmation. Such narratives demonstrate that citizens struggled to resolve whether official evidence provided by local government actors as well as credible university-based research scientists and covered by the news media could be trusted and whether the evidence was sufficient to determine if the policy was definitively successful or not, in their local area or overall.

Narrative cluster two: Disproportionate effects that are not worth the benefits

The second of the narratives we identified in the online discourse concerns the proportionality of the measures, and disputes about whether they are worth it and how they affect different communities. Concerns regarding the effects of the policy on the vulnerable and minority communities, emergency services and

74 This example has been removed from the public version of this report to protect the identity of an X account clearly labelled as for personal use.
75 Isabelle Clement on Twitter, October 2021. https://twitter.com/IsabelleClement/status/1444937506277953538.

businesses appeared across roughly 9% of the total online debate.[76] Disability, age, class, wealth and ethnicity were all identified as key dividing lines where different and overlapping communities were felt to be disproportionately negatively affected by the policy.

Negative impacts on disabled residents and the elderly

Concern for the negative impacts on elderly and disabled residents was emphasised heavily online by anti-LTN residents.[77] It's also the subject of a number of testimonials used by Together Declaration, an online campaigning group discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, in their posts.[78, 79] Online, disabled people and elderly people were typically discussed together as experiencing effects disproportionately. This concern was not typically disputed by pro-LTN advocates.

This concern was also echoed heavily offline in all three of our case study locations. In Oxford, the negative impact on disabled residents was specifically highlighted by a focus group respondent who is a wheel-chair user. She highlighted her challenges reaching a hospital despite its close proximity.

'I had to go to the hospital when I was very ill. I was told don't wait for an ambulance, [but] to get a neighbour to take you. I had to ring up lots of my neighbours around and tell them I'm not very well to find out if there was someone who could take me to an ambulance, take me to a hospital and dump me there. I live quite close to the hospital, but I can't just drive my chair there.'
- Anti-LTN resident who is a wheelchair user

The fact that this concern was left largely undisputed online and was fairly consistently discussed offline across all three locations indicates that this concern went to the heart of the policy regardless as to where it was implemented.

Negative impacts on minority ethnic and faith communities

Another prominent narrative online was a concern that LTNs disproportionately affect minority ethnic and faith communities. This concern was raised on the basis of the location of specific LTNs in or adjacent to areas that were important for specific communities. This varied based on whether there was a concern that minority ethnic communities were more likely to live in households in lower-cost accommodation on boundary roads and therefore would more likely be affected if traffic increased there. Another factor was if the LTN prevented or slowed down access to important institutions such as religious sites or shops used by a specific community.

This issue has been regularly discussed online, including by one commentator, LittleNinjaUK, who regularly spotlighted articles that analyse the disproportionate impacts of LTNs on ethnic minority communities and receives considerable engagement.[80] Rosamund Kissi-Debrah, the mother of Ella Kissi-Debrah, who was the first person to have her cause of death listed as air pollution, is a campaigner for clean air and has also been critical of LTNs redirecting traffic towards poorer areas with higher populations of minority ethnic communities.[81]

Whilst this issue has been raised online around the country, concerns regarding disproportionate impacts on minority ethnic communities were only raised within our three offline case studies by residents in Oxford in relation to three of six LTNs there (all of which are in Cowley).[82, 83] The negative impact of this LTN on Muslim

76 Based on analysis of a sample of posts that received the most engagement over this period - not all posts. Please note that one post could be assigned to more than one narrative and so the percentages do not add up to 100%.
77 Examples of challenges being highlighted for disabled people in 2021. Mik Scarlet on X, June 2021. https://twitter.com/MikScarlet/status/1405474722322714624 Sean Paul Day on X, July 2021. https://twitter.com/seanpaulday/status/1413426691469451265.
78 Examples of these concerns being incorporated into a broader campaign agenda in 2023. James Melville on X, August 2023. https://twitter.com/JamesMelville/status/1696962596040057148. Together Declaration on X, February 2023. https://twitter.com/Togetherdec/status/1628124592651833347.
79 Together Declaration, 2024. https://togetherdeclaration.org/.
80 LittleNinjaUK on X, November 2023. https://twitter.com/LittleNinjaUK/status/1722515885070467380.
81 Rosamund Adoo-KD CBE FBSA on X, March 2023. https://twitter.com/EllaRobertaFdn/status/1638960993257529345.
82 The lack of prominence of this narrative in Rochdale may reflect that the area where the LTN has been installed is fairly homogenous and therefore may not be perceived to have affected different communities disproportionately.
83 This example has been removed from the public version of this report to protect the identity of an X account clearly labelled as for personal use.

and South Asian residents was highlighted by both pro and anti-LTN residents, including Muslim residents, as well as a local councillor. The location of the LTN is experienced as lengthening journey times to the mosque and to specific shops and community centres that are used by the South Asian community.

"It's from an anti-LTN campaign group that stated specifically, these measures were intended to stop people getting their children to the mosque for after school education. And I was just like, that really upset me. Because it clearly does impact the local Asian population and local Muslim populations mostly Pakistani and Bangladeshi. And there's like big, there's two, three mosques near us. And there's quite a, you know, lots of kids go to mosque after school. And it's important. And so that population is going to be impacted by control measures, but the idea that it might be deliberate, and that it's like systemic racism." - Pro-LTN resident, Oxford

"I've seen images that, like, focus on the Muslim protesters holding the banners, sort of, as a way of doing it. It's… I don't know how accurate this is, but I think the Imam was standing at one of these speaking engagements, the ultimate, saying that the LTN is a gentrification project."
- Pro-LTN resident, Oxford

"There was definitely one I went to… there was an anti-LTN demonstration. And by the way, I went home crying because it really upset me. But it was all about Asian families from school. It was like… like taxi drivers. It was like… Usually when there's demonstrations near us, it's all like working class people like me. And I just thought, 'Oh my god, this has literally sliced our community'. And to slice our school community and to be like, talk about it. I've got friends in school who are fundamentally just- like Brexit." - Pro-LTN resident, Oxford

This specific example demonstrates how the location of this LTN was of acute concern to a particular community. Interestingly, one example of local news media in Oxford appeared to be fearful of facilitating a space to discuss this issue. Oxford Mail opted to turn off public comments on articles discussing the concern - an approach they appear to have exclusively taken to these articles.[84]

The impact of LTNs on minority ethnic communities appears to be a subject used by both sides of the debate. Kissi-Debrah has highlighted that councillors arguing for LTNs have been using her daughter's memory to further their claims - which she fundamentally disagrees with.[85] In 2023, the concerns of specific local minority ethnic and faith communities were adopted by campaigners seeking to mount a broader defence to a perceived attack on wider freedoms i.e. not just LTNs.[86] This suggests that this particular critique of the approach to policy implementation has been leveraged for a much broader campaign that goes beyond LTNs.

Class and wealth disparities

Class and wealth disparities are also highlighted in debates about the LTN policy, but these are more contentious. Unlike the disparities highlighted by disabled people, elderly people or those in specific faith and minority ethnic communities who have been affected by the location of one or more LTN, there are fewer individuals with lived experience of poverty highlighting that impoverished people are being disadvantaged by LTNs online.

Instead, this issue was also more likely to be used by political activists or a national campaign group, without a testimonial, rather than being shared directly by someone with lived experience.[87] Similarly, the Together

84 Oxford Mail, July 2021. https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/19443040.muslim-community-speak-nightmare-ltns-make-late-prayers/.
85 Rosamund Adoo-KD CBE FBSA on X, October 2023. https://twitter.com/EllaRobertaFdn/status/1712532670841223367.
86 Examples of these concerns being incorporated into a broader campaign agenda in 2023. James Melville on X, August 2023. https://twitter.com/JamesMelville/status/1696962596040057148. Together Declaration on X, February 2023. https://twitter.com/Togetherdec/status/1628124592651833347.
87 Tottenham Conservatives on X, September 2022. https://twitter.com/TottenhamConse1/status/1572857328591900673; Martin Daubney on X, May 2023. https://twitter.com/MartinDaubney/status/1656255903585189888.

Declaration leader has emphasised the problem with those with manual labour jobs to travel via bus instead of the car:

'And how do people expect when David Lammy says, 'Well, you should get on the bus or the underground with your tools' to a worker. Does he really think that it's conceivable?'
- Anti-LTN National Activist Stakeholder

The issue also appears to be highlighted more rhetorically by specific media outlets, such as The Times, The Critic or Spiked, when seeking to pejoratively suggest that those who are pro-LTN are 'middle class academics' or 'vegan cyclists' rather than being a concern reflected through specific experiences of residents.[88] Again, this particular concern about specific groups being negatively affected by the LTN policy appears to have been adopted by those seeking to leverage a broader campaign.

Negatively affecting emergency vehicles

A recent study published by the Department of Transport has definitively stated that there was no evidence to suggest that the introduction of LTNs was associated with a change in the response times for the London Fire Brigade.[89] Despite this, a prominent argument among those opposed to LTNs is a concern they create life-threatening delays to emergency vehicles. Whilst councils are mandated to consult with emergency services prior to implementing changes to road infrastructure, and, the argument by many residents and online commentators was that sufficient adjustments for emergency vehicles had not been made. In many cases, it was very difficult for an individual to assess the veracity of a claim being made online or offline that an emergency vehicle they have seen was in an LTN or was so delayed that there was loss of life.

Despite disputable evidence, this was a very prominent claim online, with a large volume of posts sharing videos of ambulances on roads that looked like they might be within an LTN or emergency workers moving bollards. Posts discussing this issue frequently included photographs and videos shared either within X, or from TikTok and YouTube.[90] This content has received the highest engagement of any anti-LTN narrative. Some of these video clips were reshared across multiple posts, sometimes with the specific location of the incident given, but other times without context, as a stand-in for the phenomenon as a whole, rather than as proof of a specific incident. Some opponents of LTNs went as far as to argue that LTNs were causing deaths due to delayed response times.[91] For example, one resident commented:

"You know, just these people didn't even consult with the emergency services, by the ambulances and the fire department that I… I recall, a friend of mine said that his father had a heart attack and died because they couldn't get there quick enough." - Anti-LTN resident, Oxford

To respond to and dispute this claim, some pro-LTN campaigners would share a study by pressure group, Cycling UK published in the Guardian, that claimed all emergency services were consulted and there was no evidence of any emergency service being delayed.[92] Some opponents would share a study made by The TaxPayers' Alliance published in The Daily Mail that suggested as many as 240 ambulances had been delayed from reaching call-outs.[93] Thus, much like the debate about the evidence for whether traffic is decreased or diverted, this particular concern persistently spiralled back to a debate about the quality of the evidence available with no one study putting an end to the debate.

88 The Times, February 2021. https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/low-traffic-zones-force-cars-into-streets-where-poorer-people-live-6svsbck3k. Spiked, August 2023. https://www.spiked-online.com/2023/08/03/why-they-hate-cars/#google_vignette. The Critic, August 2023. https://thecritic.co.uk/the-men-who-hate-cars/.
89 Ipsos, 2024. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65f400adfa18510011011787/low-traffic-neighbourhoods-research-report.pdf.
90 An example of this includes: David Atherton on X, February 2023. https://twitter.com/DaveAtherton20/status/1625103197286064130.
91 Oxford Mail, July 2022. https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/20296036.oxford-ltns-prevent-ambulances-reaching-patients-time-says-paramedic/.
92 The Guardian, February 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/feb/13/covid-bike-and-walking-schemes-do-not-delay-ambulances-trusts-say.
93 The Daily Mail, March 2023. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11925437/Ministers-come-pressure-scrap-preposterous-dangerous-LTNs.html.

Damage to local businesses

Damage to local businesses was also a narrative that did not feature significantly in the overall online or offline discussions. There was a small amount of discussion on this topic in online news stories, particularly the Oxford Mail. In Rochdale, there was some discussion of the negative impacts on local businesses and local community groups among residents and community leaders. However, on balance, this was a relatively minor narrative relative to others.

Narrative cluster three: Attacks on individuals and adversarial opponents

A number of different narratives on both the pro- and anti-LTN side of the debate shift from attacking the policy to attacking the people on either side of the debate, our research found. A not-insignificant proportion of the pro-LTN debate focuses on the impacts of cars as a means for arguing the reason why LTNs are necessary. However, those who opposed the policy, particularly 'motorists', felt attacked by the policy itself and so referred to the policy as 'anti-motorist'. This 'LTNs are anti-motorist' narrative reflected 4% of the debate.[94] Those who supported the policy also then attacked those who were against the policy, including referring to them as conspiracy theorists. This harsher tone demonstrates how the discourse turned more coarse and adversarial and where there were signs of offline social division.

Attacks on anti-LTN proponents

While most pro-LTN narratives online focused on the positives of LTNs, there was a distinct narrative that criticised opponents on a more personal level or labelled them with specific attributes such as being 'SUV drivers' or arguing that while LTNs may inconvenience road users, car drivers are responsible for deaths.[95][96] This reflected roughly 12% of the debate which received the most engagement online.[97]

An anti-LTN resident in London described the "really personal abuse" they had received online from pro-LTN cyclists after expressing concerns about the lack of complementary measures being taken on the main roads. They found similar kinds of hurtful comments directed towards other residents, including "disabled people… because cabs aren't allowed into LTNs" and "mothers of disabled children". They reflected that they felt this experience might have been shared by others "who had concerns" who might, as a result "just went away… you know, just shut up".

Connected to this was the description of people who are anti-LTN as 'conspiracy theorists' or members of a far right group. One anti-LTN national activist emphasised the damage that can be done by categorising people with a specific viewpoint as conspiracy theorists or far right purely for having legitimate criticisms of a policy - particularly when the description clashes with other attributes:

"The more one does that [calling people conspiracy theorists], the more it really discredits the people doing it. But it also makes people furious because they're, like, 'They're just contemptuous of us'... "[Referring to ULEZ] So all of a sudden, we've got a situation where Sadiq Khan says people are far right for challenging these things. It's preposterous, right?'"
- Anti-LTN National Activist Stakeholder

Also connected to the point above on spreading misinformation:

"...we have 300 people in Bristol. They want to call us 'far right'! It was the Somali community, Turkish Pakistani and white working class people in a West Indian Cricket Club, right? You can't make it up this stuff. [It] is madness. Right, 'Far Right'? Let alone the people who are in Together. If people just look at the website and where we're, where we've come from. It becomes so shrill. These people… it's a bit like a lockdown… to these people are irresponsible. They're just tin hats.

94 Based on analysis of a sample of posts that received the most engagement over this period - not all posts. Please note that one post could be assigned to more than one narrative and so the percentages do not add up to 100%.
95 Richard Murphy on X, July 2023. https://twitter.com/RichardJMurphy/status/1685714649029750784.
96 Ian Walker on Twitter, March 2021. https://twitter.com/ianwalker/status/1377313419477549062.
97 Based on analysis of a sample of posts that received the most engagement over this period - not all posts. Please note that one post could be assigned to more than one narrative and so the percentages do not add up to 100%.

Conspiracy is far right.'" - Anti-LTN National Activist Stakeholder

The frustration with having legitimate concerns regarding a policy being conflated with the view that you are a conspiracy theorist, highlights, first, the importance of focusing on the speech itself rather than the person sharing it, and second, explaining very clearly how and when certain speech reflects legitimate policy critique and when it risks veering into what can be defined as a conspiracy theory.

LTNs are anti-motorist

The narrative that LTNs were 'anti-motorist' was particularly elevated by national political figures, such as Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and Minister for Transport, Mark Harper, and received some strong engagement online from those opposing the policy. This narrative suggests that the measures were designed deliberately to persecute people who drive cars. This is a difficult narrative to challenge, given that one of the stated goals of the policy is to reduce the amount of people driving cars and to transition them to taking alternative active travel approaches instead. However, it is incorrect to say that the policy was deliberately designed to attack people who drive cars, as opposed to reducing overall levels of driving. For example, the leader of the local Conservative party in Rochdale indicated that he felt "the motorist is public enemy number one" and is presented as "the root of all evil." This quotation was shared in a Facebook group and reported by a focus group participant.[98] The strength of this language suggests that some car drivers felt that the policy was too aggressive in its targeting of their behaviour and perhaps wasn't sufficiently understanding of the different reasons why some residents use their cars.

LTNs are part of the woke agenda

Some posts attempted to place LTNs within an existing culture war of 'woke' vs 'anti-woke' rhetoric. In this framing, 'woke' is used by online users as a derogatory term for policies that might otherwise be considered as socially progressive, often relating to gender, anti-racism or climate change. In online discourse, 'woke' policies are framed as an act of 'virtue signalling': useless but relatively harmless, relating to niche issues with no material benefit, primarily of interest only to middle or upper classes. On the more extreme end of the 'anti-woke' spectrum, proponents of 'woke' ideas are seen as more sinister, with an explicit goal to destroy traditional family structures and political life.

In the context of LTNs, the language of the policy being 'woke' was often deployed by Conservative candidates or political activists in order to attack political opponents. Associating LTNs with 'woke' policies or a 'woke' agenda appeared to serve as a means of discrediting and criticising the policy, without attempting to engage in a discussion regarding the evidence for or against the policy's effectiveness.

One example of this is a Conservative Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for Huntingdon and a contributor to GB News, who framed 'woke' policies - including LTNs - as a distraction from more serious issues in a post on X.

Changing the name of Black Boy Lane to La Rose Lane today has cost @haringeycouncil an estimated £186,000. Labour Councillors don't reply to emails about fly-tipping, illegal HMOs or LTNs but they'll find time and money they don't have on virtue-signalling for headlines.[99] https://t.co/LdPxjxdFyv

12:29 PM · Jan 23, 2023 · 249.5K Views, 366 Replies · 896 Reposts · 2.5K Likes

The Tottenham Conservatives account on X was one of the main accounts sharing this narrative. They repeatedly attacked Labour for neglecting traditional working class issues, wasting time on various 'woke', unpopular policies, including LTNs. Whilst the following example does not specifically use the 'woke' label, it

98 Taylor, 2024. https://www.rochdaleonline.co.uk/news-features/2/news-headlines/152804/conservative-leaders-column-the-housing-crisis-roads-and-public-transport-and-the-consultation-to-close-littleborough-railway-stations-ticket-office.

99 Ben Obese-Jecty on X (Twitter), January 2023. https://twitter.com/BenObeseJecty/status/1617499706032291840.

assembles a number of the common narratives associated with 'the woke agenda' by those who oppose it in relation to LTNs.

Under leaders like Attlee, Labour once fought for the working class. Under Starmer they fight for middle-class fringe issues such bringing back Shamima Begum or Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs). #NeverLabour[100]

8:56 AM · Sep 22, 2022 104 Replies · 536 Reposts · 1K Likes

Harassment and abuse towards councillors and politicians

In our online analysis, a considerable proportion of debate focused on exchanges between users and councillors, or users directly naming or calling on specific councillors for clarification.

In response to the policy and approaches to implementation, there have been a range of threats, some of which were violent, made to individual councillors and campaigners both online and offline. In particular, many online attacks were directed at Mayor Sadiq Khan.

Such attacks may be a reflection of individual political actors being singled out for their support of the policy. For example, this post by Together Declaration directly accused Khan of lying.

'Well, the whole clean air debate, the whole clean air assertion is false. And what I would say by that, it's just having a cut of our report, together declaration in the same way, and this is really important, and I don't want to go off track, but in the same way, the 4000 deaths that the mayor asserted, and the measure was asserted about ULEZ and clean air was entirely bogus, was not true'
- Anti-LTN National Activist Stakeholder

Politicians in Rochdale also described the threats they received and suggested it was for this reason that they stopped the trial of the policy:

RO

"We were getting threatening emails and phone calls as well as part of that. So yeah, it was quite a scary time… I think this was the first time being a councillor, I'd actually had sort of abusive and threatening messages and emails. And so we had to call sort of an emergency meeting with our leader of the council as well, because he had been informed a bit. So we just wanted to make sure that all three of us were okay, and that we were doing fine. And I think the fact that we have to stop the trial, for our safety as well, was quite a huge thing. And definitely having sort of the beliefs involved in that when we had sort of a huge multi-strategy meeting on sort of how to move forward was quite. Yeah, it was, it was definitely daunting... It was definitely a lot, I think. Yeah, definitely opened my eyes up a lot to the work of a councillor" - Local politician, Rochdale

Similarly in Enfield, news reports and interviews with local journalists indicated that local councillors received death threats from residents. One journalist described one local councillor becoming a "hate figure for motorists' and received death threats."

100 Tottenham Conservatives on X (Twitter), September 2022. https://twitter.com/TottenhamConse1/status/1572857328591900673.

Overall, there are a range of examples of the discourse online turning to personal attacks of those on either side of the debate as well as to abuse targeted at specific local and national politicians. This demonstrates how as the tone and sentiment surrounding the policy became more extreme, this was translated, for some, into an intention to blame and attack specific individuals and communities.

Narrative cluster four: LTNs are undemocratic vs a silent majority

One of the most prominent anti-LTN arguments online was that the LTN policy has been introduced undemocratically—an argument which has been echoed by national political figures and an anti-LTN campaign group Together Declaration. This sentiment was also reflected in all three of our case study areas by residents who indicated that the council had done something 'to' the residents and as a result, a power struggle was needed to regain the balance. This is reflected in the celebrations of the removal of LTNs following a public backlash with praise for the successful 'fight for our freedom'.[101]

Notably, this argument can build on the suggestion that the council was actively deceptive in its approach to introducing the policy and in the way it positioned the evidence. It also feeds and overlaps into a number of the more extreme disinformation narratives discussed below. In this section, we first highlight the concerns raised about the perception of the approach taken by councils to consult on the policy and the feeling that this approach to consultation was undemocratic. Some simply state that the policy itself is undemocratic in a generalised sense, i.e. it is an unfair policy. Others refer more specifically to the way the policy was implemented and refer to the approach to the consultation, suggesting either that residents were not consulted, that if they were consulted, it was not genuine or that the results were ignored.

We go on to discuss a predominantly online narrative that suggests there is a 'silent majority' who support LTNs, but are not now being heard because of the strong and overly aggressive opposition by those who are anti-LTN. Finally we highlight how this debate has spilled into accusations that the council has behaved in a totalitarian manner.

Concerns with approach to consultation

The concerns about the approach and quality of consultation as well as the interpretation of the results was reflected strongly in online discourse. A range of posts commented on a lack of consultation, a feeling that residents were being ignored, or that the consultation was not genuine by councils ranging from Islington, Camden, Crystal Palace, Haringey as well as Oxford.[102] [103]

Concerns with the approach to consultation were not restrained to online discourse. In Rochdale, many respondents in our focus groups expressed concern that there wasn't 'enough' consultation or that the council's consultation on LTNs was not accessible, did not include enough people and therefore could not have reflected community viewpoints. Community leaders highlighted that the consultation had largely been conducted online or was held at inaccessible times if conducted offline. Furthermore, consultations were conducted in English and therefore may not have been accessible to those who use English as a second language.

"Deeplish & Milkstone is a big neighbourhood... they should have considered the schools, the community centres, the mosques. They didn't do nothing. They just chose one community centre and called for a meeting, and whoever goes to the centre, that's it. And not many people are aware of what's happening." - Community leader, Rochdale

101 This example has been removed from the public version of this report to protect the identity of an X account clearly labelled as for personal use.

102 James Burdass on X, April 2022. https://twitter.com/JamesBurdass/status/1516377135119802374. Mik Scarlett on X, November 2021. https://twitter.com/MikScarlet/status/1462832843143401481. Together Declaration on February 2023. https://twitter.com/Togetherdec/status/1621929197533908994.

103 Letter and post by Ellie Reeves MP on X referring to Crystal Palace council, January 2021. https://twitter.com/elliereeves/status/1348697399624130561.

"It was held during the day, not on an evening or on the weekend. Youngsters in particular were excluded... I think the feeling was the young people felt that they didn't even know about it. So sometimes as young people they don't always read all the consultation papers, read the newspapers, etc… Maybe they don't have time for it. Maybe it was just the first time they heard about this [when the planters were put on fire]." - Community leader, Rochdale

In Oxford, there was a similar feeling to Rochdale that the council had not consulted marginalised populations as well as a sense that the consultation had been insufficient for residents more broadly.

'...The council admitted in the consultation they didn't consult vulnerable people. They didn't consult disabled people, they didn't consult the Muslim community, they didn't consult the schools in the area. This is all recorded. They didn't consult the medical facilities in the area. They didn't consult the carers in the area.' - Anti-LTN resident, Oxford

'...They've not explored the minority groups. So those could be for example, my Muslim community…So then the minority groups, not just Muslim, but other communities in that I've just not thought about the elderly community, the caring community, you know, just these people didn't even consult with the emergency services by the ambulances and the fire department that I recall'.
- Anti-LTN resident, Oxford

Thus, concerns about the quality of the consultations led by councils were not limited to online discourse and can be linked to detailed concerns expressed by a variety of residents who experienced the policy directly in different locations offline.

A silent majority (online)

In contrast and despite the clear and increasing engagement with anti-LTN posts online, there was also a strong online discourse suggesting that the majority of residents do in fact support LTNs, but that they are choosing to be (increasingly) silent and therefore go 'unheard'. This too suggests that there are members of the public who feel their views are not sufficiently being taken into account.

This narrative took a few forms of expression. Some, including pro-LTN councillors based in Oxford, argued online that the silent majority who were neutral or supportive of LTNs were being drowned out by the loud, angry minority opposing LTNs.[104] One councillor highlighted a public post from a pro-LTN resident who lived within an LTN and suggested they felt the need to be quiet about their support of the outcomes they were enjoying for fear of the 'car lobby' and 'receiving a brick through your window'.[105] This is a view that was shared by just one of our respondents in our interviews and focus groups in our three case study areas - notably in Rochdale by a local politician:

"I think with the public consultation, what we realised was, when we had our in person consultations, the majority of people that did attend were people that was sort of against the whole scheme. And then the ones that were sort of happy with how everything was going, were the ones who had actually filled out the online surveys. And there was a lot of support from people who were quieter. And I think what we noticed was the people who had a lot more objections were the ones who turned up these face-to-face public consultations. And I think that was also highlighted as well, when the scheme got shut down the first time because we got a lot of support regarding the active

104 Councillor Emily Kerr on X, October 2022. https://twitter.com/EmilyKerr36/status/1584798582468907010; Charlie Hicks on X, April 2022. https://twitter.com/Charlie_Hicks_/status/1519271418281746433.
105 HaringHeaven on X, October 2022. https://twitter.com/happyharingey/status/1584653572008206336.

neighbourhood schemes from people saying, Why has it been shut down? Why have the one way systems gone? Can we not get them back? Don't let this sort of deter you from carrying on."
- Local politician, Rochdale

Another feature common to the view of a silent majority, similar to other LTN narratives online, was that posters would often share images of polling data from reputable polling agencies to back up their claims. An example of polling data that was shared by an Oxford councillor includes an image of a poll that was conducted on behalf of a pro-LTN advocacy group by YouGov in Oxford that summarises a result that does indicate that 56% of respondents support LTNs.[106] However, by not including a link to the original data tables published by the polling organisation, the approach to communicating the results does not allow citizens to access the information that would otherwise be disclosed by any members of the British Polling Standards.[107] For example, it does not clarify the date when the study was conducted, the sample used, the size of the sample, or geographic coverage. It is not possible to see if the survey respondents were weighted based on their proximity to an LTN, for example, or whether the voices of those unaffected by an LTN, but living in the town or city are weighted as equal to those who are directly affected. The BPS has these standards in order to enable consumers of information to interpret the results accurately and therefore by not also sharing this information or enabling access to it, councillors sharing polling data to strengthen their claims can again easily be accused of misrepresenting evidence of public support.

'Undemocratic' and deceptive

Some participants also distrusted the council and the results that were published of the council-led consultation. There were some accusations that the results were deliberately misrepresented and that the council was therefore 'lying'.

"'...it was the council website, and it basically said all you know, we've done this in Oxford and in this trial, and instead of we've been we've had a consultation, and it was unanimously positive. I'm like, well, 'I did the consultation and that is a complete lie'." - Anti-LTN resident, Oxford

'So for example, we know that they withheld data in one of the consultations, because they knew it was not favourable'. - Anti-LTN resident, Oxford

National campaign groups such as Together Declaration have suggested that they interpret these posts as evidence for a frustration with representative democracy or a feeling that the existing democratic processes are not producing the results citizens expect:

'They've tried to raise it, we've elected representatives, they've been mugged off. And so there's a range of them, you got a nice old couple that are, like, kind of retiring, but they're like, 'What's going on? I don't really like these bars. And are these cameras?' And then you have, like, younger people, single women and like me, I just honestly, it's a real mixture. And I think that what they're united around is a sense that these things are just being done. And it's not democratic. And it's having a disproportionate impact.' - Anti-LTN National Activist Stakeholder

106 Councillor Emily Kerr on X, July 2023, https://twitter.com/EmilyKerr36/status/1679885776979390466.
107 British Polling Council, 2024. https://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/objects-and-rules/.

Some posts also focused specifically on how the policy had brought the community together against this singular issue.[108]

The more mainstream anti-LTN argument that 'LTNs are an undemocratic policy' overlapped significantly with the narratives which could be more easily described as disinformation, including: LTNs are totalitarian, We should celebrate the vigilantes and freedom fighters, LTNs are part of the woke agenda.

Narrative cluster five: More extreme narratives and conspiracy theories

The last narrative stream includes a number at the more extreme end that dip, sometimes firmly, into conspiracy theory. There were a number of narratives online that reflect a more extreme—and frankly incorrect—stance on the LTN policy and those who propose it.

LTNs are totalitarian

The suggestion that LTNs are totalitarian by online users built on similar sentiment to 'LTNs are an undemocratic policy', but took a more inflammatory and extreme position. Individuals sharing this narrative drew parallels between the councils implementing LTNs and authoritarian regimes, including East Germany, the Nazis and the Communist Party of China. Many portrayed LTNs as a form of control and surveillance, with some even calling on the general public to resist and fight back.

One prominent voice sharing this narrative was a former MEP for the Brexit Party and a regular presenter on GB News. This user shared a video of pro-LTN residents in Oxford obstructing traffic, which has since been removed from X, as their account was suspended.

Extraordinary video shows eco Stasi in Oxford policing a Low Traffic Neighbourhood blockade & refusing to let a woman drive through to get to work. Donning their hi-viz vests & with no official authority they refuse to move. It's a cult!

Mar 28, 2023 · 1.9M Views. 1.9K Replies · 2.6K Reposts · 7.3K Likes[109]

Andrew Bridgen, the now Independent MP for North West Leicestershire who was suspended from the Conservative party for spreading vaccine disinformation has also been active on the topic of LTNs. He has shared disinformation on the topic, including alleging that 'LTNs are totalitarian'.

Andrew Bridgen MP @ABridgen. Down in Exeter the Council are asking for informers! They will no doubt be looking for an informer on every street, where have I heard that before …GOT IT , CHINA !!!! https://mol.im/a/12412657 *via @MailOnline*

Aug 16, 2023 · 74.3K Views 371 Replies · 1.4K Reposts · 3K Likes

Jim Ferguson, a former parliamentary candidate for the Brexit Party, shared a more extreme form of this narrative, verging into outright conspiracy theory.

Jim Ferguson. @JimFergusonUK. The Brits are fighting back. No to LTN,s. We don't want to live in controlled Zones with fines for those who dare to leave watched by CCTV cameras. Its time for free people to fight back and say No More. We also demand #FreedomOfSpeech #Resist No to this Dystopian Nightmare. https://t.co/Oq2xM9iEzn

108 John Stewart on X, December 2022. https://twitter.com/JohnJohnStewart/status/1600755035226660864.
109 https://t.co/mqV6fCjIA5.

Feb 3, 2023 · 563.2K Views 253 Replies · 2.5K Reposts · 5.4K Likes

Whilst such comments may come across as extreme, residents offline - including those who did not have strong opinions on LTNs - illustrated how their mistrust in the council could spill into a more conspiratorial mindset with the perception that the council was seeking to proactively control its citizens:

RO

"The idea that councils are exerting control will always be contentious so they should tread carefully... Is the LTN system a step towards the Big Brother 15-minute cities idea?"
- Pro-LTN resident, Rochdale

RO

"I feel that people felt they were being controlled and had not had full opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns... The council could have avoided this by implementing thorough consultation." - Pro-LTN resident, Rochdale

RO

"[The planters being set on fire] shows how angry people were at being controlled as they saw it"
- Pro-LTN resident, Rochdale

These examples demonstrate the slippery slope by which distrust in the council, underpinned by questions surrounding evidence and the democratic process used to introduce the scheme, can quickly spill into much more extreme speech.

Celebrate the vigilantes and freedom fighters

A small minority of online commentators not only endorsed the actions of those who set the LTN barriers on fire in Rochdale, but actively celebrated and encouraged similar actions. This included calling the vigilantes 'freedom fighters' and sharing advice on how to sabotage LTNs. Such posts received a relatively high share of engagement online compared to the numbers actually posting it. Our analysis found that commentators who shared the narrative 'Celebrate the vigilantes and freedom fighters' tended to share multiple other extreme disinformation narratives. For example, this post by journalist Martin Daubney:

The French revolutionary spirit rolls into Britain as a 'Freedom fighter' gang torches Low Traffic Neighbourhood road blocks in Rochdale – just hours after they were installed. When you push citizens too far, eventually they push back! https://t.co/uq0kJVH7q6

Mar 28, 2023 · 116K Views 246 Replies · 657 Reposts · 3K Likes

Another account, Wide Awake Media, is found to have gone beyond LTNs and shared a wide range of conspiracy theories, frequently making their own videos and graphics. On the LTN issue, this account has shared multiple extreme disinformation narratives. For example, this post includes both 'Celebrate the vigilantes and freedom fighters' and 'Great Reset' narratives.

Wide Awake Media. @wideawake_media.

Whatever you do, don't retweet this meme. It might give people ideas. #15MinuteCities #15MinutePrisons #ULEZ #ULEZExpansion #LTNs #ClimateScam #NetZero

Apr 23, 2023 · 51.9K Views 35 Replies · 1.1K Reposts · 2.1K Likes

Whilst notable that there is some celebration of LTN removals and vandalism online, in offline environments, respondents were slightly more muted, expressing sympathy and understanding for this approach taken by some residents, including among those who were pro-LTN, but did not go as far as actively celebrating it as their online counterparts did. For example:

RO

"As I was reading the article I kept thinking that the outcome was inevitable as the residents were angry at not being fully consulted and there will always be those who like to vent their frustration in violence." - Pro-LTN resident, Rochdale

RO

"[They put the measures in] without real consultation, and then people are fed up that they are not really looking into the real views of the people. They are looking into the controversial views, which are the minority people are saying do this, a majority will say no, we're going to be affected. And the real views of the local people who are ignored, and we saw had a horrible incidents of fire and arson and things and threats." - Community leader, Rochdale

RO

"[The fire] is a result of being really frustrated... people don't set things on fire for no reason." - Anti-LTN resident, Rochdale

This distinction between the more provocative online posts from the more muted, sympathetic offline narratives could indicate that, online, citizens feel a level of safety to state what they truly think on this topic. However, online posters may also not necessarily believe what they are posting, but recognise the provocative nature of a certain stance and the imagery associated with it and take enjoyment in gaining what they predict will be a strong reaction from others online. Either way, the persistence of such sentiments both online and offline that the council has behaved in a way that could be interpreted as seeking to control or act without citizens' consent demonstrates that the public are not necessarily suggesting the council is being deceptive because of content they have viewed online, but because it is their perception of how the council conducted themselves in relation to this policy.

Great Reset

A central claim made by conspiracy influencers, and those unknowingly sharing misinformation, is that LTN policies have been undemocratically imposed on citizens by shadowy elites, including the World Economic Forum. This is where opposition to the LTN policy became drawn into an existing web of conspiracy theories, known as the 'Great Reset'.

The 'Great Reset' initially referred to a concept proposed by the World Economic Forum during the Covid-19 pandemic in June 2020. The central idea was to use the pandemic lockdowns around the world as a moment to reset the functioning of global finance and capitalism, adapting to better protect the environment.[110] However, the term has become attached to a far-ranging conspiracy theory, in which the global elite are plotting world domination by means of mass surveillance, forced vaccination and the erosion of individual liberty.[111]

Similar to the 'Great Reset', the '15-Minute City' started life as a relatively niche concept in urban planning, proposing that to reduce emissions from traffic, key amenities in urban environments should be located no more than 15 minutes by foot or bicycle from home.[112] However, as the idea gathered momentum among local authorities during Covid-19 lockdowns, it was quickly swept up into the conspiracy theory. As a traffic reduction measure in a similar vein to the spirit of 15-minute cities, LTNs became incorporated too. As a result, conspiracy-motivated protests against lockdowns, vaccine passports and vaccine mandates began to include anti-15-Minute City and anti-LTN messaging.

With so many various narrative strands related to the 'Great Reset' conspiracy theory circulating, we found that many of the posts in our dataset incorporated aspects of the 'Great Reset'. The group Together Declaration, who initially mobilised against Covid lockdowns, drove the majority of the narratives we could identify online during this period and were overall responsible for a large share of the disinformation in our dataset.[113]

The following post demonstrates some of the wide range of issues which have become incorporated into the 'Great Reset' conspiracy theory, as alleged mechanisms of control.

James Melville @JamesMelville

- *Lockdowns*
- *Vaccine passports*
- *Digital ID*
- *Net Zero*
- *CBDCs*
- *ULEZ / LTNs*
- *WHO treaty*
- *WEF agendas*
- *Bill Gates, Tony Blair & Klaus Schwab lobbying governments*
- *Rishi Sunak as PM*

What do they all have in common? We didn't vote for any of them.
Oct 4, 2023 · 32.3K Views 46 Replies · 684 Reposts · 1.6K Likes

110 World Economic Forum, 2020. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/06/now-is-the-time-for-a-great-reset/.
111 Birchall and Knight, 2023. https://www.routledge.com/Conspiracy-Theories-in-the-Time-of-Covid-19/Birchall-Knight/p/book/9781032324999; See also, Antisemitism Policy Trust, May 2024. https://antisemitism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Conspiracy-Theory-Guide.pdf.
112 Peterson, Jordan B., 2022. https://twitter.com/jordanbpeterson/status/1609255646993457153?lang=en.
113 See Chapter 5 for further analysis of disinformation campaigns specifically.

Posts from the Together Declaration on the topic of LTNs frequently cut across multiple other narratives we have identified, particularly with the more mainstream critique that 'LTNs are undemocratic'.

Together @Togetherdec. The 'consultations' for 15 min cities like with LTNs elected reps have not listened to vast majority saying they don't want this. In Oxford & Uk as in London Boroughs. In Jan much more will be happening @alanvibe @beverleyturner @GBNEWS. Full vid https://t.co/UrlC5QIXzM https://t.co/Pw96t3eHQP

Dec 21, 2022 · 40.3K Views 15 Replies · 139 Reposts · 261 Likes

Whilst posts that highlight a concern that the LTN policy reflects a 'Great Reset' are distinct in their language and suggestion that there is an alternative secret policy actor and agenda, this narrative also reflects areas of ambiguity highlighted in Chapter 1 of this report. Where there is ambiguity around who the policy actors are and what the policy goals are, it becomes more possible for actors like Together Declaration to 'fill the gap' with their explanation that can assist in making sense of a variety of other themes and concerns that may be playing on audiences minds. Thus, while again, the narrative may appear extreme, the fact that online users found it so compelling demonstrates the extent to which audiences were feeling starved of alternative information that they could trust.

Offline divisions in communities

There are clearly divisions online surrounding the policy, but how far do these divisions spill into offline relationships within communities? Too much research into digital information ecosystems misses the wider context of how these conversations are playing out in real life. We wanted to ensure we were investigating this in tandem. Whilst difficult to robustly measure, it was possible to qualitatively assess differences between our case studies. In this section, we highlight a common theme across all locations before discussing differences between them.

Divides based on where you live and your individual experience of the policy

Overall, throughout our research, we were unable to find someone who lived in a quiet and peaceful LTN who opposed the policy, or someone whose day-to-day life had been negatively affected by an increased journey time who supported the policy. Perceptions of the policy differed based on their own experience of it and few appeared to change their position based on what they had heard based on the experiences of others.

A range of pro-LTN residents demonstrated detailed understanding of the concerns of anti-LTN residents and, in the main, recognised that anti-LTN resident experiences of the LTN policy might be different to their own. This recognition, however, was insufficient for changing their view on the policy overall.

The anti-LTN public in both Oxford and Enfield assumed that pro-LTN residents were supportive of the policy because they benefited from it directly or were not negatively affected by it themselves.

For example, one community activist who lived near to an LTN in Oxford suggested that if she also lived on an LTN road where it would be quiet and peaceful she would appreciate the impact it had for those specific residents. But as she lives on the neighbouring road, where she had seen traffic increase considerably, she could not share that view. Opponents overall felt that pro-LTN residents were unable to empathise with how the LTNs had impacted neighbouring roads because they were not experiencing it directly.

This differentiated experience and thus position on the policy was highlighted by both an anti-LTN resident and a supporter.

"Division occurs where you've got the people that think it's a great idea, and loving it, because they're getting a bit of peace and quiet now in their little area. And then you've got the people that are having to endure the fallout from it outside of it. And that's where division occurs. Because there's these ideologists with the cycling lobby and Healthy Streets and all that then they think they want this utopian world of where which doesn't work in a city like this. This is a city. The roads were put there for a reason, you know?" - Anti-LTN resident, Enfield

"[An anti-LTN campaigner] lives in a road that also has rat runners… he was blaming us that he wasn't getting [an LTN] and we were. And in the end, I had to exclude him from the group."
- Pro-LTN campaigner, Enfield

Opponents perceived to be 'unpersuadable'

In locations where the LTNs are still under debate, i.e. Enfield and Oxford, residents also commented on the attitude of the opposing side. Those who supported the policy shared the perception that those who opposed the policy could not be persuaded to hold a different view.

"People choose one side or another. And that's it, they'll shout for their side, they won't hear both sides of the story. And that is it, you know that. And in the extreme cases, people go down rabbit holes of inventing conspiracy theories and untruths." - Pro-LTN resident, Oxford

"It will be very interesting to see if those people in your second group tonight, those people who are anti-LTN, can also see the other side of the argument. I'm thinking… maybe not."
- Pro-LTN resident, Oxford

Differing depths of division based on community

The LTN has now been removed in Rochdale and so no residents expressed any active frustration with the policy or other residents. However, in Enfield and Oxford, the 'battle' over LTNs is felt to continue with some new LTNs still being trialled or proposed and ones that had been made permanent still generating anger among some in the community.

When reflecting historically on what happened in Rochdale, it appeared that most residents didn't feel there were divides between community members themselves about LTNs. Instead, because there had been such drastic escalation that ended in fires, it was felt that the community must have been speaking in one voice against the policy. The divide therefore was felt to be between 'the people' and 'the Council'. It was this divide that the general public were animated speaking about, particularly after they had spent time viewing news articles, the council website and the posts about the fire, rather than divides within the community itself.

In Enfield, where the LTN debate is still live, there appeared to be much stronger awareness of the policy among anti-LTN residents than among those pro. While pro-LTN residents appeared relatively sympathetic and understanding of the frustrations of anti-LTN residents, they also appeared to be much less aware of the difficulties faced by those who opposed the policy prior to the focus group itself. More broadly, much like in Rochdale, in Enfield the source of the most frustration was the council for their approach to initiating the policy. It was felt that a lot of the aggravation within the community could have been avoided had the council

approached the issue differently.

In Oxford, the divide between the pro and anti-LTN residents did appear much wider. Whilst there was clear frustration with the council, residents also expressed exasperation with their fellow community members. Some indicated that they saw one another as the source of division using a very literal example of a time when a resident had stood to protect a bollard (i.e. a key feature of an LTN that prevents traffic):

"And I know being a human bollard on my road, I have had people literally come up to this person and say, 'You are dividing this community'. So the bollards are dividing the community, the people driving over the bollards are not dividing the community. It's me standing there and saying, "Please don't drive over this bollard' that is dividing this community." - Pro-LTN resident, Oxford

Between our focus groups, one anti-LTN resident who had crossed paths with the pro group on their way into the venue even joked with the focus group facilitator about how they hoped the 'anti-LTN group' didn't mix anything in the tea!

Overall, whilst it was clear that residents could find empathy with and understand why different residents felt differently about the policy, frustration came among pro-LTNers when the anti-LTN side appeared not to compromise or was felt to be 'over-the-top' in their anger about the policy. On the other hand, the anti-LTN side expressed frustration when their experiences or concerns were disregarded or suggested to be illegitimate because they were thought to be poorly evidenced.

Clearly, any policy that has differentiated impacts within a community, i.e. where some residents incur the costs without the benefits, where others simply gain the benefits, would require incredibly strong buy-in, communication and compromise among residents with an appreciation that there would be both winners and losers. Given such communication and negotiation was missing in these communities prior to the introduction of the LTNs, and where LTNs have remained, divisions appear to have become entrenched.

5. DISINFORMATION DRIVING DIVISION?

In this chapter, we first return to the issue of defining disinformation in order to explain our approach in this study, before demonstrating how levels of disinformation shifted over time. We also respond to our key research question exploring whether disinformation campaigns weaponised and amplified social division.

KEY FINDINGS SUMMARY

- **In 2024, definitions of disinformation have become very contested in the UK. The evolution and inclusion of 'adversarial narratives' has faced specific critique.**
- **Levels of LTN-related 'disinformation' online with significant engagement increased significantly between 2022 and 2023.** The proportion that can be classified as disinformation (including conspiracy theories) rose from 5% in 2022 to 28% in 2023.
- Online campaigners, such as the Together Declaration, leveraged and repurposed, or 'weaponised', local case studies reporting genuine and evidence-based grievances from a wide range of communities to support an overarching national conspiracy narrative in relation to the LTN policy. The Together Declaration reflects 27% of the anti-LTN posts receiving the highest engagement in 2023.
- The engagement of national politicians in 2023 on specific sides of the LTN debate – including individual politicians' attacks on councils, accusations of LTNs being 'anti-motorist', and reference to 15-minute cities – is likely to have driven up engagement with disinformation narratives.
- While online anti-LTN posts clearly rose in tandem with disinformation in 2023, there is limited evidence that disinformation exacerbated offline social division.

DEFINING DISINFORMATION

A polluted research field

In recent years, there has been considerable criticism of disinformation research, from lacking clear definitions to having an overly simplified view of what it seeks to study.[114] Some have highlighted the uncomfortably close connection of mis/disinformation to the world of policy given allegations that 'misinformation often comes from the top' - a sentiment many of our respondents agreed with.[115] Others have suggested that some actors within the 'disinformation industry', particularly those who provide reliability ratings to articles which can inform advertising decisions e.g. Global Disinformation Index and NewsGuard, have evolved the definition in order to censor specific political viewpoints and advance a left-wing agenda.[116]

114 Adler-Bell. 2022. Bernstein 2022. Farkas & Schou, 2018. Camargo & Simon, 2022.
115 Nielsen, 2019. Brennen et al 2020.
116 Unherd, 2024. https://unherd.com/2024/04/inside-the-disinformation-industry/.

Classic to 'adversarial' definitions of disinformation

Disinformation has historically meant 'content that is intentionally false and designed to deceive and cause harm'. Disinformation is distinct from misinformation which is 'false content that the person sharing it doesn't realise is false or misleading'.

These classic definitions are drawn from commonly shared meaning in the research field.[117] Often mis/disinformation are used together where intent is difficult to decipher. Within the scope of the phrase 'mis/disinformation' falls the full spectrum of types of content which might cause more or less harm. Content that uses a false context, makes a false connection or is misleading are the most pertinent types.[118]

However, in recent years, agencies such as the Global Disinformation Index have introduced 'adversarial narratives' into their definition of disinformation. This definition allows for the inclusion of misleading narratives that are "often implicit and constructed using a mix of cherry-picked elements of fact combined with fabrications" that are "adversarial in nature against an at-risk group or institution" and "[create] a risk of harm".[119] In their list of at-risk groups or institutions, GDI includes scientific consensus on topics such as climate change, or democratic processes such as voting.[120] Furthermore, in their list of online harms described to inform strategies for tackling disinformation, GDI include a variety of approaches including, 'links to criminal violent acts', content that is 'used to sow doubt in face of evidence to the contrary', the 'promotion of distrust of government and rule of law' or 'baseless, unsubstantiated, defamatory allegations against persons or groups'.[121]

Disinformation classification in this study - methodological explanation

Given the sensitivities surrounding what is considered and defined 'disinformation', we developed a specific method to ensure we had a robust approach to 'disinformation' classification. To support this, we initially used the NewsGuard website rating – which classifies new sources as "proceed with caution" or "proceed with maximum caution" – to identify a subset of online news articles in our dataset which were likely to contain disinformation.[122] Out of our total 2,193 online news sources, 45 received a rating of 'Proceed with Caution' or 'Proceed with Maximum Caution' (59.5% or less credibility score). The criteria used by Newsguard to determine this ranking ranged from if a site is found to 'repeatedly publish false or egregiously misleading content' to meeting standards for transparency related to ownership and editorial decision making. We labelled this subset of articles our 'Non Credible Sources' and used this as the starting point for developing our codebook of disinformation narratives.

Whilst using this approach as our initial foundation, we identified a number of examples that could potentially be classified as 'disinformation', but we have chosen to rule out from our own application of the term. For example, one article labelled a 'Non Credible Source' was from the site The Conservative Woman, which NewsGuard rates 40/100, or 'Proceed with Caution', noting that this news site 'generally fails to meet basic standards of accuracy and accountability'.[123] The article, titled 'Think tank's woke driving plans are the road to ruin', was published on 2nd June 2023 by Howard Cox, the founder of FairFuelUK, an explicitly anti-LTN campaign group. This connection between 'wokeness' and LTNs was one of the narratives we analyse in Chapter 4. Whilst it is difficult to find any definition of what is meant by 'woke' in this context, the term is generally used as a pejorative by those opposed to a cluster of socially progressive ideas, such as transgender rights and anti-racism. In this case, the language appears to be used to persuade audiences to dislike the LTN policy agenda on the basis of this rhetoric, rather than any substantive connection to existing debates over social issues.

117 First Draft. 2019. https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Information_Disorder_Digital_AW.pdf?x76701.
118 By false context we mean genuine content that is shared with false contextual information; misleading content i.e. misleading use of content to frame an issue; content that makes a false connection is when headlines, visuals or captions don't support the information.
119 Global Disinformation Index, July 2022. https://www.disinformationindex.org/blog/2022-06-22-disinformation-as-adversarial-narrative-conflict/.
120 GDI, July 2022. https://www.disinformationindex.org/blog/2022-06-22-disinformation-as-adversarial-narrative-conflict/.
121 GDI, July 2021. https://www.disinformationindex.org/research/2021-7-23-disrupting-online-harms-a-new-approach/.
122 Newsguard, Website Rating Process and Criteria. https://www.newsguardtech.com/ratings/rating-process-criteria/.
123 NewsGuard API, The Conservative Woman. https://api.newsguardtech.com/v3/2C643B99756F6028188DE20E37EA6E5798366DF0AD41BB36FCCF680FA385F83D952FFDF1B8DDAF25A2B79C23FD1E080BEBABA59C74596094

Whilst some defenders of the policy might regard rhetoric attempting to link LTNs with 'woke ideology' as 'harmful to approaches that tackle climate change' and therefore disinformation, we consider it important to distinguish between two distinct phenomena: harmful attacks on climate change science in particular, versus attacks which are harmful to any specific policy that seeks to tackle climate change. On the latter basis, any arguably persuasive criticism of a policy that seeks to tackle climate change could be classed as disinformation. For this specific research project, we believe that including these examples as disinformation would result in an overly broad categorisation, diluting the precision of our analysis. We therefore consider such narratives that argue that LTNs are 'woke' or 'anti-motorist' or that they 'increase crime' to be difficult to evidence or prove, but are not 'disinformation'.[124]

'Disinformation' classification of specific narratives in this study

We identified the following narratives as 'disinformation'. For the purposes of this paper, we include conspiracy theory, namely the Great Reset theory, together with 'disinformation'.

Importantly, we recognise that whilst such posts are considered harmful in a democratic, peaceful and law-abiding society, we do not consider them to be illegal and therefore would not suggest such posts should be removed from a social media platform.

TITLE	WHAT THIS NARRATIVE WAS ABOUT	WHY WE HAVE CLASSIFIED THIS AS DISINFORMATION
Pro-vigilante action towards LTNs	Expressing approval of vandalism of LTNs, or encouraging others to vandalise LTNs. I.e. 'Well done brave freedom fighters'.	Any post that goes beyond objectively reporting, but instead publicly celebrates criminal behaviour is harmful to peaceful and law-abiding society. It is also fair to assume that a citizen would know this is criminal behaviour and therefore harmful. As such it can therefore be classed as 'disinformation'.
LTNs are totalitarian	Posts which associate LTNs and the policymakers behind them with authoritarian/totalitarian political regimes, ranging from Nazi Germany to the Chinese Communist Party. i.e. 'LTNs are fascist tactics of state control'.	Any post that incorrectly describes a democratic institution, such as a local authority, as behaving in a way that is akin to a fascist, communist, authoritarian or totalitarian regime, is not providing a balanced critique of a process or practice by that body, but is instead defaming and eroding trust in it. Such an approach is knowingly inaccurate and harmful.

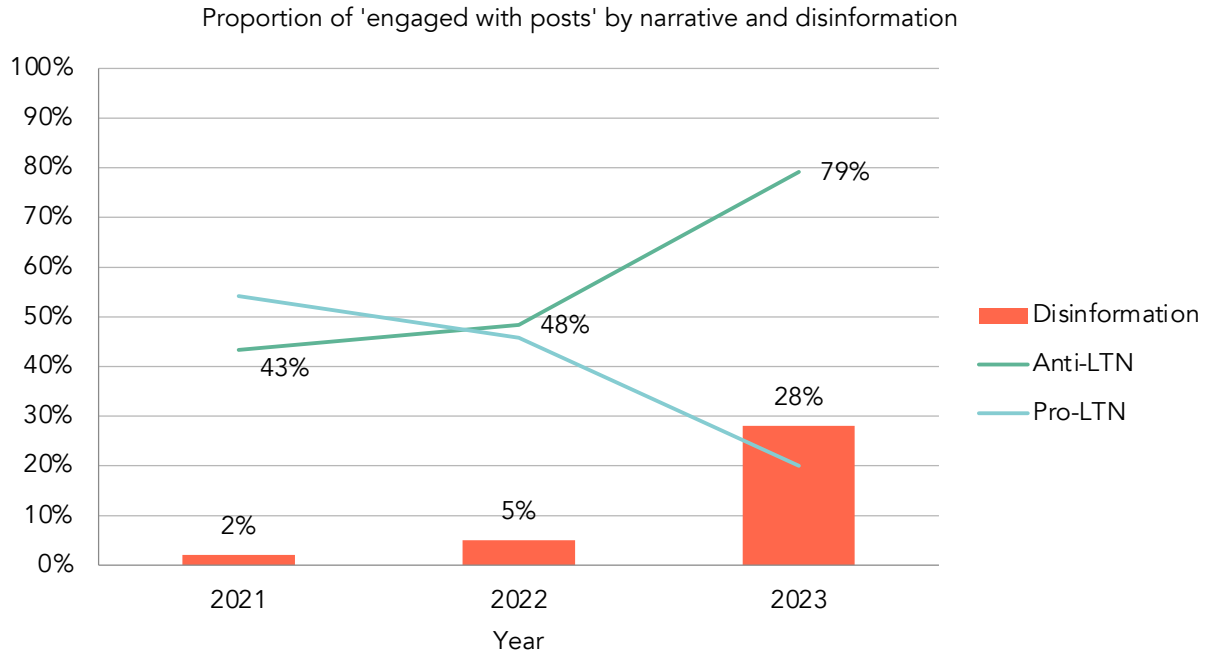
124 More broadly, we recognise conspiracy theory as a distinct phenomenon from disinformation. Demos will be publishing a forthcoming paper in May 2024 that discusses its distinct attributes.

TITLE	WHAT THIS NARRATIVE WAS ABOUT	WHY WE HAVE CLASSIFIED THIS AS DISINFORMATION
Great Reset	Posts which feature one or more strands of the 'Great Reset' conspiracy theory, including 15-minute cities, the World Economic Forum, globalists/ global elites, central bank digital currencies/digital identity and vaccine passports.[125]	Any post that incorrectly suggests that councils are advancing an agenda that can be associated with the 'Great Reset' conspiracy theory is again eroding trust in democratic institutions. Whilst it is difficult to say if a user is being knowingly inaccurate, it is likely that a user is aware of the strength and risk of their accusation doing harm to the reputation of the democratic institution.

LEVELS OF DISINFORMATION INCREASED OVER TIME

The online discourse prior to and in the early stages of 2021 had not been lacking in toxicity. Many local LTN policies as well as other travel policies, such as ULEZ, had been introduced prior to when our digital media dataset began. There was evidence of users filming and posting misleading videos of the Mayor of London online to 'evidence' that he was breaking his own traffic management measures. These videos were accompanied with labels such as 'hypocrite' and opposition councillors describing members introducing such policies as 'undemocratic' very early on in 2021.[126] Following 2021, our analysis shows that the proportion of disinformation increased over time.

In 2021, the engagement with disinformation was minor - only 2% of posts with high engagement could be classified as disinformation. However, in 2023, the proportion of posts with high engagement that could be classified as disinformation increased substantially to more than a quarter of the overall sample (28%). This symbolises both a sharp decline in the quality of the information surrounding this policy agenda being engaged with online and a shift in the level of engagement of certain arguments or voices in the debate.



125 See Antisemitism Policy Trust et al, May 2024 for a full breakdown of how this category combines a variety of conspiracy theories which interconnect, including 'the Great Reset', 'Climate Lockdown', and 'the 15-Minute City'. https://antisemitism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Conspiracy-Theory-Guide.pdf.

126 Chris Dey on X, February 2021. https://twitter.com/ChrisDey4Grange/status/1358532454613663745.

As all of our disinformation narratives can be classified as anti-LTN, it is clear that some citizens who oppose LTNs are increasingly engaging with more extreme, anti-LTN arguments.

'DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNERS'

Defining a disinformation campaigner

A 'disinformation campaigner' can be defined as an actor who uses social media platforms to publicly, routinely, and often intentionally persuade others to believe false claims, in some cases profiting from their online content.[127] The intended outcome of this activity could be to create division and/or 'do harm' to a specific community or institution such as by undermining trust in democratic institutions e.g. referring to them as totalitarian, celebrating criminal behaviour such as vandalism, or suggesting that a policy agenda is being leveraged by a shadowy elite with nefarious intention.

Notably, there also exist 'misinformation campaigners' or 'misinfluencers' who may genuinely believe the misinformation they are spreading, but nonetheless have a negative impact.[128] In this report, much like our definition of disinformation, because of the difficulty to identify awareness and intention, we have merged the two terms and simply refer to 'disinformation campaigners'.

Together Declaration

We have identified 'disinformation campaigners' in our dataset by confirming the specific accounts which are persistently sharing narratives we have classified as disinformation. One of the most prominent disinformation campaigns on the topic of LTNs is led by the group Together Declaration. This group originally formed to protest Covid-19 lockdowns and vaccine mandates, but as pandemic-era restrictions were lifted, began to pivot to opposition against LTNs and other traffic reduction schemes. Common examples of disinformation from this group include assigning sinister intentions to councillors, arguing that LTNs are a totalitarian policy which is part of a wider global agenda, and stoking explicitly conspiratorial rhetoric which connects the debate over LTNs to unrelated initiatives such as Digital Identity schemes as part of this alleged grand agenda of control.

As highlighted above, there was a distinct increase in disinformation in 2023. While we cannot say for certain exactly what caused this shift, there are three distinct clusters of actors and events between late 2022 and 2023 which appear to have played a role in increasing the level of engagement with these narratives.[129]

Whilst some references to conspiracy theories did appear prior to 2023, particular actors, such as Together Declaration, who are invested in specific conspiratorial narratives began trepidatiously adopting the anti-LTN debate in 2022. Other active disinformation campaigners include, but are not limited to, Martin Daubney of GB News and WideAwakeMedia, though Together Declaration remains the most prominent.[130]

When Together Declaration incorporated LTNs into its agenda in May 2022, the group tied the appetite to restrict movement via lockdowns with the traffic restrictions represented by LTNs. It first shared a post on X highlighting this connection just prior to the local election in May 2022, but began posting much more frequently from December 2022 onwards.[131]

127 This definition borrows from that provided for 'disinfluencers' by ISD, September 2023. https://caad.info/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Climate-Mis-_Disinformation-Backgrounder.pdf.
128 Ibid.
129 Please also note that X, formerly known as Twitter, also made its first major cut to its Trust & Safety team in October 2022 and has continued to cut staff in this area of the organisation. This change in prioritisation of resources and staffing within X may also have had an impact on the proportion of disinformation remaining on the platform between 2022 and 2023 onwards.
130 Examples of posts that reflect disinformation by these actors include: Martin Daubney, March 2023. https://twitter.com/MartinDaubney/status/1627157811397287939?lang=en-GB; Wide Awake Media, April 2023. https://twitter.com/wideawake_media/status/1650078886514892801.
131 Together Declaration on Twitter, May 2022. https://twitter.com/Togetherdec/status/1521864913362337794.

From early 2023 onwards, Together Declaration began to dominate the online discussion of LTNs, both in terms of the overall volume of posts and the most engaged-with posts. This account is likely to have significantly contributed to the swing towards anti-LTN sentiment in our dataset, as well as being responsible for a substantial portion of the increase in disinformation and conspiracy framing. This group uses various examples from local anti-LTN campaigns, including video testimonials from locals, but connects these back to a national agenda.[132] [133]

In 2023, 27% of the most engaged with anti-LTN posts were authored by the Together Declaration account.

While mainstream political figures involved in this debate have largely avoided engagement with explicit disinformation campaigns, Baroness Fox of Buckley, an non-affiliated member of the House of Lords, has previously supported Together Declaration's campaign against the Covid-19 lockdown measures.[134] In November 2023, Baroness Fox recommended Together Declaration's report on LTNs, '"Clean" Air, Dirty Money, Filthy Politics', while speaking in the House of Lords.[135, 136]

Importantly, these disinformation campaigners again did not seek to engage with the local issue or arguments about LTNs directly, but instead sought to demonstrate how genuine concerns about LTNs reinforced their broader conspiratorial narrative. It's important to note that these individuals had been active online sharing their conspiratorial narratives long before the LTN debate began. What this local debate enabled was more momentum and potentially new audiences to propagate their narrative.

Other actors driving up audience engagement with disinformation

There are a number of other factors which may also have contributed to the spike in engagement with disinformation in 2023. Whilst online disinformation campaigners clearly widened their pre-existing lens to incorporate LTNs from December 2022 onwards, a number of other events and actors with significant followings are also likely to have contributed to an increase in engagement with anti-LTN narratives, some of which included disinformation.

National journalist coverage of local flashpoint events

First, two prominent events occurred in early 2023 which attracted considerable attention. The February 2023 anti-LTN protest in Oxford (in which conspiracy communities played a key role) and the March 2023 Rochdale fire where planters were set alight. These local events gained national and international media coverage and thus attention, contributing to the shift from local to national discourse.

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE ROCHDALE FIRE?

An unknown member(s) of the public set fire to several planters hours after they had been installed to restrict traffic on 25th March 2023. Between 25th and 27th March, a number of anti-LTN activists (including Together Declaration and a journalist from GB News) expressed support for this act of arson online.[137, 138] These discussions included more conspiratorial discourse, such as this clip from Wide Awake Media with the post:

132 Together Declaration on Twitter, April 2023. https://twitter.com/Togetherdec/status/1644451335935344640.
133 Together Declaration on Twitter, January 2023. https://twitter.com/Togetherdec/status/1618531287652012032.
134 Together Declaration, Petition. https://togetherdeclaration.org/sign/.
135 Claire Fox on Twitter, November 2023. https://twitter.com/Fox_Claire/status/1727008229102952887. Together Declaration on Twitter, November 2023. https://twitter.com/Togetherdec/status/1727238957870805063.
136 In a since deleted tweet, Baroness Fox had already highlighted her sympathy with conspiratorial narratives regarding LTNs linking the approach taken to introducing vaccine passports 'by stealth' in April 2021, demonstrating a similar trajectory to Together Declaration by connecting LTNs to a perceived broader agenda of restricting freedom of movement. https://twitter.com/Fox_Claire/status/1382375998902132744.
137 The UK LTN Resistance on X, March 2023. https://twitter.com/ioisours/status/1639671536603766786; Together Declaration on X, March 2023. https://twitter.com/Togetherdec/status/1639964693786775553.
138 Martin Daubney on X, March 2023. https://twitter.com/MartinDaubney/status/1640796804663898112.

"Locals overturn and set fire to LTN barriers, on the first day of "trial".

'LTN' stands for "low traffic neighbourhood", and it's a way of gradually acclimatising people to having fewer and fewer cars on the road, in preparation for their 15-minute prisons."

195.4k views, 1,024 Reposts, 27,11 Likes.[139]

On the 28th March, the story was covered on Yahoo!News, then went viral on social media, receiving over 4,000 shares.[140]

A single story on Yahoo!News about the Rochdale fire received the most online engagement of any news story in our dataset, including all LTN coverage between 2021 and 2023, and almost double the volume of engagement that the second-most shared article received. One journalist based in Rochdale commented on the sudden explosion and then disappearance of the national news coverage:

"There was some coverage [of the planter fires] in the Manchester Evening News, the Asian Leader, Daily Telegraph, but nothing since…" - Journalist interview

Between the Rochdale fire and Oxford protests, the Oxford demonstrations received considerably more attention on social media. For example, in December 2022, Jordan Peterson, a prominent figure in the "culture wars" endorsed aspects of the Great Reset conspiracy theory while including a link to a story about LTNs featured in the Oxford Mail.[141] This additional and enduring attention surrounding Oxford is likely due in part to the fact that the debate over LTNs in Oxford has been ongoing in the public eye for far longer, whereas the Rochdale fire was the first and indeed the last time that the LTN in Rochdale had gained significant attention outside of the local community. The fact that only one LTN was introduced in Rochdale and was also quickly removed is also likely to have lessened the level of ongoing engagement in the topic.

Despite this, the focused coverage of the Rochdale fire, in the eyes of national audiences, might have suggested that there were overwhelmingly negative opinions and awareness about this issue within Rochdale itself or that this was a longer-standing issue for the community. Yet, many local residents suggested they had first learned about the LTN because of the national coverage of the fire and had not necessarily themselves felt affected by the issue until it reached national headlines. Furthermore, due to other barriers such as a lack of awareness, digital exclusion and potentially language barriers, local residents had a very limited profile and involvement in the online debate. This indicates how national coverage of particular local flash-points or heated moments in local debates has the potential to negatively skew both local and national perceptions of the policy agenda and exclude the views of local residents.

These local stories were elevated to the international stage by coverage from both local and then national media outlets. Whilst coverage of important local news stories is of course inevitable, the increase in the volume and concentration of attention on the LTN policy from journalists coincided with increased levels of activity from disinformation campaigners, thus may have inadvertently driven new audiences towards engaging with disinformation narratives.

Political actors increasingly adopting the issue

National journalists and disinformation campaigners were not alone in turning their focus towards the LTN issue in early 2023. Following the Rochdale fire, national politicians also responded to the increasing salience of the LTN issue by co-opting anti-LTN arguments into their broader agendas. This increased attention from politicians is also likely to have contributed to a significant proportion of the increase in national audience engagement with the LTN policy, with the most prominent example of this being in July 2023, when the Prime

139 This example has been removed from the public version of this report to protect the identity of an X account clearly suggests it is for personal use.
140 Yahoo News, March 2023. https://uk.news.yahoo.com/low-traffic-neighbourhood-barricades-traffic-set-fire-rochdale-143407843.html.
141 Jordan B. Peterson on X, December 2022.https://twitter.com/jordanbpeterson/status/1609255646993457153?lang=en.

Minister Rishi Sunak announced a review into LTN policies.[142] Whilst Sunak himself did not make reference to disinformation, he did support attacks on councils that had implemented LTNs, referring to them as 'anti-motorist'.[143]

Local political figures, including councillors, local parties and candidates for the Mayor of London, had long been active on the topic of LTNs from the beginning of our dataset in January 2021. For example, not long after Enfield Council voted to make two LTNs permanent, Conservative councillor for Enfield Chris Dey, accused the local Labour council of behaving like a dictatorship.[144] Mayoral candidate and Conservative peer Shaun Bailey also repeated claims about ambulance delays caused by LTNs in a tweet in May 2021 where he committed to scrapping them entirely if elected.[145] As highlighted in our narrative analysis above, the Tottenham Conservatives also played a role, sharing a series of memes drawing links between a range of more or less sensitive topics which divide the public and LTNs framing LTNs as part of a 'woke' policy agenda allegedly pushed by Labour, including trans rights.[146]

However, following the Rochdale fire, Rishi Sunak came under increasing pressure from national news media to scrap LTNs, particularly from traditional, right-leaning media outlets. This increased association between the Prime Minister and LTNs is also likely to have driven up engagement online.

MARCH 2023	Mail on Sunday article - "Ministers come under pressure to scrap 'preposterous' and 'dangerous' LTNs" - shared 620 times with 1.2k comments[147]
MARCH - JULY 2023	463 articles featuring Sunak and LTNs (out of a sample of 465 articles about LTNs in 2023) Andrew Bridgen MP reshares a number of Together Declaration posts[148, 149]
JULY 2023	Sunak announces review of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods saying he's 'on the side of motorists'

The first article on this topic in our dataset, "Ministers come under pressure to scrap 'preposterous' and 'dangerous' LTNs", was published by the Mail on Sunday on 31st March 2023, shortly after the Rochdale fire.[150] This article included quotes from the founder of the FairFuel UK campaign, who we have identified through our research as a potential disinformation influencer. His comment that "millions will be open-mouthed" at so many local councils' apparently cavalier attitudes towards human life for the sake of "pointless woke and green idealism" mirrors the 'LTNs are part of the woke agenda' narrative. The article draws on disinformation tropes, including stating that the residents who vandalised the LTN planters in Rochdale "launched a rebellion", and includes a section at the bottom of the page titled "How 15-minute cities could be coming to the UK". The Mail on Sunday's internal engagement metrics stated that this article was shared 620 times, with 1.2K comments.[151]

Between 31st March and 30th July 2023, the date Sunak announced policy changes on LTNs, 463 news articles appeared in our dataset mentioning Sunak and LTNs. For context, our full dataset for the year includes 465 articles on Sunak and LTNs over the entirety of 2023, demonstrating the intensity of the coverage over this short period of time. The Mail on Sunday shared several more articles over this period pushing for Sunak to change the policy, including "Is this the beginning of the end for LTNs? Now Sadiq Khan admits low-traffic neighbourhoods 'aren't perfect' and some may need REMOVING in London - as Government 'concedes there's no evidence they reduce the number of miles driven" and "Transport Secretary Mark Harper urges local councils to rethink 'unpopular' low traffic neighbourhoods as he warns they can 'set people against each other'".[152]

142 The Guardian, July 2023. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jul/30/rishi-sunak-orders-review-of-low-traffic-neighbourhood-schemes.
143 The Sun, September 2023. https://www.thesun.co.uk/motors/24208749/rishi-sunak-car-drivers-ltn-speed-scheme/.
144 Chris Dey on Twitter, February 2021. https://twitter.com/ChrisDey4Grange/status/1358532454613663745.
145 Shaun Bailey on Twitter, May 2021. https://twitter.com/ShaunBaileyUK/status/1388791292738641920.
146 Tottenham Conservatives on Twitter, September 2022, https://twitter.com/TottenhamConse1/status/1572857328591900673; November 2022, https://twitter.com/TottenhamConse1/status/1587745784862326784.
147 Mail on Sunday, March 2023. https://www.mailonsunday.co.uk/news/article-11925437/Ministers-come-pressure-scrap-preposterous-dangerous-LTNs.html.
148 Andrew Bridgen on Twitter, May 2023. https://twitter.com/ABridgen/status/1682751753979146240.
149 Andrew Bridgen on Twitter, July 2023. https://twitter.com/ABridgen/status/1686117795719700480.
150 Ibid.
151 Our analysis platform erroneously claims that Mail on Sunday articles received no engagement, so we are using the outlet's own metrics.
152 Mail on Sunday, May 2023. https://www.mailonsunday.co.uk/news/article-12111087/Sadiq-Khan-admits-low-traffic-neighbourhoods-arent-perfect-need-REMOVING-London.html; Mail on Sunday, July 2023. https://www.mailonsunday.co.uk/news/article-12280063/Transport-Secretary-Mark-Harper-urges-local-councils-rethink-unpopular-LTNs.html.

Other national politicians such as Andrew Bridgen MP became more prominent in the debate during this period. Bridgen shared a number of posts by campaign groups Together Declaration, as well as potential disinformation.[153, 154]

On 30th July 2023, Sunak announced that there would be a review of low traffic neighbourhoods. An article from Sky News announcing the policy - 'Rishi Sunak orders review of low traffic neighbourhoods and says he's on the side of motorists' - received 762 shares.[155] The announcement sparked a huge volume of debate online, with 2,674 posts mentioning Sunak shared on X in the month following the announcement, compared to only 183 posts over the previous 18 months. Following this announcement, the Conservative party continued to double down on an anti-LTN stance, with Transport Secretary Mark Harper giving a speech stating that he will end "the mis-use of so-called 15 minute cities" and "ensure no Government money" funds LTNs in future.[156]

One journalist commented that it was the language used in online posts by politicians that was predictably explosive for certain commentators online.

"Sadly, anything that involves limiting the freedom of motorists is a dog-whistle to all kinds of wrong-headed fools, a situation exacerbated by the current government." - Journalist interview

Importantly, national figures tied the issue of LTNs to broader narratives of this policy being against freedom of movement and 'anti-motorist' rather than making the case for whether this policy was suitable for the local area it was being introduced in. We found that the narratives shared by mainstream newspapers and political figures blurred the line between legitimate critique of LTN policies and disingenuous narratives shared by disinformation actors. This both reflected and intensified the toxicity of the national debate on this topic, abstracting the debate away from the concrete reality of how LTNs work, or do not work, within local communities.

DID DISINFORMATION AMPLIFY AND WEAPONISE DIVISION?

It is difficult to robustly determine if division offline was caused or amplified by online disinformation

To determine if division as highlighted in Chapter 4 has been exacerbated by disinformation, it must be clear that those who are divided (1) are aware of or have been exposed to that disinformation and (2) have been led further into that division by the online disinformation that they have been exposed to.

In our analysis of the impacts of LTN disinformation on community division, it was difficult to determine the extent to which a resident was opposed to a policy because they have been exposed to disinformation. There were a variety of reasons why a resident might oppose the LTN policy—as described in both Chapter 4 and in further detail in Chapter 6—and it was difficult to tell to what extent those reasons as opposed to online disinformation influenced their resolution. That said, the awareness of disinformation or any of the extreme narratives we have discussed here among those who we engaged with offline was fairly low. This may suggest a more limited effect of disinformation on further driving division among the community members we engaged with.

Low awareness of disinformation offline

In Oxford and Enfield, pro- and anti-LTN residents had similar views offline to the mainstream narratives and sentiments expressed online. However, very few residents indicated an awareness of the more extreme narratives associated with disinformation. In Rochdale and Enfield, residents appeared fairly shocked and some appalled by examples of the narratives presented to them in focus groups.[157]

153 Andrew Bridgen on Twitter, May 2023. https://twitter.com/ABridgen/status/1682751753979146240.
154 Andrew Bridgen on Twitter, July 2023. https://twitter.com/ABridgen/status/1686117795719700480.
155 Sky News, July 2023. https://news.sky.com/story/rishi-sunak-orders-review-of-low-traffic-neighbourhoods-and-says-hes-on-the-side-of-motorists-12930344.
156 Mark Harper, October 2023. https://www.conservatives.com/news/2023/cpc23-address-from-mark-harper.
157 See Appendix for the examples presented to residents.

In Oxford, where some awareness of these narratives did exist, and where conspiracy theories were identified across the placards of protesters in 2023, residents expressed strong concerns with being associated with such narratives.

Instead, these residents sought to actively distance themselves from them because of concerns their association would negate their own position against the policy which they regarded as rational and justified.

"The arguments from… the outside… kind of the Great Reset and all that kind of, you know, gubbins… It really doesn't help. It gives the councillors a stick to beat us with."
- Oxford Anti-LTN respondent

Anecdotally, councillors in Oxford have highlighted that some members of their community have been concerned by some of the disinformation, to the extent that they have enquired through the council if some suggestions are true. However, again, such influence appears to be fairly limited.

Dissonance between online debate and offline flashpoints

It might be suggested that particular flashpoints, such as residents setting fire to their local LTN planters in Rochdale, was because they were influenced by disinformation or conspiracy theories. However, to stay with this example in Rochdale, the online debate - including disinformation - bore little resemblance to the views of residents offline. Residents were generally unaware of the divisions between pro- and anti-LTN groups online, and instead expressed more of a division between the council and the residents. Both pro- and anti-LTN residents had a nuanced understanding of each others' points of view. Many pro-LTN residents even took the fire as a sign that the community was united against LTNs, and that the council must have done something wrong to have provoked such drastic action from locals.

Therefore, there is next to no evidence that disinformation was the primary cause of the opposition to the LTN policy or any division within the community itself.

Weaponisation of division by disinformation campaigners

Whilst it is difficult to robustly determine whether online disinformation exacerbated offline divisions, it is clear that those sharing disinformation did 'weaponise' division for their own ends. As highlighted above, where online campaigners have sought to suggest that vandals of planters and bollards are 'freedom fighters', or that councils are 'totalitarian', they frequently use videos and case studies of individual residents expressing very real division and frustration with the approach taken by democratic institutions and actors in the information ecosystem. It is the weaknesses and vulnerabilities within the information ecosystem that we will explore in further detail in Part 3 of this report.

PART 3
THE ROLE OF INFORMATION ECOSYSTEMS IN CHALLENGING DISINFORMATION

Drawing on our information ecosystem framework introduced in Chapter 1, in Part 3 we demonstrate how, rather than challenging disinformation, our information ecosystem provided fertile ground for its generation and spread. To achieve this, we evaluate each layer of the information ecosystem in turn - including national government, national and local news media, local government, local community groups and personal networks.

6. NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

In this section, we explain how rushed policymaking and the inconsistency of leadership from the top likely enabled divisions at a local level.

KEY FINDINGS SUMMARY

- The government's U-turn, from an initial call to act swiftly to introduce the policy during lockdown in 2020 to an outright attack on the LTN policy and "anti-motorist" councils in 2023, fractured the communications between national and local and created further gaps for disinformation to thrive.
- The allowance for councils to pursue means which contradicted the stated goals of the policy, such as using bollards that prevented electric vehicles when stating the goal was to bring down emissions, enabled accusations of hypocrisy and hidden agenda.
- Such fissures and variation between national and local government, and between local authorities across the country, were further exacerbated by the engagement of national politicians in conspiracy theory and invective in 2023 (as discussed in Chapter 5).

NATIONAL AND LOCAL POLICY ACTOR CONFLICT

In Chapter 2, we introduced the range of policy actors who had a hand in designing, introducing and implementing the LTN policy. Within the UK, this included national, regional and local governments. In Chapter 4, we explained how the Great Reset conspiracy theory suggested that LTNs were a strategy of a global elite plotting world domination by means of mass surveillance. Certainty and consistency surrounding who the author and driver of a policy is is a key means by which both national and local government can tackle suggestions of nefarious agendas.

Not only was communicating the LTN policy likely to be a complicated message given its implementation was devolved from national to local government, but the complex structures of local government and transport governance creates even further ambiguity for local communities.[158]

To add to this complexity, from 2022, Conservative politicians, including Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, Transport Secretary Mark Harper and Andrew Bridgen MP can be found increasingly attacking councils and critiquing the LTN policy in the run-up to the full government U-turn of the policy in September 2023.[159] This division between the national government advocating against the policy and local government advocating for presents a very confusing representation of who owned the policy agenda itself and whether councils were acting out of step with the national government when enacting this policy.

Given the tension between national and local government as well as the level of variability across the country, it is already possible to identify how and why mis/disinformation narratives around who is behind the policy have emerged.

158 Government Office for Science, January 2019. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c6fddea40f0b647b35c43d8/governance.pdf.

159 See Chapter 2 for the full context and timeline on the policy announcement as well as Chapter 5 for the political narratives associated with the policy in 2023.

POLICY GOAL AND IMPLEMENTATION CLASH

In Chapter 2, we highlighted the high number of goals associated with the policy and the very varied rationales given by councils for their reasons to implement the policy and their measures of success. Some residents also found contradictions in the stated goals of the policy described by their local government relative to the way it was being implemented, particularly in relation to the goal for supporting active travel. Whilst this ambiguity did not lead all residents to assume the council had a hidden agenda, it also contributed to confusion and a sense of disbelief in the communication being shared about the overall goals of the policy.

LTNs are for active travel, but limited improvement in cycling infrastructure

Some residents disputed the stated intention of the policy being to motivate active travel because whilst councils had restricted traffic, they hadn't also made the corresponding implementation measures to encourage cycling. One opposition councillor in Enfield indicated that Enfield Council had installed LTNs without simultaneously improving the walking and cycling infrastructure highlighting that this undermined their message for motivating active travel. In Rochdale, several residents indicated that the claim of encouraging active travel did not make sense for their specific context. In Rochdale, because of the distance people need to travel from the surrounding villages to get into the town, cycling was thought to be an unrealistic alternative. As a result, it was considered that whilst LTNs might improve road safety in a specific area, it would not actually increase takeup of walking/cycling because people would still need their cars and thus the expressed goals of the policy were futile. The discrepancy between goals ascribed to the policy and the approach to implementation appeared to undermine its overall objective.

LTNs are for the climate, but prevent electric vehicles too

Given the historical context of the LTN policy being embedded in the Net Zero strategy, those who were already advocating for action for climate change incorporated and elevated the profile of LTNs into this agenda.[160, 161] In Oxford, some residents felt that they were receiving conflicting messages from central and local governments, with the national message being that LTNs were to help stop climate change, whereas the local message was that this was a traffic control measure. Some residents also struggled to understand why, if the goal of the policy was to reduce car emissions, the implementation measure had been a bollard rather than measures that encouraged more usage of electric vehicles or that allowed electric vehicles to be exempt. This inconsistency in the stated goals with the approach to implementation led some to return to question the intentions of the policy itself and whether they were true.

"I read somewhere it was to help the environment to reduce the traffic and traffic and emissions. So, I've got an electric car, so I'm helping the environment. Yeah, I can't take my car. So I don't think that is really the reason why they put the LTNs in." - Anti-LTN resident, Oxford

The lack of clarity regarding whether and how the LTN policies goals and implementation tie into the broader national climate change agenda, and how that aligned with specific transport policy, such as incentivising electric car use, provided unhelpful ambiguity to the policy's implementation.

Overall, such confusion among residents about the specific goals of the policy at a national and local level indicated the importance of having absolute clarity about this for the specific community concerned, that it aligns completely with the approach to implementation and what would be realistic and measurable outcomes in that specific neighbourhood.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the national government and national politicians created a destabilising information environment in which disinformation could thrive.

160 An example of pro-LTN references to the climate emergency include: Cllr Benali Hamdache on X, July 2021. https://twitter.com/greenbenali/status/1420295345540669446.

161 Net Zero Strategy: Build Back Greener, October 2021, p24. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6194dfa4d3bf7f0555071b1b/net-zero-strategy-beis.pdf.

With respect to enabling truth, the government not only failed to maintain leadership and provide a coherent communications strategy or framework resilient to potential unpopularity in local communities - it smashed apart the fractured approach by U-turning on the policy and by directly attacking councils just three years after it launched the policy in question. The creation of the Active Travel England may support higher quality approaches by councils in the future, but does not address or undo what amounted to very inconsistent leadership around this important policy area. The extent to which national politicians were vilifying councils by vilifying councils as 'anti-motorist' played directly into furthering distrust within communities. The validation of conspiracy theory narratives such as those concerning 15-minute cities by some politicians also demonstrates the level of decay that has already eaten its way through the standards of political discourse and into the hearts of local information ecosystems. The need for an anti-disinformation standard in public life is long overdue.

Existing funding solutions also lack evaluation approaches that ensure councils implement schemes that reflect the goals they set out to achieve. It remains possible for councils to roll-out traffic management measures, such as bollards and planters, that contradict the stated goals of the investment such as tackling air pollution - with no allowance for electric vehicles. The ability for councils to roll-out incoherent policies demonstrates a lack of effective evaluation at the top. A 'means match goals' rule is needed for all government departments allocating funding to local authorities.

In terms of inclusivity and resilience, the Government certainly allowed for a broad variety of participation and variation in approach. However, it has been blind to the lack of inclusivity and resilience within local democratic systems, providing funding with little accountability or due diligence for the extent to which local actors have the power to effectively negotiate and implement such schemes at a local level. The need for a local democracy health monitor will be discussed further in the recommendations section.

7. LOCAL GOVERNMENT

In this section, our findings highlight the democratic chasm that has opened at a local level between councils and communities in which disinformation is flourishing.

KEY FINDINGS SUMMARY

- Residents suggest it is 'the Council' who is the driver of misinformation within local communities - underlining the severe damage done to relationships at a local level.
- The rush to introduce LTNs caught many residents off-guard with some finding out about LTNs through tickets or penalties. Many councils simply failed to target the full range of households that needed the information about the schemes that would affect them. For those that councils did target, communications failed to cut through. From the start, residents were left to feel excluded from the process of policy design and implementation.
- There are a range of signs that the existing model of consultation is broken:
    - The dominance of web-based, passive approaches to consultation and lack of proactive engagement with vulnerable communities, such as disabled people, who were likely to be disproportionately affected by schemes, led to the exclusion of citizens from decision-making that had a significant impact on their day-to-day lives.
    - The timing and scope of consultations as well as the perception of council bias in the process led many citizens to feel disempowered and that their participation was futile.
    - 'The Council' is perceived as relying on poor evidence and mischaracterizing the level of positive impact schemes are having leading to accusations of being deliberately deceptive.
    - The lack of transparency and facilitated discussion at a local level regarding the trade-offs implicit in the policy as well as the positive framing of more nuanced evidence led some citizens to describe the council's approach as "manipulative" and even "gaslighting".
    - The lack of trust in the communication and consultation process combined with ambiguity regarding the levels of public support for the schemes led some citizens to describe the overall process as "undemocratic".
- Disinformation narratives, accusing councils of being 'totalitarian', clearly link to more mainstream critiques of council approaches to consultation demonstrating an easy slide from constructive political debate to conspiracy online.
- The historical funding context for local government in the UK is dire with a £4 billion funding gap to enable existing services. A gradual erosion of investment appears to also be reflected in levels of trust. 43% of residents suggested they trust their council 'not very much or not at all' in 2024.[162]

162 LGA, 2024. https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Resident%20Satisfaction%20Polling%20Round%2037.pdf.

CONTEXT FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN THE UK

There are four contextual factors which are likely to have negatively impacted the introduction of LTNs. The combination of constraints on local government funding and a deterioration in or absence of investment by the council in maintaining local community relationships, with a lack of demand for council-related information among communities and a need for highly tailored communication to engage citizens, all likely led to a weakening in the relationship between councils and citizens.

Constraints on local government funding for local democracy

Good communication and consultation requires long-term investment and secure funding - a key attribute of resilience in any ecosystem. In 2020, when the Active Travel Fund was launched, councils were facing a range of funding challenges, some of which persist or have worsened since. Councils' core spending power fell by 26 per cent in real terms between 2010-11 to 2020-2021.[163] The impact of the pandemic, rising demand for services as well as the extra costs arising from inflation have since placed council budgets under even further strain. For example, the LGA has indicated that in late 2023, councils in England faced a £4 billion funding gap just to keep their existing services running.[164] Half of councils responding to a recent survey indicated they were not confident they had enough funding to fulfil their legal duties including statutory services in 2024-2025.[165] Furthermore, the Commons' Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee recently described 'the systemic under-funding' of local government as 'out of control'.[166]

Oxford, Rochdale and Enfield are no exception to this trend. Between 2023-2024, both Oxfordshire County and Oxford City Councils have reported needing to make cuts to their services in order to balance their budgets, Rochdale has highlighted significant concerns plugging national government cuts and Enfield Council described the "most challenging ever" of budgets.[167] In this context, it's likely that there has been considerable strain on expenditure, potentially including investments in consultation and communication.

Whilst spending on local community engagement and consultation is very difficult to identify in council budget reporting, national analysis of funding that may contribute to these activities, such as on 'central services' (-16.4%) and planning and development services (-35.7%), reduced significantly between 2010-11 and 2020-2021.[168] Furthermore, the impact of funding cuts and inability to increase salaries has led to difficulty recruiting and retaining staff in councils which is also likely to have knock-on effects on the ability to maintain key relationships with community stakeholders.[169] A recent survey of council leaders expressed concern regarding how funding cuts impacted their ability to honour commitments to being responsive to local voices.[170] Thus, it is extremely likely that the highly constrained funding environment for councils has had a negative impact on their ability to invest in relationship-building activities that facilitate strong engagement and effective consultation.

Deterioration of investment in community relationships has negatively impacted trust

The LGA has highlighted that engagement with local communities should not be one-off in response to the need to consult on a specific policy. Instead, it should be 'continuous' to 'build trust on both sides' and include targeted approaches to communities councils may know the least.[171] A continuous relationship enables councils to softly test new ideas and identify possible resistance as they go.

To enable and reflect this ongoing relationship, councils should be maintaining community maps with a sense of where their residents are, as well as key stakeholders and civic institutions so that they can navigate intermediary networks, such as key charities or key ambassadors and connectors, when seeking to engage

163 National Audit Office, 2021. https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/The-local-government-finance-system-in-England-overview-and-challenges.pdf.
164 LGA, 2023. https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/section-114-fear-almost-1-5-council-leaders-and-chief-executives-after-cashless-autumn.
165 Ibid.
166 BBC, 2024. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-68159001.
167 Oxfordshire County Council, 2024. https://news.oxfordshire.gov.uk/balanced-budget-proposed/ BBC, 2023. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-67636879; Rochdale Online, 2024. https://www.rochdaleonline.co.uk/news-features/2/news-headlines/155311/council-leaders-column-the-council-budget-and-the-reopening-of-rochdale-town-hall; Enfield Dispatch, 2024. https://enfielddispatch.co.uk/budget-report-reveals-how-enfield-council-expects-to-save-16-6m-in-2024-25/#:~:text=The%20council%20will%20also%20be,further%20%E2%80%9Coperational%20efficiencies%E2%80%9D%20in%20its.
168 Ibid.
169 Institute for Government, 2019. https://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/housing-communities-and-local-government-committee/local-government-finance-and-the-2019-spending-review/written/99949.html.
170 LGIU, 2024. https://lgiu.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/State-of-Local-Government-Finance-in-England-2024.pdf.
171 LGA, 2024, p29, 38, 75. https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/New%20Conversations%20Guide%20refresh_11.pdf.

communities and disseminate important messages.[172, 173] To be effective, such community maps would be kept regularly up to date with clarity on the most appropriate and effective channel to reach each audience. For example, the LGA, in their stakeholder mapping tool, highlights how some audiences require a highly safe, anonymous communications channel with payment for participating, whereas others may require a professional briefing and the use of advocates from the Chamber of Commerce.[174]

Yet, evidence suggests that nationally, community relationships with councils have deteriorated. Following the trends in decline in spending power, recent national surveys of resident perception of their council suggest that trust is at its lowest since 2012. In February 2024, 43% of residents suggested they trust their council 'not very much or not at all' and 47% said they were aware of what their local councillor did in their local area 'not very much' or 'not at all'.[175] In our three case study areas, the foundational strength of communications and relationships between the council and local residents appeared to vary considerably and would also no doubt depend on the extent to which residents rely on the council for certain services, such as social housing and home repairs or just road maintenance and bin collection.

In February 2024, 43% of residents suggested they trust their council 'not very much or not at all' and 47% said they were aware of what their local councillor did in their local area 'not very much' or 'not at all'

In Rochdale, there were some who would describe a relatively positive relationship between the council, residents and community leaders, delineating the introduction of the LTN policy as an unusual approach in an otherwise fairly responsive relationship.

"I think it was, it was a one off. So because they've had good experiences in the past. So they will take it as a one off, and they feel that the councillors are listening now."
- Community leader, Rochdale

"[The Council] listen to us, they consult us, the area forum is happening every quarter... They're really, really open, they come to the forums, they come to the community, they are connected. But I think on this plan, nobody knew what was happening." - Community leader, Rochdale

Others in Rochdale appeared to have a more negative baseline perception suggesting that they would typically only hear from the council during election times with one community leader suggesting that the only reason the council withdrew the LTN was because elections were coming up.

"I think that was a fear of election [that caused] my local authority [to remove] everything."
- Community leader, Rochdale

In Oxford, it was more difficult to decipher what the preexisting relationship with the council had been like prior to the LTN policy introduction. Residents discussed the council solely within the context of LTNs suggesting that they had limited interaction with the council outside of this policy, with just one referring to how they had accessed the council website because of an issue with the bin collection.

In Enfield, residents who are both pro and anti-LTN appeared to have a fairly negative relationship with the council even before the LTN policy. Their perception appeared to be shaped by their interaction with

172 LGA, 2024. P30, p66
173 Owned channels include newsletters, magazines, websites and social media channels. Paid channels include placing notices in newspapers. Earned channels include coverage through engagement with local news media and providing sufficiently engaging communication to generate demand, discussion and sharing among citizens.
174 LGA, 2024. https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/How%20to%20map%20stakeholders.pdf.
175 LGA, 2024. https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Resident%20Satisfaction%20Polling%20Round%2037.pdf.

the council via service provision rather than a broader relationship or a reflection of the level of effort or investment in outbound council communications. Several residents described how unreliable they found council services and had had past experiences of the council failing to honour commitments that had been made.[176]

"I had a problem with my boiler. And obviously, I live in a house with three children and I need a house with water and stuff like that. I called them and, I'm, like, at work so come at this time. I can't afford to have any time off work and so please come on time. They promised to come on time and I'm having to wait for them. It's them sort of things." - Pro-LTN resident, Enfield

One pro-LTN resident, prior to a discussion about misinformation, suggested that the council 'misinforms' you:

"I'm already aware that they are giving you misinformation. They are misinforming you - the Council. That you … want to get involved in anything I'm… that's why I don't even bother to read the magazine that we were talking about because I'm thinking how much of this is true? Why am I going to waste my time?" - Pro-LTN resident, Enfield

Such negative pre-existing perceptions of the council in Enfield provided weak foundations for trust when it came to information regarding the LTN policy.

Overall, while national trends of trust appear to be in decline, through our case study research, broad trust in the council among residents varied considerably between locations and between individuals within the same locations. As our research was conducted after the introduction of LTNs, it is not possible to identify what began first i.e. whether the trust was low in the council because of the approach taken to the LTN policy, or whether there was such a negative response to the LTN policy because of the pre-existing low trust in the council. In the next sections, we will seek to identify where specific steps taken might have contributed to negative perception of the policy and low trust in the council concerned.

Few citizens seek out council communication

When asking residents about their typical media consumption for local information, very few mentioned communications shared by the council or the council website. It appears that very few residents would expect to regularly engage with council media and instead would more likely find out information in the spaces they more typically engage with day-to-day i.e. from their local Facebook group, online local news site or friends and family. Residents did suggest they would use the council website when prompted or asked about it directly, but this was typically in response to a specific need that might arise for them to solve, rather than taking an every-day interest. This lack of proactive engagement with council websites and social media pages perhaps explains why residents communicate low awareness of the LTN policy despite councils communicating about it via their own sites.

In Enfield, where residents indicated very low awareness of the LTN policy prior to the trial, there are a range of examples of ways the council sought to facilitate awareness, but through their owned spaces. For example, citizens could visit the Enfield Council website and subscribe to Enfield Council newsletters and opt for specific information regarding 'Journeys and Places' and for consultations such as 'Have Your Say'. Once on the website it can be quite challenging to navigate the website and search specifically for information on 'Local Traffic Neighbourhoods' using the Enfield Council website search function.[177] If you can navigate to find it, Enfield Council has a dedicated page specifically for any consultation, and one specifically for information and consultation on LTNs, including links to past consultations and reports.[178] Whilst it's unclear when this information was made available, these examples demonstrate that the council did seek to provide information

176 This perception if the council may also not have been helped by the council not arriving to give focus group respondents access to the venue we had pre-booked to host the focus group on a cold evening in December 2023. This meant that our groups were forced to relocate to a nearby pub and were left feeling fairly frustrated.
177 Enfield Council, 2024. https://www.enfield.gov.uk.
178 Enfield Council consultation page, 2024.https://letstalk.enfield.gov.uk/hub-page/neighbourhoods; Enfield Council web page specifically regarding LTNs, 2024. http://journeysandplaces.enfield.gov.uk/.

on its website - if citizens proactively looked for it.

This lack of appetite for council communications is also evident via Enfield's social media channels. Enfield Council's social media presence is fairly active, but with relatively low engagement.[179] It has over 16,000 followers for its Facebook page and considerably more for its X page, 28,000.[180] Given its population size (329,984), this reflects a comparatively low following, with just one in 21 residents following the council on Facebook or Twitter.

While Oxford City Council does not have a dedicated webpage referring to LTNs, this information can be found on the Oxfordshire County Council website.[181] Residents on the county council website can subscribe to a mailing list and opt for specific topics such as 'Roads and Transport'. As well as the general page on county council news, there is also a dedicated Consultations page which contains details on all current consultations by topic as well as a section on closed consultations.

Oxford City Council's social media presence also appears to be fairly active and commensurate with the size of the community living in the city (152,450). Its Facebook and X pages appear to have a marked difference in following, with its X page having more than double (56,000) the number of its Facebook (26,000).[182] Oxford City Council did have a magazine that was shared twice annually to over 61,000 homes -though it is unclear if this remains in place.

Compared to Enfield and Oxford, Rochdale Council's online communication regarding the LTN policy appeared to have been very light. Its website is difficult to navigate on the topic of LTNs or 'Active Neighbourhoods' carrying just one reference to the consultation proposed in 2022.[183] However, Rochdale Council's social media presence appears to be fairly active given the size of the community (223,773). Its Facebook and Twitter pages have 26,000 and 24,000 followers respectively, suggesting a 1 in 9 chance that a resident follows the council.[184] This is considerably higher than in Oxford and Enfield.

When assessing councils' outbound activity seeking to engage news media coverage, there is strong variation between locations. A search back to the first news release in January 2020 indicates that Oxford City Council has provided 32 news releases regarding LTNs by the County Council and 4 of these referred to 'Have your say consultation' notices. This is considerably fewer than in Enfield where it's possible to identify 56 news releases relating to LTNs going back to March 2019, 15 of which were requests to take part in consultations. In Rochdale, it's not possible to identify the level of activity targeting news media as the council website only carries news stories since the beginning of 2024 and does not appear to have an email newsletter sign-up. Our analysis of local news coverage between 2020 and 2023 indicates that councils did seek to make themselves available for interviews with journalists who discussed LTNs in their news coverage. This demonstrates an ongoing willingness by the council to continue engaging with questions from the local community. However, the fact that the council was more likely to be responding to questions only once journalists had engaged with the issue - rather than being on the front-foot with their outbound communication with residents suggests that this engagement may have come too late in the process of the LTN policy introduction.

It is also perhaps because of a lack of resident-led regular, proactive engagement with council communications that residents expect the council to themselves be extremely proactive in communicating out about the LTN policy and to invest time in thoroughly communicating and understanding the needs and perspectives of different residents. Some commented that in contrast to this much more personalised approach, they often only heard important information by chance through word of mouth from others on social media rather than directly from the council itself.

"For me, and I know they can't reach everyone, but you [should] get representatives from each area to sit with you—the people who will be affected directly, sit with them and hear their views from

179 Enfield Council news page, 2024. https://www.enfield.gov.uk/news-and-events.
180 Enfield Council Facebook page, 2024. https://www.facebook.com/EnfieldCouncilUK/ Enfield Council Twitter page, 2024. https://twitter.com/EnfieldCouncil.
181 Oxford City Council, 2024. https://www.oxford.gov.uk/ Oxford County Council, 2024. https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/residents/roads-and-transport/local-transport-and-connectivity-plan.
182 Oxford City Council on Twitter, 2024. https://twitter.com/OxfordCity; Oxford City Council on Facebook, 2024. https://www.facebook.com/OxfordCityCouncil/.
183 Rochdale Council, 2022. https://consultations.rochdale.gov.uk/research/milkstone-deeplish-active-neighbourhood-consultati/.
184 Rochdale Council on Facebook, 2024. https://www.facebook.com/rochdalecouncil; Rochdale Council on Twitter, 2024. https://twitter.com/rochdalecouncil.

beginning to end. 'Okay, this is what we've plan to do…', lay out their objectives before-hand and then send somebody out who lives in the area to go and do some investigation. Speak to people, hear their views and discuss." - Pro-LTN resident, Enfield

"In my opinion, it's not for the individual to be getting in contact with the local council… it's their job to be contacting local residents, and saying, 'This is what's happening'... for some of the stuff that we did during [the pre-task], I've only seen that through social media… and I live there. So, you know, I'm saying they need to be more engaging." - Anti-LTN resident, Rochdale

Community leaders also emphasised that given the range of challenges residents face, including many which they would ideally prefer the council to prioritise such as crime and lighting, traffic is less likely to grab their attention:

"Basically they are earning and supporting the family in a deprived neighbourhood, making sure everybody has food on the table and they work hard on a low paid job so they may have one or two or three jobs you know, that's all they do. And they don't really connect with other forums and initiatives but when they saw this is happening... You know, what is the active neighbourhood?... What is local authority? Local authority is saying it is TfGM, TfGM is saying it is local authority... Many people have many other issues like cleaning the streets, recycling is not really happening, the roads are not really marked properly, streets are bad, poor lighting... why do we bother about the traffic when there are loads of crimes and other things to action?" - Community leader, Rochdale

Other residents, much like our own researchers, suggested that even when seeking out information, such as via the website, finding it can be a challenge.

"I think [the information on LTNs] is there if you want to find it, but it's hard work finding it. The details are there, but surely the people implementing it should be directing you to that."
- Pro-LTN resident, Rochdale

Overall, levels of demand and engagement by residents with council-run web and social media pages appears to be very low. Therefore, whilst councils might be posting information on their websites or social media channels, unless residents are regularly checking them - it is unlikely such communications are visible. Council engagement with news media also appears to be highly variable and in some cases, such as Oxford, very low. Citizens demonstrate an expectation for councils to be much more proactive in their approaches to engaging them - making efforts to be targeted and personalised in their approaches. This indicates that different and more concerted strategies are needed for ensuring visibility of and engagement with vital council information.

SIGNIFICANT MISTAKES IN POLICY COMMUNICATION

A shock LTN introduction

Returning to the implementation of the LTN policy in 2020, following an initial wave of funding from the national government, a number of councils rushed to initiate the introduction of the policy in their local communities. With the requirement to act quickly, rather than taking time to design and launch a concerted communications campaign with recommendations for ways users of motorised vehicles could change their travel habits and achieve understanding and support for the longer-term goals of the policy, some councils jumped straight to the introduction of restrictions to vehicle-based travel, be it through cameras or physical

barriers such as bollards and planters.[185]

Ensuring the visibility of a consultation is crucial to its integrity.[186] The councils' own reports suggest they did attempt to communicate with residents over a short period of time. In Rochdale, Enfield and Oxford, councils issued a notice in the newspaper and sent letters to specific households living within the proposed LTN. In some cases, councils posted via their own social media channels. In Rochdale, the council also communicated via a trusted intermediary such as a mosque leader or community group. There was a time period ranging from between six to twelve weeks from the first communication to residents about the new LTN before introducing the trial scheme.[187] For example, Enfield introduced two LTNs in September 2020 as a trial after giving 6-weeks notice for residents. Oxford consulted for 6-weeks from November 2020 before introducing the trial in February 2021. In Rochdale, there was considerable ambiguity around the length of time spent communicating about the policy prior to its introduction - though the introduction of the LTN was experienced as very sudden. This speed in implementing a trial of the policy following what was felt to be a disproportionately short communication period caught a range of residents off-guard.

A considerable proportion of residents across all of our case studies suggested that they had been shocked by the introduction of the LTN. A recent government-led review suggests that this was not solely shared by residents in our case studies.[188] For those who did not receive the council communication or received it but hadn't noticed it, residents' first experience of the policy was particularly negative. Complaints about their ignorance of the policy prior to its introduction were highlighted even by those who were ultimately supportive of the LTN.

"Because it kind of felt like when they introduced them during the Covid pandemic, there was no information. They just appeared and it was experimental. And it was like it's an excuse to get them in without informing anyone."- Pro-LTN resident, Enfield

Some discovered the LTN for the first time through receiving a penalty ticket or a fine and therefore becoming confused or frustrated as well as potentially out-of-pocket.

"I actually didn't know what they were until I got a ticket. I was shocked. I got the ticket, and I was like, "what is it?" It was, oh my god, it was last year I think it was." - Pro-LTN resident, Enfield

An anti-LTN councillor commented on how the surprise fines had caused upset in her ward: *"There were people when it was first introduced and they were doing the school run and they didn't realise and they got 3 tickets in one day - it was only when they got the tickets that they realised. People are ringing me, desperate, saying, 'I can't pay these'. If you're getting 3-4 tickets, and they're saying, I can't afford that."*

Some residents were taking it on themselves to warn other residents about it in case they didn't know:

185 Language taken from journalist interview referring to speed with which policy was implemented
186 TCI Charter, 2017. https://www.consultationinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/The-Consultation-Charter-2017-edition.pdf.
187 There is no mandatory guidance stipulating the length of time a council must provide to communicate a trial policy before it is introduced. According to the Gunning Principles, despite there being a 'generally accepted' 12-week time frame, the length of time a consultee can be given to respond can vary depending on the policy concerned and the extent of the impact it is considered to make. LGA, 2024. https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/The%20Gunning%20Principles.pdf; TCI Charter, 2017. https://www.consultationinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/The-Consultation-Charter-2017-edition.pdf.
188 Ipsos, 2024.

"I'm one of the people that - there's an LTN route right outside my school. And it's not obvious that it's an LTN. So I wanted to stop, you're gonna get a ticket stop, stop, stop. I warned the mums as well, because, obviously, a lot of money to lose." - Anti-LTN resident, Enfield

Having discovered that an LTN had been introduced, some were also aware under what circumstances it had been introduced. For example, whether it was a permanent installation or a trial.

"I live in that local area, and really no one even knew it was a trial. So the majority of people who did act out and stuff, they just thought this is how it's gonna be from now on. They didn't know it was a trial. They did lash out and that's one of the reasons why. If they were informed that it's just to try it and see how it works out, maybe that would be better... [The mosque told us about it] and that it's starting tomorrow. And not everyone goes to mosque, do they, so not everyone knew. And when they started shutting people's roads off, that's the reaction that happened."
- Pro-LTN resident, Rochdale

Thus, a broad range of residents were caught by surprise when they first encountered an LTN with limited awareness of any attempts to inform them that this would be introduced. This is despite councils following what was rather ambiguous guidance about the time-frame they should apply for communicating the introduction of a policy prior to its introduction. This shock experienced by residents was likely to have an impact on the initial sentiment towards this policy and to those enacting it. However, it is important to understand how councils sought to communicate the policy initially.

Mistargeted communication

When exploring why their communications approaches failed, the short period of time allowed was not the only problem. It appears that councils initially only targeted communications about the policy to those immediately living within the vicinity of the LTN in all three case study areas. This narrowed approach limited the chance of the communication reaching those who may not live in the area that would become an LTN, but could still be directly affected by the policy. For example, those who drive into or through the area via bus or car, and whose behaviour is sought to change as part of the policy, had a minimal likelihood of receiving any communication. Communications were also generic to any resident and not targeted towards anyone based on their existing behaviour, such as whether they own or use a motorised vehicle. This approach limited the visibility of the consultation to affected communities.

"It was a big mistake. They only communicated to people immediately in the area. After people were shouting and there was a big hoo ha. We said, 'You need to TELL people and this was shocking. And they said, 'Well, they don't live in the area'. And we said, 'Yes, but they live outside it.'"
- Anti-LTN councillor, Enfield

"Yeah, in terms of the local voices, though… if you go around and ask household by household people are supportive. But, then that doesn't really…, especially where we were… it was people who wanted to drive through that were very opposed to it." - Pro-LTN resident

It would appear councils had not thoroughly considered the various reasons why access to certain spaces might require, for example, multi-generational households to rely on a car. For example, there are five mosques and a range of halal shops in Cowley, where three LTNs were installed. This disproportionately impacted Muslim families who may not live within the area, but still depend upon it. Such families were crucial to include in communications, but were not considered - despite the potential impact this change would have on their lives.

"I used to take my children to the mosque every day, but have stopped altogether now. And we have to do meat shopping, which is a nightmare." - Anti-LTN resident, Oxford.

Overall, it appears that some residents whose daily journeys and routines might be affected by the LTN might not have received any communication from their local government because they did not live directly on the roads where the LTN would be installed. Other residents might have lived in the area directly affected by the LTN and still not noticed any communications about it. This lack of communication contributed to the lack of awareness about the policy prior to its installation and therefore contributed to the frustration and confusion when residents first encountered it.

Given that the LTNs are now highly visible and that many councils sought to continue to introduce new LTNs —as was the case in both Oxford and Enfield—this initial challenge of communities being caught by surprise was relatively short-lived. There have since been opportunities for councils to adapt their approach to communication and discuss the policy with those who had become aware of it through the introduction of earlier LTNs. However, as residents had had a rather negative introduction to the policy, with some residents suggesting that the council almost "kept it a secret" "deliberately", it is possible that their sentiments towards it and to the council may have had knock-on impacts on residents' readiness to trust and engage positively or constructively in future engagements on this issue.

CONSULTATION IN NAME ONLY

Once aware of the LTN policy, residents could develop and contribute their perspectives on it to the local government via a consultation exercise. Inevitably, due to the barriers to communication regarding the policy, participation from residents was already likely to be low. However, consultations were run by Rochdale, Oxford and Enfield Councils with some common themes in approach between the different councils. However, there was also considerable variation, particularly with regards to who was engaged, the amount of time afforded for this exercise as well as the methods used. This variation is echoed by the government-led review with councils across 90 LTN schemes.[189]

In this section, we highlight the litany of concerns raised with the approaches taken to consultation, including the dominance of exclusive web-based methods, the lack of targeting of key communities, a lack of transparency regarding the scope of the consultation, the trade-offs implicit in the policy, disputes regarding the quality of evidence of impact of the scheme and the evidence for public support prior to making a decision.

Passive and exclusively digital

Councils are mandated to ensure that consultations are 'available, accessible, and easily interpretable for consultees to provide an informed response'.[190] Furthermore, 'the methods chosen must be appropriate for the intended audience and that effective means are used to cater for the special needs of 'seldom heard' groups and others with special requirements'.[191] Therefore, consulting only online is 'prohibited by the second Gunning Principle'.[192]

Despite these guidelines, consultations by councils seeking to introduce LTNs were typically web-based.[193] This involved sending a letter with a link or QR code inviting residents to participate in an online survey or launching an online portal where residents, if they became aware of it and decided to seek the portal out of their own volition, could input their perspectives.

This paper-to-web or purely web-based approach has a number of implications. First, it once again required communities to notice communications from the council which, as highlighted above, can be very challenging, or have a strong prior level of engagement which has been shown to be fairly unusual. Second, it requires communities to have digital access and skills to engage with an online survey or portal as well as the digital

189 Ipsos, 2024.
190 The Gunning Principles shared by LGA, 2024. https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/The%20Gunning%20Principles.pdf.
191 TCI Charter, 2017. https://www.consultationinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/The-Consultation-Charter-2017-edition.pdf.
192 LGA, 2024, p 34, p41. https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/New%20Conversations%20Guide%20refresh_11.pdf.
193 Ipsos, 2024.

civic literacy to understand what is being asked of them. In many of the communities where LTNs had been introduced, for example in Rochdale, there are residents who are digitally excluded as well as lacking English as a first language.[194]

"The information sharing was very poor, for our community. So it's a very digitally deprived community that relies on the community centres to be active and tell them and consult with them. So in this instance, I wouldn't say there was false information, I just said there was a lack of information. So the information was there, you could access the Rochdale Council website, but that wasn't practical for the majority of the community." - Community leader, Rochdale

This is not unique to Rochdale -in a recent study, 4 in 10 households with children are below the Minimum Digital Living Standard which means lacking both functional and critical digital skills.[195] A councillor in Enfield described the range of communities who would be negatively affected by this approach:

"The consultation isn't in person, it's digital. That cuts off a huge amount of the population - we have a large elderly population. If they ask for a copy, we send them one. But they might not know it exists. But they'd need to know the consultation was running before…Elderly, disabled people, people living in poverty, a lot of people don't have a laptop. And the council said - people can email us - and we said. 'well not everyone can.'... "They did a few online meetings - so again you're cutting out most of the people. But it doesn't achieve anything, because they don't listen to a word. It's heartbreaking when you hear…" - Anti-LTN councillor, Enfield

Third, existing research highlights that online consultation methods can limit participation and exclude historically marginalised groups.[196] Some residents are more likely to be politically active in spaces that are not formally organised and curated by the local government. For the council to gain access to spaces that they themselves do not lead or shape requires either a pre-existing trusted relationship or a trusted intermediary with sufficient resources, time and an appetite to engage participants on behalf of the Council.

Trust in local government is already low. As a result, community maps, intermediary networks and offline engagement are absolutely necessary for achieving effective communication and consultation. Less than half of the schemes reviewed in the government-led LTN review reported using community maps as part of their engagement activities.[197] This perhaps reflects historical reductions in investment in local infrastructure, highlighted above, and therefore is also likely to be too weak to activate at short notice and over a short time frame. The knock-on impact of this is the exclusion of communities from the consultation process which has a corrosive impact on the already weak relationship such communities have with local government.

Poor engagement with vulnerable communities

As has been highlighted in prior chapters, understanding the needs of disabled people and the elderly prior to implementation of the policy was crucial given how likely the policy was to disproportionately impact them. Some councils did proactively seek to engage specific communities in their consultation by targeting community groups for disabled and/or elderly people or recruiting and engaging with residents with specific characteristics to dedicated conversations. But this approach was not routinely applied by all councils. In some cases, councils simply did not seek out such communities to understand their specific needs or mitigations.[198]

194 In Rochdale, the council did also actually conduct face-to-face consultations, but these were considered to be poorly advertised and timed and therefore were considered not to have achieved the goal of enabling deliberation with community members.
195 Minimum Digital Living Standard, 2024. https://mdls.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/MDLS-2024-overview-final.pdf.
196 Helsper, 2021; Robinson et al, 2015; Morris & Morris, 2013; Dobransky et al. 2021; Pew Research Centre, 2021. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/09/10/americans-with-disabilities-less-likely-than-those-without-to-own-some-digital-devices/.
197 Ipsos, 2024.
198 Ipsos, 2024.

'...The council admitted in the consultation they didn't consult vulnerable people, they didn't consult disabled people, they didn't consult the Muslim community, they didn't consult the schools in the area. This is all recorded. They didn't consult the medical facilities in the area. They didn't consult the carers in the area.' - Anti- LTN resident, Oxford

Furthermore, our case study research suggests that where these proactive and dedicated conversations were conducted, some participants came away from those interactions feeling dissatisfied and unheard.

"The council did give them a meeting—the disabled people—but they told me that they didn't think the council were listening. They weren't professionals so they didn't understand their disabilities and how it affected them. It was just someone from the council. They needed someone with more expertise in disability. If you don't have a disability yourself or work in the profession—how can they understand how you're suffering?" - Anti-LTN councillor, Enfield

This gap in consultation for disabled people in particular has also been highlighted by TransportForAll who found a lack of consultation was the strongest theme among disabled respondents' reflecting on the implementation of schemes.[199]

Proactive engagement was also needed with specific minority ethnic and faith communities when the approach to LTNs in that neighbourhood was located in an area that disproportionately affected those communities. For example, in Oxford, a location decision for one LTN affected the South Asian and Muslim communities disproportionately, with community members describing having longer journey times to places of worship and community centres. As a result, the policy was felt to marginalise already marginalised communities by this specific decision. Furthermore, those with housing closer to the centre of Oxford and therefore may be more likely to be able to walk or cycle to get around are typically those associated with the university. Thus, the policy was felt to disproportionately negatively affect those not associated with the university and/or from more impoverished households.

Similarly, in Rochdale, given that the LTN was located in an area with a community with a high proportion of people who are not confident English speakers, community leaders suggested that materials—whilst they were printed and available offline—were in the wrong language:

"And then eventually the local authority or the TfGM, through the local authority did send a survey to each centre and each public place of businesses - tell us your views, what's happening and this and that - they started, you know, putting printed copies of that and it. But it was only in English. In my centre there were hundreds [of printed copies] and only five or 10 or 20 maximum have been taken and it was there for months and months and I've given it to recycling." - Community leader, Rochdale

Overall, by not proactively engaging the most vulnerable and considering how the policy could be implemented in a way that did not harm these communities, the council inevitably created further opportunities for residents to perceive them as acting negligently. Where it did engage such communities and took measures to mitigate its effects, the fact that communities were unaware of these mitigations allowed for the same perception.

Misleading scope for the consultation

For those who did engage in the council's consultations about the initial wave of LTNs, there appears to be significant confusion or at best, variability, regarding their scope. The first Gunning Principle is clear that for

199 TransportforAll, August 2023. https://www.transportforall.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Road-User-Charging-Write-Up.pdf-

consultations to be legitimate, then proposals for a policy must be at the formative stage i.e. a final decision has not yet been made or pre-determined.[200] The Consultation Institute's Charter also advises that councils disclose the obligations of a consultation i.e. areas where decisions have effectively been taken already, and where consultee views cannot influence the situation, should be disclosed.[201] The LGA recommends councils are very clear if their activity is for 'information-giving' or 'consultation'.[202] Or clarifying whether, on the basis of the consultation, the policy could be rejected entirely - as has been the case in some locations - whether it matters who is unhappy about the policy for it to be rejected or whether, regardless of the level of discontent, the policy is still likely to be implemented.

Confusion about the role and scope of consultations for LTNs has stemmed from policies being fully implemented following a trial despite their being significant discontent expressed through the consultation. Decisions being made despite this discontent being expressed has had a knock-on effect with regards to residents' trust in the council as well as trust in the function of these democratic processes overall. For example, residents in Enfield indicated a sense that the consultations run for the initial LTNs were not 'genuine', but instead were more of a "tick-box exercise":

"They'll say they're having a consultation, just to say… they can say they've done something that's spoken to us. But they're not. They're not listening to what we want… They're gonna do it anyway."
- Anti-LTN resident, Enfield

"These consultations are just project refinements. They've already decided what they're going to do… It's not a referendum, right? It's not '85% of people in Fox Lane area did not want the LTN'. They didn't care about that. They wanted to see what they were saying, to see how they can make it better for what they want to do. So you've already made the decision to implement it. And you're going to hear from everybody here. They [the Council] don't listen to us." - Anti-LTN resident, Enfield

"I think maybe this is a formality and the council will make their own conclusions."
- Pro-LTN resident, Rochdale

"I think that this is just an excuse to bring this in through the backdoor."
- Community leader, Rochdale

The feeling in Oxford regarding the council's approach and (lack of) response to the consultations where residents shared frustrations and needs regarding the LTNs, including denying requests for permissions for disabled people to gain special access to drive through, was felt to demonstrate how the approach to consultation was not meaningful.

200 The Gunning Principles summarised by LGA, 2024. https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/The%20Gunning%20Principles.pdf.
201 TGI, 2017. https://www.consultationinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/The-Consultation-Charter-2017-edition.pdf.
202 LGA, 2024. pp29 https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/New%20Conversations%20Guide%20refresh_11.pdf.

*'So it's as the measures have increased and every single one has been made permanent. Irrespective of the evidence, you go, 'F**k these guys. They don't give a sh*t about our lives.' [Councillor's name] is called a sociopath… for his utter inability to have any empathy towards people. He'll say, 'No blue badge access through LTNs.' And it's like, he wouldn't even consider it. I mean, like, you know, you could argue to give a toss about resident access. But if you can't get a blue badge access that's not right… He is … telling the East Oxford people who are fucking dirt poor, to change their lives. It's that's why… but the hatred of the people… it's a massive disconnect between their lives.'*
- Anti-LTN stakeholder, Oxford

Some also commented on the behaviour of councillors in meetings suggesting that their lack of visible engagement demonstrated their lack of care for the residents they served:

One of the councillors actually fell asleep in the meeting. We were just like, 'What is the point of even being here?' He didn't answer any of the questions even though so many people were trying to be constructive, and give a solution.' - Anti-LTN resident, Oxford

Overall, there are a number of examples across the case studies that suggest residents had significant concerns regarding the scope of the consultation which suggests that the principles of disclosure were not followed or effectively communicated at the outset.

Suspicion of bias among councillors in policy design and decision-making

Some residents in both Oxford and Enfield (though not in Rochdale) suggested that they believed certain councillors were being motivated by self-interest or the interest of specific lobbies, rather than providing more neutral approaches to what they thought was best and in the interests of the whole community. For example, one respondent in Oxford suggested that councillors were opting to place LTNs in areas that would benefit them personally:[203]

'Cowley is a poorer location than other parts of Oxford. And so, places like North Oxford, traffic flows. That's where wealthier people live, that's also where [councillor name] lives.'
- Anti-LTN resident, Oxford

Cyclops [a pro-cycling civil society organisation] is literally like sponsoring the council. It feels like the councillors are basically there to represent a particular pressure group with a particular worldview, and not even their own constituents.' - Anti-LTN community activist, Oxford

Similarly in Enfield, some residents suggested that councillors might be gaining monetary benefits from their approach to LTNs, be it personally or for the council as a whole, reflecting their awareness of the financial difficulties faced by councils:

203 Different respondents had different views on whether it was desirable to live in an LTN or not. Some suggest residents are disadvantaged by an LTN and therefore it's desirable not to live near one, whereas others regard the benefits of a quiet, peaceful street are only afforded to those living directly within an LTN, but recognise that those living on the boundary roads might have a different experience.

"[The money is being spent]... not on us…the people that are living in the area. It's maybe fattening people's pockets. But not us, benefiting us or our children. So, and we've got less roads, more cars, they want us to have electric cars." - Anti-LTN resident, Enfield

"The truth is, they need the money and Enfield's almost bankrupt. That could be the next [council] to die." - Anti-LTN resident, Enfield

Whilst these concerns do not directly relate to the consultation, the implication of bias by the council underpins why a 'non-biased' approach to consultation on proposed policies is so crucial. To counter this, the fourth Gunning Principle suggests that councils should demonstrate a 'conscientious consideration' of the consultation responses before making a decision.[204] Furthermore, the TCI Charter suggests that 'fair interpretation' of a consultation means decision-makers should not be involved in the primary analysis of the responses and instead this process should be undertaken 'objectively'.[205] The concern among residents that the process is vulnerable to bias by councillors suggests that there has been insufficient clarity regarding the scope of the consultation and the process by which evidence of success and public support for the policy has been decided.

Disputed evidence of success of the policy

As indicated by online users in Chapter 4, residents in Oxford, Enfield and Rochdale also expressed considerable scepticism in the way that their respective councils were sharing evidence of the policy's success. Some cited specific examples where they felt they had evidence of the council deliberately misrepresenting evidence of the policy's impact so that it could be interpreted more positively. Others suggested that certain mistakes by the council had only come to light following Freedom of Information requests when the council had otherwise denied there had been a problem. Residents indicated that these examples were their reasons for not trusting what the council was proposing or sharing as evidence.

"We know that they withheld data in one of the consultations, because they knew it was not favourable. And this email was released to the public for Freedom of Information. And so, they denied, denied, denied until they had to admit, 'So oh, by the way we did it'... I guess, you want to have trust. But the problem is, you've had all these indications to say we can't trust you.'"
- Anti-LTN resident, Oxford

"They also say pollution levels are lower. An objective observer would say that's a bit sketchy, especially when they put pollution monitoring stations in places where you can't drive your car there. Or at the far end of a road, where it's a dead end road, there's no traffic. So they've selected those selectively placed data collections to give the answers they want. But they keep saying active travel has gone up." - Anti-LTN resident, Oxford

"...Repeatedly then the Council and councillors say that active travel has increased. It's not true. If so, they pick a random point in time and sector for instance. If you have to look back, active travel is less than it was before Covid. So, therefore, that's a false situation." - Anti-LTN resident, Oxford

204 Gunning Principles summarised via LGA, 2024. https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/The%20Gunning%20Principles.pdf.

205 TCI Charter, 2017. https://www.consultationinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/The-Consultation-Charter-2017-edition.pdf.

Such concerns as well as the requirement for residents to submit Freedom of Information requests in order to be able to review the evidence used to determine a policy decision following a consultation, suggests that residents perceive a lack of transparency or disclosure by councils regarding the evidence used. This lack of transparency has contributed to their sense of distrust in the Council.

Disputed evidence of public support

Residents in Oxford and Enfield who opposed the policy also expressed significant scepticism regarding how the council had interpreted positive support from the consultation process.

"When you ask they say they did not have any negative consultations, after that's been proven beyond reasonable doubt that does exist. That's the secret. So if you look at the raw data, and then the interpretation of it, it's always skewed to be a positive message for the policy of the council.…
- Anti-LTN resident, Oxford

"I do not trust the reasons they give to the public for all the changes. I also do not trust the reliability of the information that they claim that they collect during the consultation sessions."
- Anti-LTN resident, Enfield

These concerns again suggest that there has been insufficient clarity regarding the scope of the consultation and the process by which evidence of success and public support for the policy would be decided.

Lack of information about trade-offs is 'manipulative'

Clarifying what are the potential risks or down-sides of a policy can be challenging when trying to motivate public support and behaviour change. However, if seeking public support for and consulting on a policy, being clear on what the policymaker recognises is likely to occur and how they seek to mitigate those risks is an important part of demonstrating thorough planning in the policy design. Furthermore, if there are negative outcomes that policymakers are looking for public support to accommodate, then demonstrating awareness of these and seeking support for the overall trade-off, is crucial for the legitimacy of the final decision.

Aside from the possible risks to disabled people and the elderly, the research team has found it extremely challenging to identify where local authorities acknowledged other possible negative outcomes or trade-offs in their initial communications or consultation surrounding the policy. Whilst such acknowledgements came following conclusions of trials of the scheme, it remains difficult to ascertain what threshold of difficulty or risk policy actors were comfortable with prior to a trial commencing in order to achieve the overall outcomes of the policy.

This gap in transparency surrounding the trade-offs was highlighted by some residents, particularly in Enfield, who went as far as suggesting that the way the policy had been described on their Council's website was openly '*misleading*', '*manipulative*' and even '*gaslighting*'.

"[The council webpage on LTNs] refers to the scheme as "community led traffic" which seems to indicate the majority are in favour of it and this is not accurate… No potential disadvantages are mentioned." - Pro-LTN resident, Rochdale

"I felt and I think [redacted name] feels there was a lot of deception in the way LTNs were/ are sold."
- Anti-LTN activist, London

"I get photos from residents every day of the traffic. It's just chocca block traffic. They've made traffic and pollution worse… They said traffic would disappear in 3 months - that was a lie - it has not disappeared." - Anti-LTN councillor, Enfield

One resident in Rochdale highlighted that this is a trend they see in a lot of local government communications that isn't limited to their specific area reflecting a broader sense of distrust:

"I think there's just like a general lack of trust with councils - not just Rochdale, but a lot of councils where they get this idea in their head and they really want to do it, like it's someone's little baby. And like you say they can put the stats down to encourage it, and they're not going to put on their website the negative impacts of it, because if they're trying to get it done, why would they? … You see it in all places, that people want to get stuff pushed through and there's nothing stopping them doing it. And it kind of feels that all they're going to do is put that good information out. You think they're not gonna listen to any other opinion, but just slap it through anyway."
- Pro-LTN resident, Rochdale

Accusations were not limited to the council. Some even went right back to the political campaign for the General Election to suggest that the government had not been transparent about the trade-offs of certain policies e.g. implicit in their Net Zero strategy.

'Now, it is true that the Tories won on… and they had Net Zero in the pipe. And no one said what Net Zero would mean? If no one said, 'Right, you're not going to be able to drive your cars unless you're very wealthy and not travel, and you'll get less work and you'll be restricted to certain areas.' And because if you said that to people, and he said, "Would you want it? They might not say [yes]!'
- Anti-LTN National Activist Stakeholder

This lack of transparency about the possible risks of the policy together with disputes about the quality and communication of the evidence and incongruous goals with approach to implementation can be interpreted as constructive criticism of a government policy. What becomes more concerning is where citizens also suggest that the council has been deliberately biased or deceptive.

IRREPARABLE DAMAGE TO THE RELATIONSHIP?

The range of issues from poor communication to exclusionary consultations appears to have had a significant impact on what were already low levels of trust in councils. The language used to describe the impact of the choices made by councils in their approaches indicates a sense of disempowerment. This language is not isolated to just those who opposed the policy, but also those who might have or still do support the policy in principle, but have felt deeply disenchanted by the process for achieving it.

The following quotations highlight this sentiment:

"They've already decided what they're going to do... It's not a referendum, right? It's not '85% of people in Fox Lane area did not want the LTN'. They didn't care about that… So you've already made the decision to implement it. And you're going to hear from everybody here [at the focus group].... they don't listen to us." - Anti-LTN resident, Enfield

'Because the consultation process in the first place… Communities want to be involved! And obviously they weren't involved and it's that feeling of having your power taken away instantly.'
- Pro-LTN resident, Oxford

Some in Oxford and Enfield indicated that the approach that had been initially taken by their council had had long-term damage on their trust:

"I've absolutely given up on them [the Council], they're absolutely useless. So consultation this and that, that word doesn't go with councillors. And if you're not actually going to take someone's view and do something, why are you here?" - Anti-LTN FGD, Enfield

"I think some people are becoming so cynical… that they're simply disengaging. We had an SEJ meeting earlier this week... And one of the women started up saying 'I don't know how long I can go on. I've been at this for three years. And I'm getting all this disinformation and I'm being messed around.'... I think, in her case, it was difficult to get information from Islington town. She's quite rightly asking for before and after studies, and they wouldn't give them this information. She just felt, you know, just banging my head on a brick wall. So it was the same sort of stuff."
- Anti-LTN activist, London

Some felt that, because of the criticism of the initial consultation processes, it was becoming more difficult to gain buy-in for the results of consultations that followed:

"I think sometimes it's an argument that people are using against, 'Oh, there wasn't good enough consultation', and then they did another one. And they weren't happy with the results. I mean, I think it could have been better, but I do think they did try them.' - Pro-LTN resident, Oxford.

This highlights how the approaches taken over this period have done significant damage not just to the chances of the policy ever being implemented again, but to the councils' ability to facilitate any policy development in partnership with the community.

However, there are indications that there are routes councils have been successfully taking to repair trust. For example, in Rochdale, councillors and one community leader suggested that there had been some positive resolution. However, other residents in Rochdale appeared very unaware of this which suggests that work remains to extend out this initial positive outreach and feeling.

"The councillors finally got on board and since then they really have been listening. They've been going round asking people what's the impact of this. Whether it translates into extra car parking or another consultation I'm not sure." - Community leader, Rochdale

"I think that what we tried to do as the three ward councillors was trying to speak to people and try to speak to the people who were sort of against the scheme and see what alternatives they had come up with. So we actually did have another meeting with a group of people who were not quite happy with some of the systems that had been put in place within the active neighbourhood scheme. And so we sat down for quite a while, I think it was a couple of hours, just trying to get their, what their own individual views were and how we could sort of implement that into the scheme, as well. And so we tried to use that tactic in sort of understanding where they're coming from, as well."
- Local politician, Rochdale

CONCLUSION

Overall, rather than preventing and tackling disinformation, councils were perceived as a central driver of the problem - exacerbating a range of challenges in the truth, inclusivity and resilience of local information ecosystems. The fact that councils are facing accusations of being undemocratic and deceptive both online and offline demonstrates the scale of the challenge not just for local government, but for society as a whole.

First, the gaps in outbound, targeted communication of important information that is cutting through to the communities, including already marginalised groups, demonstrates both weaknesses in council knowledge and understanding of their communities as well as very real challenges achieving visibility in a challenging information environment. This demonstrates the need for councils to regularly maintain their community mapping information as well as for a Must Carry duty for tech platforms. Both of these recommendations are discussed further in the Recommendations section.

Second, the neglect of offline methods of consultation demonstrates a lack of human-to-human connection at the heart of local authorities' relationships with their communities which has no doubt contributed to the loss of trust over time. This highlights the need for a recommitment to face-to-face routes to engaging with council engagement, consultation and participation exercises to provide more opportunities for the restoration of human connection and trust as well as to ensure no-one is digitally excluded. This is reflected in our recommendation for a new Civic Accord discussed in the Recommendations section.

Third, the criticism and debate that have ensued regarding the quality of evidence shared by the council, both to evidence the impact of the policy, and of consultation exercises, demonstrates not just gaps in trust, but also the need for a commitment to transparency, high standards and consistency for communicating evidence to citizens. A proposed new Civic Accord includes a recommendation for councils to voluntarily adopt the National Statistics Authority's Code of Practice to enable the significant improvements needed in evidence and communications practice.

Finally, and crucially, the fact that consultations are failing so significantly to meet the needs of local government as a tool for engaging citizens in policy design and implementation demonstrates that these methods need a radical overhaul. Councils need to consider participatory methods for such crucial policy decisions that require local communities to learn about one another's perspectives and achieve a compromise. Greater levels of community participation early enough in the policy design process would not only enable the council to learn about the specific needs and possible compromises available within the community, but it also provides a crucial opportunity for key stakeholders in the community to build relationships and learn from one another. Such processes are crucial to help close the democratic chasm we witnessed in our research between councils and communities and assist in preventing the kind of backlash and stalemate that we have seen in so many cases across the country, and indeed abandonment of policies altogether. We must and can strengthen our democratic systems and information ecosystems at a local level to prevent these outcomes.

8. NEWS MEDIA

In this section, we will discuss the challenges faced by journalists in reporting on LTNs; summarise the negative perception of journalists in some local communities; consider the ongoing collapse of local journalism; and assess the local news ecosystems in our three locations.

KEY FINDINGS SUMMARY

- Local journalists found covering the LTN policy challenging, because of harassment and abuse by local residents as well as the increasing difficulty of finding sources who were supportive of the policy to contribute their view.
- The perception of local journalism among some citizens appeared to be fairly negative, with scepticism about the quality of coverage and potentially biassed reporting.
- Our study found the symptoms of a widely recognised collapse in local journalism, in terms of both the breadth and depth of local outlets.
- Challenges faced by journalists in reporting on LTNs

In Chapter 4, we explored a shift in the weight and quality of the debate from being relatively balanced to, from 2023 onwards, more weighted towards anti-LTN sentiments and including more mis/disinformation. Throughout our interviews, journalists commented on their own growing reluctance to cover the LTN story over this period because of harassment and abuse and the difficulty of finding sources who were supportive of the policy to contribute their view. This finding aligns with concerns raised by the Khan review about 'freedom-restricting harassment' and evidence of increasing levels of abuse faced by journalists which can impact the stories they choose to cover.[206]

If local journalists were feeling increasingly uncomfortable covering the story, this could also explain why there was diminishing quality of coverage of the policy online. Some journalists told us that they had initially had an appetite to cover the story in-depth, but that over time, the abuse they received drove them to cover it less and less. One journalist said:

"I was trying to do original journalism on it and knocking doors to get balance… did that… but every piece I wrote got criticised—it became a depressing issue to cover… became really toxic… I couldn't win… I reduced my effort…" - Journalist, anonymised location

The change in the online engagement between pro and anti-LTN arguments may have affected how comfortable pro-LTN supporters felt about engaging with journalists on the issue. One journalist indicated that this had a negative impact on their ability to cover the story:

206 Khan Review (2024). https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65fdbfd265ca2ffef17da79c/The_Khan_review.pdf Beth Grossman (2021). https://medialawyersassociation.org/news-2/; DCMS (2022) https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/dcms-safety-of-journalists-call-for-evidence.html; National Union of Journalists (2020) https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/nuj-safety-report-2020.html; United Nations News (2022) https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/11/1130117

"At the start, supporters were quite happy to talk, but opponents then got very loud. That did get some councils to change policy. By the end, it became quite hard to find supporters who were willing to talk on camera as it had gotten quite nasty. Opponents were certainly louder by the end."
- Journalist, anonymised location

This suggests a vicious spiral, where the increasing dominance of anti-LTN arguments online, and the harassment of journalists covering this issue, discouraged pro-LTN advocates from sharing their views with journalists, thereby further reducing the range of perspectives included in the debate at a local and national level.

NEGATIVE PERCEPTION OF JOURNALISTS

Throughout our discussions with residents, we found dismissiveness and in some places, strong negative perceptions of the work of some journalists and news media outlets. Some residents appeared somewhat unclear about how journalists conduct their work. There was a suggestion that because journalists disagree or provide different perspectives on the same story, then there's a basis for not relying on them overall:

"I don't believe half the stuff in the local news. [You don't believe it?] I don't know. Like some things obviously yeah, but journalists can write anything really. Then someone could tell you something like, well, I read it in this one. It says this. Yeah, but I read that one and it said something else. It's like Chinese whispers." - Pro-LTN resident, Enfield

This negative perception of journalists may contribute to the apparent lack of demand for local news. If the public cannot distinguish between journalism and the rumours they find on social media, then why should they choose journalism above social media?

COLLAPSE OF LOCAL JOURNALISM

Our study found the symptoms of a widely recognised collapse in local journalism, in terms of both the breadth and depth of local outlets. Three of the largest regional news publishers in the UK have seen their newsrooms cut by two thirds, and over 270 local print titles have vanished over the last 15 to 20 years.[207]

"There's a vacuum - as there is in many cities across the UK. The local newspaper is a shadow of what it once was, as is its circulation (down 80% in 15 years)." - Journalist, Oxford

This loss is evident within all of our three case studies, but most prominent in Rochdale and Enfield, which are more likely to be covered by regional media (for Greater Manchester and London respectively), than by dedicated local media. Oxford has a higher number of professional journalists. This difference in local news coverage is demonstrated by the difference in volume of articles about LTNs in these locations over a 3.5-year period. There were just 15 articles in the local press about LTNs in Rochdale and 35 in Enfield, but 138 in Oxford.

In each location, including Oxford, residents believe that there has been a hollowing out of established titles, resulting in a drop in the volume and quality of articles focusing on local issues, including LTNs, and reduced coverage of local council activities. In the absence of trusted local news sources, a considerable proportion of residents described using Facebook groups or Next Door as their main source for local news (see Chapter 9). Residents also shared their concerns about the potential for bias or sensationalism in news outlets that - because of challenges to their business model - may be more motivated to make money than report the news objectively.

207 Press Gazette, 2024. https://pressgazette.co.uk/publishers/regional-newspapers/colossal-decline-of-uk-regional-media-since-2007-revealed/ Ibid, 2022. https://pressgazette.co.uk/news/uk-local-newspaper-closures-2022/.

"Sometimes, journalists can be biassed, because they're only papers at the end of the day, journalists today. They're not funded." - Pro-LTN resident, Enfield

Residents are sensitive to the variable reliability of local news journalism and its vulnerability to a lack of stable funding. While the impact of a loss of stable funding for local news is clear across all three locations, there are also attributes that are specific to the local news ecosystems in each of our case studies, which we discuss below.

Rochdale's local news ecosystem

Rochdale is served by a small number of local media titles including the Rochdale Observer, which is part of the Manchester Evening News portfolio and doesn't have its own online presence, and Rochdale Online, which is an independent news website. Historically, the Rochdale Observer also had 'MyRochdale', a digital only platform, but this no longer exists. There is also an email-subscription service called the Manchester Mill which has been praised for its occasional in-depth stories on issues in Rochdale, but these are relatively few and far between. Rochdale has a population of over 223,770: Rochdale Online has a readership of 211,923 and the Rochdale Observer has a print circulation of 1,635.[208]

Despite the presence of these titles, Rochdale residents told us that they believe their town is overlooked by the news media. Regional news outlets, such as Manchester Evening News, BBC Manchester, Manchester World or This Is Lancashire, typically focus on Manchester or Liverpool.

"[In the context of news media] I feel like [Rochdale is] a little bit left behind"
- Anti-LTN resident, Rochdale

"I think the Manchester Evening News has really gone downhill. The quality of the reporting. It can be quite sensationalised as well, like you're trying to get a reaction from it."
- Pro-LTN resident, Rochdale

"It's just 80% advertisement, and just a bit of news." - Pro-LTN resident, Rochdale

Residents also noted the absence of sustained coverage of Rochdale Council or the LTN policy. This meant a lack of awareness of the LTN introduction prior to the fire as well as a lack of more detailed analysis or context for the fire. The resulting isolated coverage of the fire lent itself to out-of-context glorification that was then picked up and catapulted into the national media.

208 Vuelio Media Monitoring tool

"I heard about [the LTN] first of all because it's about a mile away from where I used to live - in the other authority. I just saw in the news that all the planters have been set alight… I wasn't even aware of anything about it. I've not heard anything in the news. And, you know, feedback from the residents, they were saying, well, we didn't really know about either. Literally every planter was set alight. It wasn't just Rochdale. That was the first I'd even heard of an LTN."
- Anti-LTN resident, Rochdale

"I think the focus could have been more on the challenges and what we need to do rather than 'Oh, look at the fire.'"- Anti-LTN resident, Rochdale

Furthermore, when regional or national news does feature Rochdale, it's felt to be almost always negative, putting Rochdale under a cloud. One resident used the Rochdale LTN fire as an example of the typical news media coverage of Rochdale, characterising it as 'harmful' because it perpetuated the negative perception of Rochdale as a town.

"So I think it's a shame that, like an isolated event has been… there's been so much focused on it. And because of it, maybe all things or stereotypical things of Rochdale might have come out again..."
- Anti-LTN resident, Rochdale

Overall, there were strong concerns among Rochdale residents about the quality of reporting of the LTN policy in their community and the characterisation of their local area in national media. Residents felt they lacked crucial context and analysis of what was occurring in their community, regarding the LTN, and expressed a sense of frustration, disconnection and even shame about the national media coverage it received. More broadly, residents suggested they most frequently get their local information from social media such as Facebook groups and via WhatsApp groups.

Enfield's local news ecosystem

In Enfield, residents are able to access local news titles and media from wider London. For local titles, there are The Enfield Dispatch and the Enfield Independent. The Enfield Dispatch is a monthly independent paper with an online presence. The Enfield Independent is a print title owned by NewsQuest, which owns a range of UK titles and is in turn owned by the US holding company Gannett. The Enfield Independent lacks any real on-the-ground presence in Enfield and appears to rely for its local coverage on the BBC Local Democracy Reporting Service, which is licence fee-funded, and press releases. Our interviewees expressed concerns about the fragile state of the Enfield Independent:

"There's nobody to bump into; no local office, no local journalists, and the editor is editor for about five newspapers." - Journalist.

"When everything went online it [the Enfield Independent] kind of fizzled out". - Enfield resident.

"We've only got one newspaper now [the Enfield Dispatch]." - Enfield resident.

The Enfield Dispatch, on the other hand, appears to have a solid local reputation. It publishes roughly five stories a day via its website and residents regularly get in touch to report stories or point out things they have identified via social media. One Enfield journalist commented that their LTN stories received high levels of traffic. When sharing examples of local news media in our focus groups, both pro and Anti-LTN residents described the coverage of LTNs as relatively balanced.

"They've [the Enfield Dispatch] done a very good job saying what's going on. They've done a very good job - they've been fair as well. They've tried to put all the views forward of both sides - which is right." - Anti-LTN councillor, Enfield

"I trust this information [from Enfield Dispatch] as it's from a reliable source and the information is factual and can be checked." - Pro-LTN resident, Enfield

"I do feel the article [from Enfield Dispatch] tells a lot of truth to the situation, as it has quotes from a member of the Anti-LTN group. Also raising some poignant points to back up the argument as well." - Pro-LTN resident, Enfield

In Enfield, residents appeared more likely to consume news media from wider London than from their local Enfield news providers. Some suggested that BBC London or the Evening Standard felt most relevant to them for local news, though some were critical of the 'left-wing' bias of the latter, with one anti-LTN resident suggesting: "There's no real middle ground."

In general, whilst residents were relatively satisfied with the Enfield Dispatch, they also emphasised the difficulty of finding news about their local community and suggested that they typically turn to Facebook or Next Door to find the latest information.

Oxford's local news ecosystem

Oxfordshire has a number of titles, including the Oxfordshire Independent (email subscription), Oxfordshire Guardian, Oxfordshire Live, Oxfordshire Living, Primary Times Oxfordshire, Pathways Magazine, Banbury Guardian and Henley Standard. Titles that are specific to Oxford include The Oxford Times and the Oxford Mail as well as university-related titles such as the Cherwell and The Oxford Student. Despite what may sound like a plethora of local titles, residents feel under-served and expressed particular concerns about the quality of the Oxford Mail:

"The only reporting for this cosmopolitan, educated city [is] an outrage machine owned by a multinational." - Journalist

Founded in 1928, the Oxford Mail is a lot smaller than it once was - down 80% in 15 years according to one journalist.[209] The Oxford Mail print circulation is deteriorating, down to 4,115 in the second half of 2023 which marks a decrease from 5,504 in the first half. Whilst its online reporting still appears to achieve a high number of views (3,483,437 in the most recent quarter), the quality was seen by residents in our focus groups as

209 Oxford Mail, November 2019. https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/18041035.look-back-time-oxford-mails-history/.

provocative and described by those commenting on its articles as 'click-bait'.[210] One reader suggested that its LTN coverage reflected just that:

"Oxford Mail standard click bait bollards." - a comment on an Oxford Mail article

The Oxford Mail favoured anti-LTN voices in their coverage of this contentious issue. We analysed 68 stories about LTNs published in the Oxford Mail between July 2020 and October 2023. These articles cited 155 voices in total, of which 91 were anti-LTN, 51 were pro-LTN and 13 were neutral. We also found an opinion piece by the Oxford Mail's politics reporter, which - whilst deploring the 'hijack' of the issue by 'conspiracy theorists' and 'far right activists' - endorsed the views of anti-LTN residents and businesses.[211] It is entirely legitimate for local news outlets to publish opinion pieces and even to support particular campaigns. However, this apparent alignment between the Oxford Mail and one side of the argument may have contributed to the distrust of the title among pro-LTN residents:

'I think there's a lot of stories that aren't necessarily very factual. The stories get perpetuated. And this is where I find the Oxford Mail really problematic, because it makes them seem like they're real. The stories, but then there's the same as the social media stories that just get reiterated.'
- Pro-LTN resident, Oxford

'My own eyes are supported by councillors and people in the area who've done a survey on the streets in data, and then yeah, so they had data. And then today, the Oxford Mail reported the footfall like there's many more visitors in Oxford. So that was a fact in the opposite way.'
- Pro-LTN resident, Oxford

'I don't like the Oxford Mail, because it just seems to provoke, like, polarisation over these issues.'
- Pro-LTN resident, Oxford

Whilst some anti-LTN residents suggested they found the Oxford Mail balanced and 'sometimes factual', they also suggested that it republishes the views of activists:

'So a lot of the stuff in Oxford Mail is, I think, overall, we could probably say it's relatively balanced. But a lot of that depends on the article. But sometimes it's very factual. Sometimes it's one way or the other way. But if you look at the way that the Oxford Mail works, someone, basically an activist, writes an article, and hands it to the Oxford Mail and the Oxford Mail tweaks it and checks it and then posts it and publishes it.' - Anti-LTN resident, Oxford

Some felt that some alternative local news media had done a good job in evaluating the evidence surrounding LTNs, though alternative sources appear to have fewer readers.

210 Online readership and print circulation taken from Vuelio Media Monitoring.
211 Oxford Mail, 24 February 2023: https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/opinion/columns/23343283.oxford-traffic-businesses-must-not-ignored-ltn-row/.

"We've certainly helped a fuller discussion take place. I think our reporting has reassured people that it's ok to hold views that aren't those favoured by the Oxford Mail… We're trying to bring a little less heat and more light." - Journalist

CONCLUSION

Local news media appear to have played an inconsistent role in their ability to tackle and challenge disinformation in the local information ecosystem.

Journalists are likely to have played a key role in widening awareness of the LTN policy to those who might otherwise not have been included in important local democratic decision-making processes. However, there appeared to be limited activity by journalists to create safe and neutral forums for debate. Journalists were rarely present in alternative local online forums to offer a fact-checking role for people who may not have engaged in more formal consultation processes. However, the abuse and harassment experienced by journalists also shows the risks faced by those acting as information producers in the public sphere. This is likely to limit who can participate in such a role over time, with a knock-on impact on the balance and quality of debate overall.

In some cases, professional journalists did improve the quality and 'truth' of debate, providing additional context, scrutiny of the facts and balance of arguments. Where professional elements of the local news ecosystem did play a useful role, their small size and lack of resources meant they could be easily outgunned by national reporting, which typically served to highlight the extremes of the debate, missing crucial local context, flattening more nuanced issues and reinforcing stereotypes by zooming in on more dramatic incidents such as fire and protest.

The lack of sustainable funding for local news has had a clear impact on the depth and breadth of local news available to the public. The perceived skew of some local news organisations towards 'click-bait' to drive up advertising revenues demonstrates how this lack of funding can directly impact quality. Furthermore, the difficulty for local news of competing with national titles once a local story has engaged broader audiences demonstrates how the size of local news media organisations can have a negative impact on their ability to tackle mis/disinformation once it reaches a national, online audience.

9. LOCAL GROUPS & PERSONAL NETWORKS

In this section, we explain the role played by key local networks such as businesses, community groups and online groups, as well as personal networks comprising relationships with immediate family and friends. These peer to peer networks can enable citizens to access and influence power as well as to disseminate key information to one another.

KEY FINDINGS

- Our findings demonstrate the central role played by local community networks in disseminating information to citizens and mobilising participation at a local level highlighting the pivotal role they could play if engaged effectively by councils early enough in the process of policy design.
- Local businesses played a key role in local information ecosystems by sharing information through word of mouth via the shop floor, where council communication was lacking, as well as by, in some cases, using their online influence and relationships with other business owners to highlight common interests and concerns.
- Existing environmental and cycling lobbies were able to draw on pre-existing networks, infrastructure and political capital to mobilise and leverage their support for the LTN measures, whereas those who opposed the policy felt under-resourced and disadvantaged.
- There also appear to be significant barriers for some minority faith and ethnic communities to engage directly with the council surrounding this policy area, again suggesting how a lack of deliberate networking and engagement from the council can disadvantage key communities.
- Online groups are important spaces for information-sharing in local communities. However, they are not viewed as inclusive spaces for deliberative discussion given the tone of debate in such forums and the concerns expressed by many residents that they would experience abuse or 'hate' when sharing their view.
- Personal networks appear to be the most trusted sources of information and are frequently perceived to be the safest and most used spaces for deliberating on local issues, considerably more so than in local community or online groups.

LOCAL BUSINESSES

Local business owners in certain communities appeared to play a key role offline in the LTN debate. While their voices reflected a rather disparate contribution online (Chapter 5), offline, the concerns that LTNs negatively affected footfall and income overall appeared to mobilise businesses into action.

Local businesses played a particularly prominent role in Oxford with groups such as the Oxford Business Action Group being particularly vocal in the LTN debate. This role was elevated by the Oxford Mail which published numerous articles regarding concerns about local business, particularly drawing on one infamous local businessman. This restaurateur was also the father of a famous actress, and perhaps for this reason, is quoted more than 20 times in articles by The Oxford Mail, The Mail Online and The Telegraph.[212] Residents also commented on the number of local cafes who put posters in their windows sharing information about LTNs suggesting that it was through these spaces that they heard about LTNs for the first time. Furthermore, two residents from the British South Asian and Muslim community in Cowley, who had otherwise felt excluded by the consultation process, suggested that they heard about LTNs for the first time through local business owners. These examples demonstrate the prominent role businesses played in sharing information with the local community and raising the profile of the issue via local and national news media.

While businesses did not rally into business-specific organised coalitions in Rochdale and Enfield, some business owners played a strong individual contribution. In Enfield, the firm stance of a range of local businesses was highlighted when one pro-LTN resident criticised their anti-LTN position and received a backlash online:

EN

"I've criticised a shop at the end of my road. Some of the shops had Anti-LTN posters and cafes and some didn't… I posted a note [online] saying, "I was more likely to shop in shops whose values I agree with the ones I ones I wouldn't like", to Next Door. If one said, 'We don't want the LTN, we want traffic back.' In other words, they're encouraging traffic down my road. Then I'm more likely to go in the one that is neutral. And then I was accused on Twitter of trying to bankrupt local businesses!" - Pro-LTN campaigner, Enfield

In Rochdale, one particular business owner associated with motorised vehicles played a key role in sharing information about the LTN, particularly the news concerning the fire. This business owner was particularly active on social media, well-known in the local community and was highlighted by a number of community leaders as a significant local advocate against the LTN. One politician highlighted how influential this individual was in shaping local opinion, but also noted the role and perspectives of businesses that contrasted with his demonstrating that there was no singular opinion 'of local business' on the policy.

RO

"I think what we saw was there was, there has been one specific resident who has been quite vocal about how they feel about the entire scheme. And I think it was sort of on an individual, individual basis. And then it sort of grew into sort of this group scenario thing. Because that individual was the one who sort of started this petition, again, sort of the scheme and the one way systems. But then when we spoke to other members of the community, sort of business organisations and community organisations as well, they were quite happy with what was happening. So yeah, I definitely think there was sort of a group against and a group for the scheme." - Local politician, Rochdale

Overall, local businesses' prominence in the LTN debate at a local level highlights the highly influential role they play in shaping local public opinion and reflects an important node in the network for disseminating key information for local residents.

COMMUNITY GROUPS

Across both Oxford and Enfield, local community groups online and offline have played a prominent role in mobilising communities either for or against the policy. Such groups played a key role in disseminating information to members and in some cases also then began generating their own information, including fresh research. There were some differences between communities in terms of whether community groups were developed in response to the LTN policy, or if existing structures were simply repurposed and targeted

212 Mail Online, March 2023. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11853037/Florence-Pughs-dad-selling-three-restaurants-LTN-scheme-killing-business.html; The Telegraph, October 2023. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/10/23/clinton-florence-pugh-ltns-low-traffic-neighbourhood-oxford/.

towards it. The visibility of infrastructure and political capital for some communities through this policy debate has also illuminated inequalities at a network and influencing level for others—including those with the potential to be disproportionately affected by the policy.

First, we will highlight where and how mobilising infrastructure did exist for some corners of civil society. In Oxford, there appeared to already be a number of pre-existing groups that could be repurposed and mobilised surrounding the policy. These typically appeared to be associated with the 'pro-LTN' side of the policy, where those who had already mobilised surrounding active travel, such as cycling, or environmental groups could adopt the issue. As such, they had stronger networks and connections to the council in place and their campaigns were already very well-known.

The local cycling lobby in Oxford in particular was seen as influential with community activists. For example, Cyclox was mentioned as playing an active role in campaigning and participating in local planning consultations to contribute to designs that benefit cyclists.[213] Another community group with a focus on active travel that existed prior to the policy being implemented noted that while they're not a big organisation, they already have a strong online following and influence with the council:

"So, I think, my role running [the community organisation] is to provide… as an organisation, we have an objective towards Healthy Streets and active travel, but… we can't achieve that unless we maintain our integrity and our brands. So we look to buy…. we're not a public campaign, but we do have some influence. We have a Twitter campaign. It has.. what…1,000 followers. Yes, it's not huge. But then it will have some … has more influence with the councillors who are kind of leaning in our direction anyway." - Pro-LTN local community activist

In Enfield, like in Oxford, a number of residents commented on the strong campaigning by cycling groups who shared organisational power across London or represented cyclists local to Enfield, such as the Enfield Cycling campaign. One activist commented on how they observed a considerable backlash from cyclists online when they posted about LTNs:

"I put up a post on Twitter... what I consider very mild post on Twitter, that really that this did seem unfair on people on the main roads, and it needs to be looked at again. And suddenly, suddenly, I was inundated with tweets. Some of them really quite abusive tweets, largely from cyclists, largely from male cyclists. It's got to be said, you know, who did I think I was? You know, I was, I was encouraging car use. I was killing children, et cetera, et cetera. And it's, it's then, I began to realise, actually, that there's more to it than I thought. And it's more difficult to compromise overload than I thought, because you know, that fierce reaction was what was not from people who had any intention of compromising." - Anti-LTN activist, London

In contrast to those who supported the policy, those who opposed it were initially newly united surrounding the policy alone. For example, Reconnecting Oxford was developed in response to the policy in 2020.[214] The following individual case demonstrates how, step by step, a group of activists formed and mobilised.

RECONNECTING OXFORD MOBILISATION - AS TOLD BY AN ANTI-LTN ACTIVIST IN OXFORD

"So I got involved, you know, I got to know people on [XXX] Street. And then, you know, the site, you know, different people got involved in Cowley, because you could see how it was…. So when we started off in the traffic field, since traffic filters about three years ago, it was me and a guy called [xxx] who met in a drafty village hall. And [XXX] from [XX] Street. It was three of us.

213 Cyclox, 2024. https://www.cyclox.org/#what-we-do.
214 Reconnecting Oxford, 2024. https://reconnectingoxford.weebly.com/.

"What's happened since then is as the skews become more serious; the entire infrastructure has grown. So there's a new political party formed with multiple candidates. There's Facebook groups, there's WhatsApp groups. So now we're pretty much on the foot.

"When it first started out…the BBC would ask for a quote. And it'd be basically me, me me, because it was no one else. And, now, I can just put it in the WhatsApp group. And that Sky TV came down early in the year, they weren't they were on that way, nine o'clock on a Sunday morning, you know, 11 o'clock filming. And we got three people to be filmed within a couple of hours.

"And then we've built an infrastructure, an entire community infrastructure of opponents, simply because we can't believe it's happening. So civic society has been created off the back of something being imposed on us. So, from a society point of view, it's fantastic but none of us want to be here. It's … [Another speaker: stressful?]..incredibly."

Some residents in Oxford also highlighted how some pre-existing groups - including online peer-to-peer messaging services - were utilised and even felt to be 'taken over' by those seeking to mobilise opposition to the policy. One parent described how the issue had occupied their school WhatsApp group:

'It just felt really painful. Because I was like, I actually really liked you. And I feel like there's something that is so there's so much that's different about us that we can manage. But this just feels like it's just an angry explosion that has nothing to say… it's not showing this kind of information. And it was kind of like… it's a massive conspiracy, we're all going in, just stay home, it was a video, when it was going on, around the time of the demonstration.' - Pro-LTN resident, Oxford

Another commented on how the topic would arise in parent WhatsApp groups associated with children's sports unsolicited:

'But that's the kind of I came across comments on Whatsapp groups as well. So my kids play for different football teams and stuff ... And one of the other parents had like, launched into some messy rant against the LTN zone. And it was like that kind of really extreme stuff. And it's just something given a polite message that this was a sort of football Whatsapp group. ' [when probed on the impact that had] 'I mean, I think most people thought it was really a bit out of place. Yeah. Like why is it even further, then presumably, that person holds those views very strongly in their everyday life and probably do despise it, it's like you were saying you avoid that conversation with somebody who you might like and know.' - Pro-LTN resident, Oxford

A community group in Enfield was also perceived to be 'taken over' by the LTN debate, such as local residents associations.

"There's a residents association that covers our area. And while it purported to stay neutral, many of the people on it were anti. It doesn't represent the population of our LTN which is 3,000. It only had 300 members, three or four of us joined to represent the pros… We were having online meetings, we stood for the committee, and it was very unpleasant and the people changed constitutions, etc. And they ended up with the residents association being entirely anti-LTN. Albeit, you know, they weren't representing the population. And actually, the residents association hardly exists, because they were single issue people. - Pro-LTN activist, Enfield

The 'take over' of certain community WhatsApp groups and residents associations by those who opposed the policy demonstrates some of the strategies used by those who were seeking to mobilise stronger community participation in the issue.

Despite this mobilisation, some felt that some pro-LTN voices were overrepresented and did not just have significantly more mobilisation infrastructure, but also resources and political capital at their disposal in terms of engaging key political actors. Anti-LTN activists online and in interviews felt that pro-LTN groups such as "cycling lobbies" had greater access to resources and channels of political influence, including being able to fund their own research, whereas anti-LTN activists had less ability to fund their own research or campaigns. This evaluation was made particularly by national activists seeking to galvanise a more anti-LTN campaign:

'But they [the cycling lobby] try and pretend that somehow it's all local. But this UK 100 and the cyclists campaign are all funded by the same few billionaires, right? The so-called 'grassroots campaigns' are all funded by [name of wealthy individual]' - Anti-LTN National Activist Leader

"If you get a million pounds, and you can commission your own research… it is different. But if you don't have a million pounds, you know, it can be quite disheartening. Disempowering, actually is the word." - Anti-LTN activist, London

One journalist in Oxford also commented on what they observed to be a key dividing line between those who are 'anti-LTN' and those who are supportive, or as a 'Town vs Gown' issue:

"The nub of the issue feels like a middle class battle vs working class… middle class kids want to cycle to school and the working class want to drive to work… broad sweep but does feel like that…" - Oxford journalist

It's crucial to acknowledge that there are also long-term barriers for specific audiences to engage in political discussions with different online and offline spaces where they can share their views either directly and privately with the Council. Evidence suggests that this is particularly acute when spaces are solely offered online or in a passive manner i.e. available if you are aware of it and want to participate. People with lower levels of income and education, racially minoritised groups, disabled people and the elderly are less likely to confidently engage with political processes online.[215] It is because of these long-standing trends that government actors are strongly recommended, and in some instances required by law, to take a proactive approach to consultation, including providing offline engagement opportunities.[216] This is especially the case when those communities are at risk of being disadvantaged by a policy.

Notably, in Rochdale, we were unable to identify any community groups that had been engaged in discussion or mobilised in response to the LTN. However, some religious leaders with links into the local Muslim community highlighted how they had drawn on their existing spaces and networks to participate in their consultation demonstrating a relatively strong relationship with the local council. In contrast - and as highlighted in the section focused on government actors, this did not appear to be the case in Oxford with residents from the local South Asian and Muslim community suggesting that they felt they had been ignored.

Given these notable imbalances in community mobilisation infrastructure, financial resources and political capital in relation to the local council, it is clear that there were a range of hidden barriers to different communities having the ability to access information, engage in debate and to mobilise campaigns. A lack of proactive support or dismantling of these barriers, particularly for the British South Asian and Muslim communities, as well as for the elderly, disabled or those digitally excluded, became a key area of criticism in

215 Helsper, 2021; Robinson et al, 2015; Morris & Morris, 2013;Dobransky et al. 2021; Pew Research Centre, 2021. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/09/10/americans-with-disabilities-less-likely-than-those-without-to-own-some-digital-devices/.
216 Ministry of Justice, 2012. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-sector-equality-duty.

the LTN debate more broadly. This demonstrates how weaknesses in the inclusivity of an ecosystem can have knock-on negative impacts on the legitimacy of democratic decision-making overall.

ONLINE GROUPS

A range of respondents, including journalists, highlighted that residents typically use online public or semi-open groups specific to their local area as an important source for their local news and information. Whilst residents demonstrated healthy scepticism surrounding the reliability of this information and also expressed concerns regarding the levels of abuse and toxicity in such spaces, it was felt to be the most obvious and quick source for local news.

Local journalists noted seeing their stories shared via these groups and also commented that some residents will email them to highlight a story that is circulating for further consideration. Whilst some journalists suggested they would struggle for time to keep up with such groups, at least one suggested that they occasionally support a moderator with recommendations of what content to remove if it might pose a risk locally. This includes posts that identify a child, for example.

Residents in all three locations mentioned Facebook groups and, in Oxford and Enfield, NextDoor groups were also a key source of local information:

"I don't really have sources of information on you know... to find out that there might be something going on. But, I am a member of one like local Facebook group. And there seems to be a sense of community and people want to exchange information and help each other out on community policy in the area." - Pro-LTN resident, Enfield

'I think a lot of people around us are on NextDoor, where people are on, you know, my wife's on that. And everyone on our street is on there and you know you get a feeling of what is going on very locally.' - Pro-LTN resident, Oxford

"If you don't see [information about local issues] on MEN [Manchester Evening News], you'll see it on Facebook in one of your groups." - Pro-LTN resident, Rochdale

"I don't really watch the news or anything. But if anything happens in the area, I'm straight on Facebook" - Anti-LTN resident, Rochdale

The utility of these online platforms for local information sharing is also demonstrated in relation to the LTN policy. For example, in Enfield, new Facebook groups were created solely to mobilise around the issue of LTNs. In Enfield, the 'LTN Enfield' and 'Fox Lane FB Group' as well as a Facebook group created by the council specifically for the 'Healthy Streets' campaign. Furthermore, existing Facebook groups were also used, but were notable for having banned the topic of LTNs, such as, 'Love Your Doorstep',[217] 'Enfield Matters',[218] 'Enfield Equality Community'.

While a high proportion of each local community appear to be using these groups, they are not necessarily considered to be inclusive because of the nature of behaviour and the tone of the debate. Some residents

217 Enfield Love Your Doorstep Community. https://www.facebook.com/groups/ENFIELDwhatstheretodoandwheretofindstuff/?locale=en_G.
218 Enfield Matters. https://m.facebook.com/groups/1562425140473274/?locale2=be_BY.

described feeling very shocked by some of the things their neighbours had posted online and/or choosing to leave the group entirely because of their disappointment with the tone of local discussion. This discussion about Next Door in a pro-LTN Oxford focus group demonstrates

"I found it really bad because it's my community. People I was like, oh, you're around me. And you're horrible'

'That's when I gave up in NextDoor.

'Yeah I gave up on NextDoor as well.'" - Pro-LTN residents, Oxford

Residents in Rochdale and Enfield also commented on how they are very cautious about what they share in such groups, with some suggesting they would always remain silent and simply observe.

"Absolutely [no I would not comment]! Not just because I'm a private person but also I wouldn't put myself amongst some of these types who spread confrontation and hatred. I wouldn't feel safe adding to the comments as people just tear you apart if you don't agree with their own comments." - Pro-LTN resident, Rochdale

"I wouldn't consider commenting due to the potential of getting hate online but I would consider sharing it with family and friends." - Pro-LTN resident, Rochdale

"I feel like [it's] more of a debate [than when] it is online because on Facebook it tends to be either for or against it. It's not really a place to comment because you will get shouted down …" - Pro-LTN resident, Enfield

Residents also highlighted observing where the topic of LTNs was actively banned in certain community groups to assist in keeping the tone relatively civil:

"I think my Facebook group actually banned this topic. I saw someone say, "I'm sorry, I know I'm not supposed to say anything about LTNs." - Pro-LTN resident, Enfield

One community activist who also served as a moderator on NextDoor in Oxford highlighted, in a one-to-one interview, that while she would remove personal attacks, she would leave other stories in the group as she did not think it was her place to check the origins of the story and her neutrality was more important. One resident suggested that they felt this did not always happen in Facebook groups, suggesting that some Facebook moderation can lead to a 'control of the narrative' and had perceived pro-LTN activists in particular opting to play the role of admin in a group.

"But in my observation, different groups have different meanings. And therefore. Yeah… it's not an evil debate. And obviously, that's the way that Facebook has chosen to administer that. And [it's a] similar sort of thing with NextDoor. You can become an admin. And the pro debate are very… have got organisers and they are the admins of those environments. So they do control the narrative.'
- Anti-LTN resident, Oxford

In Rochdale, community leaders suggested that the wider community Facebook groups may not include those community members based in Deeplish, where the LTN was situated. One journalist commented that they assumed those who live in Deeplish are unlikely to join the main groups, and were more likely to have their own groups.

"Deeplish has a very high population of Asian origin, maybe 80% or higher, so they might have their own [Facebook] group… so they don't use FB in the same way… some do but there's clearly a massive group not on [the same groups]…" - Journalist interview

A small proportion of respondents suggested that they also used X for local information. Whilst not a local group setting and clearly offering public awareness-raising, it appeared to be used predominantly by journalists, activists or councillors for sharing and receiving local information, including by or for those who are not necessarily in the local area. One journalist suggested that they noticed a very different tone and reaction to their coverage on LTNs via X:

"[I've] been on Twitter since 2009 but nothing I've written in 10 years had ever blown up as much as [a story about problems with LTNs] … one guy said 'my story put his children at danger' - it was just unhinged." - Journalist interview

Overall, whilst a high proportion of residents might be found in online Facebook groups and on NextDoor, it's important to remember that not all residents will feel comfortable joining these groups, or if in the groups, speaking up. Therefore, such online forums should not be considered as inclusive spaces for deliberative discussion. Furthermore, given the lack of information verification in such spaces, they are also less likely to be reliable as sources of truthful information.

PERSONAL NETWORKS

Personal networks, such as relationships with family and friends, appear to represent the most trusted part of the ecosystem, but perhaps may also reinforce already held views. Such networks appeared to be particularly crucial when residents were seeking to assess the validity of information being circulated in the wider part of the ecosystem. In some cases, residents appeared to prefer evidence and perspectives shared by those they knew and trusted very well, rather than necessarily the council or another single organisation.

"Those articles or reports or whatever you want to say… that information comes from one organisation, or one person using the data or the research that they've done to spin it in the way that they want you to, you know, take what they want you to believe. And so it's their narrative that we're supposed to prescribe to, which is not true. The reason I, obviously, listen to my community is because it's a group of people who are directly affected by what's going on. And so that source of information for me is more powerful than any print media, any Facebook article, any website. You know, I don't trust none of these things. Because they all have an agenda. Every single one via good or bad. There's an agenda. So my ears and eyes are with my community." - Anti-LTN resident, Oxford

This appetite to only engage or trust to speak up with or among those who are trusted appears to reflect a broader concern with sharing or trusting those outside of people's immediate circle. When suggesting who they might share articles regarding LTNs with, a high proportion of respondents suggested they might share it with their family and friends, but wouldn't extend or share further or comment publicly. Such sentiments appeared to be reflected on both sides of the debate. For example, in Rochdale:

"I wouldn't consider commenting due to the potential of getting hate online but I would consider sharing it with family and friends." - Pro-LTN resident, Rochdale

"I'd share it to group chats or individually to people I speak to who have very similar views to myself regarding this" - Anti-LTN resident, Rochdale

Overall, personal networks appeared to be the most trusted source of local information amongst citizens. Whilst in and of itself, not a concern, this reliance solely on personal networks above trusting any other sources may suggest a broader lack of trust or sense of inclusivity in alternative and more publicly shared spaces.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it should not be the case that citizens are relying only on their personal networks and local offline and online groups for their local information. And yet, where a vacuum has been left by the decline in trust in local authority information and the loss of local news, civil society has sought to fill the gap.

Local businesses have clearly played a key role in local information ecosystems by sharing information through word of mouth via the shop floor, where council communication was lacking, as well as by, in some cases, using their online influence and relationships with other business owners to highlight common interests and concerns. It is clearly crucial that councils engage such local businesses effectively when seeking to understand and facilitate discussion within local communities.

However, the imbalance that appears to have arisen within the civil society sector, particularly the perceived riches of the environmental and cycling lobbies relative to those who may have different and varied concerns about the specific measures used to achieve active travel or air pollution goals, and who wish to be heard and included in decision-making that affects their lives. The entrenchment of divisions between the citizens that are represented by such groups demonstrate the facilitation gap that needs to be filled by a neutral actor who can bring the respective parties together - that can and should be the council when it is their responsibility to facilitate local democracy within their communities. Ensuring councils are enabling these conversations in a way that is constructive and conciliatory, early enough in the process of decision-making, is fundamental to ensuring compromises can be made. In the new Civic Accord proposed in the Recommendations section, we will stress the importance of including participatory methods in the toolkit of councils when seeking to introduce policies that require community compromises and changes in behaviour.

Our findings have also demonstrated the significant barriers for some minority faith and ethnic communities as well as disabled people to engage directly with the council surrounding this policy area. This underpins why regular community mapping exercises are so important, so that councils can anticipate the needs of different communities and ensure that their voices are heard in decisions that affect their lives, rather than further excluding them from political decision-making.

We have also highlighted that whilst online groups are important spaces for information-sharing in local communities, they are also not inclusive spaces where community members feel they can learn and share their views openly. The tone of debate in such forums and the concerns expressed by many residents that they would experience abuse or 'hate' when sharing their view demonstrates the need for alternative spaces where

community members can connect and build human relationships. This can be, and to an extent is being, facilitated by some community leaders, but creating such spaces is a role that both news media and local government should play.

Overall, there is a significant need for local authorities and local news ecosystems to strengthen their capacity to facilitate inclusive and truth-producing spaces, not just when initiating participation exercises in policy-making, but by creating new long-term, offline spaces that provide equitable access to key political decision-makers and authoritative information. In the Recommendations section, we will set out our vision for how the local news ecosystem could be regenerated to meet these needs, as well as the ways in which councils can provide greater transparency and commitment to how it seeks to learn about and support the lives of residents.

RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

This study has turned the hypothesis that disinformation has amplified social division surrounding the LTN policy on its head. Rather than blaming conspiracy theorists for the backlash against councils, we have identified that it is failure in policy design and implementation from local and national politicians and severe vulnerabilities in our local information ecosystems that has resulted in such division and provided fertile ground for disinformation.

The explosion of disinformation over the last 18 months in tandem with spiralling discontent with the LTN measures in communities across the country has highlighted fractures and vulnerabilities at every level of our information ecosystem, including a severe democratic chasm between councils and communities.

At a national level, the government's U-turn, from a call for local authorities to implement measures swiftly to reduce traffic in 2020 to an outright attack on 'anti-motorist' councils in 2023, has highlighted the lack of resilience in our Ministerial leadership of important policies that require strong and clear communication, especially when there are difficult compromises and trade-offs to be made. The role played by national politicians online in stoking invective towards councils, including validating conspiracy theories, underlines the dereliction of responsibility from the top of government. To lead in a democracy requires politicians who resist stoking division and endorsing disinformation for personal gain and instead are committed to foreseeing challenges, planning for enabling participation and community compromise and lead through difficult deliberative discussions. We are clearly far from this situation in May 2024.

At a local level, councils have been accused of spreading misinformation, of being deceptive, manipulative and undemocratic. While there are clear exceptions, many have failed to properly consult their communities to the point where the rows have further exacerbated and fundamentally undermined trust in local governance. Our findings demonstrate that the tools that are most frequently used by local authorities to communicate and consult are not fit for purpose. Web-based, passive consultation methods exclude key voices, do not facilitate learning or empathy, and lack the capacity to facilitate discussion and human connection and compromise. We have better - participatory - methods for tackling difficult trade-offs within communities. We also have better offline, human capacities to listen and engage with one another when we can ensure such times and spaces are made available. We must use these participatory, human and offline methods early enough in our local policy making if we are to rebuild trust in our democratic processes.

Our local news ecosystems have been decimated creating a vacuum for public information that is being filled by personal networks and toxic online groups. Market failures are a central part of this problem, but we have also identified the challenges created by the poor perception of journalism in 2024, the abuse received by journalists and the knock-on self-censorship that this creates. The loss of this ecosystem and challenges faced by journalists day to day are no doubt a key factor in why and how disinformation can soar in local information ecosystems.

Overall, our findings evidence the need for significant reform of our local information ecosystems if we are to rebuild trust and participation in local democracy and prevent disinformation. Such an overhaul will be crucial if we are to achieve the necessary changes in our ways of life that can restore strength in community relationships and tackle climate change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our recommendations are designed to significantly reform local information ecosystems in order to rebuild trust and participation in local democracy. They are aimed at five distinct audiences, three of which are reflected in the layers of the information ecosystem: national politicians, national government, local government and the news industry. Our fifth audience is the disinformation research and funder community.

NATIONAL POLITICIANS

Recommendation 1: An anti-disinformation standard in public life

Finding: The engagement of national politicians on specific sides of the LTN debate in 2023, including references to 15-minute cities, is likely to have impacted on engagement with disinformation narratives. This behaviour demonstrates how politicians continue to flagrantly ignore the Nolan Principle 'to be truthful' in public office.[219]

Recommendation: The Committee for Standards in Public Life and the Labour Party's new independent Ethics and Integrity Commission should incorporate into their reviews the way in which politicians behave in relation to disinformation narratives online.[220]

In its review, the Commission should specifically recommend how politicians educate themselves on such narratives and evaluate the extent to which such narratives weaken relationships with democratic institutions and the rule of law, before amplifying them via online platforms for their own political gain. The Commission should also consider approaches for punishing such behaviour should it be identified to have occurred, creating a greater incentive to thoroughly investigate certain narratives before promoting them at scale.

NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

Our research reveals that the implementation of the Low Traffic Neighbourhood policy was beset by ambiguity at the top of government that trickled down through the local rollout resulting in significant variation, confusion and disruption to its impact. For the rollout to prove more effective in the future, the government needs more prioritisation and clarity in its goals, consistency in its message and citizens need a clearer idea of who is responsible for it.

The government's move in late 2023 to explicitly disown the policy it had funded and then actively attack councils for how they implemented it represents a dangerous dereliction of its responsibility.[221] The impact of this decision, together with the language used by politicians (as we will later discuss), left the information environment a wide open goal for the conspiratorial narratives that flourished.

Our policies focus on giving greater accountability and leadership at the top of government

Recommendation 2: A local democracy health monitor

Finding: A lack of resilience in funding of local government as well as a lack of accountability and protection for investment in approaches that preserve local democratic systems has contributed to a widening of the chasm between local government and communities and frustration with "undemocratic" processes.

219 Committee on Standards in Public Life, 1995. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-7-principles-of-public-life/the-7-principles-of-public-life--2.
220 Committee on Standards in Public Life. https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life.
221 BBC, 2024. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-66965714.

Recommendation: For Oflog to take on responsibility for activating a local democracy health monitor and enabling departments who award funding to local governments, such as Active Travel England, to utilise this information to determine which parts of the country are in a strong enough position to introduce policies that will require significant public support to be effective. This role for Oflog would include:

- Curating local democracy data for each local authority via its Data Explorer tool in collaboration with local councils;[222]
- Reporting on whether the local authority has a published, transparent local democracy strategy available for its citizens;
- Reporting on how much each local authority is investing in local democracy, including local elections, engagement and consultation activities with the local community, per year;
- Reporting on the level of participation in each local authority's democratic processes including average number of consultations per year, level of participation in consultations, number of consultation methods used, whether offline consultation methods are enabled, voter turnout at local elections, number of candidates at local elections and the diversity of candidates at local elections.

Supplementary recommendations:

- CIPFA should update their Service Reporting Code of Practice (SeRCOP) guidance for local authorities to include a consistent explanation for how councils should include the level of investment in their local democracy via their financial budget reporting.[223];
- LGA should analyse their annual census of councillors to identify the extent to which the council reflects the local population in their constituency. Gaps in representation and diversity should be highlighted.[224]

Given the importance of strong local democratic mechanisms to prevent mis/disinformation, we consider it crucial to strengthen the accountability and monitoring for good quality local democratic practice. A key lever in accountability infrastructure is to gather more consistent and comprehensive data to inform our understanding of the relative vulnerabilities of local democracy across the country. Such data could then be used for decision-making when government departments are considering funding allocation decisions for implementing policies and measures whose success will rely on strong local democratic practice and participation.

Given that, at the moment, there are very limited data sources that enable us to assess this, we recommend that Oflog—the newly created unit within the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Local government — take responsibility for defining, curating and transparently sharing this data. Oflog has already begun collating local government data across a number of other metrics. Therefore the extension into collating data for local democracy reflects an incremental step. The indicators for the health of local democracy are illustrative and demonstrate a minimum baseline for what could be curated. We suggest that this data is shared through self-reporting by councils in most instances.

Recommendation 3: A 'means match goals' rule for national government funding

Finding: Whilst the allowance for variety and choice in policy goals and implementation enables locally responsive strategies, unless the choices for specific approaches are made very explicit with a clear coherence and rationale, contradiction and hypocrisy can creep in. Citizens found clear discrepancies between the stated goals of a climate change policy with the means of planters that prevented electric vehicles or a stated goal of active travel without corresponding means of improvements in cycling infrastructure.

Recommendation: Departments that are responsible for awarding funding to local government, such as Active Travel England , must ensure that their evaluation criteria includes a "means match goals" rule. This evaluation criteria will assess the extent to which a council has plans that align entirely with the stated goals of the funding and has identified possible risks for perceived or actual contradiction with plans to mitigate them. Any contradictions between the policy goals and the mechanisms for achieving them must be clearly and

222 Oflog, 2024. https://oflog.data.gov.uk/?area=E09000010.
223 CIPFA, 2022-2023. https://www.cipfa.org/policy-and-guidance/publications/s/service-reporting-code-of-practice-for-local-authorities-202223.
224 LGA, 2022. https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Councillors%27%20Census%202022%20-%20report%20FINAL-210622.pdf.

robustly substantiated before funding can be awarded.

Where multiple goals are included that cut across different policy agendas, for example, active travel and Net Zero, then the relationship and prioritisation between those goals should be carefully articulated by the funding recipient with a clear explanation for how the means for achieving the respective goals will complement each other.

Recommendation 4: A new 'Civic Accord' is needed to restore trust in local democracy in our local communities.

The accord includes the following:

1. The creation of a council 'local democracy' strategy and set of principles that are published and transparent to demonstrate an ongoing investment in these important activities. This strategy and principles will clarify:

    b. The procedures the council follows when designing and implementing a policy in terms of its engagement with councillors throughout the process;

    c. How and when the council chooses to run different forms of engagement, consultation, and participation exercises with citizens i.e. what types of policy and threshold of change for communities require what method;

    d. The ways and levels of regularity with which citizens are able to meet with their local councillor and share information about their needs;

    e. The regulatory process within which the council will commit to undertaking its community mapping exercise, particularly identifying key community leaders;

    f. The ways in which the council intends to maintain its relationships with community leaders;

    g. The ways in which the council uses online social media groups, either when it creates new ones or when members of the council might observe or participate in local groups to share information;

    h. The support that will be offered to enable community members to take part in engagement, consultation and participation exercises, particularly those who lack digital access or lower political literacy.

2. A dedicated centralised staff member with named responsibility for delivering the local democracy strategy day-to-day. This staff member would be the central figure for collating community mapping information, sharing accountability data with Oflog and ensuring the council follows its commitments to the accord.

3. The initiation of a regular community mapping 'census' exercise every three years to identify key community groups and community leaders as well as key community spaces to better enable Council's to engage community members in spaces they already use and to strengthen understanding of community needs.

4. A new set of commitments that are triggered when a policy meets a specific 'need to know' threshold.[225] Where a policy has the potential to require significant changes to citizens' lives and compromises across the community, such as was the case with Low Traffic Neighbourhood measures, a commitment to:

    a. Utilise participatory methods where possible in order to identify possible compromises or approaches that can minimise difficulties or any disproportionate negative impacts for any specific community;

    b. Proactively ensure the inclusion of those who may be the most opposed and/or negatively affected by the policy together with those who support the policy so that all parties can learn more about the others' needs;

    c. Provide balanced information, including the possible risks and trade-offs needed, for citizens ahead of any consultation or participation exercise;

    d. A commitment to a minimum of 12 weeks between the initial communication of a new policy and a

225 The 'need to know' threshold is a policy where citizens need to know about it before it directly impacts their lives in another way e.g. the installation of a planter in a route they normally take every day.

consultation closing to ensure there is sufficient time for community groups to become aware of the consultation, circulate information to their community members, and to give feedback.

5. A mandate to always provide face-to-face methods methods of engagement, consultation and/or participation to ensure the inclusion of those who are digitally excluded and to rebuild human relationships where trust may already be low.

6. Voluntary adoption of the National Statistics Authority's Code of Practice for Statistics which encourages the consistent publication of any evidence for any public claims made to support the implementation of policies, adhering to consistent and high levels of quality. [226]

7. A commitment to a 'Civic Rebate' when a council participation exercise requires a significant investment of time from members of the community.[227] This rebate would provide incentives to participate and would include reinvestment back into the community, such as providing vouchers for local shops and services.

Recommendation 5: Ditch the polling

Finding: Local governments should not invest money in representative polling as a route to resolving issues of backlash.

Recommendation: National government should withdraw the statutory guidance to conduct representative polling to assess public support to avoid creating a form of direct democracy and undermining the voices of those disproportionately affected by policies.

The government's recent LTN review proposed 'objective methods' such as 'professional polling to British Polling Council standards to establish a truly representative picture of local views' as the solution in the face of significant public opposition.[228] The use of representative polling as a means of informing decision-making surrounding a contentious policy reflects a marked departure from traditional approaches to engaging local citizens in policy making towards a suggestion of 'direct democracy' where Council's may determine actions based on majority support. Such an undertaking could typically cost councils a minimum of £10,000 per survey to conduct local quantitative representative research with large enough samples.

Such a proposal does not recognise the scenario that is specific to the LTN policy and the source of such frustration in communities. Where a policy has different impacts (negative or positive) on different residents, based on where they live, how they travel as well as other personal attributes, including whether they are disabled or elderly, the voices of residents are not equal. Different residents will have different justified concerns for different reasons. Someone whose life is not impacted in a negative way, but only reaps the benefits, should not have an equal say to someone who is disadvantaged by the policy. When conducting representative polling—as the Department for Transport proposes—each individual is considered equally regardless as to where they live or what their attributes are. The Department has not indicated what threshold a poll should meet to suggest that a policy has sufficient support to be implemented which again allows for variation between different communities in terms of how they would interpret the results. This recommendation therefore does not respond to the specific issue still creating tension in communities.

Furthermore, the recommendation undermines approaches that would effectively enable the council to prevent backlash by facilitating citizens participating in an exercise where they can listen, be heard and achieve a route forward - such as have been laid out in the Accord above. Furthermore, like any direct democratic process, it also undermines the role of councillors as elected representatives of the public. Like the LGA, we consider resident surveys as a useful tool for assessing public opinion, but regard resident surveys (not representative polling) as just one tool in the toolbox of councils to consult.

THE NEWS INDUSTRY

In this section, we propose a package of measures which are designed to put journalists at the heart of healthy local information ecosystems.

226 National Statistics Authority, 2024. https://code.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/.
227 A nod to the Periclean jurors' payment system.
228 Department of Transport, 2024. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/implementing-low-traffic-neighbourhoods/implementing-low-traffic-neighbourhoods#design-principles-for-effective-ltns; LGA, 2024. https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/New%20Conversations%20Guide%20refresh_11.pdf.

Some of our proposals echo the recommendations of other recent inquiries into local news in the UK and initiatives in other countries.1 However, our recommendations are not simply a response to the disappearance of local journalists or the closure of local newspapers. We are not proposing support for local journalism just for the sake of it. Some forms of journalism are not conducive to healthy information ecosystems, and therefore simply funding journalism is not enough to ensure the health of these ecosystems. In fact, funding some forms of journalism may be actively harmful to local information ecosystems, by creating further incentives for low-quality, biassed or sensationalist reporting.

Our recommendations are intended to strengthen local information ecosystems by ensuring a positive relationship between local journalists and the wider community. This means forging a new settlement between local news media and central government, local government, local people and big tech platforms.

Together, our proposals add up to a necessary and long-overdue intervention in the local news market, to create healthy information ecosystems across the UK and Europe, mitigate the harms of disinformation, and encourage vibrant and productive democratic debate.

Recommendation 6: News Funds to ensure that local news serves local communities

Finding: The decimation of our local news infrastructure within local communities has created a vacuum that enabled mis- and disinformation to flourish around LTN schemes

Recommendation: Central government should provide a funding package to stimulate a new era of vibrant local news, starting at £50 million per year.

As recommended by the Cairncross Review, the Culture, Media and Sports Select Committee, Nesta, and the News for All campaign, the UK government should provide funding to stimulate the local news market.[229] This funding should not create perverse incentives for poor-quality journalism or clickbait but should be geared towards the needs and interests of local communities.

The funding package should have the following characteristics:[230]

- Funding should be administered through Local News Funds, based at local or regional levels, and modelled on the network of community foundations.[231] These Local News Funds could administer both public funding and philanthropic grants and donations. Local News Funds would act as a firewall between funders and news providers, to protect journalists' independence whilst ensuring stability of funding;
- Resources for Local News Funds could be drawn from **dormant assets**, which the government is able to direct towards good causes as set out in the Dormant Assets Act, 2022.[232] If necessary, the government should amend the legislation to ensure that local journalism is recognised as an appropriate cause for support. Other potential funding sources might include a hypothecated tax on big tech platforms that create economic value by piggy-backing on the work of news providers or a reformed funding settlement for public service media, whereby - for example - the BBC Licence Fee might be distributed across the news ecosystem, with the BBC playing an anchor role alongside other independent but subsidised local news outlets;
- The allocation of funding should be informed by **Local News Plans** which could be drawn up by a task and finish group of a wide range of local stakeholders from across the community and assembled by the Council. Like Neighbourhood Plans, these plans should create a framework for the development of local media, identifying challenges and opportunities and showing the community's priorities for local news;
- The allocation of funding should also be informed by a detailed **Local News Map**, to be updated regularly, to ensure that funding is used to address areas of low local news provision, and to monitor the change in local news provision over time as one way of monitoring the impact of funding.

Alongside funding for news providers, the government, via Local News Funds, should also:

229 House of Commons, 2023. https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmcumeds/153/summary.html; Nesta. https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/Nesta_Future_News_Pilot_Fund_End_Of_Prog.pdf; Public Interest News Foundation. https://www.publicinterestnews.org.uk/news-for-all.

230 Whilst this is not the full £100 million per year that has been recommended, £50 million could still be transformative for 200 local authorities where news ecosystems are at their worst. The assumptions based on this number are detailed fully in: Grayson, 2023. https://www.publicinterestnews.org.uk/_files/ugd/cde0e9_f2d9ecdbebac4f82826995d14b9dc017.pdf.

231 UK Community Foundations. https://www.ukcommunityfoundations.org/.

232 Dormant Assets Act, 2022. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/5/contents/enacted.

- Invest in the infrastructure for local journalism, including ongoing training, mentoring and leadership development for journalists from the widest possible range of backgrounds, to ensure that the local news sector reflects the diversity of the UK, and that journalists have the skills they need to meet the changing demands of audiences;[233]
- Include innovation funding for shared tools or technologies that will enhance revenue generation, such as shared advertising exchanges or platforms;
- Support new entrants into the market, including grants for programmes like the New Media Incubator, to allow news entrepreneurs to understand the character of a particular local area before launching a new outlet;[234]
- Ensure a section of these funds are used to transfer legacy local newspapers into **community ownership**.[235] The UK government and devolved governments should legislate if necessary to ensure that legacy local newspapers are treated as 'community assets' for this purpose, giving first refusal to community groups to take over outlets that are otherwise at risk of closure;
- Prioritise support for co-creational forms of local news, where members of the local community are actively involved in the production of journalism.[236]

The framework of Local News Funds should be regulated by Ofcom, whose media plurality duties should be enhanced to give them a more proactive role, advising local news funds on how to increase plurality, as well as reacting to proposed takeovers and mergers that might reduce plurality.[237]

Alongside the direct subsidies provided through the Local News Funds, the UK government should also create and enhance tax incentives in support of local news.[238] These incentives should encourage advertisers, investors, charitable donors and subscribers to support truly local news. They should also encourage the owners of local news outlets to employ journalists, rather than leaching profits in dividends, for example through an employment tax credit for local journalists.

There are examples from elsewhere in Europe and North America of readers receiving tax incentives to support news. For instance, a one-off incentive was offered to news subscribers in France during the Covid-19 pandemic and Canada has also experimented with a similar scheme.[239]

Recommendation 7: Turn the democratic lights on

Finding: Residents described feeling poorly served by their existing local news providers, particularly in relation to sufficient balanced coverage of local government. Rather than utilising mechanisms for holding local news media accountable and improving its quality, citizens have turned to local online groups for their news instead.

Recommendation: Local News Funds should include a guarantee that no local authority, court, tribunal or other local public body in the UK will go without professional scrutiny by local journalists.

One of the fundamental roles of local news is to hold local authorities accountable, acting as the 'watchdogs' of democracy. This role will only become more important in the years ahead, as the UK government devolves further powers to local government. The relationship between local authorities and local journalists should

233 This training is distinct from formal accredited courses offered by the likes of NCTJ, BJTC or PTC and instead reflects a more informal mentoring model that could be facilitated by grants to bodies within the independent news sector.
234 New Media Incubator. https://ipi.media/innovation/new-media-incubator/; The Local News Incubator. https://www.theajp.org/incubator/.
235 ITV, 2017. https://www.itv.com/news/border/2017-05-03/langholm-community-group-takes-over-local-newspaper.
236 PINF, 2023. https://www.publicinterestnews.org.uk/post/co-creational-media-committing-to-truth-and-public-participation; There are positive examples of community ownership of local news media, for example with the Bristol Cable, Great Central Gazette in Leicester, The Ferret, Exeter Observer and the Dublin Inquirer. This model reflects 'co-creational media' which is not the same as citizen journalism or participatory journalism, where individual members of the community publish content that has not gone through any journalistic processes of verification. In co-creational news media, journalists work in partnership with non-journalists to identify the issues to cover, frame and report on these issues, and disseminate stories to the community. Co-creational media may involve community ownership of the media as discussed above (for example, through a co-operative model), or other forms of community accountability (for example, through regular community listening forums or surveys) or engagement (such as through a community newsroom or popup news café e.g. the Greater Govanhill newsroom or community newsroom at the West Leeds Dispatch).# In all cases, co-creational media maintains journalism's commitment to accuracy, but blends this with wider community involvement than in traditional forms of journalism.
237 Ofcom, 2021. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/228124/statement-future-of-media-plurality.pdf.
238 PINF. https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/107669/pdf/.
239 News Media UK, 2020. https://newsmediauk.org/blog/2020/07/02/france-gives-tax-credits-to-news-subscribers/; Nieman Lab, April 2022. https://www.niemanlab.org/2022/04/canada-offered-a-tax-credit-to-encourage-digital-news-subscriptions-heres-how-its-going/.

not be cosy and comfortable, but it should be generative, as both parties have an interest in supporting strong local information ecosystems that facilitate healthy democratic debate. Constraints on resources within newsrooms has undermined local news outlets to continue playing this role. Therefore, we recommend that Local News Funds are also used to tackle this, by:

- Ensuring a sufficient proportion of resources is committed to enabling the comprehensive and impartial reporting of the activities of local government and other public bodies and private bodies exercising public functions in the local area;
- Enabling local news outlets to provide **opportunities for the local community to raise concerns**, share information and engage directly with local officials. Whilst local government should also invest separately in deliberative forums and opportunities for public consultation, local news outlets have a distinct role to play here as an independent forum for debate which could also be supported by Local News Funds.

A new settlement between big tech and local news

Big tech platforms provide most people's gateway to news. This gives them huge power over how news is perceived and monetized. They have created incentives for some news providers to publish clickbait to maximise engagement and advertising revenue. At the same time, some forms of social media create exciting new opportunities to engage local people in debate and deliberation, and journalists could be using these opportunities to create new models of local media.

We believe that a new settlement between big tech platforms and local news media should have the following characteristics.

Recommendation 8: A fair deal for local news

Finding: The decimation of our local news infrastructure within local communities has created a vacuum that enabled mis- and disinformation to flourish around LTN schemes.

Recommendation: **Big tech platforms should be legally required to negotiate** in good faith with the local news providers whose content they carry to ensure that these providers are treated on fair, reasonable and non-discriminatory terms, including in the distribution of relevant data and revenue.

The Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers (DMCC) bill, making its way through Westminster as of May 2024, has the potential to create a regulatory framework that will satisfy this recommendation, by empowering the new Digital Markets Unit (DMU) to oversee negotiations between designated big tech platforms and the third parties that rely on their services, including news providers.[240] However, there is a risk that this framework will create further incentives for news providers to publish eye-catching content that does not support healthy information ecosystems—if, for example, big tech platforms offer more favourable terms to publishers of clickbait, because they receive more traffic, than to publishers of balanced local reporting. Therefore, we urge the new regulator to monitor the outcomes of the legislation against the principles agreed at the Big Tech and Journalism conference in Johannesburg in July 2023, which include the public interest, plurality and diversity.[241]

Recommendation 9: The Must Carry bridge into social media platforms for local news

Finding: Councils are struggling to gain the attention of residents when needing to communicate important public interest information, including communications about consultations

Recommendation: Much like television broadcasting's Must Carry duties stipulated in the Communications Act 2003, UK policymakers and Ofcom should consider requiring big tech platforms to carry certain forms of local news, including news that meets people's critical information needs about local council consultations as well as emergencies, natural disasters, public health and so on.[242]

Recommendation 10: New digital terrain for journalists

Finding: Some journalists are already playing a supportive role to moderators facilitating local online groups.

240 Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers (DMCC) bill, https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3453.
241 Gordon Institute of Business Science, July 2023. https://www.gibs.co.za/news/big-tech-and-journalism---principles-for-fair-compensation.
242 Communications Act, 2003. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/21/part/2/chapter/1/crossheading/general-conditions-mustcarry-obligations.

Yet, many journalists do not have the time or validation from these groups to play a more formal role to support the quality of information circulating in these spaces.

Recommendation: Journalists should be enabled to play an active role in online community forums such as those provided by NextDoor or Facebook. Journalists could actively fact-check claims and share accurate information to help support a productive democratic culture in these forums. Relevant platforms should be required to support local journalists in playing these roles.

Many journalists already appear to play an informal role of advising online group moderators of what content they should remove to minimise risks locally. Such a role could be given greater credence if platforms were to verify 'trusted journalists' in local areas.

RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE FUNDERS

Recommendation 11 : The launch of a self-censorship tracker

Finding: Some journalists have received online and offline abuse for their work which has led to self-censorship and an overall reduction in reporting on contentious topics. Some citizens expressed a low opinion and understanding of the role journalists play and their contribution to democratic discourse.

Recommendation: Journalists' safety should be paramount. We support the recommendations of the National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists and Dame Sara Khan's review that seek to mitigate against the risks of self-censorship, including to develop a stronger understanding of the problem through research and evidence, including conducting an annual survey to understand the extent and severity of freedom-restricting harassment and its censorship impacts.[243, 244]

It can be challenging to report on the community in which you live. Our findings replicate an alarming pattern across the UK, where journalists face increasing levels of hostility, with clear signs of the knock-on negative impacts for self-censorship and the reduction in quality of the debate.

Recommendation 12 : Investment in understanding systemic local information ecosystem vulnerabilities

Finding: Weaknesses at multiple levels of local and national information ecosystems, including the approaches of government actors, can provide fertile ground for disinformation to emerge and spread.

Recommendation: Disinformation funders and researchers should expand the scope of their research to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of local information ecosystems in order to identify possible vulnerabilities to and drivers of mis/disinformation, particularly by government actors, which may be specific to local contexts.

243 DCMS and the Home Office, October 2023. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-action-plan-for-the-safety-of-journalists/national-action-plan-for-the-safety-of-journalists.

244 The Khan Review, March 2024. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-khan-review-threats-to-social-cohesion-and-democratic-resilience/the-khan-review-executive-summary-key-findings-and-recommendations#recommendations.

APPENDIX 1
METHODOLOGY

Our methodology was designed to achieve a rich and in-depth understanding of both the offline and online information ecosystem in specific locations and to identify the type, levels and use of disinformation within it. Specifically, we sought to answer the following two research questions:

How do disinformation campaigns weaponise and amplify existing social divisions in local communities?

What is the role of local information ecosystems in challenging this?

To achieve this, we selected three case studies, namely in Oxford, Enfield and Rochdale where we: mapped the information ecosystem through desk research; conducted interviews with 24 journalists, local politicians, civil servants and community leaders; and conducted face-to-face focus groups with 47 members of the public who reflected attitudes an all sides of the 'LTN debate'. We also completed a detailed analysis of digital media and social media discussion of the LTN policy within the UK between January 2021 to January 2024, reflecting over 570,000 posts. After completing our analysis, in March and April 2024, our research was complemented by a detailed literature review of other relevant studies and a series of stakeholder engagements to discuss and refine our policy recommendations.

Our methodology is detailed in full below.

CRITERIA FOR SELECTION OF CASE STUDIES

We designed a set of criteria before selecting the three case studies of locations where the LTN policy was being implemented. The criteria included:

- A location that was likely to have a weak information system in order that we could explore if this might play a role in enabling disinformation to have an effect.[245]
- A regional balance across England[246]
- A mix of a big city, small city or town, and a location that might affect a rural community
- A location with a significant proportion of under-represented communities e.g. minoritised ethnic communities, faith communities and/or from poorer socio-economic backgrounds
- A mix in terms of the progression of the LTN policy implementation in the community i.e. a community where LTNs were still being trialled as well as a community where LTNs had been trialled and implemented

Based on this criteria, the following neighbourhoods were selected:

1. Oxford - a small city that has received the most media coverage surrounding the implementation of the LTN policy and that had been referenced by a number of international commentators. We hypothesised

245 We would ideally have included at least one location that was likely to have good information ecosystem in order to assess what impact this might have.
246 We would ideally have also included locations from the devolved nations, but chose to remain within one nation's approach to local government.

that Oxford had a weak information ecosystem.

2. Enfield - as a borough in the capital city of London with a community who is typically under-represented in newsrooms and who have been heavily referenced in commentary regarding those who benefit from LTNs.

3. Rochdale - as a town in the north of England where its LTN had been reportedly vandalised and gained significant coverage on social media. This is a town which is also likely to be a centre for rural communities.

We sought to select neighbourhoods that allowed a mix of councils from across the political spectrum. However, it was found to be too difficult to achieve this whilst also meeting our other prioritised criteria. As a result, all councils across the three neighbourhoods were Labour controlled.

INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM MAPPING

Within each of three chosen areas of study, researchers identified professional, local (specific to one of the three local authorities under consideration) and regional (covering one of the three local authorities among a group of others) news outlets by using the Public Interest News Foundations' Local News Map.

We reviewed all stories published by relevant local and regional providers on each Wednesday in October 2023, establishing a sense of the average number of stories published per area. Researchers then analysed all stories published online by relevant local and regional press on one day - 25 October 2023 - to understand the proportion of the stories that could be called 'public interest news' and that could be deemed specifically 'local' or were regional or national.

Researchers also recorded all professional news outlets' stories on LTNs in each of the three areas, their authors, the stakeholders mentioned in those stories (and whether they were pro/Anti-LTN), and the number of comments on the stories from July 2020 to October 2023.. The only local professional news outlet to allow comments on some of its stories was the Oxford Mail. Researchers reviewed all comments on stories relating to LTNs over the same period.The comments were then categorised as pro-LTN, Anti-LTN or neutral.

Researchers also reviewed a commercial dataset (Vuelio), which provided a broader range of providers of locally relevant information, including some prominent local Facebook groups. Where researchers could view the posts in these groups and judged them likely to be relevant parts of the information ecosystem, messages were sent to the administrators, but these did not result in any interviews.

Researchers reviewed each councils' website and social media presence from March 2019 to November 2023. We looked for press releases over time from each council and tracked how these had been responded to in local professional news providers' stories. We researched the extent to which councils provided print materials, such as a monthly magazine.

FOCUS GROUPS WITH LOCAL RESIDENTS

Sample

We spoke to 47 members of the public across 6 in-person focus groups (with 6-8 participants in each) on Tuesday 12th and Wednesday 13th December 2023, in addition to engaging them in a pre-task in the 6 days leading up to their focus group. The groups were split by case study area and attitudes towards LTNs:

1. More supportive of LTNs, Oxford
2. Less supportive of LTNs, Oxford
3. More supportive of LTNs, Enfield
4. Less supportive of LTNs, Enfield
5. More supportive of LTNs, Rochdale
6. Less supportive of LTNs, Rochdale

Within each focus group, we ensured a mix of demographics, with a range of ages and mix of genders, and representation of ethnic minority groups, religions and socioeconomic grades relative to the local area.

We also had criteria to cover a range of potential impacts of LTNs:

- Ensuring representation in each group of at least one person with a disability that impacts their mobility and at least one parent of a school-aged child.
- Ensuring a mix of primary modes of travel in each group.
- Ensuring some people in each location who live in an LTN area or one directly impacted by an LTN.

While each group was defined by their view on LTNs, we had different strengths of view within that. We included varying representation of different political views (e.g. Labour vs Lib Dem vs Conservative voters) as well as different levels of engagement with the LTN debate. Whilst we required that everyone had engaged in the debate in at least one way (from actively looking for information on the issue to attending a protest on it, we excluded anyone who had played a leading organising role as they would be more appropriate for our community stakeholder sample). Additionally, as we were interested in the information ecosystem around LTNs, we sought to achieve variation in terms of media consumption in each group (e.g. not all online).

Despite our efforts to ensure all our participants had an understanding of LTNs and were engaged enough to have a view on them, we struggled with this in Rochdale and found that our participants didn't have very strong views (and so there was overlap between the 'pro' and 'anti' groups), and a few were not even aware of the Rochdale LTN before the research. However, this was an interesting finding in itself about the lack of awareness on this issue in Rochdale, as will be explored in this report.

Research process

We asked participants to complete a daily questionnaire in the 6 days leading up to their focus group. We wanted to get to know participants and their starting points on the LTN debate - including prompting them to recall this if less active in their local area - and local information ecosystems, monitor anything they were engaging with in relation to the LTN debate on a daily basis, and prompt them with content relating to LTNs in their area to understand their reflections on different elements of the debate. For each piece of content we shared, we followed up with questions looking to understand familiarity with the content, reactions and reflections, levels of trust in the information, and whether they would comment on or share it if they came across it.

We showed participants the following content at stimulus for feedback:

- On Day 3, we shared a link to the page on their local council websites about the LTN(s).
- On Day 4, we shared a link to a local news article about the LTN(s), which presented both sides of the debate.
- On Day 5, we shared a link to a social media post or page relating to the local LTN debate, which was broadly anti-LTN. For example, the Facebook page of a local anti-LTN activist group.

On the final day, we asked participants to reflect on the LTN debate having engaged with the content we shared, and asked them to rank the following actors from playing a very helpful to not very helpful role in the LTN debate (with a don't know option): community groups and activists, local journalists and media, local politicians.

In the focus groups, held in person in Oxford, Enfield and Rochdale, we explored views on the local community, information ecosystem, and LTN debate further, before exploring the topic of disinformation, which had not featured in the pre-focus group questionnaires.

So as not to prime participants and narrow the conversation down too much, or to assume a shared definition of the term 'disinformation', we explored the topic using the language of 'inaccurate', 'false', or 'harmful' information. We found that this helped to keep the conversation open and to go in directions we did not necessarily expect, for example many participants felt the council was sharing such information.

After asking whether they had come across any information like this in the LTN debate, we shared examples of misinformation and disinformation about LTNs, not necessarily from their local areas, to understand familiarity with this kind of content, and the perceived impact of it, including on social divisions. We chose examples that reflected the range of debate online, including mis/disinformation from those who were both pro and Anti-LTNs.

We shared the following examples:

1	Misinformation about the Manchester Clean Air Zones has been widely shared on Facebook. The most popular post mentioning the scheme claimed that authorities had cut down trees by a motorway junction near Wigan in order to install Clean Air Zone signage. The post later received 43,000 interactions on Facebook when it was reposted by a meme page.
2	Sadiq Khan's cycling tsar has been accused of 'distorting' data to suggest the number of cyclists in a busy part of London has tripled.
3	Twitter account "Elander and the News" posts: "World Economic Forum - if you accept 15-minute cities, then 5 minute cities come next, citizens imprisoned and controlled. Sold to you as utopia, where all you need is within 5 minutes of your pod. A dystopian future you'd never vote for. So they won't ask you!" #GreatReset
4	"[Councillor's name] is the same as Hitler!!!! He deserves to die!"

Finally, we explored views on roles and responsibilities of different actors in improving the quality of information in the debate, including perceptions of their own role.

COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS

Sample

We spoke to 15 community stakeholders between November 2023 and January 2024 to help inform the findings of this research: 4 from Rochdale; 5 from Oxford; 2 from Enfield; 4 not specifically 'from' a case study area, but instead from national activist group many of which were based in London.

We defined stakeholders as people or groups that are playing or have played a leadership role in the LTN debate to some extent. They fell into one of the following groups:

- Leaders of activist groups (local or national, pro or Anti-LTN)
- Community leaders e.g. leading a community centre, place of worship or school
- Local politicians i.e. councillors

The breakdown of the sample by location, stakeholder and position on LTNs was as follows:

	MORE PRO-LTN	MORE ANTI-LTN	NEUTRAL OR BALANCED VIEW ON LTNS	ACTIVISTS	COMMUNITY LEADERS	LOCAL POLITICIANS	TOTAL
Enfield	1	1		1		1	2
Oxford	3	2		4		1	5
Rochdale	2	2			3	1	4
National		2	2			2	4
Total	6	7	2	5	3	5	15

Recruitment

We used desk research and snowball sampling to identify targets to invite to take part, and offered, where relevant, a choice of a £50 voucher or donation to a charity of their choice.

Research process

We conducted 30-60 minute online interviews with each stakeholder, and followed up with some for a further conversation if needed.

The purpose of these interviews was to understand their perspective on the debate around LTNs, and awareness and perceptions of disinformation (although not necessarily using this language) promoted in relation to LTNs and its perceived impact. From stakeholders living in our case study areas, we also looked to deepen our understanding of the local social and political context. For local politicians, we were especially interested in the process of making decisions on and implementing LTNs, and whether the debate had an impact on their approach.

The focus of the conversation was not on their views on LTNs as a policy, although we did allow space for them to summarise what they see as the key arguments for and against the policy, but instead on the debate around it, and crucially their involvement in and experience of it. Particularly with activists and community leaders, we avoided using the term 'disinformation', and instead referred to 'false' or 'harmful' information. As with the public, this allowed the conversation to go beyond our assumptions about what this term means. In contrast, we used the term 'disinformation' with local politicians, as we assumed there would be higher awareness of this term, but started by asking how they would define it to again avoid assumptions.

JOURNALIST INTERVIEWS

Sample

9 interviews were conducted, either over the phone or via email. We have not broken this number down by location to avoid identification of individuals where quotes are used.

Recruitment

Journalists at relevant local and regional news outlets were identified by desk research or through the use of a commercial database, Vuelio. In total 35 journalists were invited for interview, the vast majority local or regional journalists based in the areas of interest. Several other journalists who had experience of covering LTNs at a national level were invited to interview.

Research process

Interviewees were asked about the local information ecosystem, their role in it, and what could be done to improve it, as well as questions on the influence of disinformation and how the LTN debate had been conducted.

DIGITAL MEDIA ANALYSIS

Data sources

We collected our data using the Pulsar platform. Data was collected from a variety of sources including social media, X and Facebook, digital news media, including TV, radio and news articles, and online forums such as Reddit.

Due to differing restrictions on how much data you can access and over what time period, our dataset was drawn from slightly different time periods depending on the platform.[247] These time-periods are shown below.

247 Pulsar, 2024. https://www.pulsarplatform.com/about.

These were as follows:

	3-YEARS +	2-YEARS	1-YEAR	1-MONTH
X	01/01/2021 - 17/01/2024			
TV and Radio		20/01/2022 - 18/01/2024		
Online news			23/01/2023 - 22/01/2024	
Reddit			24/01/2023 - 17/01/2024	
Facebook				20/12/2023 - 17/01/2024

Data collection and cleaning

Within the sources highlighted above, we collected data using the following Boolean Query Structure to collect all posts within our time frame across the data sources we were able to access.

Our initial search terms were as broad as possible to ensure that we captured as close to the entirety of LTN discussion as we could, with the caveat that we had to filter to only collect posts that were both English-language and uploaded from a UK location, in order to reduce overall data volume to a manageable level. We then filtered this dataset to remove spam posts.

All posts contain at least one of the following terms: ("Low traffic neighbourhood" OR #Lowtrafficneighbourhood OR LTN OR LTNs). Plus the following conditions: AND (LANG en) AND (LOCATION GB). And filtered out: AND NOT (crypto OR tving OR "tving's" OR personskadeforbundet OR rotary OR transference OR song OR airdrop OR ennc OR accesswire OR elife OR sex OR "check out" OR cyber OR security OR electromechanical OR sport OR sports OR "slip ring" OR samsung OR airdrops OR mix OR airport OR airports). We also used specific keywords for Facebook: Low traffic neighbourhood, #Lowtrafficneighbourhood, ltn, ltns.

Data collected

Based on the platforms, time-periods and search terms, we collected over 570,000 posts.

PLATFORM	NUMBER OF POSTS
X (Twitter)	572,178 - 68,598 original posts and 503,580 retweets
Online news	2,193
TV	1,414
Radio	734
Forums	28
Facebook	3
Total	**576,808**

Narrative analysis and disinformation labelling method

In order to analyse specific narratives within the dataset, we sampled 10 of the posts that received the highest online engagement, on a month by month basis, for the entire dataset between 01/01/2021 and 17/01/2024. Using this ranking and selection from each month, we produced a sub-sample of 370 posts. These posts totalled 152,905 engagements over this period (111,757 reposts and 41,147 replies), as well as over 2.9 million views (2,919,370).

'Online engagement' on our digital media analytics tool, Pulsar, is calculated slightly differently for each data source, but broadly refers to the number of reactions to a post. For example a repost, a share, a reply or a

comment. The metric of engagement for X (Twitter), where the bulk of our data was collected, was the sum of reposts (retweets) and replies to a given post. Whereas the metric of engagement for 'Online News' was the number of times the article URL had been shared on Facebook. Due to this difference in measurements, as well as the fact that the bulk of our data came from X, we chose to only sample the 'most engaged' posts from X.

We chose to sample only the 10 posts which received the highest engagement per month, as we found that engagement fell exponentially, with the majority of posts receiving almost no engagement. For example, out of the 13,459 X posts in our dataset between 1st January and 1st February 2021, only one post received more than 100 engagements, 3 received over 50 engagements, and 11,705 posts received no engagements at all. Based on this pattern, we opted to only analyse the top 10 posts in order to focus on the narratives that received engagement online, and not over-represent and 'upweight' narratives that received minimal engagement.

In order to classify the posts into different pro-LTN and anti-LTN narratives as well as, within those narratives which reflected disinformation, we iteratively developed a qualitative coding framework. These classifications and our approach to refining this are discussed in full in Chapter 5.

Literature review

Disinformation and information ecosystem research is a rich and evolving field. We reviewed a number of signature studies to inform our own research design, particularly in our definitions of information ecosystems and mis/ disinformation. We have highlighted, where possible, where our findings build on these foundations.

Furthermore, during the period of our fieldwork, a number of new studies were published that had overlapping research objectives. These reports were reviewed following the analysis of our data and were considered for areas of discrepancy and alignment. We have identified where we diverge from existing studies and where we overlap in the reporting of our findings.

Stakeholder engagements

We identified a number of individual experts in specific policy areas to inform the strength and feasibility of our policy recommendations. Between March and April 2024, we consulted with the following experts and stakeholders (some of which have chosen to remain anonymous): The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), Local Government Association (LGA), UK Statistics Authority and Trust for London. We also tested recommendations via PINF's network of over 100 professionals (the vast majority of whom are journalists) working or volunteering in independent media via an online chat group and a sub-group of independent news publishers for more detailed analysis and refinement.

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DEMOS

PUBLISHED BY DEMOS MAY 2024
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