

CROYDON HEALTHY NEIGHBOURHOODS

Paper by

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Healthy neighbourhoods schemes work: indeed they are the only demonstrably practical and successful way of promoting active travel

The evidence from elsewhere in London, and indeed internationally, is that using modal filters to exclude through motor traffic from neighbourhoods is an extraordinarily powerful and cost-effective intervention. That evidence also shows that, far from increasing traffic on other roads, schemes tend, in fact, to reduce it across an area as a whole, with no increase in congestion on nearby main roads, indeed often reductions. They also result in increased active travel in all forms, walking and active mobility by disabled people, not just cycling. They have been transformative, in particular, for home-school travel, making the roads safer for children and parents to walk and cycle, and discouraging vehicle use. These benefits were seen in the Crystal Palace and South Norwood scheme, with hundreds of responses to the consultation reporting more active travel, and resident surveys suggesting a threefold increase in walking and cycling. Very recent analysis of collision data suggests that the Crystal Palace and South Norwood scheme, in its short existence, resulted in statistically significant reductions in injury collisions within the scheme area and on surrounding main roads.

By contrast, in nearly 18 months of local debate, opponents of schemes have not been able to offer any other practical and realistic means of achieving the same benefits. “Traffic calming” has been suggested, but it is not clear what this means in practice. Many streets in the current healthy neighbourhoods scheme areas have features including humps, cushions and speed displays, but these have not been successful in reducing vehicle numbers, enforcing safe driving or creating the feeling that active travel is safe and enjoyable. The other, likewise usually unspecific, category of proposals has been for public transport improvements. In fact, public transport across most of North Croydon is astonishingly good already, and TfL’s finances are extremely unlikely to allow for significant improvements. We would strongly support options like tram extensions, but they are not even on the drawing board, the costs would be huge, and they could not be completed for 10 years or more. In any event, the reductions in private car use needed to get to net zero require both more active travel as well as more use of public transport.

Decisions following consultation should not be a numbers game

It would be completely wrong to read the numbers of people apparently supporting or opposing schemes in an online consultation as a reliable indication of local public opinion, for a number of reasons:

- We have not seen the figures for the summer 2021 consultations, but if experience of the 2020 Crystal Palace/South Norwood consultation and participation in similar consultations generally is anything to go by, responses are likely to be seriously unrepresentative of the community as a whole – older, more affluent, more likely to own and use a motor vehicle, less likely BAME. Consultations of this kind tend to exclude sections of the community, including the oldest people and children, whose voices really should be heard on issues of this kind.
- Aside from sending out consultation letters and material posted on its website, the council has done nothing to explain and promote its proposals. Its materials have failed to address clearly likely concerns and misconceptions.
- Open Our Roads, in its leaflets and on the doorstep, has lied about the proposals, in particular claiming that cabs, delivery and visiting vehicles could not enter healthy neighbourhoods, that residents would have to pay for permits, and the council’s real

intention is to generate revenue from fines. The council did nothing to rebut these lies, and, despite our efforts to counter them, they must have affected some residents' response.

- We know from elsewhere, for example Hackney, Newcastle and Cambridge, that opponents of active travel schemes game and manipulate online surveys. Councils have discovered multiple responses, running into the thousands, from the same IP addresses, overwhelmingly expressing opposition to schemes. Responses are submitted from far and wide.
- Professionally conducted polling, in London and nationally, has been consistent in suggesting that the majority of people support healthy streets and active travel schemes.

The Government has made clear in its guidance to councils that simple majorities of respondents in consultation surveys opposing schemes are not by themselves good reason for ending them. The council itself recognised this in its decision to proceed with a revised scheme in Crystal Palace and South Norwood. Other councils, including Southwark and Hackney, have taken the results of local consultations as only one element in their decision-making, alongside the quality of the arguments of supporters and opponents, and objective evidence of the impacts of schemes.

There is no credible Plan B

If the council scraps the current schemes, what next? As we have argued above, there is no obvious effective and workable means of achieving the same combination of environmental and public health benefits. We strongly suspect that opponents of the current schemes, whatever they may say from time to time, would not in fact engage in any serious debate about different ways of achieving the council's objectives. In fact they are likely, in concert with the current opposition, with which they are closely aligned, to push back further on such issues as school streets and 20 mph limits.

However, even if other options were found after some further process of community engagement, the council would have no means to deliver them. It goes without saying that the council's current financial position means it is dependent on external funding for any projects in this territory. The Government and TfL have made clear that they will not provide funding for councils which have removed active travel schemes and may even demand repayment of funding already provided. Ealing Council, for example, which removed schemes on the basis of crude numbers supporting and opposing them in an online survey, has been excluded from any future funding. So the council's ability to make any practical progress is likely to be non-existent.

Funding aside, scrapping schemes on the basis of a very unreliable reading of local public opinion, ignoring the substantive benefits, would fatally undermine the other necessary basis for making progress, the confidence and support of local stakeholders, London and national government – which is at a premium because of the council's wider reputational standing. All would read a decision of this kind as suggesting the council is not serious or lacking in the capability to make progress, with repercussions for its credibility well beyond this specific issue.

A further phase of public engagement is the right approach

The correct lesson to draw from the process over the summer, and indeed the autumn 2020 process in Crystal Palace and South Norwood, is that the council needs to raise its game significantly in the way it explains and promotes its position, works with community stakeholders, and engages all parts of the community. A citizen's assembly or similar approaches could be a productive element in that next stage.

Unfortunately the approach so far has been characterised by poor communication, initially and in response to misinformation and misperceptions, and a lack of practical engagement with local organisations and campaigns, and outreach to sections of the community whose voice tends not to be heard through formal consultation processes, especially children, less affluent older people, BAME communities and marginalised groups. We ourselves put forward ideas about improvements to the council's consultation proposals to which we have received no response, and meetings we have suggested about a range of issues, including data, have not taken place. It is deeply disappointing that the council has not in recent months even been willing to meet with local campaigners who have endured vandalism, abuse, hacking of email and even death threats while trying to explain and promote schemes which the council itself has done so little to present positively.

Despite our unhappiness about the way the process has been handled so far, we would be prepared to work alongside the council, using channels we have, for example to community groups working on mental health and active travel in BAME communities, to improve the extent and quality of engagement around schemes. Taking the council's evidence and data and ours together, we suggest there is scope to significantly improve the presentation of the facts on the impact of schemes.