

Full council meeting. July 12, 2023 Jesmond East Low Traffic Neighbourhood

Antony Baird – presenting the petition

Objection to the East Jesmond Low Traffic Neighbourhood scheme

Thank you Madam Mayor for allowing me to present my petition, the “Objection to the East Jesmond Low Traffic Neighbourhood scheme” - that’s the Jesmond road closures.

The petition now has over 4000 signatures, so I assume that you’ve read it.

That’s thousands of local people who are angry with the disruption the road closures are causing to their lives, their livelihoods and businesses.

You may have been told the road closures have enhanced Jesmond, cut pollution and allowed kids play football in the streets while birds tweet in the trees.

They have not.

The Jesmond road closures have forced traffic onto surrounding main roads - which are now frequently gridlocked at busy times.

This has damaged the viability of local businesses, many of which rely on passing trade.

So the Jesmond road closures have put people’s jobs and livelihoods at risk.

The proprietor of Fern Avenue Antiques in Jesmond summed it up:

“We’ve lost all passing trade and the extra time it’s taking people to get to us is forcing them to shorten or even abandon their visit. People need to be able to access our business with cars. You simply can’t take an antique wardrobe home on a bike.”

Then there’s the human cost to ordinary working people. Here’s a comment from a mother who uses the Coast Road to get to work at the Nuffield hospital in Jesmond.

“Since the closures the traffic has become so excessive It’s added almost an extra hour into my travel time. I’ve had to now start paying for my child to attend breakfast club so I can leave home earlier to ensure that I get to work on time. Not only have these closures affected my family financially, it’s taking its toll emotionally”

Of course gridlock on Jesmond Road, Osborne Road and Mathew Bank means more pollution, more emissions and more CO2.

But these are also residential streets. Is it fair that residents on these roads have to breathe in more fumes so residents of presumably more important streets with bigger houses can breathe fresh air ?

Are we expected to accept the deterioration of some people's health as just unavoidable collateral damage for the alleged common good, along with all those job losses ?

No-one can realistically argue that the scheme has been good for the environment. Actually not even the council can, because they haven't gathered any adequate data for the most badly affected roads, so any meaningful before/after comparison is impossible.

Maybe that's why, in its interim report on the Jesmond Road Closures, The Council published journey times from Sandyford, NOT JESMOND, to the Coast road.

Can you smell a rat there? Well what we're smelling is called Gaslighting !

The road closures discriminate against vulnerable people who can't walk or cycle and rely on cars and taxis to get about.

And since two doctors have resigned from the Osborne Road clinic, citing problems with the traffic jams - access to primary health care in Jesmond for these people has deteriorated.

"From a policing perspective, our overall consideration is that the implementation of this TRO (the road closures) is likely to adversely impact our ability to provide effective policing in the area." This is a statement from Northumbria police

Here's one from the Fire service "best case scenario is to not have roads closed"

Ambulance "we recognise such schemes may affect our response times."

In an emergency minutes, even seconds, make a difference between life and death.

It's just a matter of time before someone dies waiting for an ambulance which is stuck in gridlock, or stuck on the wrong side of the bollards without the right key to get through.

I'd like you to consider how that will sit with your conscience.....

if you vote to continue with this experiment.

Supporters of the scheme claim it's made the streets in Jesmond safer for cycling and walking. But the Council has no evidence that the streets were dangerous before they

were blocked off. And now they're much more desirable if you're a thief on an e-bike and much more intimidating if you're a woman walking home alone late at night. Any benefits to the scheme are marginal at best. Are they worth it when set against the loss of jobs, increased risk of crime, deterioration in emergency services, increased pollution and the damage to physical and mental health.

We don't think they are. Do you ?

And one final thought I'd like to leave you with

The Transport Secretary, Mark Harper, has urged councils to scrap low traffic schemes where they are unpopular, divisive or where there has been a lack of prior consultation.

So why is this Labour council continuing to press ahead with a Conservative government's road closure policy when even the Tories have abandoned it?

Councillor Jane Byrne (Lab) – responding to the petition.

Thank you for bringing this petition to council. We welcome all feedback on the Jesmond East roads neighbourhood low traffic zone.

This is a trial scheme introduced under an Experimental Traffic Order in order to respond to concerns received in relation to traffic levels and speeds on residential streets.

The trial is designed to reduce the amount of traffic travelling through the area. Every property in the area can still be accessed by motor vehicle but depending on the journey they may have to use alternative routes using main roads.

With less traffic cutting through, neighbourhood streets can become safer and more attractive places for the people who live there, it gives children more space to play and encourages more people to walk and cycle on local journeys.

Under an Experimental Traffic Order the formal consultation takes place during the first six months of the trial. The thinking behind this is that it allows people to comment on their actual experience rather than what they anticipate will happen. We are also able to tweak schemes in response to feedback in the hope of coming up with the best possible version.

During the consultation people can feed back online using Commonplace, via email, in writing or by post.

We are collecting our own pollution and traffic data and we have access to other monitoring data such as that collected by the Traffic Accident Safety Unit who collect data on behalf of the wider Tyne and Wear region.

If we decide the trial scheme in Jesmond could be a permanent solution we are committed to collecting a full year of data before making that decision.

We have had negative feedback about the trial and we have also had positive feedback. We are using that feedback together with our own data to identify ways in which the trial could be improved and to determine whether it is achieving its objectives, whether there are any negative impacts, and if so whether we can remove or mitigate them.

And if we found that there were negative impacts that we couldn't address and that would outweigh the benefits of the scheme we would have to find other ways to address the issues the trial is designed to resolve.

In evaluating the evidence we will be considering all feedback but we will be prioritizing the impact on people who actually live in the zone and within that group those residents who live in streets previously open to through traffic.

For those not familiar with the area there have been multiple previous road closures which put additional pressure on those roads that remained open.

We will be weighting the impact on modes of transport in line with the road hierarchy, walking or wheeling, by which I mean using a wheelchair, cycling, motor vehicle.

In all cases we will need evidence of impact. So for example, a business that wants to report a loss of custom would have to provide figures to back that up. A resident who has concerns about journey times or feedback that somehow that they think journey times are not as impacted as has been claimed would have to give details of location and the time of journeys made.

With that in mind we will be inviting everybody who has commented so far to provide us with further information.

We are also working with the emergency services.

The emergency services were consulted during the development of the scheme and we will continue to consult with them throughout the trial. It is important to note that if at any point an emergency service told us that they did not want us to continue the trial we would stop it.

There are statements from the emergency services that you can read on Commonplace.

The police have raised some operational issues and I would like to take a moment to thank Pat Roycroft the resident who alerted me to this which we are discussing with them.

Sorry, I have got much more I could say about the trial but I am aware of the timing. So I can come back and give further details at the end.

What I will be moving that we accept the petition, that we invite everybody who has signed if they haven't already been in touch with us to register on Commonplace so we can discuss this with them further.

Councillor Nick Kemp (Lab) Leader of the Council

Thank you Lord Mayor. I'd like to second the motion proposed by Cllr Byrne.

I think the key point to reiterate that this is a pilot and a pilot is a trial. And the purpose of every trial that we run is transparent, to listen and to learn from the views and observations of people in Newcastle.

What I would suggest is we've heard many, many views expressed in the petition and on commonplace. They are views. What we're very interested in is the evidential case behind that, as Councillor Byrne has said. Not simply to say anecdotally something has happened but the evidence base and that will be weighted and measured in the consultation.

We've been clear in publishing the aims of this trial in Jesmond from the start to pilot reduced traffic in residential streets and encourage vehicles to use identified main routes around the area and encourage people towards active modes of transport where possible.

As with all pilots this trial is time and scope limited to allow us more fully understand all of the impacts and the actions taken, including any indirect and unintended impacts from their day to day lives of residents living in Jesmond as Councillor Byrne has said.

To gather this information effectively we clearly set out our engagement consultation processes and continuously publicised ways for residents, business, community groups and local services to give us their views.

There are things that a trial that we could have done differently. For example there was a time lag between asking for ideas and publishing the proposals. People may have forgotten or assumed we weren't going ahead and we've acknowledged that.

And of course legitimate challenge is welcome. But at the same time it's become clear that some opponents of the trial are seeking to discredit the scheme, and the cabinet member in order to achieve their goals. That's not reasonable debate. But we're all for reasonable debate.

And I do find it somewhat disappointing that the speaker would make a reference of gaslighting. I think we are above that so I'd hope that that would get acknowledged.

I would also note then, that the LibDems had an North Jesmond Councillor throughout the development of the scheme and that they were consulted by officers and a cabinet member at the time and I'm not aware of any comments being made at that point.

It's not our job to listen to the loudest voices. It's our job to make sure that all our voices are heard and considered. And I feel that's really really important.

Equally the validity of the submissions made is incredibly important. When we say local consultation it must mean local consultation.

And therefore as Councillor Byrne has said having the provision of peoples addresses to show where they live and how they are affected by the scheme is really important.

We've seen petitions in this chamber with representations from as far as Newcastle New South Wales. So, and Tommy you can shake your head all you like, but its called legitimate process.

So last month we published an interim report which presented out findings so far. We're continuing to monitor the impacts of the trial in Jesmond including an equalities impact assessment which will inform our final independent report.

We are listening to all the feedback receive, every voice is being heard as part of this democratic consultation process and we would receive this petition as part of that process.

Thank you Lord Mayor.

Philip Browne (LibDem) speaking for the petition

Mrs B has lived in her home on Cavendish Place, Jesmond, since 1964 - nearly 60 years. One of the joys in her life is to meet up with her friends at the Baptist Church in Heaton. She's not so good on her feet these days and often has to rely on a taxi to get her to Heaton. This is now a much longer and more expensive journey, if you can even get a taxi because of the bollards in Jesmond. When I spoke to her on Saturday about the bollards, she said to me whimsically, "It feels like the final straw. I'm going to have to move out of Jesmond."

Dr N lives with his family on Grosvenor Place. He's a Consultant at the Freeman Hospital. He's regularly "on call", and when his phone goes, he urgently has to get across to the hospital. That trip used to be straightforward, down the Cradlewell and up to the Freeman - it's part of why they chose to live where they do. But now, when he gets the call, he has to decide whether to go by Jesmond Road or Matthew Bank, both options longer and slower than before, all the time thinking of his patient who needs him - someone's mum or dad, son or daughter. Who needs that additional stress?

Jesmond Swimming Pool on St George's Terrace, is a much loved feature of our community, providing a valuable and popular service. But COVID and rocketing energy prices have really hit it hard. On top of this, as a direct result of the bollards, they have lost at least 40 bookings a week, mainly children not able to get there on time because of the bollards. That's over £1,000 income per month which they can ill-afford to lose.

These are just three examples of the impact of the LTN trial in Jesmond. There are literally thousands of others – residents, businesses, and people who work in Jesmond, as we have already heard.

However unintentional, this trial has physically divided a community.

But it has also emboldened and unified a community.

Colin Ferguson (Lib Dem) - speaking for the petition

How has it come to this?

First, a charged election campaign, then a fraught Audit Committee meeting, and now 4,000 signatures on a petition. Why has the subject of this Low Traffic Neighbourhood become so contentious? Where are the solutions? 86 days since we were told Automatic Number Plate Recognition was going to save the day. Bit quiet on that now?

At heart, I think we all want the same thing: clean air, quiet streets, environmental sustainability.

I want my son to be able to grow up playing out. I want us to achieve Net Zero. Fewer cars on the streets will have to be part of equation. I'm sure almost all of us in the chamber and in the gallery agree on that. But what hope do we have of achieving those goals if this is the response when questions are raised?

Already we see new challenges to old schemes. The prospect of public trust in any new scheme being delivered is likely to be perilously low. The likelihood of making progress recedes yet further away.

It is possible to have progress: new schemes have been successfully implemented, where residents have been engaged in advance, options have been presented, and a majority preference established.

Unfortunately, the Administration has fallen into the trap of believing that because some objections will be made against every proposed new scheme, then no objections should matter for any proposed new scheme.

Over what should have been a quiet matter, we have posed now questions of political governance, of candour and transparency, of basic credibility, not sitting at the door of any one individual, to be clear, but at the decision making apparatus led by this Labour Administration and the collective responsibility they share. We have an internal review that goes unmentioned.

And all for what, but for want of our leaders saying, “We hear you, we’re listening, we’ll act.”

Continuing to dig your heels in won’t help support any future highways schemes without significant controversy. Change course, engage, bring people back on side.

Second speech by Jane Byrne – in reply to the debate. After LibDem councillors.

A couple of points for clarification on Councillor Brown’s comments. As you, know because I told you when we met, I invited anybody who was on call to get me a letter from their Trust and I would arrange emergency access. I have not heard anything from any Trust requesting access for an on-call doctor. If somebody wants to send that then I would be happy to arrange that and you are well aware of that because I told you when we met.

In terms of Jesmond Pool, I would simply invite the whole pool to make direct contact as I have already said. We need direct evidence from businesses. We can’t rely on hearsay.

I think what I would say is, Councillor Brown and Ferguson speak from the luxury of opposition. I have the pressure of power and I’m happy to do that. I don’t accept the criticism of governance or decision making or criticisms made because I am the decision maker. Right?

And every time that people try to discredit the decision making they are trying to put pressure on me. But you know what, that’s Ok. Because I’m very happy to defend all of the decision making and everything that has happened throughout this scheme. Where we could have done things better, we have been happy to acknowledge that.

We did not suggest that ANPR would save the day. It was the Jesmond Labour Councillors that offered to work with the community on the proposal and that is something they are still working on. This is a live consultation, and we are dealing with the issues as they arise.

You mentioned the internal review Thank you for giving me the opportunity to say that the internal review was going in response to requests from myself and from Councillor Kemp when we were contacted about the residents about the Northumbria police issue which we hadn’t been informed of. It is not a result of the comments made at audit committee and I will simply make public here that I have made a formal complaint about what has happened at audit committee because I think

audit must be carried out in an independent and objective way. Political comment and comments about my integrity are not appropriate for audit committee and it is the subject of a formal complaint.

Do you know what? All of that is to one side. What is important is that when you are creating change there will be difficulties.

We are asking people to change behaviour. We are putting pressure on people in their everyday life. I absolutely accept and understand that people are angry and upset about this which is why I have accepted and tolerated the abuse that has come my way. It is part of the job.

What we have to do when we have these kind of situations where there are competing interests and different points of view is to keep going and listening to every point of view. To evaluate evidence not anecdote and to take the time and patience to come to a fair conclusion.

That I why we have a six month consultation period. That is why we are continuing to work. And that is why I move that we accept the petition as part of that six month consultation process.