

# Transport Planning Society

## *Transport Planning Society's response to the government's consultation on 'Reform of Planning Committees'*

### *Recommendation to Address Implicit Bias in Planning Decisions through Councillor Training*

## About the Transport Planning Society

[The Transport Planning Society \(TPS\)](#) is the only professional body focusing entirely on transport planning in the UK. The aim of the Society is to raise the profile of transport planning and chart a course for the profession.

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## Introduction

We welcome the government's technical consultation on the reform of planning committees and support the aim of improving consistency, transparency, and effectiveness in local planning decision-making. However, we believe that one critical issue has not been adequately addressed in the consultation or the underlying evidence base: the influence of implicit bias, particularly in the context of transport planning.

Recent work by the Transport Planning Society (TPS) has highlighted the impact of what it terms "motornormality": the deep societal normalisation of car travel that shapes planning decisions at all levels. Our paper, *Motornormality: Challenging Implicit Bias in Transport Planning Decisions* (Feb 2025), provides compelling evidence that Councillors serving on planning committees often make decisions that favour car dependency due to subconscious biases, even when sustainable transport alternatives are available and aligned with policy objectives.

These biases include:

**Status quo bias** – favouring existing car-dominated patterns even in the face of progressive policy shifts.

**Perceived practicality bias** – dismissing sustainable modes like buses or cycling infrastructure as unrealistic.

**Car dependency bias** – assuming most residents or employees in an area rely on cars because of personal experience.

**Equity blindness** – overlooking the needs of those who cannot or do not drive, including low-income groups, older adults, and young people.

Examples such as the initial resistance to the Waltham Forest Mini-Holland scheme and diluted proposals like the Cambridge South-East Transport Corridor illustrate how these biases can materially alter the outcome of planning decisions, often to the detriment of long-term sustainability and accessibility.

## Missed Opportunity in the Evidence Base

The recent Planning Advisory Service (PAS) national survey (2025) on modernising planning committees provided helpful insight into committee function and structure, but it did not explore whether decision-making is affected by car-centric bias or how this might be mitigated through training and support. This represents a notable gap, given the government's wider objectives for transport decarbonisation, healthy place-making, and modal shift.

Crucially, the fact that “motornormality” is not considered an issue of concern only underscores how deeply embedded this bias is within planning culture. It has become so normalised and unquestioned that it is rendered invisible in research focused on improving planning governance. This silence itself is indicative of the problem.

Furthermore, if left unaddressed, local planning committees risk becoming a major barrier to the successful delivery of vision-led transport planning. Their role in supporting sustainable transport measures and challenging car-dependent development must be more clearly articulated and better understood. Without clear expectations and the right tools to evaluate transport proposals against long-term strategic goals, committees may unintentionally undermine national policy ambitions by defaulting to decisions that reinforce private car use.

This challenge is even more pronounced in two-tier authorities, where the Highway Authority provides technical advice to the Planning Authority. In many cases, this advice is treated as fact rather than questioned or tested against wider policy objectives. As a result, proposals that support car dependency may be accepted without scrutiny, while more progressive, sustainable solutions are downplayed or rejected due to Implicit Bias. Greater clarity is needed on how planning committees can evaluate and, where appropriate, challenge highways advice to ensure alignment with national and local transport and sustainability policies.

## Recommendation: Integrate Bias-Awareness and Vision-Led Transport Training

We recommend that reforms to planning committee procedures include the following:

1. **Mandatory training for planning committee councillors on recognising and addressing implicit bias**, drawing on behavioural insights and lived case studies (e.g., Waltham Forest, parking standards reform, etc.).
2. **Specific focus on transport planning decisions**, including how to interpret and weigh evidence-based proposals against public perceptions and anecdotal objections.
3. **Incorporation of "vision-led" planning principles** as referenced in the revised NPPF, supported by clear guidance on implementation and validation. Councillors should be equipped to understand how a proactive approach to shaping sustainable transport systems differs from the traditional "predict and provide" model.
4. **Promotion of inclusive decision-making**, encouraging councillors to consider the mobility needs of non-drivers and how planning decisions affect access to opportunity, health outcomes, and social inclusion.
5. **Sharing best practice through national learning networks and peer review mechanisms**, allowing councillors to learn from successful schemes elsewhere.

The Transport Planning Society has already set out a detailed approach to supporting councils and councillors through workshops, policy toolkits, e-learning modules, and community engagement strategies. We encourage the Department to work with professional bodies like TPS to embed this approach into national guidance and capacity-building programmes.

## Conclusion

Bias-aware decision-making is essential if we are to deliver planning outcomes that align with modern transport, environmental and social policy goals. We urge the Department to take this opportunity to future-proof planning committee reforms by addressing the influence of implicit bias and providing councillors with the tools and training necessary to make balanced, inclusive, and forward-looking decisions.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these recommendations further.

## About the Transport Planning Society Policy Panel

The TPS Policy Panel was formed in November 2024 to:

- Ensure TPS is influential and proactive in seeking improvements in policy and practice, and in setting the transport agenda at a national, regional and local level.
- Be proactive in the creation of an open, diverse and inclusive transport planning community.

- Provide the widest possible forum to engage on relevant and topical transport planning issues.
- Improve the public understanding and the image of transport planning and transport planners, and promoting transport planning as a profession.

The panel has five sub-groups, and this piece has been crafted by the Development and Landuse Planning Policy Group. On an individual level, it has been produced by Dr Colin Black (Mayer Brown Ltd), Nicola Waight (Hampshire County Council, Joely Hill (Transport for London).

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