



Promoting sustainable transport through planning

Planning for the Climate Crisis: A guide for local authorities

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Introduction

Well planned development that promotes active travel and sustainable transport should be a priority outcome of planning. As well as playing a key role in reducing the carbon emissions associated with new development, active and sustainable travel provides benefits for health, air quality and the local economy. The Climate Change Committee advises that in order to meet national net-zero targets, local development plans and transport plans should aim to deliver a 33%-35% modal shift away from cars towards walking, cycling and public transport for shorter trips. Urban areas can set even more ambitious targets.¹

Carbon emissions from transport have proven difficult to reduce in recent decades, although there are signs that this is beginning change, due largely to the increased market share of electric vehicles.² To support ambitious emissions reduction targets, new development must deliver well designed places that are compact, complete and well connected, and offer pleasant environments for people to walk, cycle and take public transport. Planning must also consider the implications of technological transformation of transport systems, such as the rapid roll out of electric vehicles.

Policy context



Chapter 9 of the NPPF covers planning policy for sustainable transport in England, and paragraph 109 identifies key opportunities to promote sustainable and active modes of travel and address the transport impacts of development. These include engaging early with local communities on transport considerations, understanding the impact of new development on transport, and pursuing opportunities to promote active and sustainable travel and make best use of existing and proposed infrastructure.³

The NPPF update from December 2024 promotes a ‘vision led’ approach to transport.⁴ This is an important policy lever because it encourages local planning authorities to use planning as a tool to achieve a positive vision for transport based on creating sustainable places – a shift away from the traditional ‘predict and provide’ approach to transport provision. Increasing the mode share of walking and cycling and public transport also aligns with the Department for Transport’s (DfT) Decarbonisation Plan, which recognises the important role of the planning system in promoting a shift towards sustainable travel.⁵ As part of this strategy, the DfT and National Highways have updated guidance on transport evidence for planning, and have launched a Connectivity Tool⁶ to help understand the sustainability of different locations in relation to transport connectivity.

Box 1: Vision led transport planning

The vision led approach to transport planning represents a significant shift from the mainstream transport planning approaches of recent decades. This is because, rather than focusing on providing for a perceived increase in car use from new development which generally lends towards increasing road capacity, planning should work towards a ‘collective ambition for how a place could look and feel.’⁷ This involves a broader understanding of creating a vibrant, healthy and sustainable place that works for people using active and sustainable travel modes.

The NPPF defines the ‘vision led approach’ as: ‘an approach to transport planning based on setting outcomes for a development based on achieving well-designed, sustainable and popular places, and providing the transport solutions to deliver those outcomes as opposed to predicting future demand to provide capacity (often referred to as ‘predict and provide’).’

Leading transport academics at the University of the West of England have developed the following definition which further outlines differences in the approach:

‘The vision led approach considers how transport and travel choices directly or indirectly influence these factors and sets out the interventions needed to achieve the right outcomes. Rather than a linear ‘inputs’ and ‘outputs’ modelling approach, the vision led approach is iterative and holistic, embracing flexibility, learning from past mistakes and adapting to uncertainty. It is important to note that it does not advocate for spending less on transport infrastructure. Instead, investment is redirected to accommodating alternatives and unlocking latent demand for those modes of travel.’⁸

This is illustrated in Figure 1, created by Integrated Transport Planning (ITP), which visualises the ‘virtuous circle’ of vision led planning.

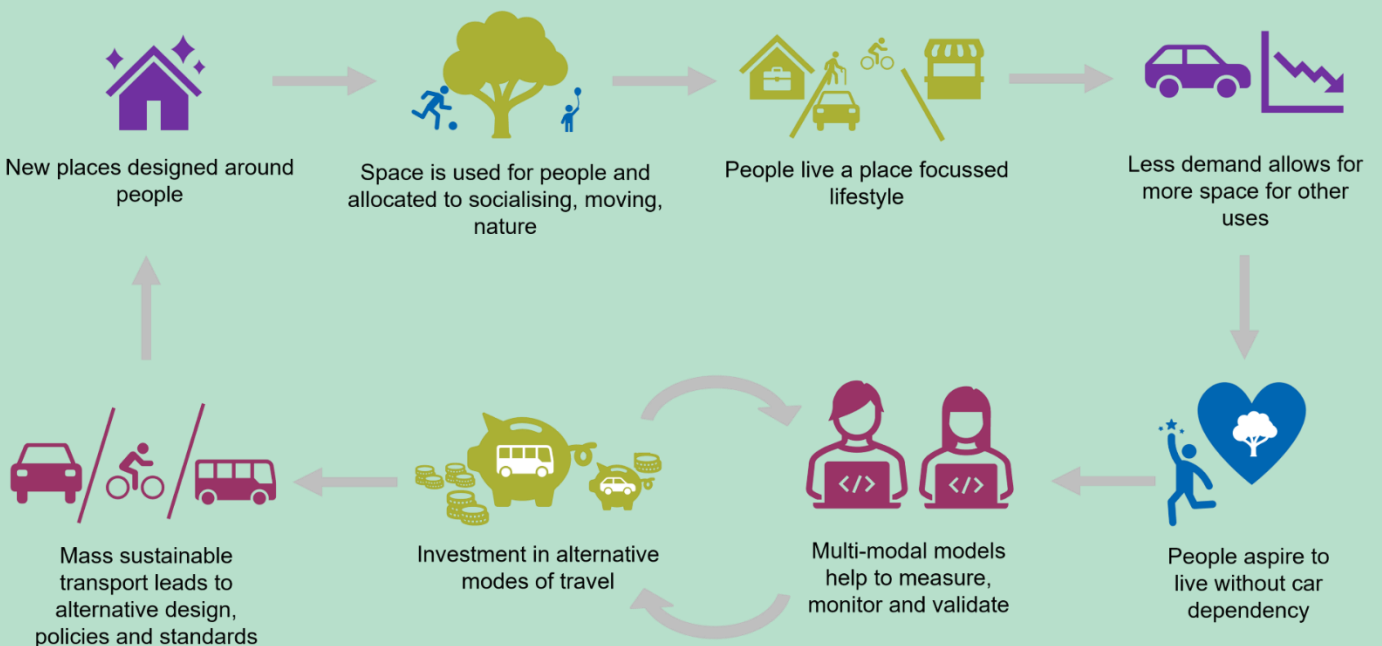


Figure 1: The virtuous circle of vision led planning. ©ITP (sourced from the TfQL / UWE report)

Key principles

Sustainable transport needs to be a fundamental driver for development plans, informing both the location and form of new development. The following principles should underpin how this is achieved:

- Align the development plan with the broader vision for sustainable transport and places, ensuring the plan looks to secure improvements to sustainable and active travel networks at the strategic and site scale.
- A development's location will be a key influence on future occupants' travel behaviour - allocations should be in locations which are or can be made sustainable, through limiting the need to travel and offering a genuine choice of transport modes.
- Planners should seek to 'tip the balance' by making active and public travel routes within a development quick, convenient and well designed. To achieve this, design tools such as masterplans and design codes should be used to achieve high standards and set clear expectations.
- Look ahead to accommodate future innovations in transport, such as infrastructure to support the electrification of transport, micro-mobility and transport sharing and hire schemes.



Figure 2: Active travel routes near new homes at Greenwich, London. Source: TCPA

Evidence for sustainable transport



Understanding the transport impacts of proposed development is an essential starting point to ensuring the development plan has a spatial strategy and policies that reduce the carbon emissions arising from new development. This will be through a transport assessment, which should take account of aspirations to prioritise active travel modes and public transport provision, rather than focus on increasing road capacity. This is in line with the hierarchy of decarbonisation recommended in the RTPI's Net Zero Transport: The Role of Spatial Planning and Place-Based Solutions.⁹

The Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) on transport evidence base¹⁰ outlines the process and scope of transport assessment for plan making. Some local authorities are taking proactive approaches to assessing the carbon impact of different growth options as part of their development plan evidence base. Bioregional's Net-Zero Spatial Planning Tool, for example, has been used by Greater Cambridge to model the carbon impact of growth opportunities and policy options.¹¹

Planning authorities should also consider how transport and planning policies can help deliver wider corporate objectives, such as addressing health inequalities. Drawing on health evidence or undertaking a Health Impact Assessment will help identify transport interventions to support physical activity and reduce congestion and air pollution.¹²

Good practice for plan making



The most significant influence of development on travel behaviour is its location, and therefore the spatial strategy must be founded on a cohesive vision for sustainable transport. To achieve this, transport needs to be considered in an integrated manner at the beginning of the plan-making process, so that development patterns are shaped by existing and planned sustainable transport infrastructure.

The plan should identify and establish a strategic and local transport network to serve the needs of the area and set expectations for delivery through the plan period.

Policies in development plans should reduce car dependency and promote active and sustainable travel. This can be done through policies which:

- Support the delivery of, and integrate development opportunities with, strategic transport provision such as improvements to rail, bus and tram networks.
- Set requirements for new development to provide good conditions for walking and cycling, such as lowering speed limits, providing convenient cycle storage and encouraging the creation of new walking and cycling routes.
- Secure the phasing of development so that sustainable travel infrastructure is provided prior to occupation, giving the best chance for sustainable travel use to become the norm for new residents.
- Secures better public transport services, including new demand-responsive and community transport, as well as integration between existing services.
- Encourages development that focuses on improving local high streets and town centres and prevents urban sprawl and low-density development far from local amenities, which locks in car dependence.
- Set targets to ensure that all developments are air quality neutral and do not lead to further deterioration of existing poor air quality.
- Improve connectivity both inside and outside development boundaries.
- Set requirements for new development that disincentivise private car use, such as setting maximum car parking standards, low emissions zones and traffic calming.

The approach taken to **placemaking and design** will also have a significant influence on the success of sustainable travel interventions. The principles of the 20-minute neighbourhood will help to achieve **complete, compact and connected** places where shops and services, including pre-school and primary education facilities, are located within walking distance of people's homes. Principles set out in the National Design Guide¹³ should also be used to create inclusive and resilient travel routes which consider how accessibility and safety can be improved for different users, particularly vulnerable groups (including children and young people, women, older people and disabled people).

Design principles to support sustainable travel should be considered alongside climate resilience. See the separate topic resource on [Designing for Climate Resilience](#).



Figure 3: New cycle route in Glasgow City Centre. Source: TCPA

Decision making

In determining planning applications, local planning authorities are advised to expect planning applicants to:



- Engage with applications early to identify opportunities to promote sustainable transport through the development proposal.
- For large schemes, require a masterplan that secures a well-connected, compact and high quality travel network.
- For schemes of 150 homes or more, ensure Active Travel England (ATE) are consulted on proposals. For smaller schemes, ensure they comply with ATE's standing advice.¹⁴
- Utilise existing frameworks and checklists to identify opportunities for a proposal to promote sustainable travel modes (see further resources section for examples).
- Provide a proportionate transport assessment and travel plan to identify opportunities to promote sustainable travel.
- Consider how other facilities that support active travel are provided in the scheme, for example cycle parking, showers, wayfinding, benches etc.
- Look for opportunities to improve the resilience of travel networks to the changing climate, for example through tree planting to provide shade for walking, cycling and public transport routes.
- Manage the provision of car parking (including consideration of charging for use), so that it supports decarbonisation of transport and includes provision of EV charging in line with national policy requirements.

Box 2: Case study - Leeds City Council

Leeds City Council's Local Plan Update includes a policy to promote the delivery of complete, compact and connected places to create well-served, safe, accessible, walkable neighbourhoods.

The policy provides guidelines in relation to distance from amenities, whilst recognising the differences between town centre, suburban and rural contexts. The aim is to integrate key services and features into communities to allow people to live locally, and direct development to locations that offer the best opportunity for active travel, use of public transport and minimise use of private motor vehicles, which will help to minimise carbon emissions.

To evidence the policy, Leeds City Council commissioned a heat map showing the walkability of neighbourhood areas. This analysis gives an accessibility score to authority areas, which can be used to inform the appropriateness of development within that area.

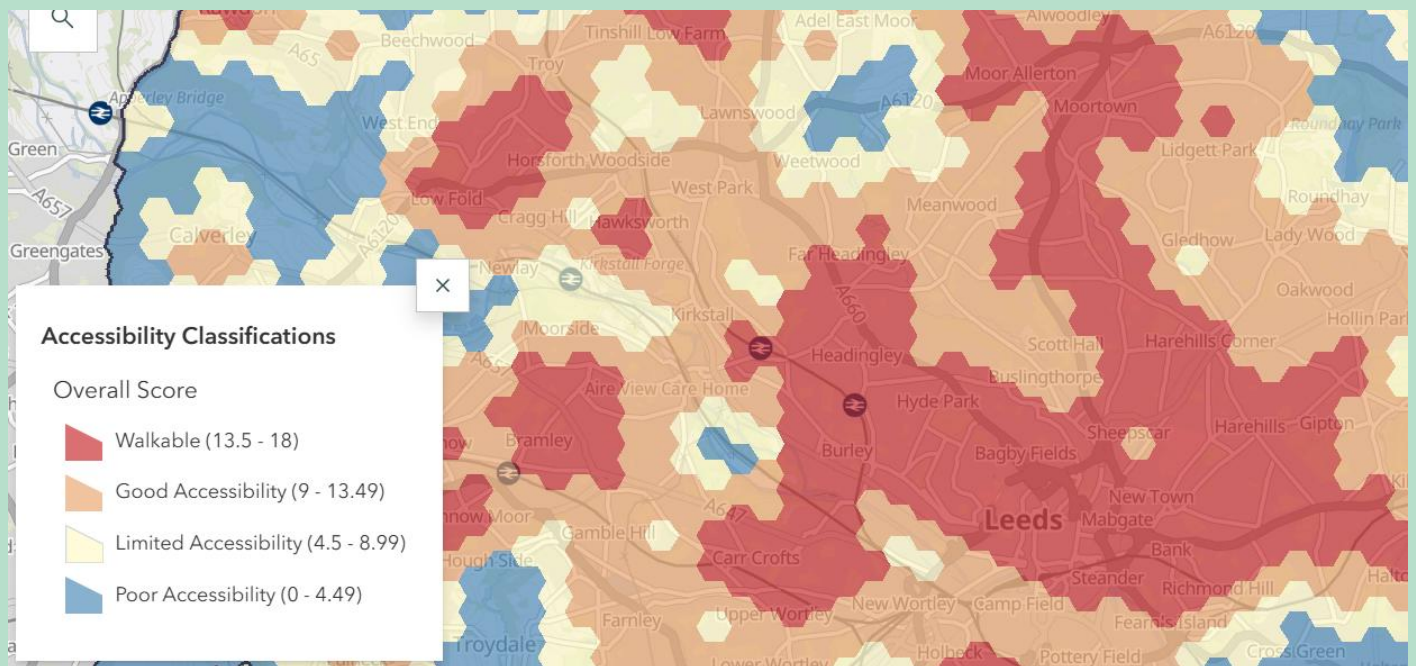


Figure 4: Extract from Leeds City Council 20 minute neighbourhood accessibility mapping.

Source: Arcgis / Ordnance Survey / [Leeds City Council](#).

Author: Leeds City Council and Mott Macdonald

Date: October 2022

Link: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/5601f5c5f1304518bf48fab8379f8b67>

Horizon scanning



- Active Travel England are due to publish a series of Supplementary Planning Advice Notes, to provide more guidance on topics including how to support a vision led approach to transport through planning.
- MHCLG have committed to updating Planning Practice Guidance to reflect changes in the NPPF that promote a vision led approach to transport planning.
- The DfT committed to updating the Manual for Streets some time ago. This anticipated update should integrate design principles that prioritise active travel and support planners to secure better outcomes for new development.

Further Resources

There are many credible resources available that provide guidance on how to secure development that supports sustainable travel. A few of them are listed below:

- **Active Travel England**'s Planning for Active Places tool provides guidance on integrating active travel routes in different contexts and street design for residential developments. Available [here](#).
- **CIHT** have a suite of resources on planning and transport, of particular relevance is the Better Planning, Better Transport, Better Places report which advises on a sustainable approach to transport for new places. Available [here](#).
- The Building for a Healthy Life toolkit for new development was produced by **Homes England** to create places that are better for people and nature. Its checklist seeks to ensure consideration has been made to promoting walking, cycling and public transport. Available [here](#).
- Further guidance from the **TCPA** is available on creating [20-minute neighbourhoods](#), [planning for healthy places](#), and [sustainable transport for new communities](#).
- **Transport for New Homes** have developed a checklist for new housing development to assess whether schemes are designed to reduce car dependency. Available [here](#).

References

- ¹ *Local Authorities and the Sixth Carbon Budget*. Climate Change Committee, Dec. 2020. <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/local-authorities-and-the-sixth-carbon-budget/>
- ² *Progress in reducing emissions: 2025 report to parliament*. Climate Change Committee, June 2025. <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/progress-in-reducing-emissions-2025-report-to-parliament>
- ³ National Planning Policy Framework. MHCLG, December 2024. Para 109.
- ⁴ Ibid. A definition of ‘vision led transport’ is provided in the NPPF glossary.
- ⁵ *Decarbonising Transport: A Better, Greener Britain*. Department for Transport, 2021. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/transport-decarbonisation-plan>
- ⁶ Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/connectivity-tool>
- ⁷ *Vision Led Planning*. L Hopkinson, N Lodge, J Parkin and J Parker et al. University of the West of England and Transport for Quality of Life, 2025. Available from: <https://www.transportforqualityoflife.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Vision-led-planning-v1.5.pdf>
- ⁸ Ibid. (Page 12).
- ⁹ *Net Zero Transport: The Role of Spatial Planning and Place-Based Solutions*. RTPI, Jan. 2021. <https://www.rtpi.org.uk/new-from-the-rtpi/net-zero-transport-the-role-of-spatial-planning-and-place-based-solutions/>
- ¹⁰ Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/transport-evidence-bases-in-plan-making-and-decision-taking>
- ¹¹ Information on this tool is available here: <https://www.bioregional.com/projects-and-services/built-environment-consultancy/local-authorities/net-zero-spatial-planning-tool>
- ¹² For guidance on this see *Health Impact Assessment in spatial planning*. Public Health England, 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-impact-assessment-in-spatial-planning>
- ¹³ *National Design Guide*. MHCLG, 2019. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-design-guide>
- ¹⁴ Available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/active-travel-england-sustainable-development-advice-notes>

Cover image: Stockport Transport Interchange. Source: Graham Frost / Shutterstock.com

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Topic Resource 9

The Climate Crisis Guide for Local Authorities on Planning for Climate Change

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