

How To Make Friends And Influence Councillors

Shedding light on the processes that shape how we deliver sustainable transport

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June 2025

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the following councillors for sparing their time to be part of the interview process, and in doing so aiding this research. A further 5 councillors also took part and did not wish to be named, but they know who they are.

Councillor Liz Clements, Birmingham City Council

Councillor Colin Davidson, Fife Council

Councillor Paul Dimoldenberg, Westminster City Council

Councillor Andrew Gant, Oxfordshire County Council

Councillor Kate Ravilious, City of York Council

Councillor Rupert Swarbrick, Lancashire County Council

The author would also like to thank the Foundation for Integrated Transport, for providing the funding necessary to deliver this research.

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Introduction

Transport professionals and campaigners often comment that transport is a political choice as much as it is an economic and social one. Governments of all political persuasions have long had their own views on how transport should be provided and operated, and even structured. It is tempting to think of such views in clear and binary language. For example, in the UK, the Conservative Party has been associated with free markets and competition in public transport, and being generally favourable towards private motorists. Whilst the Labour Party has been associated with public ownership of public transport services, and focusing on achieving social outcomes. There are further other variances between other political parties, that we will not go into detail on here.

Such binary views are not typically helpful when it comes to understanding how political decisions are made in transport. The reality is that there are a number of external influences on politicians who are elected to make decisions, as well as the influence of their own particular political viewpoint.

Delivering a transport future that is decarbonised and socially just, and one that prioritises sustainable transport, necessitates understanding such a process, the motivating factors involved in that process, and importantly how to ensure that process makes the delivery of sustainable transport interventions as smooth as possible. This research project has sought to explore this in the context of the UK, and provide guidance to practitioners on ways by which this can be done.

Furthermore, this research project sought to understand what tools would be necessary to help influence such a process in a manner that encourages sustainable travel choices. Whilst it did not develop such tools itself, it identified what tools would be useful, what challenges they would meet, and for whom.

Methodology

Undertaking this research necessitated understanding decision making processes of which political leaders are a part, and the motivations of those who are participating within it. It requires collecting evidence on how the process currently operates within public sector authorities.

There are varying types of public sector authorities across the UK, each of which has differing roles for elected politicians in decision making. For the purposes of this research, focus was given to the type of public sector organisation that is responsible for 94% of the length of the highway network in the UK¹. Namely the Local Highway Authority, typically the County Council, Unitary Authority, or Metropolitan District Council for an area. This was necessary to ensure that the research project was manageable within established budgets, and reflected the likely challenges of undertaking data collection with more senior politicians (for example the Secretary of State for Transport).

This research necessitated undertaking two distinct strands of research: a literature review and interviews, with associated qualitative analysis, with main political leaders within Local Highway Authorities. The methodology is detailed below.

Literature Review

The main purpose of the literature review was to understand political motivations and some decision making processes with regards to making political choices, especially those choices relating to sustainable transport. As such, the literature review focussed on the following associated topics:

- Political philosophy
- Governance
- Democratic decision making
- Allocation of power

The method chosen was searching [ScienceDirect](#) and [Google Scholar](#) to identify appropriate reference material of relevance to this research. This was primarily through the use of key word searches, with key words and search phrases used shown in Table 1.

Table 1 - Key words and terminology used in key word search

First term	AND / OR
"Councillors"	"Sustainable transport"

¹ GOV.UK. (2024). *Road length statistics (RDL)*. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/road-length-statistics-rdl>.

First term	AND / OR
"Governance"	"Active travel"
"Political decision making"	"Public Transport"
"Political pressure"	"Walking and cycling"
"Political motivation"	"Transport improvements"
"Politics"	
"Decision making power"	
"Political controversy"	
"Decision making authority"	
"Council members"	

From the resulting articles and reports, the summaries were reviewed to understand their relevance to the subject matter. Irrelevant articles and reports were discarded. The resulting 47 articles and reports were then systematically reviewed. These were read in depth, with key thematic areas highlighted and summarised.

Following the interviews, further research was necessary on local authority decision making structures. This was undertaken through a review of local transport authority websites, reviewing copies of their constitutions and standing orders.

Interviews

To gain an understanding of the experience of local authority decision making, interviews with local transport authority councillors with decision making authority for transport or highways were undertaken. The sample size of this group is relatively limited. Within England, there are 71 Local Highway Authorities (not including 9 Combined Authorities which were excluded from the sample). In Scotland there are a further 32, while in Wales there are 22 principle councils with responsibilities for highways. From these councils, councillors with responsibility for transport and highways were identified through a review of their respective websites.

It should be noted that the researcher was restricted in the number of councils within England they could contact, with 16 local transport authorities within the South East of England not contacted. This was due to a restriction associated with a sub-contracting arrangement on a separate project undertaken the researcher.

The intent was to secure a broad political cross section across the sample size, based upon political parties. To do this it was necessary to identify the overall political control of Local

Highway Authorities across England, Scotland, and Wales. As of October 2024, the overall control of Local Highway Authorities is²:

- Labour Party – 81 councils
- No Overall Control, Minority, or Coalition-run Councils³ – 72 Councils
- Conservative Party – 32 councils
- Liberal Democrats – 10 councils
- Independent Parties – 6 councils
- Plaid Cymru – 4 councils
- Scottish Nationalist Party – 1 council

Reflecting this political spectrum, it was determined that a minimum sample size of the following would be required:

- Labour Party – 2 councillors
- No Overall Control, Minority, or Coalition-run Councils – 2 councillors
- Conservative Party – 2 councillors
- Liberal Democrat – 1 councillor
- All other parties – 1 councillor

All local authority councillors with responsibility for transport (typically the Cabinet or Executive Member) outside of South East England were invited to participate. In all, 12 accepted the invitation, with 11 interviews eventually being undertaken, 5 of which wished to remain anonymous in reporting. The political affiliation of the participants was:

- 3 Conservatives
- 3 Labour
- 2 Liberal Democrat
- 1 Scottish Nationalist
- 1 Plaid Cymru
- 1 Independent

It should be noted that the recruitment of participants was significantly affected by the May 2024 Local Elections in England and Wales, as well as the associated 8-week pre-election period. This meant that many councillors either could not speak due to the restrictions associated with the pre-election period, or were campaigning themselves and were unable to spare the time.

The interviews themselves were undertaken remotely on Microsoft Teams, in a semi-structured format. The core questions that were asked were:

² Wikipedia Contributors (2024). *Political make-up of local councils in the United Kingdom*. Wikipedia.

³ This is where the largest party elected to the Council does not have a majority of the seats, and so runs the council themselves with no formal partners, or through a partnership or coalition with one or more other parties.

- Can you tell me about the importance of your relationship with officers, and how it influences your decisions?
- How does your political philosophy affect how you approach transport issues?
- What discussions take place with your political colleagues concerning transport issues? And how does this affect your decision?
- If others could do one thing to help make decision making easier, what would it be?
- What would you improve about the process?

The transcripts from the interviews were then analysed in a thematic manner. Key themes were identified through coding the responses in a spreadsheet, highlighting common and consistent messages within the data.

Political Decision Making in Transport in the UK

There are a significant variety of political views relating to transport, and even individual aspects of transport in the UK. Making an informed political decision about transport in the UK is difficult to do. There are conflicting interests, conflicting opinions, and different value sets in relation to transport (and wider) outcomes that are involved in making decisions about investing in infrastructure and services⁴.

The Political Context of Transport

The political context of transport in the UK is not simply about which political parties favour specific modes of transport. It concerns itself with wider political decision-making frameworks and structures that result in transport decisions, as well as the political views of actors within those frameworks and structures.

Much has been written already about the complexities in transport governance across the UK, with different public sector authorities being responsible for various aspects of transport policy and decision making. A highly simplified summary of this is shown in Table 2.

⁴ Coelho, M., Ratnoo, V., and Dellepian, S. (2014) The Political Economy of Infrastructure in the UK. Link: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/report/political-economy-infrastructure-uk>

Table 2 - Types of organisations in the governance of UK transport systems (Sourced from Urban Transport Group⁵ and Marsden and Docherty, 2019⁶)

Type of organisation	Primary responsibilities⁷	Most common political decision making
National Government	• Legislation, both primary and secondary • Strategic transport planning and policy • Strategic road network management and operations (including by executive agencies) • Rail, both infrastructure and services (including by executive agencies) • Funding for policy delivery, either through funding bids or allocations to other delivery agencies • Development, maintaining, and adopting delivery standards across all modes • Security and safety	Secretary of State or Minister

⁵ Urban Transport Group (2022) UK Transport Governance – An Introduction Available at: <https://www.urbantransportgroup.org/system/files/general-docs/UK%20Transport%20Governance%20-%20an%20introduction.pdf> [Accessed 19 Nov. 2024].

⁶ Marsden, G. and Docherty, I. (2019). *Governance of UK Transport Infrastructures Future of Mobility: Evidence Review Foresight, Government Office for Science Governance of UK Transport Infrastructures*. [online] Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c6fddea40f0b647b35c43d8/governance.pdf>.

⁷ These can vary between organisations within different types of organisations, for example some Combined Authorities may have some powers, and others may not.

Type of organisation	Primary responsibilities⁷	Most common political decision making
Mayoral Combined Authority or Combined Authority	• Contributing to the planning of local rail services (in partnership with the DfT and/or regional entities like Transport for the North); • Planning and funding socially necessary bus routes; • Working in partnership with private operators to improve bus services - for example through bus priority schemes; • Running concessionary travel schemes for older, disabled and young people; • Developing, investing and promoting new public transport schemes—like new stations, light rail and guided bus networks; • Providing impartial and comprehensive public transport information services through a range of media; and • Managing and maintaining bus interchanges, bus stops and shelters.	Mayor and Cabinet
County Councils	• Management and maintenance of the local highway network • Operational of socially-necessary public transport services • Highway network management and operations • Transport planning and policy	Lead member, often with associated committee e.g. Cabinet
District Councils	• Parking Management • Taxi and Private Hire Vehicle Licencing	Lead member, often with associated committee e.g. Cabinet
Unitary Authority or Metropolitan District	• Management and maintenance of the local highway network • Operational of socially-necessary public transport services • Highway network management and operations • Transport planning and policy • Parking Management • Taxi and Private Hire Vehicle Licencing	Lead member, often with associated committee e.g. Cabinet

What Table 2 does not cover is the political realities of decision making undertaken by the political actors within those organisations. At the highest level, ministers are ultimately

answerable to Parliament and to the Sovereign⁸, and a similar principle of democratic accountability is often applied to Local Highway Authorities as well, where members with responsibility for transport are responsible to the authority's political decision making body – either Cabinet or Full Council in most cases.

Consequently, policy making in transport in the UK is informed by political realities as to what is and isn't popular. The research notes that there is a strong and demonstrable impact of public attitudes on political decision making⁹. To no shock, issue salience is particularly a strong motivator when it comes to people casting votes, and therefore is responded to strongly by decision makers. In other words, at times when people care most about an issue, they are more likely to cast their vote with that in mind. A further interesting finding is that, even when accounting for the influence of interested groups, public opinion still has a strong effect on political decisions. However, for opinion to be translated into political action, two pre-conditions are necessary¹⁰:

- The opportunity for redistributive effects, namely the benefits of the policy are felt wider than the target group, and
- Having in place credible frameworks for addressing collective action problems, or in other words the potential side-effects of the policy are tackled in a collective manner and in a way that still results in overall benefits.

This relationship is not one way. The political sphere can influence to influence attitudes and behaviours¹¹, and the evidence does show that political leaders can, and do, shift general attitudes of the public in their favoured policy direction¹². However, this affect is often questioned due to what is referred to as 'pre-treatment effects.' Namely, the public might have a general indication of the kinds of positions that a party is likely to take prior to taking a view on a politician, and consequently their baseline for changing positions can vary between politicians¹³.

Regardless of the degree of this influence either way, the existing transport system is a consequence of political decisions and the influence placed on politicians. With the prevailing

⁸ Parliament.uk. (2019). *Erskine May - UK Parliament*. [online] Available at:

<https://erskinemay.parliament.uk/>

⁹ Burstein, P. (2003). The Impact of Public Opinion on Public Policy: A Review and an Agenda. *Political Research Quarterly*, 56(1), pp.29–40. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/106591290305600103>.

¹⁰ Shum, R.Y. (2009). Can attitudes predict outcomes? Public opinion, democratic institutions and environmental policy. *Environmental Policy and Governance*, 19(5), pp.281–295. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1002/eet.518>.

¹¹ Institute for Government. (2021). *How governments use evidence to make transport policy* | *Institute for Government*. [online] Available at: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/report/how-governments-use-evidence-make-transport-policy> [Accessed 19 Nov. 2024].

¹² Matsubayashi, T. (2012). Do Politicians Shape Public Opinion? *British Journal of Political Science*, 43(2), pp.451–478. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0007123412000373>

¹³ Slothuus, R. (2015). Assessing the Influence of Political Parties on Public Opinion: The Challenge from Pretreatment Effects. *Political Communication*, 33(2), pp.302–327. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2015.1052892>.

narrative around current society experiencing motornormativity¹⁴, of the biases of wider society which are broadly in favour of car use even if that presents a hazard. Within this context, it is theorized that this car-dependent culture is driven by¹⁵:

1. The automotive industry;
2. The provision of car infrastructure;
3. The political economy of urban sprawl;
4. The provision of public transport, and;
5. Cultures of car consumption.

In such a context, shifting towards a sustainable future by public attitudes and their influence on politicians alone is a daunting prospect. Especially where such radical change is needed over a variety of socio-economic and political systems¹⁶. Though there have been significant changes in individual and especially collective attitudes to growth, intergenerational solidarity and nature preservation, it is far from certain whether these will be sufficient to encourage politicians to give sustainable policies priority over other legitimate concerns¹⁷.

Politics can also affect the degree of success (or otherwise) of transport interventions. For example, if an area is politically experienced in delivering complex transport projects, successful project delivery is more likely, and it is more likely that those outside of the area are more likely to perceive successful delivery¹⁸. In contrast, where attitudes are more antagonistic - especially between regional and local politics - this can undermine communication and deliberation channels, hampering delivery of projects¹⁹.

The nature of political conflict that can take place within specific contexts can vary even within governance structures that are established. For instance, in a comparative analysis of the expansion of Bus Rapid Transit Systems between China and Indonesia, China's contestations were between national and local government - with swings of decentralisation and centralisation of power - while in Indonesia the contest was between technocratic reformers and

¹⁴ Walker, I., Tapp, A. and Davis, A. (2023). Motonormativity: how social norms hide a major public health hazard. *International Journal of Environment and Health*, 11(1), pp.21–33. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1504/ijenvh.2023.135446>.

¹⁵ Mattioli, G., Roberts, C., Steinberger, J.K. and Brown, A. (2020). The Political Economy of Car dependence: a Systems of Provision Approach. *Energy Research & Social Science*, [online] 66(66), p.101486. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2020.101486>.

¹⁶ van den Bergh, J.C.J.M., Truffer, B. and Kallis, G. (2011). Environmental innovation and societal transitions: Introduction and overview. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, 1(1), pp.1–23. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2011.04.010>.

¹⁷ Dieter Birnbacher and Thorseth, M. (2017). *The politics of sustainability : philosophical perspectives*. London: Routledge.

¹⁸ Galilea, P. and Medda, F. (2010). Does the political and economic context influence the success of a transport project? An analysis of transport public-private partnerships. *Research in Transportation Economics*, 30(1), pp.102–109. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.retrec.2010.10.011>.

¹⁹ Legacy, C., Curtis, C. and Scheurer, J. (2017). Planning transport infrastructure: examining the politics of transport planning in Melbourne, Sydney and Perth. *Urban Policy and Research*, 35(1), pp.44–60. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/08111146.2016.1272448>.

politico-business interests especially of ruling politicians²⁰. The latter often resulting in turbulent policy making and uncertainty.

The final matter is that while transport decision making can be seen in the context of achieving wider policy goals, such as improving public health, singular focuses on such outcomes can result in political blindness to other issues. For instance, when campaigning for more cycling locally, other related matters such as social justice can be ignored²¹.

Public Participation and Politics

The experience of the politics of transport is most acutely realised through public engagement in transport schemes and policies. Such engagement activities give the opportunity to politicise transport issues in ways not previously experienced²².

A notable example of this is the recent experience in the UK of the delivery of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods. It was noted that the friction associated with government control in their delivery (essentially to deliver them quickly, to a constantly changing requirement led to distrust between central and local government, with political consequences²³. This is made more complicated by the dynamic and complex relationships between local civic society and pressure groups, which when combined with a rapidly delivered policy with a lack of inclusive engagement, can result in sustainable transport interventions being removed. A notable example being Ealing in London²⁴.

There is some, though limited, evidence that sustainable transport measures can have positive political outcomes. For example, evidence from Barcelona indicates that the successful delivery of street improvements in favour of sustainable transport resulted in favourable political outcomes for the ruling party²⁵. While in introducing congestion pricing in Stockholm, there were

²⁰ Lin, K.-C. (2012). *CRP WORKING PAPER SERIES The Political Economy of Rapid Transport Infrastructure Expansion in China* Centre for Rising Powers Department of Politics and International Studies. [online] Available at: <https://www.crp.polis.cam.ac.uk/system/files/documents/crp-working-paper-3-infrastructure-politics-in-chi.pdf> [Accessed 19 Nov. 2024].

²¹ Leyendecker, K. and Cox, P. (2022). Cycle campaigning for a just city. *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 15, p.100678. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trip.2022.100678>.

²² Legacy, C. (2017). The post-politics of transport: establishing a new meeting ground for transport politics. *Geographical Research*, 56(2), pp.196–205. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12263>.

²³ Dudley, G., Banister, D. and Schwanen, T. (2022). Low Traffic Neighbourhoods and the Paradox of UK Government Control of the Active Travel Agenda. *The Political Quarterly*. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923x.13198>.

²⁴ Finn, P. (2022). Low-traffic neighbourhoods in Ealing: Contested policy making in a polycentric governance environment. doi:<https://doi.org/10.31124/advance.20120411.v1>.

²⁵ Marquet, O., Fernández Núñez, M.-B. and Maciejewska, M. (2024). The political price of superblocks. Electoral outcomes of sustainable transport interventions in Barcelona. *Environment International*, [online] 189, p.108789. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envint.2024.108789>.

no significant political consequences²⁶. Though interestingly, this also appears to be the case with road expansion, with local parties who deliver road expansion projects benefitting over the course of two election cycles²⁷.

Political Acceptability of Controversial Policies

It has been understood for some time that sustainable transport measures that are 'effective' in terms of increasing travel by sustainable transport and reducing the use of private cars are more politically challenging to deliver²⁸. Therefore, practitioners often recommend delivering more controversial transport measures (e.g. road pricing) alongside more acceptable transport measures (e.g. better public transport) to make the intervention more palatable politically.

A more recent phenomenon that has been subject to study is the role of conspiracy theories. Especially around ideas such as 15 Minute Cities. This research has shown that there is a link between the acceptability of policy interventions and the fear of social engineering²⁹. This has been observed to be part of a broader challenge of embedding non-car modes of transport within a context of driving being seen as essential, and therefore the priority mode of transport³⁰. An important aspect of this is media framing, where media focussing on the practical elements of scheme operation as opposed to how sustainable transport can re-frame society³¹.

What has been noted in research is how the acceptability of controversial policies changes significantly after a measure has been implemented, often in a manner more favourable to it³². For example, studies of the Stockholm congestion charge revealed that acceptance of the

²⁶ Hysing, E. and Isaksson, K. (2015). Building acceptance for congestion charges – the Swedish experiences compared. *Journal of Transport Geography*, 49, pp.52–60. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jtrangeo.2015.10.008>.

²⁷ Boudot-Reddy, C. and Butler, A. (2024). Paving the road to re-election. *Journal of Public Economics*, 239, p.105228. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2024.105228>.

²⁸ Gärling, T. and Schuitema, G. (2007). Travel Demand Management Targeting Reduced Private Car Use: Effectiveness, Public Acceptability and Political Feasibility. *Journal of Social Issues*, 63(1), pp.139–153. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2007.00500.x>.

²⁹ Marquet, O., Mojica, L., Marta-Beatriz Fernández-Núñez and Maciejewska, M. (2024). Pathways to 15-Minute City adoption: Can our understanding of climate policies' acceptability explain the backlash towards x-minute city programs? *Cities*, 148, pp.104878–104878. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2024.104878>.

³⁰ Egan, R. and Caulfield, B. (2024). Driving as essential, cycling as conditional: how automobility is politically sustained in discourses of everyday mobility. *Mobilities*, pp.1–17. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2024.2325370>.

³¹ Leyendecker, K. and Cox, P. (2022). Cycle campaigning for a just city. *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 15, p.100678. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trip.2022.100678>.

³² van Wee, B., Annema, J.A. and van Barneveld, S. (2023). Controversial policies: growing support after implementation. A discussion paper. *Transport Policy*, [online] 139, pp.79–86. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tranpol.2023.05.010>.

charge is higher than views on its acceptability³³. Similar findings have been found in relation to low traffic neighbourhoods³⁴.

Another aspect of this media framing is within the context of a particular transport issue being perceived as 'solved.' A notable example being road safety, where between the 1980s and 2002 road safety was accepted as a policy problem to be tackled. Whereas since this, this matter has been reframed as collisions being accidents, and so solutions can be contested politically³⁵.

Looking at wider policy measures, the influence of the process of decision making on acceptability is well established. For example, where councillors have been part of the decision making process and the decision has been made through compromise, participants consider the outcome to be fair even if the outcome is not favourable to them³⁶. Expanding on this further, this acceptability is further boosted when the group making the decision is seen as like-minded, and the decision is made by people with subject-area expertise³⁷.

But a further interesting finding from the research is that while wider public acceptability can play a role in the political, it does not fully explain the lack of support for specific transport policies. For instance, in a study of congestion pricing, it was found that conflicting interests in the outcomes and how to get there meant that focus was given by politicians on initiatives that had broad support as opposed to highly polarised solutions³⁸.

³³ Schuitema, G., Steg, L. and Forward, S. (2010). Explaining differences in acceptability before and acceptance after the implementation of a congestion charge in Stockholm. *Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice*, [online] 44(2), pp.99–109. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tra.2009.11.005>.

³⁴ Belcher, K., Davies, C., Guscott, E., Holland, E. and Vey, J. (n.d.). *Low Traffic Neighbourhoods Research Report*. [online] Available at: <https://natcen.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-01/low-traffic-neighbourhoods-research-report.pdf>.

³⁵ Greenwood, I., Jamson, S. and Marsden, G. (2024). The changing politics of road death in Britain: from policy action to kicking the can down the road. *Transport Policy*, [online] 158, pp.255–268. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tranpol.2024.09.011>.

³⁶ Nakatani, M. (2021). How do political decision-making processes affect the acceptability of decisions? Results from a survey experiment. *International Political Science Review*, p.019251212199825. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512121998250>.

³⁷ Arnesen, S. and Peters, Y. (2017). The Legitimacy of Representation: How Descriptive, Formal, and Responsiveness Representation Affect the Acceptability of Political Decisions. *Comparative Political Studies*, 51(7), pp.868–899. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414017720702>.

³⁸ Westin, J., Franklin, J.P., Proost, S., Basck, P. and Raux, C. (2016). Achieving political acceptability for new transport infrastructure in congested urban regions. *Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice*, 88, pp.286–303. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tra.2016.04.009>.

Interviews with councillors

In all, 67 different subject matters were identified in the analysis of the interviews, the full details of which are shown in Appendix A. These were further grouped into 11 broader groupings of subject matters, which are shown in Table 3 below. Within these subject matters, 5 were mentioned across all interviews, these being Officers, External Partners, Public engagement, Working with councillors, and Practical delivery. These subject matters form the basis of the analysis here. These are displayed in greater detail in Table 4.

Table 3 - Subject matters raised by councillors during interviews

Subject matter	Number of mentions by interviewees	Mentioned by all interviewees?
Officers	25	Yes
External Partners	22	Yes
Public engagement	22	Yes
Working with councillors	21	Yes
Practical delivery	21	Yes
Politics	16	No
Other policy areas	16	No
Modes of transport	13	No
Governance structures	10	No
New ways of working	7	No
Their role	4	No

Table 4 - Detailed subject matters raised under subject matter groupings raised by all councillors

Subject matter grouping	Detailed subjects raised
Officers	Relationship with officers
External Partners	Establishing positive working relationship
	Relationship with government
	Working with others
Public engagement	Changing minds
	Communications
	Controversy
	Public consultation and engagement
	Public opinion
	Their role
	Working with local groups
Working with councillors	Political priorities
	Working with other councillors
Practical delivery	Different solutions for different areas
	Funding
	Impact of things being delivered
	Impact on different community types
	Knock on effects

Subject matter grouping	Detailed subjects raised
	Local characteristics and priorities
	Relationship with strategy
	Resources
	Risk taking
	Smaller and larger schemes
	Timescales of delivery

Officers

A clear message that came across in the interviews was how central the relationship between councillors and officers was to effect delivery of sustainable transport schemes. The answers by the interviewees made it clear that a positive working relationship based upon mutual respect between councillors and officers acted as a key enabler that provided both parties with confidence that successful delivery could be achieved.

“Simply, without my officers I wouldn’t be able to do anything. They have all the expertise after all.”

“Council officers are better at running the operations and if they have operational responsibility. So any decision I make is based on recommendations that they give me that whether it’s in line with the policy and whether it’s legal, you know. So my decision making process is informed by the by those professional recommendations by my officers and then obviously I look at the context and the policy and politics of it.”

“Well, we work very closely with our senior officers because they’re the people who deliver what we want. And so we have to have an understanding and a way of working. And by and large it’s working very well.”

The interviewees often spoke of their engagement with officers in terms of the value that each brought to the decision making process. All interviewees considered that a significant role that officers played was as technical advisors, especially when it came to advising councillors on delivery best practice as well as the legalities of what they wished to achieve.

“If I’d got the got the adult social care gig, I wouldn’t have known very much about all that. So you’re massively reliant on good officers and senior officers to to tell you what’s what.”

“You can’t get anything done unless you work closely with your officers. And we’ve got some very good officers.”

“I’m accused by some of our people, who say ‘Well is this Council run by officers or members?’ Well, in respect of when which potholes are filling, yes. It’s it’s officer driven because I can’t possibly make a decision about every single pothole. So if a pothole is between 1490 millimetres deep it will get filled and it will get filled within five days or

whatever our KPI is and if it's if it's 90mms or more than it'll get delivered it'll get fixed as soon as we know about it."

In the other direction, interviewees spoke of the value they added to officers in the form of setting a strategic direction, and advising on the politics and controversies associated with specific schemes. Strategic direction in relation to transport was spoken of in terms of priorities of different modes and setting the vision as to what they wish for their communities to look like in the future, while the latter was expressed in terms of ensuring officers were prepared for political controversies.

"I see my role as being quite simple in many respects. I know the council's strategy, and its transport strategy too. Others in our cabinet have ideas on what our areas should look like in the future. I see whether or not what is planned lines up with that, and advise officers."

"The first question I always ask officers is 'how does this align with our [local transport plan]?' If they cannot tell me, I ask them to come back when they have identified how it does."

"Sometimes it means telling officers that this is likely to cause a problem – like losing some parking spaces. It might not seem much on a plan, but it can blow up in your face if you are not careful."

An interesting observation from the interviews was when there were disagreements between officers and councillors on the principles of delivery, as opposed to the practicality. Namely what should the council be achieving. In some interviews it was noted that councillors had to, effectively, force the decision to achieve a goal they wished to see, resulting in some churn of officers within the authority.

"Once you know a particular [sustainable transport] decision would have been possible, and then it's only when you start to explore the complexities or realise your financial constraints or realise your officer resource constraints. That you start to see it's maybe not as possible as you originally thought, and so. There are you do start to see tensions with officers..."

"We felt we needed to shift the mindset. It was a very cautious mindset and let's keep doing small things, small changes and keep things just as they are kind of mindset. And we came in and this was very hard for the officers because we came in and said 'no, we want system changes, actually this city we need to do something quite radical.'"

It should be noted, however, that this was an exception as opposed to the rule. In most instances, matters of conflict were addressed between officers and councillors, with councillors learning lessons as a result of this. Notable examples of this were when schemes developed under previous council administrations were presented to them for approval, with them pushing

back as it did not align with their new strategy, before realising that in such cases it was necessary to essentially ‘wave the project through’ due to extensive scheme development undertaken before.

“The thing is to work well together is to have difficult discussions about the scope of a scheme really early on. I think that's the thing that frustrates me the most and where I feel like our relationships deteriorate is when I'm presented with a scheme where I go ‘if you'd shown this to me six months ago we could have, you know, got the scope right and aligned it with the strategy and now it's too late.’”

Some councillors did express a frustration with officers when the process did not work properly, particularly in early engagement with sustainable transport initiatives. The interviewees identified that the value that they added to this process through early engagement was the political ‘sense check’ of the scheme, with them realising that officers may not be aware of the political realities of specific schemes and potential controversies.

“One time I had a project for a new cycle lane on a major road into town. I had to send it back to the officers and get them to re-do it, as politically it was a no-go as it did not meet the standards of what we wanted to do with cycle infrastructure. If they had asked me earlier, I would have avoided this.”

“It was very hard to start with. But now my officers send me emails asking for my ideas on schemes that have hardly got started. It's a lot, but it's a better problem to have than doing it too late!”

A further aspect to this was identifying the relationship with wider strategy and goals, which we will come into in more detail shortly. Within this context, it was considered that councillors add value by providing a different view from officers on how the delivery of specific schemes can achieve the wider goals of the strategy.

“My job also covers planning. I have found myself thinking ‘hey, if we did this scheme in a different way, we might be able to help this [housing] site be more viable.’”

“[The councillor's political group] got elected on making the city centre more accessible to all. So we always ask whether this policy or scheme will do that.”

External partners

The interviewees spoke, and often at length, about how the delivery of their vision for the area was reliant working with external partners. Some had expected, when taking on the role, that such engagement would be led by officers – and it is to a significant degree. However, some expressed surprise about how much engagement they were required to undertake to ‘sell’ their vision of their places and how individual schemes played a role in this.

“Well, if the police are not minded to agree with our policy I need to read in between the lines. It’s probably because they can’t resource enforcement, as they can’t even resource enforcing other speed limit areas.”

“We have transport partnership meetings four times a year, where we try and develop our approach on various matters. Including working with government. I have to sell why it is a good idea to leave some decision making to us very often.”

There was a lot of mention of the role of Central Government in delivery, though it was notable that none of the councillors expressed any comments relating to engaging with ministers or ministerial teams directly. Primarily this discussion focussed on the Department for Transport’s role in setting direction and providing the funding for schemes.

“We are wholly reliant on central government for funding. So we often have to deliver what they want and what we want to deliver may come second sometimes.”

“Thankfully, what we want and what the government wants to achieve generally aligns quite well. Otherwise it would be hard for us to do anything with our shrinking budgets!”

Some councillors did mention that conditions associated with funding, for example compliance with guidance such as Local Transport Note 1/20, did restrict what they could do to adapt schemes for local circumstances. As a consequence, this often made for difficult conversations with other councillors about the degree to which schemes could be varied.

“Our backbenchers like to make some noise about things like losing parking spaces or a lane of traffic. They don’t like it when I say we need to follow the guidance otherwise we lose the funding.”

Other transport delivery organisations were mentioned, such as Transport for London and Active Travel England. There was an indication from the interviews that councillors themselves did not lead on the engagement with such organisations (unless their council was invited to sit on decision making boards within those organisations), but that they were generally aware of the influence that they have on officer-level discussions. Especially when it comes to matters like scheme design, funding, and associated approvals.

“I tend to leave most of the engagement with external partners to our officers. As they need to do it for the day-to-day work. If they need me, then I will help them out.”

As a consequence of this, councillors understood the value of a positive working relationship between their authorities and these respective organisations, even if they did not get to experience those working relationships directly. They saw their role in this regard as one of supporting their officers in developing a positive working relationship, or at the least one where they themselves do not cause friction that affects the working relationship.

Public engagement

The matters of public engagement included a broad range of topics. But one area that commonly came up was councillors seeing early engagement, participatory, and deliberative engagement with the public as essential for scheme development. What was interesting in this regard was not the ability for public engagement to win over people skeptical of the transport schemes – though this was mentioned. But the purpose being that doing this results in some degree of acceptance of the scheme, even if members of the public still did not agree with it.

“There will be some people who will object no matter what you do. But if you can say to people ‘we spoke to you, and we made these changes as a result,’ then some people might feel that you listened to them.”

“If the public can have a meaningful say as early as possible, and be part of every part of the process, then it helps makes things more acceptable.”

On this latter point of disagreement, what was interesting was councillors revealing the difficulty that they faced between being a champion for schemes and for the council more generally, while balancing public opinion that can often be uncertain. They specifically mentioned cycle infrastructure schemes in this regard, where in some instances the public opinion has often been hostile towards such schemes while councillors themselves realise the significant value of such schemes outside of purely transport. Especially when it comes to linking schemes to health outcomes.

“I have been in meetings with officers and they mention all of the good things that these schemes. I agree with them. But I keep thinking how hard this will be to sell to people. As most people don’t think that this new cycle lane will be good for their health.”

“I want to see more active travel schemes as what they do is obvious. But that is not obvious to most people. If I try and say to people that this scheme will mean more people visiting shops, they will look at me like I have three heads!”

Councillors found the experience of public engagement much easier where they could directly align schemes with commitments made in their manifesto, especially those of their local political parties. For example, if a party made a commitment to improving the overall accessibility of a town or city centre, they felt more confident in championing a scheme that achieved this aim – even if public sentiment opposes the scheme.

“I was elected on improving bus services in my village, and last year we got an extra bus to the hospital. I can now say to people that I said I was going to get them a bus, and now say that I got it.”

"We are consulting on changes to access rules in the city, where people who have blue badges can drive in the pedestrian areas. Its caused a bit of backlash. But this was in our election manifesto, so I can say 'we got elected on this, and we are doing it.'"

They also saw their role in public engagement as that of an effective communicator. The councillors were concerned that if left entirely to officers, communications would be somewhat technocratic and cautious in its tone. They consider that they play a vital role not only in 'translating' such language into that which many people can more easily understand, but challenging their officers to think about how schemes are communicated in a more simple manner that is easily understood.

"I try and say what we are planning in plain and simple English. Most people don't know the difference between a cycle land and a cycle track."

Some of the councillors have had experience of dealing with controversial schemes, for which there have been passionate views against a sustainable transport proposal. From the interviews, councillors faced a conflict. On the one hand, in their role, they felt they needed to defend the scheme whilst welcoming constructive comments.

"Its been a steep learning curve, as sometimes people can be nasty. But you have to keep your cool, show you understand and care about what they say, all while defending the hard work of the officers."

"We worked on the Local Transport Plan, and did loads of public engagement on it. I am proud of the work that we did. Yet when it was published many of these same people who we spoke to were not happy. So you have to still welcome positive and constructive comments."

"Some of the comments we received against some trial street closures in [the city centre] were stupid. I told the officers so. Yet I cannot say anything like that in person."

On the other hand, as councillors for their respective wards, they felt duty-bound to understand this sentiment and work with the local community to resolve issues. Taking such a democratic responsibility seriously was common across all of the interviews, even if personally they found it to be a tough balancing act.

"You cannot be a councillor and not listen to the people who vote you in. It is a matter of principle."

"Anyone who says 'I don't care what others thing, I am going to do this anyway' should never serve as a councillor."

Councillors also saw part of their role being working with local groups and champions to understand better local sentiment and also to influence public opinion on the scheme through

enabling more people to be more informed about it. An interesting aspect of this was that councillors often only worked with sustainable travel advocates where they were seen as having significant community networks and influence. In fact, councillors often favoured people with community networks and influence to 'get the message out' on schemes, even when such people may be skeptical of the scheme.

"Before we went out and consulted on a Low Traffic Neighbourhood scheme, I went out and talked to a few business people. One person who owns a chip shop was right in the middle of the scheme. They don't like it, but I had a word with them and asked them if I could put up a poster getting people to have their say. He agreed, and would ask his customers to respond. He gets 100-200 people in there on a busy evening, and so that is a really effective way of getting the word out."

"When you are a ward councillor, you get to know the people in your area who know everyone else. If you want the word spread on something, you talk to them about it. If you want to convince people what you are doing is a good thing, you convince them it's a good thing. Their word matters a hundred times more than anything the council puts out."

"We have a lot of advocates for cycling and buses in our area. They can be very antagonistic and wind up a lot of people. We have tried to work with them, but its been futile as they tell everyone how bad everything we are doing is. We are trying to improve things, but when things that are better get slandered by people who are meant to support these kinds of things, what is the incentive to work with them?"

Working with councillors

The interviewees mentioned working with other councillors in two respects. The first was their relationship and working arrangements with their fellow Cabinet members – all of whom have decision making authority across their own briefs (e.g. Adult Social Care), while the second is with other ward councillors.

With regards to Cabinet Members, all interviewees revealed that prior to making significant or controversial decisions across any of the council's functions, there was often extensive discussion between Cabinet Members for many months in advance of the decision being made. This partly explains why councillors were so keen to understand schemes at an early stage – so they could have these discussions with their fellow Cabinet Members early, and controversial matters could be worked out as opposed to being dealt with quickly. Which often meant in a defensive and non-engaging matter.

"As a cabinet, we make decisions as a collective. So I need to let them know what we are doing, and what is likely to be controversial."

“When we are working on a new policy, I am constantly talking to other cabinet colleagues. They let me know where things could be better, or how what we are planning in highways affects their service areas too. We talk through the issues both at cabinet meetings and offline.”

“If I am struggling with something, I might drop a message to the Leader or another Executive Member to ask their views. It often helps clarify things for me.”

The interviewees placed great importance on the Cabinet system. The Cabinet acts as a central ‘political nervous system’ for decision making across the authority. This has two benefits. Firstly, the wider value of sustainable transport interventions could be discussed, leading to a greater collective understanding of the potential opportunities (and risks) associated with transport schemes. A notable example being links between transport and adult and children’s social care, where the impacts of changes to bus routes and times and changes to socially-necessary services could be debated.

“A couple years ago we kicked off a review of our supported buses and transport for social care. That was at the request of me and the member for adult services. Having this led from the cabinet level helped us identify opportunities to improve the services, and not just focus on budget cuts.”

Secondly is the value the councillors felt in collective decision making as a Cabinet. Where the Cabinet system runs effectively, councillors feel as though any controversial decisions are owned by a collective, and not simply placed on their shoulders. And as such, the Cabinet provides a friendly support and check-and-challenge mechanism on their decisions, reducing the burden associated with controversial choices. From the interviews undertaken, it appeared that the Cabinet system across all of the authorities was working well.

“There were huge protests against our plans for traffic reduction schemes. People were being dragged out of public meetings, and making speeches at Full Council. So having the knowledge that we made the decision to go ahead with them as a collective really helped put my mind at ease.”

“It’s the nature of working as a councillor in a Cabinet. Just as much as you collectively own the failures, you collectively own the successes. That is quite reassuring in some respects.”

Engagement with other councillors is a different experience altogether for interviewees. They realise that other councillors have much more freedom to campaign on specific matters of interest to them and to challenge them and the Cabinet directly when they wished to do so. The general tone of the language used was an acceptance of this role, partly because many of those interviewed have experience of this role themselves.

“Before getting a cabinet role, I was a normal councillor for 6 years – a backbencher you could say. This gave me a lot of freedom to question the cabinet as well as give them my support. So I don’t begrudge others doing the same.”

“Councillors from your own party can be your own worst enemy sometimes. But they are just looking after their area.”

A further interesting finding was the degree to which there is cross-party working on matters of common interest. The interviewees indicate that this is partly due to ward-level politics, where two or more councillors representing two or more parties represent specific electoral wards, and work together to tackle common issues. This gets translated into how local transport infrastructure is delivered, especially when it comes to continuing the investment of previous political administrations.

“At the last election, the whole council changed. The [current opposition] were booted out and we took over. But the previous cabinet member took some time with me, and ran through all of what I needed to know to take on the role. I really appreciated that.”

“There are 3 ward councillors in my area. One of the others is Labour like me, the other is a Tory. We all get on really well. We disagree on some things, but we all want where we live to be better.”

Practical delivery

The interviewees spent some time discussing the challenges associated with the practical delivery of transport schemes, in a manner that was often quite wide-ranging in its scope. The issue of funding was one that did emerge regularly in the conversation, but not in the manner that may have been expected. The discussions were often not about levels of funding, but about the flexibility to adapt funding to changing contexts on the ground. For instance, where cost-overruns on schemes necessitated changes needing to be made on the scope, talking to funders about this proved challenging.

“You know that inflation has been really bad since COVID. This meant we had to go back to government and say that we have had to rescope to reflect the rising costs. They have not tended to like that, and are putting ever-more-stringent conditions on what we can do. But I am not employed by the government, so I don’t like that.”

“I have asked officers to make changes to schemes due to comments from the public. But sometimes they say ‘we can’t because the conditions of our funding say we can’t.’ That is really frustrating.”

An interesting discussion emerged around the process of delivering on priorities. For many of the councillors, they had a clear sense of their priorities for delivery when they came into a position of power. But the complexities of changing policies, development of schemes,

engagement on those schemes, delivery, and giving the schemes time to ‘bed in’ ahead of future elections posed a political challenge for councillors. Namely, they were averse to having schemes that were especially controversial being fresh in the mind of voters in the run up to an election.

“You get into office and you have big ideas. Then you realise you have to change the policy, then develop the scheme idea, then bid for funding, then design and consult on it, and make changes, then make the decision, before you then implement. Your 4 years can be taken up just getting a scheme to consultation.”

“I was told in my first week that in order to do more traffic reduction schemes, we would have to change our transport plan. That was a minimum of 2 years. I was not happy.”

“The worst thing for a politician is having something controversial on people’s minds when they come to vote. So I’m not shocked that other councils cancel controversial things a couple of years out from an election.”

There was also a sense from the interviewees that the link between what they wanted to achieve in terms of wider policy objectives (such as improving health outcomes, improving accessibility, and supporting local businesses) and the delivery of specific schemes and policies needed to be much clearer. The interviewees expressed a frustration that such links were essentially implied in terms of scheme justification, or only directly related to transport objectives such as those in the Local Transport Plan. Leaving them to determine this link to wider policy objectives themselves, and to translate that for others.

“The number of times I have had to tell officers that they need to make the links with things like health more explicit is maddening.”

“Say these schemes make people’s health better, or make places better to shop. Make it really explicit, and sell that in really simple language.”

Other subject matters raised in the interviews

The interviews themselves covered a wide range of other subject matters, many of which were light on detail or were only mentioned in passing. But from the interviews other subject areas can be briefly summarised.

An interesting finding was that the interviewees often did not speak about politics, or the role of their political philosophy in shaping their views on how transport should be delivered. Some interviewees did speak of past political failures, such as the deregulation of buses or restrictions on car parking in city centres for people holding blue disabled badges. But rarely did they mention how their political philosophy directly drives their day-to-day decisions.

"I've been a member of the party since I was 18 – I'm now way past that clearly. I joined them because I agreed with their policies, but I learned quickly that to the average person this doesn't really matter. That creeps into your thinking – so long as you are doing good things, the colour of your rosette doesn't matter that much."

"Most of us know the things the Tories did like bus regulation and privatising trains has been a disaster. The people who fix those things, regardless of the party, will get a lot of thanks for it."

When pressed on this subject matter, some interviewees highlighted that their manifestos that they were elected on highlight their political philosophy, and so long as they delivered on their manifesto pledges they were, in many respects, delivering on their philosophy. But much of their decision making relates to operational issues and managing stakeholders, which is extremely practical regardless of the political philosophy of the councillor responsible. So effectively, the practical requirements of the position necessitates some degree of neutrality in political judgement.

"We are judged based on whether we deliver our manifesto. If I can go back to my local area at the next election and say to them 'I made this happen' they will vote for my party. In that respect, just making sure we do the basics right matters more right now, rather than all of the politics."

"My politics almost never come into it. I just ask whether this is delivering what we promised to do and have people been asked."

This is not to say that politics does not affect their decision making. They stated that ultimately, voters judge them on delivery, and so thoughts of playing politics on issues comes secondary to delivering what they promised.

Specific modes of transport were infrequently mentioned during the interviews, and even then the mentions were only in passing as part of a broader point the interviewees were making. For example, buses were mentioned either as part of discussions relating to the promise of bus franchising, or working with operators on network management issues. Or cycling was mentioned as part of general discussions on public engagement, and often cited as examples where engagement was both good and bad.

"We made some commitment years ago to franchise buses in our area. We are just waiting on [national government] to sort out the legislation so we can come to a view on whether we can do it."

"I don't know why, but cycling schemes seem to really get some people's backs up."

Finally, governance structures and processes were also mentioned, primarily in relation to the model of Cabinet governance that seems to have been adopted across all of those who were

interviewed. What was interesting was the lack of mention of governance and process being a barrier to deliver. Councillors saw that the Cabinet governance model for delivery provided a democratic and necessary check and challenge on delivery, to ensure that schemes are delivered correctly and achieve wider policy objectives than simply transport objectives.

“We could do things quicker – delegate all the decisions to cabinet members or officers or the like. But democracy means being deliberate. A botched decision done quickly people remember.”

“The Cabinet is there for a reason, and the way that work means that so long as engagement is done early, decisions can be made more quickly later on in the process.”

Key Research Findings

This research raised some interesting matters that are relevance to sustainable transport professionals and campaigners who are seeking accelerated delivery of sustainable transport interventions. In terms of understanding the dynamics of key relationships that cabinet members have, and how they see the practicalities of delivery, as well as the influence of public acceptability of schemes.

A clear finding from the literature review was **the role of public acceptability in making political decisions**. Namely that, regardless of wider influences on the decisions of politicians, public acceptability significantly and demonstrably impacts upon political decision making. Even more so if the matter at hand is more salient at the time of the election. There is evidence that politicians can shift attitudes, but this is primarily among people who already agree with them.

This poses a dilemma for those supporting sustainable transport initiatives. Namely how can support for sustainable transport initiatives be made salient, and especially so at the time of voting against a variety of other issues. This is especially challenging in a social context where car use is normalised and is the dominant framing of transport issues in the public mind.

Political conflict can emerge at any point, and in any form. Whether it be conflict over relevant jurisdiction for making decisions, or conflict in terms of outlook and outcomes from what is attempting to be delivered. The possibility of such conflict and debate can be mitigated through close engagement with political decision making bodies and people from an early stage, but even then the nature of local politics means that this risk cannot be eliminated.

In terms of the key relationships that affect decisions, what became clear is that **the most important relationships in terms of day-to-day decision making is that which cabinet members have with officers**, and that which they have with their cabinet. The relationship with officers is that of delivery within partnership with them, with cabinet members seeing their role as providing the strategic direction and check and challenge on the public acceptability and political aspects of schemes.

How this is applied is very much down to the **temperament and leadership style of the councillors in question**. Some councillors interviewed have shown examples of them being more forceful in their approach with officers, sometimes to the extent where they secured outside expert opinion themselves. Meanwhile, others are happy for officers to lead on the technical aspects and provided input in terms of being a champion or providing political guidance. There was also a general desire for officers to be much more politically aware of the ramifications of policies and schemes.

When it comes to the role of engaging with fellow councillors, it very much comes across as **a relationship of equals, focussed on shared responsibility for outcomes for their communities**. There is a strong sense that rather than individual councillors owning major

decisions at councils, they are collectively owned amongst the Cabinet, and to some degree the wider body of councillors as well.

This could potentially be positive and negative in relation to sustainable transport. On the one hand, when controversial decisions are to be made, the collective ownership of the decision amongst councillors gives a sense of assurance to councillors with responsibility for transport, even if they may personally disagree with the decision. However, should a recommendation on a sustainable transport scheme not be positively viewed by the wider Cabinet, or worse be sprung upon them with little notice, the dynamics of the Cabinet group can make it harder to reach a satisfactory conclusion for sustainable transport schemes.

This may partly explain while the councillors interviewed support early engagement with councillors and their Cabinet colleagues. This is so the rationale behind projects can be discussed and debated, and councillors can have a meaningful say in the development and delivery of these projects. Thus minimising the risk that sustainable transport projects rejected by councillors at a later date.

Ultimately, how this works in practice is very much down to the style of the individual councillor. Consequently, having a general recommendation focussing on a specific tool or technique to implement is somewhat tricky. Different councillors lead in different ways with their own styles of leadership. But **understanding the dynamics, especially within decision making forums such as Cabinet**, is essential to understanding the best ways to influence decisions in a manner beneficial for sustainable travel outcomes.

The common message with regards to public consultation is like established best practice in the field. **Engage as early as possible, giving people a chance to have a meaningful say in the development of the proposals.** There appears to be a mix of views as to why this is valuable. On the one hand it could help to manage the risks associated with delivery of controversial projects, by showcasing that local communities have had a meaningful say in the development of projects. On the other it can come from a spirit of community-mindedness of some councillors, who wish to see communities at the heart of key decisions that are being made in their communities.

An interesting observation is that of the delivery timescale. Local councillors are typically (with some exceptions) elected on 4 year cycles. This gives a challenging timescale in terms of delivery, which necessitates changing policies (including Local Transport Plans), having the time to develop controversial schemes, deliver them, allow them to bed in, and promote successes in advance of a future election.

The reality of this process is somewhat different. Local Transport Plans can take up to 3 years to be developed, consulted upon, and adopted. Scheme development can range from a few months to several years, meaning that controversial schemes can be consulted upon or are being delivered at election time.

A final further observation to be made is in **the skillset of local councillors**, one that is often misunderstood by sustainable travel professionals and advocates. Knowledge about the benefits and challenges associated with sustainable transport infrastructure and services can be acquired through experience, and some councillors have that knowledge prior to them being elected. But there is an interpersonal skillset which is necessary for all councillors, reflecting their roles as community champions and advocates for sustainable transport schemes. Consequently, their value is not simply in their knowledge and support of sustainable transport initiatives, but their ability to influence and command the respect of others within their communities.

Frameworks to aid in influencing political decision making

One of the intentions of this research was to identify what changes could be made to decision making processes so as to aid in ensuring sustainable transport schemes could be delivered more quickly. What became obvious from the research, however, was less the process of delivery, and more the actors within that process. Ultimately understanding what influences them.

Consequently, what is presented here is a mixture of frameworks to help sustainable transport professionals and activists understand the influences on decision makers, a map of a typical process of decision making to aid in understanding, and some best practice recommendations for officers to improve the relationship with their respective lead councillors.

Influences on decision makers

A variety of different influences impact on councillors when making decisions. From the research undertaken, this can broadly be defined into 3 groupings.

- The decision maker themselves – what their beliefs, norms, and behaviours are
- An Immediate Influence Sphere – where different groups have a significant impact on their immediate decisions. These groups include their fellow cabinet members, fellow councillors, public opinion, community leaders, and their officers
- Wider Society Influences – which tend to impact on the decision maker themselves as well as those within their immediate influence sphere.

Across these spheres, there are broad classification of groups that have a strong influence on similar group types, and a slightly weaker influence on other group types. These are experts, community groups, public acceptance, and political. This is represented visually in Figure 1.

In reality, the situation is more complex, and there are many different types of relationships across these different spheres. But what this usefully demonstrates is that influence on decisions is more likely to come a decision makers Immediate Influence Sphere. For sustainable transport advocates this offers a number of opportunities:

- Sustainable travel expertise becoming embedded at an officer level, through technical training and developing the skills of professionals;
- Sustainable transport advocates being positioned as community leaders able to work positively with decision makers, including advocating for them where applicable;
- Shifting public attitudes towards those that not only favour sustainable transport, but make the issue of improving sustainable transport more salient in the minds of the public.

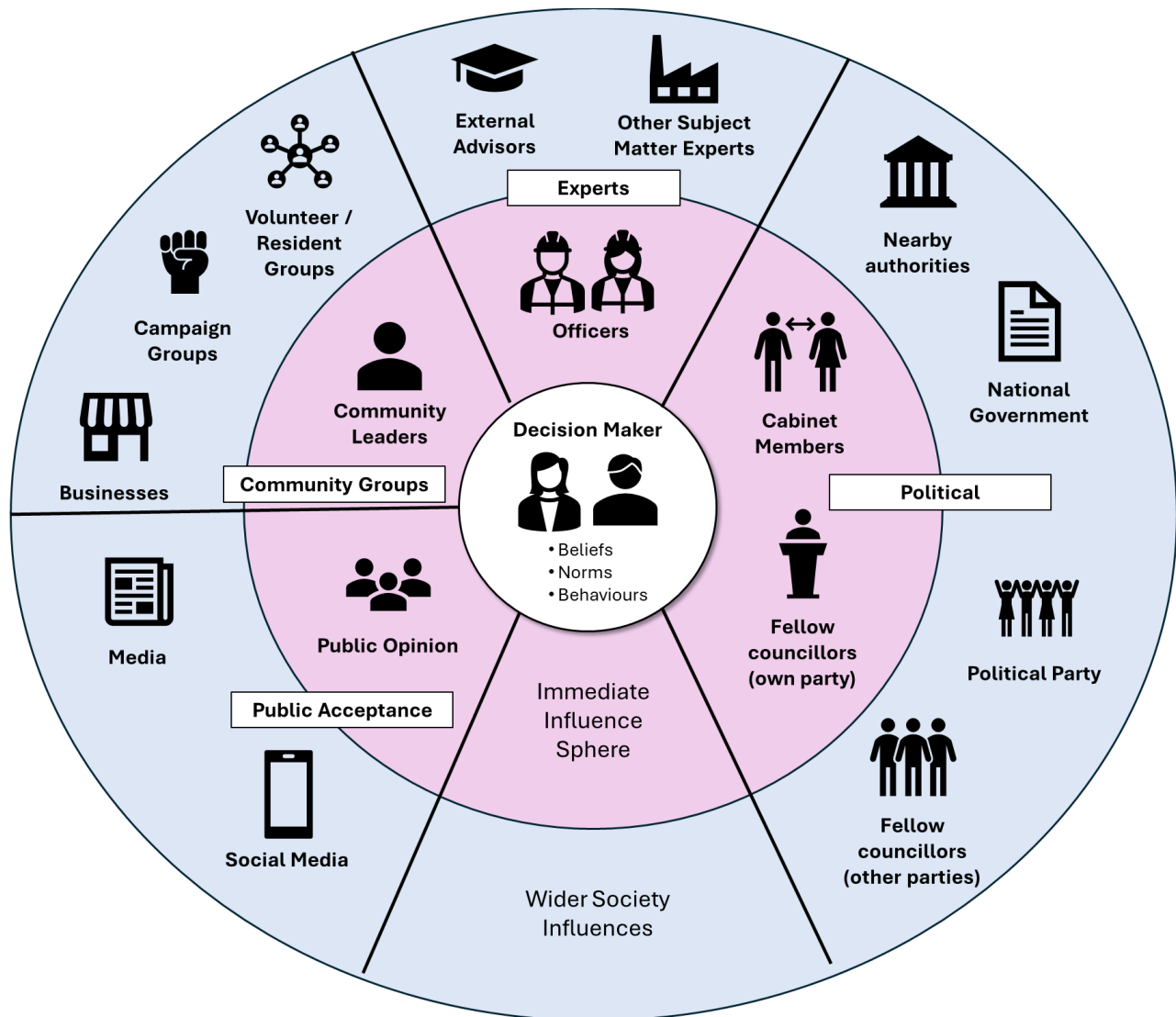


Figure 1 - Spheres of influence on sustainable transport decision makers

Consequently, sustainable transport advocates need to understand their relative position in this sphere of influence, and how to position themselves in a manner where they can proceed to work positively with decision makers to push forward sustainable transport.

The process of political decision making

From the interviews, and a review of council constitutions, a simplified version of a council's decision making process is shown in Figure 2. The importance of this diagram is to articulate not just the procedural elements of the decision making process, but to articulate the importance of specific relationships within that process.

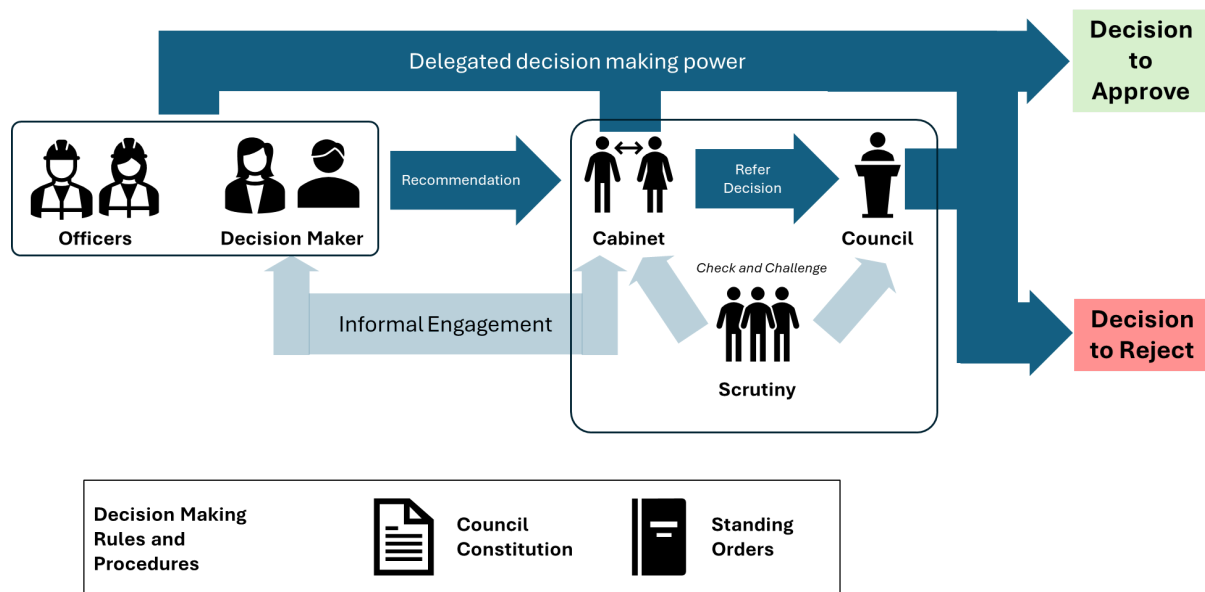


Figure 2 - Decision making process in a Local Highway Authority (Simplified)

At the beginning is a more technical process between officers and the decision maker. This is often where the technical matters of schemes and policies are discussed in detail and both progress, and in some instances they can make a decision under delegated authority within the decision making rules and procedures. The decision maker themselves can also informally engage with the wider cabinet to get their ideas and challenge, and discuss about how what is being planned achieves their wider goals.

Once a decision is referred to Cabinet, a more strategic decision making process takes place. The Cabinet can, in many instances, make a decision itself, or the decision may be referred (either by the Cabinet itself or as required under the Council's rules) to a Full Council Meeting. A process of Scrutiny may also check and challenge the decision at any time.

Understanding this process is important in terms of influencing outcomes for sustainable transport. Namely that the decision presented and made later in the process (by Cabinet or Full Council) is a result of extensive engagement at a much earlier stage, often before the decision reaches Cabinet. As such, while public participation at public meetings of Cabinet or Full Council is welcomed and can change decisions, being engaged in the process earlier is critical to having an influence.

Best practice recommendations for officers

This research identified the critical role that officers play in working with councillors to deliver sustainable transport schemes. A positive working relationship is therefore essential so that sustainable transport interventions continue to be delivered. Such recommendations are based upon the feedback provided through the interviews and the literature review.

Present ideas to councillors on how you can help achieve their manifesto commitments as early as you can. Review the details of their manifestos, and what they campaigned on. Identify changes to the programme of works that could be made to deliver against this, even if its just to start work on it. Present your ideas in your first meeting with them as a basis for discussion,

Commission survey work to understand public attitudes towards sustainable transport. The purpose of such a survey is not to understand what people think of sustainable transport, but to understand how pertinent it is to them on an ongoing basis. For example, how important is it in relative terms to other services? This provides you with evidence to inform discussions with decision makers.

Establish ground rules for engagement. Ask decision makers at your first meetings with them how they prefer to work, and on what matters it is essential you engage them on. Similarly, come with a clear ask of what you need from them so that they can help you do your job more effectively.

Understand that it is a learning relationship. Establish a relationship where both sides are learning from each other. You as officers get to learn of the political context within which you sit, and how to navigate that. They also get to learn of the implications of the decisions as well as some of your technical knowledge.

Use clear language. Councillors need to understand the reasons for the decision being made or recommended, and the background to it. Over time you will learn what level of detail is useful and necessary for them, but start from a basis of using clear, simple language to communicate the recommendation, the evidence for it, and what the impacts are. Accept feedback from them on ways to improve it.

There will likely still be instances where councillors may recommend decisions that are contrary to sustainable transport principles. That is to be expected. However, delivering against these recommendations ensures that a positive working relationship is developed, and consequently the likelihood of sustainable transport interventions being delivered is increased.