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# Emma Rawlings Smith

## Transport Planning Consultant

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**Royal  
Geographical  
Society**

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Advancing geography  
and geographical learning



**Job title:** Transport Planning Consultant

**Organisation:** AECOM

**Location:** Birmingham, UK

### How did you get to where you are now?

Prior to a career in transport planning, I was an educator. For over 17 years, I worked as a Head of Geography, teacher trainer, textbook author, A Level exam author and education consultant in schools and universities.

In 2017, I switched careers, taking up a new role as a Transport Planner at AECOM, Birmingham. Having been involved in a range of projects over the last two years, including Highways England's M42 Junction 6 Major Project and the Clean Air Zone for Birmingham City Council, I have been inspired to continue working to improve and manage our transport infrastructure in the Midlands region.

I have found that many of my skills from my former career are transferable and having a geography degree was invaluable. Transferable skills include the ability to carry out desk-based and primary research, report writing and data management. I have still needed to invest my time and effort to develop technical knowledge of transport, the local

context and national planning policy framework through CPD events and further research. I am still involved in education, mentoring a Transport Planning apprentice, writing A Level resources, completing my PhD in Geography Education and presenting papers on my research.

### What do you do as part of your role?

I am currently seconded into Birmingham City Council three days a week, where I am involved in the Clean Air Zone project. The secondment is focused on the delivery of eight Bus Priority Schemes along key transport corridors across Birmingham and involves liaising with design consultants, city councillors, bus operators, cycle stakeholders, the public and our partner in the scheme (Transport for West Midlands) to ensure delivery by January 2020. This role also involves writing consultation materials, reviewing consultation responses to inform detailed design, and supporting council planners to produce high-quality work and meet deadlines.

Back at AECOM, I spend the rest of the week on a range of projects. This includes writing development control responses to planning applications on behalf of Highways England, writing transport assessments and plans for developers and carrying out desk-based research on a range of studies. I also carry out invoicing and financial forecasting each month to ensure cash flow and support project management.

### What skills and characteristics do you need for this role, apart from geographical knowledge?

There are a range of skills required for transport planners which vary according to the particular project you are working on. Transport planners need to identify and solve problems, use models to create economic forecasts, analyse transport data from a range of sources, carry out desk-

**W:** [www.rgs.org/geographyprofessionals](http://www.rgs.org/geographyprofessionals)

based research and be able to write succinct reports, give presentations about proposed plans and provide recommendations and assess potential options or schemes designed to solve a transport problem or support economic growth. The ability to work well in a team and collaborate on projects is also key.

### **How does geography feature in your work/ what difference does it make?**

Geography is at the core of transport planning, it is impossible to effectively plan for transport without having a good understanding of how people use and move through a particular place. Planners use and create maps for all projects. Locational knowledge can be used to understand current transport problems and future growth pressures and to inform decisions about transport proposals and options.

### **Where might you be in five years' time?**

I could be anywhere in the world in five years' time. AECOM, and all the large consultancies, have offices worldwide, so moving abroad to gain a different type of experience is possible. I want to make rapid progression over the next five years and hope to have been promoted so that I am managing projects which improve peoples' lives.

### **What advice would you give to someone wanting to go in to this career?**

There are several routes into transport planning, depending on the stage at which you are in your education. A Level students can choose an accredited planning degree course, which means that they can achieve Chartered status after a couple of years working in the planning sector. Chartership is through a number of institutions. So, it is worth deciding whether your focus is on transport, logistics, civil engineering, economics or urban planning before deciding on the right degree.

If you have already completed a degree in a related discipline such as economics, geography or engineering, then completing a Masters in transport planning can provide the necessary qualification to become a graduate transport planner. I did not take either of these routes,

instead I approached my employer directly for my role in transport planning. I have now got two years' experience and I plan to develop my knowledge through CPD and technical training. I would probably advise graduates to think carefully about what aspect of planning they want to focus on and this should drive their choice of degree. Alternatively, if a degree course is not for them, there is now a Level 6 Apprenticeship in Transport Planning. With A Levels in suitable subjects such as geography, maths or economics, students can learn while on the job and get paid.

### **How do you maintain your knowledge and interest in geography outside of work?**

Due to my background in education, I feel that it is important to share my knowledge of the subject with others. This involves presenting papers about my geography education research and sharing my knowledge about projects such as Birmingham's Clean Air Zone with A Level students through magazine articles and subject update events. I also disseminate some of my knowledge through the Royal Geographical Society's online resources. I have previously written Data Skills resources about Changing Places, introducing students to the concept of place, while developing mathematical and GIS skills.

### **Why did you choose geography? Why should others choose geography?**

I chose to study geography because of an interest in the impact of humans on the natural world and because I wanted to study a subject which was tangible as a result of my lived experiences.

Viewing the world through a geographical lens helps geographers to see connections between people and places, think critically and analyse spatial and temporal patterns and processes. There has never been a more important time to study human-environment interactions, to turn our concerns about our rapidly changing climate and environment into action. Geography is about understanding the cause of issues and possible ways in which individuals, organisations and politicians can take direct action for a better world.