

Air Quality Plan briefing: Tackling transport's impact on air pollution

Tens of thousands of people die prematurely each year in England because they frequently breathe dirty air. Road transport is by far the biggest contributor to this pollution, the product of policies like those that promote diesel engines, and land-use planning that supports car-dependent development over better, more healthy alternatives.

After losing a Supreme Court case, national Government is being forced to take action. By the end of 2015, it must have in place a plan that will reduce air pollution to below legal limits across the country by 2020. This briefing sets out the transport policies national and local Government should adopt to tackle air pollution, save lives, improve health and make our towns and cities better places to live.

To make a meaningful contribution to meeting legal standards, the Air Quality Plan should include a coordinated, cross-departmental programme of action at national level to address the above issues. This should include:

Audits

- The Road Investment Strategy needs to be revisited to ensure it contributes to reduced air pollution. The most damaging schemes that add to breaches in cities should be amended (for example with lower speed limits) or removed.
- The forthcoming decision on airport capacity in the South East will need to take air pollution from surface access very seriously in its decision making.
- Planned investment in the railways, especially in rail electrification and the strategic freight network, should have positive effects on air pollution and these benefits should be counted in their business cases.
- Future Local Growth Fund bids around transport and development must contribute to meeting legal targets for cleaner air. Guidance should be clear that projects which increase car reliance in areas in breach of air quality laws will not be permitted.

Monitoring

- An improved national network of roadside air quality monitoring is needed. This should work to a consistent methodology and take in roads beyond the Strategic Road Network such as urban routes where congestion is often heaviest and pollution at its worst

Spending

- The Comprehensive Spending Review should support local sustainable transport through national funding for measures to change travel behaviour and improve choice. This could include car clubs, bike hire schemes, marketing programmes, travel plans, measures to increase walking and cycling and improve public transport. Initiatives like the Local Sustainable Transport Fund, Green Bus Fund, Clean Vehicle Technology Fund and New Stations Fund have successfully targeted sustainable transport investment in the past.
- The Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy should target the 75 per cent of car journey which are under 5 miles. Modal shift should be supported by funding cycle routes and good pedestrian networks in urban areas. This would help achieve pollution targets and other objectives such as doubling cycling in England and increasing walking to school.

Powers

- The planned 'Buses Bill' should support better public transport in cities by allowing local authorities to franchise bus services (as agreed for Greater Manchester and Cornwall). Other reforms in the Bill should include making low emissions buses a requirement in franchises and support for bus partnerships, multi-operator tickets and Oyster-style smartcards which can help shift more urban journeys from cars to public transport.

Tax policy

- There should be changes to consumer labelling and Vehicle Excise Duty to change perceptions about diesel and reverse the growth in diesel's market share.
- Company car taxation should be adjusted to give incentives to buy and run low emission cars and the levy on Heavy Goods Vehicles could be extended into a broader charging regime to incentivise lower emission vehicles and better freight operations.

Clean Air Zones

- A national network of Clean Air Zones is an important part of efforts to reduce air pollution and should be a requirement for all zones currently in breach of legal limits. Currently, Zones are proposed for only the seven areas predicted to have worst air quality by 2020. This is based on a number of assumptions including cleaner engines about which recent revelations raise serious questions.
- Lessons need to be learnt from existing clean air zones, such as London's Low Emissions Zone. Launched in 2008, this failed to improve air quality in its first three years resulting in much tougher steps subsequently being required in the form of the proposed Ultra Low Emissions Zone.

National land-use planning

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and Planning Practice Guidance notes (PPG) needs to be amended to better support sustainable transport and move away from car dependency. This should include:

- A lower threshold by which negative transport impacts make a proposal unacceptable (currently development is only prevented where transport impacts are "severe.")
- A sequential test in assessing the suitability of sites for development with brownfield land close to the town centre first and greenfield sites only accessible by road considered only when other options are not available, and then taken forward in a way that does not rely on car use.
- PPG needs to be amended to reflect clean air objectives achievable through sustainable transport. This should include appropriate guidance on Sustainability appraisal, Transport evidence bases, and Travel plans, transport assessments and statements.

Local plans

- Local plans and neighbourhood plans should set out how sustainable transport will be actively supported through future networks for walking, cycling and public transport. These should be linked to the Infrastructure Delivery Plan and Community Infrastructure Levy.
- New housing should include minimum density standards of between 100 and 200 dwellings per hectare and be located within easy walking of major public transport links and existing urban centres, as well as ensuring easy access to public transport and cycle networks
- Street layout and design standards should focus on a network of safe, convenient and attractive routes for cycling and pedestrians.
- Larger developments should be designed so that car use is actively restrained through, for example, limited parking. They should have dedicated public transport routes with direct high quality pedestrian and cycle links to public transport
- Smart travel and behaviour change programmes such as residential travel plans should be in place both as part of the construction and marketing of a development, and then part of an ongoing commitment to supporting and extending sustainable transport
- 'Last mile' freight management should be supported for example, there are existing or planned 'consolidation centres', which put goods into smaller and less polluting vehicles for local delivery. Local fiscal tools such as Nottingham's levy on workplace parking spaces should be encouraged with revenue used to fund improvements to public transport.
- Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) play a central role in local transport infrastructure and should have a formal link with the planning system to ensure their transport priorities support sustainable transport and include a clear evidence base on public health and air pollution

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