

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee inquiry into air pollution ~ Response from Campaign for Better Transport

Summary

Campaign for Better Transport is concerned that initiatives set out in DEFRA's Air Quality Plan (December 2015) are insufficient for the UK to comply with the legal responsibility to tackle air pollution in the shortest possible time.

To address this, we believe DEFRA should oversee the coordination of a proactive cross-Government package of measures to tackle air pollution. The national air quality plan and associated decision making should be based on the following approach:

- Auditing existing policies - ensuring existing policy positions such as those around transport taxation, road building and land-use planning are audited and consistent with requirements to tackle air pollution
- Spending decisions help tackle air pollution – Planned spending in areas including public transport, walking and cycling to be designed to actively contribute to meeting air quality targets
- Improving guidance and support to local decision makers – A national network of air quality monitoring to underpin decisions and clear guidance on land use planning and transport infrastructure to tackle air pollution.

Auditing existing policies

UK air pollution can be characterised as an environmental problem, created by emissions from road transport, and having a major effect on communities and public health. An effective response therefore needs to be based on a package of measures coordinated in their implementation across Government departments, local authorities and agencies. DEFRA's Air Quality Plan should provide a framework for this.

The DEFRA plan, however, relies on local action and existing policy measures to maintain trends and achieve compliance. Only the places worst affected by pollution are proposed for specific national action (Clean Air Zones) with the majority of compliance reliant on a continuation of existing trends.

Nationally, while we would acknowledge there is some cross-departmental working on air pollution, the measures needed to achieve compliance with air quality standards (in particular, the UK Supreme Court requirement for changes to be made in the 'shortest time possible' (April 2015)) are insufficient.

To address this in national coordination, there is a need for DEFRA to audit those national policies likely to have a negative effect on air quality, for example:

- Road fuel taxation policy continues to promote the use of diesel engines
- A multi-billion pound predict-and-provide road building programme that encourages car use over other more sustainable forms of transport

- Land-use planning guidance allows car-dependent development and fails to adequately support and encourage development based on sustainable public transport.

Without undertaking a full assessment of whether existing national policies such as these are compatible with air quality objectives, DEFRA's proposals come up significantly short of a full response to the court judgement against the UK.

As part of the Air Quality Plan, we also look to DEFRA to coordinate an assessment of the transport taxation options which the Government should properly consider as part of actions to reduce emissions from transport. These include:

- Road fuel: Fuel taxation should be applied in a way that encourages drivers to choose genuinely cleaner vehicles including hybrid and electric cars.
- Company cars: Tax policy on company cars should be adjusted to give incentives to buy and run low emission cars of all kinds. Currently the system doesn't reward these sufficiently and the overall charges on company cars are in fact significantly below the value of the benefit now, leading to incentives for increased driving.
- Vans: Graduated vehicle excise duty should be extended on vans to create a similar approach to the first year system introduced for cars in the recent Budget.
- Heavy Goods Vehicles: HGVs already have a levy applied to them. This could be extended into a broader charging regime that incentivises lower emission vehicles and better freight operations, as other countries have done.

Spending decisions help tackle air pollution

Given the constraints on public spending, it might be helpful to look at cross-Government funding where multiple departments will benefit from a programme including introducing a cross-Government fund to cut air pollution. We also look to DEFRA to coordinate national initiatives to ensure they best contribute to improved air quality and compliance with legal standard. These include:

Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy

With over three quarters of car journeys being less than 5 miles, the forthcoming Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy should target modal shift by funding cycle routes and good pedestrian networks in urban areas to increase cycling and walking for shorter journeys. Such an approach would help achieve pollution targets and other objectives such as doubling cycling in England and increasing the percentage of journeys to school taken on foot.

New measures in the Buses Bill

The planned 'Buses Bill' should support better public transport in cities by allowing local authorities to franchise bus services as has already been 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 a shift more urban journeys from cars to public transport.

Road Investment Strategy

The programme set out in the Government's Road Investment Strategy should to be revisited to ensure that it contributes to the reduction in air pollution needed, with the most damaging schemes that add to breaches in cities amended (for example with lower speed limits) or removed. The DfT has ringfenced an Environment Fund, Innovation Fund and and Cycling, Safety and Integration Funds for the Strategic Road Network within the Road Investment Plan to assist with a 'green retrofit' of existing motorways. The Highways Executive should continue to work with NGOs to ensure timely and appropriate allocation of this funding. The DfT Road Investment Plan also allocated an Air Quality Fund worth £100 million that will focus on working with local

authorities to reduce pollution away from the Strategic Road Network. This funding should be co-ordinated with DEFRA funding to assist delivery of the Air Quality Plan.

Spending Review support for local sustainable transport

National funding should be available for sustainable transport interventions which improve air quality. The Local Sustainable Transport Fund showed that such an approach can be highly effective, funding measures to change travel behaviour and improve travel choices such as car clubs, bike hire schemes, marketing programmes, travel plans, as well as the measures to increase walking and cycling and improve public transport. Other initiatives such as the Green Bus Fund, Clean Vehicle Technology Fund and New Stations Fund have also allowed national government to target investment in sustainable transport.

Air Transport

In addition, the forthcoming decision on airport capacity in the South East will clearly need to take the air pollution implications very seriously. The cost of sufficiently improving surface access to avoid unacceptable congestion and pollution is likely to be so high as to make airport expansion unaffordable. Fiscal tools to mitigate pollution such as a frequent flyer levy could avoid the need for airport expansion in the South East at all.

Improving monitoring and guidance to local decision makers

Monitoring

An improved national network of roadside air quality monitoring is needed to underpin assessment of progress with the Air Quality Plan. This should work to a consistent methodology and take in roads beyond the Strategic Road Network, for example urban routes where congestion is often heaviest and pollution at its worst.

Land-use planning

Improved planning guidance to local authorities to encourage sustainable transport choices and discourage car-based development. For example, local plans and neighbourhood plans do not currently set out how sustainable transport will be actively supported. In failing to do this, they represent a missed opportunity in reducing air pollution. Policies that locate new developments around public transport services will help reduce car mileage and pollution. To address this, guidance for local spatial planning should require:

- Clear policies and plans covering the future networks for walking, cycling and public transport
- Locate new housing with a focus on walking distance to major public transport links and existing urban centres planned
- Include minimum standards for density of new housing, with standards of between 100 and 200 dwelling per hectare being the norm
- Public transport that provides rapid connections to major centres of jobs and services
- Larger developments should have dedicated public transport routes with direct high quality pedestrian and cycle links to public transport.
- New developments should be designed so that car use is actively restrained through, for example, limited parking, while other modes are faster and more convenient
- 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

Air Quality Plan guidance

We would also expect the Air Quality Plan to offer good practice suggestions for local authorities in reducing pollution. This should include:

- 'Last mile' freight management in cities: The Air Quality Plan should actively support projects to manage freight better in cities. For example, there exist or are planned 'consolidation centres', which put goods into smaller and less polluting vehicles for local delivery. Some cities have been promoting cycle couriers and zero emission freight distribution vehicles, and there have been experiments with running freight trains into city centre stations at night to enable more local distribution.
- Local fiscal tools: The Air Quality Plan should encourage local authorities to employ fiscal tools to reduce pollution. For example, Nottingham has already implemented a levy on workplace parking spaces and used the revenue to fund a fleet of electric buses and new tram lines.
- Managing and reducing urban traffic: measures to achieve this include local parking controls and charges, redesigning streets to give more priority to pedestrians, cyclists and public transport, and managing traffic more actively and intelligently. New technology makes this easier and some measures are already being applied in cities here and in other countries. Government should give extra powers to local authorities to help this - for example activating part of the 2004 Traffic Management Act would allow councils to enforce traffic management properly.
- Low Emission Zones and Ultra Low Emission Zones can be effective in deterring vehicles that do not meet prescribed standards from areas of high air pollution. However, Government should provide greater powers to local authorities with them and allow the zones to be tightened progressively in order to meet the targets. The Environmental Audit Committee recommended a national framework for LEZs in its report on air pollution last year.

Improved guidance to Local Enterprise Partnerships

Future Growth Fund bids around transport and development must contribute to meeting legal targets for cleaner air. Local Enterprise Partnerships should be asked to audit the consequences for local air pollution of their economic programmes, which include significant transport investment, and to give priority to investments that will help cut air pollution. In particular:

- Guidance that the LEP's activities must conform with legal environmental requirements is insufficiently explicit with regard to air quality
- Guidance should be clear that projects which increase car reliance in areas in breach of air quality laws will not be permitted.
- Guidance should require co-ordination of bid programmes with measures identified in local air quality zone plans.
- Air quality impact assessments should be mandatory in bids and project evaluation in the proposed new Clean Air Zones (Birmingham, Leeds, Southampton, Nottingham and Derby).
- 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.

December 2015

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Campaign for Better Transport

Campaign for Better Transport's vision is a country where communities have affordable transport that improves quality of life and protects the environment. Achieving our vision requires substantial changes to UK transport policy which we aim to achieve by providing well-researched, practical solutions that gain support from both decision-makers and the public.

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