

Environmental Audit Committee response to Defra consultation on air quality

- **Data and public awareness**

The Committee welcomes the Government's commitment to providing "up to date and accessible information" (p.14) on air quality to the public, and in particular the near real time monitoring communicated via the UK-Air website. However, we call on the Government to do more to raise awareness of current air quality forecasts, and in addition, to provide fuller information and education on how individuals can translate these forecasts into action.

In the Committee's 2014 report on air quality, we called on the Government to work more closely with the Met Office, BBC and other broadcasters to ensure that high air pollution forecasts are disseminated widely via mainstream media in the same way that pollen and UV forecasts are broadcast now. Crucially, the Committee also called for these to come with advice on what action should be taken. Government should ensure that local authorities are aware where to find this information, and schools and care homes should be identified and presented with air pollution advice so that they know what to do during air pollution events.

- **Local strategies**

A substantial component of the plan to deliver air quality improvements rests on action by local authorities and individual local plans. We welcome the principle of local plans, and hope that it achieves the Committee's 2014 recommendation that the Government set out a clear picture of the demarcations between central and local government on the management of air quality, bringing greater consistency to the relationship.

However, the Committee seeks reassurance that, against a backdrop of reductions in local authority funding, that authorities will be adequately resourced to carry out these local plans where they require action and spending over and above that already in place. Additionally, the Committee reiterates the concern set out in its 2011 report: that a blanket approach of transferring EU fines to local authorities where air quality standards are not met would be unfair, since the causes of poor air quality often arise from policies for which central government is responsible.

The Committee is also concerned that by relying on the delivery local plans to achieve a substantial degree of its progress toward meeting the air quality targets, that it undermines its control over whether the targets will be met in appropriate time, and so reduces its ability to assure that the targets will be met.

- **National framework for clean air zones**

The Committee welcomes the Government's proposal to set up a national framework for Clean Air Zones to provide consistency and clarity. The Committee has, on more than one occasion, called for a national framework for low emission zones, and we are pleased that this recommendation has been taken up. We regret the fact that the

proposed framework does not form part of the consultation and will not be published until 2016, after the submission of the air quality plan to the European Commission.

We seek assurances that the power for local authorities to decide what class of access control to grant in their area will not lead to “conflicting signals to consumers” which “make it difficult for businesses to operate across a number of cities to make straightforward, economic and operational decisions” (p.32) – problems which the national framework is designed to solve, not perpetuate.

- **Existing diesel vehicles**

The consultation discusses schemes to retrofitting older, more polluting buses through national retrofit schemes, including £7.3m committed in 2013 and a further £5m in 2015. The Committee welcomes this. However, in line with the recommendation of our 2014 report on air quality, we invite the Government to consider a scheme to allow diesel vehicle owners to retrofit their engines, or a national vehicle scrappage scheme which reflects the different circumstances, costs and benefits in urban and rural areas. Such schemes could provide useful incentives for customers to drive vehicles which pollute less.

- **Fuel duty and vehicle excise duty**

In the Committee’s 2014 report, we called for Defra and the Department of Transport to work urgently with the Treasury to work towards a long-term rebalancing of fuel duty and Vehicle Excise Duty consistent with reducing not just CO₂ emissions but also NO₂ and particulate matter. The Committee is disappointed that the consultation on air quality contains no mention of the impact of upcoming Vehicle Excise Duty changes on incentives for vehicles that emit less NO₂.

- **Cross-Government Strategy**

The Committee welcomes the assurance of ministers from Defra and the Department for Transport, given at an EAC evidence session on 27th October, that these proposals were developed collaboratively between the two departments. Nonetheless, DEFRA is reliant for the success of this strategy of the actions of a number of other Departments, agencies and local authorities. The Committee would like the final version of the plan to include clear accountability, with each action point and proposal having a responsible department or agency and measure for that body’s success or otherwise.