

To: City Executive Board

Date: 15 December 2016

Report of: Scrutiny Committee

Title of Report: Air Quality

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To present the recommendation of the Scrutiny Committee on Air Quality

Scrutiny Lead Member: Councillor Andrew Gant, Chair of Scrutiny

Executive lead member: Councillor John Tanner, Board Member for A Clean and Green Oxford

Recommendation of the Scrutiny Committee to the City Executive Board:

That the City Executive Board states whether it agrees or disagrees with the six recommendations set out in the body of this report.

Introduction

1. The Scrutiny Committee prioritised the issue of air quality for consideration during the 2016/17 council year and requested a report from the Council's Air Quality Officer to support a discussion at the 7 November 2016 Scrutiny Committee meeting. The Committee would like to thank Councillor John Tanner and Ian Halliday for providing an excellent report and supporting this discussion.

Summary and recommendation

2. The Board Member and Air Quality Officer explained that significant progress was being made in improving air quality in the City but that further action was needed. More information about air pollution is available than ever before and public awareness of the impacts of air pollution on health are increasing. They explained there needed to be a shift to zero emission transport in the City as hybrid buses, taxis and freight still produced diesel emissions.

3. The Committee asked a question about the implications of a recent High Court ruling which ruled that the Government failed to comply with EU targets on air quality. The Air Quality Officer advised that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) had indicated that their broad air quality framework and current targets would remain in place post-Brexit. It was stated that DEFRA was likely to look to increase the number of Clean Air Zones being implemented in UK cities, but that plans for a zero emissions zone in Oxford already went further. Government has also indicated that any EU fines in relation to non-compliance of EU targets could be passed down to local authorities. The Committee suggest that, in the event of a future weakening of air quality targets in the UK, the Council should continue to work to the current EU targets.

Recommendation 1 – That the City Council continues to seek to comply with the current EU air quality targets in the event that the UK Government chooses to introduce less-stringent targets after leaving the EU.

4. The Committee commented that the Low Emissions Zone (LEZ) in Oxford City Centre was not well publicised by signage. The Committee heard that the LEZ only applies to buses and while the bus companies were fully aware, more could be done in terms of wider awareness-raising.

Recommendation 2 – That the City Council should promote and raise public awareness of initiatives to improve air quality in Oxford such as the Low Emissions Zone.

5. The Committee commented that there were no smokeless obligations or restrictions on boat emissions in the City Centre area. Currently data is not available to evidence the level of impact of emission from boats. The Committee suggest that measures are needed to determine if emissions from boats are found to be in breach of air quality targets. If this is found to be the case the Council should work in partnership with the Canal and Rivers Trust and press for the introduction of appropriate measures.

Recommendation 3 – That the City Council gathers empirical evidence of the impacts of boat emissions on air quality and works in partnership with partners to identify solutions.

6. The Committee noted that there was a growing body of evidence that planting trees can help to reduce nitrogen dioxide concentrations and noted that the Council could draw on local expertise in this field. The Air Quality Officer agreed and said this was something that could be looked at. The Committee suggest that further consideration should be given to the case for tree planting to offset emissions and whether tree planting could be included in the Council's Air Quality Action Plan.

Recommendation 4 – That further consideration is given to whether tree planting should form part of the City Council's approach to improving air quality in Oxford.

7. The Committee examined air quality data at various locations in the City for 2011 to 2015 and questioned why, following a trend of steadily improving data, air

quality appeared to have deteriorated in 2015 at various locations. The Committee heard that the monitoring data was considered to be accurate to within plus or minus 25%, so the 2015 rises were generally within the margin of error. However, it was expected that prolonged roadworks close to some monitoring locations had had a significant impact on air quality in those areas.

8. The Committee noted that St. Clements was one area where, even allowing for the margin of error, the monitoring data for nitrogen dioxide had consistently exceeded targets. The Air Quality Officer agreed that the data indicated that this was one of the worst areas in the City for air quality due to heavy traffic, frequent bus movements, a lack of alternative routes and its geographical position. He said that the department had tried but been unsuccessful in seeking funding for additional monitoring at St. Clements. The City continued to raise concerns with the transport authority, Oxfordshire County Council. The Committee suggest that urgent action is needed at St. Clements in particular, perhaps supported by an area-specific action plan.

Recommendation 5 – That the City Council works with the Transport Authority in order to achieve air quality objective levels in the worst areas (e.g. St. Clements).

9. The Committee noted the need for effective partnership working with the County Council as the local transport authority. Transport accounts for 75% of emissions, so transport policy and strategy will have the biggest impact on air quality. The Committee heard that a lot of work had gone into working with the County to reduce emissions from buses and that further air quality improvements required commitment and continued pressure from the City Council.
10. The Committee questioned what impact the opening of the redeveloped Westgate Shopping Centre was expected to have on air quality. The Air Quality Officer said he had reviewed the air quality impact assessments for the new Westgate Centre and there was likely to be an increase in nitrogen dioxide concentrations at a specific location. This had resulted in the developers being required to implement mitigation measures. Modelling future air quality was difficult to do and it was now becoming generally recognised that some projections had included very optimistic assumptions about the impacts of new technologies on emissions levels and air quality, as evidenced by the VW emissions scandal.
11. The Board Member expressed concern about the transportation of shoppers to and from the new Westgate Shopping Centre. He said that his preference was for fast buses to and from park and rides or slightly further afield.

Recommendation 6 – That the City and County Council encourage shoppers to utilise sustainable methods of transport when the Westgate Shopping Centre reopens in autumn 2017.

12. Other lines of inquiry pursued by the Committee included the impacts and take up of additional cycle parking at park and ride sites, controls around wood burning stoves, the prevalence of volatile organic compounds in the City and whether

additional monitoring would take place during a major road scheme in Headington. The Committee noted that people would be forced to consider whether journeys through Headington were really necessary and that people tended to be exposed to the highest levels of nitrogen dioxide when in their vehicles, rather than when walking or cycling. The Committee also voiced support in principle for the introduction of a Workplace Parking Levy.

Further consideration

13. The Committee agreed to revisit the issue of air quality within the next six months or so and to invite representatives of the County Council to that discussion.

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