

To: City Executive Board
Date: 13 February 2018
Report of: Scrutiny Committee
Title of Report: Air Quality Annual Status Report 2016

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To present Scrutiny Committee recommendations on the Air Quality Annual Status Report 2016
Key decision:	No
Executive Board Member:	Councillor John Tanner, Climate Change and Cleaner Greener Oxford
Scrutiny Lead Member:	Councillor Andrew Gant, Chair of Scrutiny Committee
Corporate Priority:	A Clean and Green Oxford
Policy Framework:	Corporate Plan
Recommendation(s): That the City Executive Board states whether it agrees or disagrees with the three recommendations in the body of this report	

Appendices
None

Introduction and background

1. The Scrutiny Committee considered the 2016 Air Quality Annual Status Report at a meeting on 15 January 2018. The Committee would like to thank Councillor John Tanner, Board Member for Climate Change and Cleaner Greener Oxford, Mai Jarvis, Environmental Quality Team Manager, and Pedro Rocha Abreu, Air Quality Officer, for presenting the report and answering questions.
2. The Board Member for Climate Change and Cleaner Greener Oxford said that an analysis of the last 10 years showed that NO₂ levels had dropped, typically, by 35%, at roadsides in the city centre. However the rate of improvement had decreased. A range of measures were in place and proposed to mitigate the risks posed by poor air quality.
3. The Environmental Quality Team Manager explained that the Council was required to submit an Air Quality report annually to DEFRA. While the Council had an important role to play in monitoring air quality and taking some mitigating action, the

County Council, as Transport Authority, had a particularly significant role and so close partnership was important.

4. There are 70 monitoring locations within the city in addition to automatic continuous monitoring at three city centre locations. Data from some locations provided a picture of trends over the last 13 years. The report noted 17 locations where the annual mean objective for levels of NO₂ had been exceeded. This was a reduction of 11% when compared with the previous year.
5. A range of actions were now in train to reduce levels of poor air quality. These included, among many others: preparation for the introduction of a Zero Emissions Zone; successful bid for provision of electric vehicle charging infrastructure for taxis; “Test Drive the Future” event; promotion of electric vehicle car clubs; and launch of the Go Ultra Low Oxford project. The Board Member for Climate Change and Cleaner Greener Oxford said that the ambition of moving towards a Zero Emission Zone was a serious and significant commitment but is not without its challenges, such as how to deal with heavy goods vehicles making deliveries in the city centre for example. The message of intent in the relation to the ZEZ was as important as its final achievement.

Summary and recommendations

6. The Committee noted that the air quality results for St Clements is a matter of concern and heard that a strategic group (with County Council representation) would meet to explore ways of addressing those concerns. The County Council has conducted a traffic survey of the area and one possibility being explored is the re-phasing of traffic lights to keep traffic flowing. Interestingly two monitoring sites in the area, just 25 metres apart, had produced markedly different results, which showed that air pollution diffused to a significant extent over short distances.
7. In response to a question, the Committee heard that the Council has not benefitted from the recently announced government funding pot of £4.5m to be put towards electric car charging points. This is because the city has already made significant advances in this area, including piloting on street charging points, and might well be used as an example of good practice for others. The Committee felt that notwithstanding the progress already made, no opportunity to secure a share of government funding should be lost.

Recommendation 1 – That the Council looks again at whether there is an opportunity to bid for some of the £4.5m of government funding available for electric vehicle charging infrastructure

8. The Committee recognised the potential value of vegetation (and notably trees) to absorb pollutants. At the same time it was noted that in some circumstances trees could create a “canyon” effect, trapping polluted air and exacerbating its detrimental effects. The Board Member for Climate Change and Cleaner Greener Oxford said he was disinclined to agree with a suggestion that there should be a pilot investigation into the benefits of planting because of the great difficulties in establishing a clear connection between the many and various mitigating strategies and their consequences. He was of the strong opinion that the focus should be on preventative measures. The Committee noted that scientific knowledge of the benefits of certain types of vegetation in relation to air quality was advancing all the time and suggest that this is kept under review.

Recommendation 2 – That the Council keeps a watching brief on the emerging science on the benefits of different types of vegetation as absorbers of pollutants

9. The Committee asked about the launch of the School’s Tackling Air Pollution (STOP) project and heard that it would provide additional monitoring data and, as importantly, would act as an educational tool, not just for pupils but for their parents, including about pertinent issues such as cars idling close to schools. More generally, the team were investigating the identification and supply of cheap but effective devices for measuring air quality which could be made widely available to interested members of the public. The Environmental Quality Team Manager said that work was also being done with the Hackney Cab drivers’ association about environmental matters. The Committee suggest that the Council should do more to stop Hackney Carriages idling in the city centre.

Recommendation 3 – That the Council engages with Hackney Can drivers about the issue of idling and continues with the enforcement of anti-idling and the promotion of electric vehicles

10. The Committee suggested that the wording of the Action Plan was, in places, too vague and lacked ‘gritty’ objectives. Where strategies or plans had been proven to be ineffective, there should be no shame in being candid about the fact and ceasing the activity. The Environmental Quality Team Manager said that the wording in the plan needed to provide sufficient flexibility to accommodate detail which had, in some cases, yet to be determined, particularly when it involved working with partners. The report is also constrained to some degree by the DEFRA template.

Further consideration

11. The Committee asked to have sight of the data for 2017 at the earliest opportunity, not least because of the possible consequences of the opening of the Westgate Centre.

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