

To: Cabinet

Date: 11th February 2026

Report of: Director of Economy, Regeneration and Sustainability
(Clive Tritton)

Title of Report: Air Quality Action Plan (2026-2030)

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To approve adoption of Oxford's Air Quality Action Plan (2026-2030, as amended) following public consultation.
Key decision:	Yes
Cabinet Members:	Councillor Anna Railton - Cabinet Member for Zero Carbon Oxford and Climate Justice
Corporate Priority:	Zero Carbon
Policy Framework:	No
Recommendation(s): That Cabinet resolves to:	
1. Approve the adoption of Oxford's Air Quality Action Plan 2026-2030	

Appendices	
Appendix 1	Air Quality Action Plan 2026-2030 (Final version)
Appendix 2	Risk Assessment
Appendix 3	Equalities Impact Assessment
Appendix 4	Public Consultation Report

Introduction and background

1. The Local Air Quality Management (LAQM) process requires all UK local authorities to regularly review and assess air quality within their areas and determine whether the UK's legal air quality objectives are likely to be met. If an exceedance is considered likely, the authority must declare an Air Quality Management Area (AQMA) and develop an Air Quality Action Plan (AQAP) outlining the measures it will implement to achieve compliance.

2. Nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) is the pollutant of greatest concern in Oxford. It is primarily emitted from high-temperature combustion processes, such as road transport and energy generation. Due to its relatively short atmospheric lifetime (typically just a few hours) NO₂ tends to remain concentrated near its sources, resulting in a distinct localised pattern, particularly in urban areas and along busy roads.
3. Oxford City Council declared a city-wide AQMA in 2010 for NO₂, due to continuous breaches of the national objectives for this pollutant (an annual mean of 40 µg/m³). An AQAP was produced in 2013 in response, running until 2020.
4. Meeting the UK's legal air quality objectives does not necessarily mean the air is safe. In September 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO) published strong evidence showing that adverse health effects from air pollution occur at concentrations well below the UK's current legal limits for several pollutants and confirmed that there is no safe level of exposure.
5. The WHO therefore recommended non-legally binding guideline values set at much lower thresholds, intended for countries and local authorities to use as benchmarks on the path to cleaner air. For NO₂, the WHO proposed a stepwise approach, with interim targets of 40, 30, 20, and 10 µg/m³.
6. In January 2021 (six months before the WHO published its updated evidence), Oxford City Council adopted its second Air Quality Action Plan (AQAP), comprising a comprehensive set of 30 measures jointly agreed with key partners. These measures were designed to improve air quality across the city during the 2021–2025 period and led the Council to commit to achieving an annual mean NO₂ level of 30 µg/m³ citywide, at all locations considered relevant for human exposure by the end of 2025.
7. Key air quality measures delivered under the previous AQAP include: the launch of the Energy Superhub (2021), the Zero Emission Zone Pilot (2022), the implementation of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (2023), the city-wide expansion of Oxford's Smoke Control Area (2024), and, most recently, the electrification of Oxford's bus fleet through the ZEBRA scheme (2024).
8. Over the past decade (2014 - 2024), average NO₂ levels across Oxford have fallen by around 50%, with a quarter of that reduction achieved since 2021 - the year AQAP 2021-2025 was adopted. While this progress is encouraging, the Council recognises that much more remains to be done. As part of its statutory responsibilities, the Council must now publish a new Air Quality Action Plan (AQAP) to succeed the previous plan.
9. The new Air Quality Action Plan (AQAP) 2026-2030 sets out a comprehensive range of actions to be delivered by the Council and its partners to improve air quality in Oxford from 2026 to 2030. It also introduces a new local annual mean target for NO₂ of 20 µg/m³, to be achieved by 2030. This builds on the previous commitment to a 30 µg/m³ target by the end of 2025, a goal the Council is on track to deliver¹, reflecting continued ambition to go further in reducing pollution.

¹ Although all monitoring results for the 2025 calendar year have been collected, the final air pollution data must still undergo ratification and correction. Therefore, it is not yet possible to confirm whether this objective has been fully achieved. As in previous years, the Council will officially publish Oxford's final 2025 air pollution data in June 2026, in line with the timetable set by DEFRA.

10. The draft AQAP 2026-2030 was approved for public consultation by Cabinet in October 2025, and the consultation ran from 24 October to 30 November 2025. Feedback from the consultation has been incorporated into the AQAP where appropriate, and a full consultation report is provided in Appendix 4.

Public Consultation

11. The consultation engaged 125 members of the public.
12. The following stakeholder engagement activities were undertaken to promote the consultation survey: an online consultation link and local press release; multiple social media adverts and posts; direct emails to internal teams within the Council and at the Oxfordshire County Council, community groups, and the community action group network; information shared via internal newsletters, member briefings, and the corporate digital noticeboard; and published articles in Your Oxford, the Oxford City Centre business newsletter, and information shared to ZCOP Partnership members.
13. An AQAP booklet and an online public survey were made available alongside the draft AQAP document to support the consultation process. A summary of the survey results is provided in Appendix 4.
14. During the consultation, the Council complied with [LAQM PG22](#) and [Schedule 11](#) of the Environment Act 1995, actively seeking feedback from key statutory consultees on the AQAP. These included: the Secretary of State (DEFRA); neighbouring local authorities (Cherwell District Council, West Oxfordshire District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, and Vale of White Horse District Council); the Environment Agency; Oxfordshire County Council (as Transport Authority); National Highways; and Public Health.
15. The AQAP, included in Appendix 1, was developed by incorporating feedback from the public and key consultees. In response to this feedback, the following important additions were made:
- ✓ New AQAP Objective - Ensure three years of sustained compliance with the current legal NO₂ annual mean limit of 40 µg/m³, enabling the revocation of the city's AQMA after that period (a DEFRA requirement²).
 - ✓ Expanded Public Consultation Section - Includes detailed analysis and results, with a direct link to the full consultation report, which will also be published on the Council's air quality website alongside the final AQAP.

² The Local Air Quality Management (LAQM) framework, as administered by DEFRA, stipulates that an Air Quality Management Area (AQMA) should be considered for revocation once the relevant air quality objective has been met for three consecutive years, as confirmed through systematic monitoring. For AQMAs designated for nitrogen dioxide, this typically means demonstrating annual mean NO₂ levels below 36 µg/m³, to account for measurement uncertainties.

- ✓ Health Impact Information - Additional data on the overall health benefit for Oxford population, as a result of achieving the new proposed annual mean NO₂ target of 20 µg/m³ across the city by 2030 (42 life years saved).
16. The complete list of text amendments and additions to the final AQAP can be found in the public consultation report (Appendix 4).
 17. No new key areas of intervention or air quality actions were added as a result of the public consultation. According to the consultation results, 69% of participants either 'Agree' or 'Strongly Agree' with the four key areas of intervention proposed in the plan and only 15% "Disagree" or "Strongly disagree".
 18. This AQAP will build on existing proposals and identify additional measures to complement and integrate them. Its main priorities for the period 2026 - 2030 are focused on continuing the reduction of transport emissions. These priorities take into consideration three major schemes that are currently being led and developed by Oxfordshire County Council, the Highways Authority for Oxford: the Traffic Filters trials, the introduction of a Workplace Parking Levy, and the expansion of the Zero Emission Zone (ZEZ).
 19. The first two initiatives aim to reduce the number of private vehicles on the city's roads, while the ZEZ expansion targets emissions from vehicles operating in central areas of the city. Note that many elements of these schemes are still subject to public consultation and political approval, meaning their scope and final design may evolve as the process unfolds.
 20. The final AQAP is fully integrated with Oxford's draft Local Plan 2042, Oxfordshire's Local Transport and Connectivity Plan, and the Central Oxfordshire Travel Plan as well as with other relevant Council and Oxfordshire County Council policies and strategies (Please refer to Section 5.3 of the AQAP document on Policy Integration). It also aligns with the outcomes of Oxford's Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change, supports the objectives of the Oxfordshire Zero Carbon Partnership and reflects the Council's corporate priorities of pursuing a Zero Carbon Oxford and supporting thriving communities, as well as with the recommendations from the Council's Scrutiny Climate and Environment Panel.

New local target for NO₂

21. This AQAP introduces a new local air pollution reduction target for Oxford: an annual mean NO₂ concentration of 20 µg/m³ to be pursued citywide by the end of 2030, in all locations relevant to public exposure. This builds on the work initiated in January 2021 under the city's previous AQAP.
22. The proposed NO₂ target of 20 µg/m³ marks a substantial tightening relative to both the UK's current legal limit of 40 µg/m³ and Oxford's previous local target of 30 µg/m³, established in the previous Plan.
23. This new target is fully aligned with the World Health Organisation's Interim Target III and the European Union's recently adopted legal standard - both set at 20 µg/m³, with the EU standard also expected to be met by 2030.

24. The local target is not legally binding, but progress will be reported annually through the city's Air Quality Annual Status Report, as part of the Council's statutory air quality duties.
25. Public consultation results show strong support for the new local NO₂ target, with 71% of participants either '*Strongly Agreeing*' or '*Agreeing*' with its adoption and only 21% "*Disagreeing*" or "*Strongly Disagreeing*" with the proposal.

Actions

26. According to the latest [Source Apportionment Study](#) by Ricardo Energy & Environment, transport remains the largest contributor to NO_x emissions in Oxford, accounting for 44%, followed by emissions from Industry and services (30%), and domestic combustion (26%).
27. This AQAP outlines a comprehensive set of actions and measures, structured around four key priority areas for intervention:
 - ✓ Promoting Sustainable Travel and Reducing the Need to Drive
 - ✓ Accelerating the Transition to Low and Zero Emission Transport
 - ✓ Reducing Emissions from Domestic Heating, Industry, and Services
 - ✓ Facilitating behaviour change by enhancing public awareness and fostering collaborative partnerships
28. The full list of 30 air quality actions across the four key areas was developed using evidence from the source apportionment study and strengthened by feedback gathered during the public consultation.
29. Oxford City Council's new AQAP sets out a clear vision to:
Deliver Cleaner Air for everyone who lives in, works in, or visits the city of Oxford. To achieve this, the plan is built around four core aims:
 - ✓ Alignment with the World Health Organisation Air Quality Guidelines - These guidelines will serve as the city's reference standard and long-term target. This AQAP commits to pursuing WHO's Interim Target III for NO₂.
 - ✓ Raising Public Awareness - The plan aims to increase understanding of the health impacts of air pollution, empowering residents with information and encouraging behavioural change.
 - ✓ Leading by example - Through local action and policy, the Council will demonstrate its commitment to cleaner air and healthier communities, influencing broader change.
 - ✓ Achieving NO₂ compliance for AQMA revocation - To ensure NO₂ concentrations across Oxford remain below 36 µg/m³ (10% under the UK annual mean objective of 40 µg/m³) for three consecutive years (as per DEFRA's policy requirement), enabling the revocation of the city-wide Air Quality Management Area (AQMA) for NO₂.
30. Although DEFRA requires this proposed AQAP to focus primarily on reducing NO₂ concentrations (so that Oxford's Air Quality Management Area for NO₂ can eventually be revoked) it is important to highlight that several of the proposed measures will also deliver co-benefits by indirectly reducing PM_{2.5} emissions.

31. The actions outlined in this AQAP are expected to be delivered through collaboration with a range of partners, including Oxfordshire County Council, which has played an active role in its development due to its responsibilities as the local transport authority.

Monitoring and Assessment

32. The key to the success of the new AQAP is the ability to monitor and report on the progress of measures and assess their impact. This will allow the Plan to be further developed and ensure transparency and accountability.
33. The AQAP will be subject to an annual review. Progress each year will be reported in the Annual Status Reports (ASRs) produced by Oxford City Council as part of its statutory Local Air Quality Management duties. The Council will endeavour to share the annual updates with the largest number of citizens and give them the most robust scrutiny through the Council's scrutiny function.

Carbon and Environmental Considerations

34. This AQAP includes targeted measures and emissions reduction goals across a range of City and County Council-led programmes aimed at tackling both climate change (through carbon reduction) and air pollution.

Financial Implications

35. This AQAP includes a list of 30 actions, which are aimed at achieving compliance with legal limits and local targets of air pollution.
36. Three important actions outlined in this AQAP (Zero Emission Zone Expansion, Traffic Filters, and Workplace Parking Levy) are of the single responsibility of Oxfordshire County Council to deliver and hence present no financial burden for the Council. They have been included in this proposed AQAP following extensive engagement with Oxfordshire County Council through a joint AQAP steering group and are the result of current transport planning strategies and already on-going work.
37. Many of the actions proposed in this AQAP are already embedded within existing internal workstreams being developed by various teams across the Council and Oxfordshire County Council. As such, they are currently already being pursued using available funding and resources.
38. For certain actions not yet fully funded, this AQAP includes a commitment to *exploring opportunities* for delivery. It is anticipated that external grant funding will be necessary to implement these measures. The Council has a strong track record of securing external funding to support its sustainability objectives and will continue to build on this success. This includes seeking partnerships with innovation-focused organisations. However, it is important to note the significant reduction in UK Government funding for local air quality initiatives in recent years - particularly following the cancellation of DEFRA's Air Quality Grant programme, which previously supported local authorities in delivering air quality improvements.

39. The delivery of this Air Quality Action Plan may also face financial and operational risks linked to the proposed reorganisation of local government in Oxfordshire. Currently, air quality improvements are supported through a two-tier governance model, with Oxfordshire County Council acting as the transport authority and the Council leading on statutory air quality duties.
40. The anticipated redistribution of responsibilities and budgets resulting from the proposed local government reorganisation (expected to be finalised by May 2027 and implemented by April 2028) could significantly affect the prioritisation and funding of key measures within the AQAP.
41. Existing initiatives may need to be reassessed or re-approved under new governance arrangements, which could affect their scope, design, and delivery timelines. These uncertainties must be carefully managed to maintain continuity and ensure the effectiveness of air quality improvements in Oxford. Consequently, this AQAP will likely require review and updates once greater clarity on these governance changes is available.

.Legal Issues

42. Section 82 of the Environment Act 1995, (as amended by the Environment Act 2021) provides that every local authority in England shall review the air quality within its area, both at the present time and the likely future air quality, within the programme of Local Air Quality Management established under requirements within Part IV of that Act.
43. Local authorities also have a duty under Section 83 (1) of the Act to designate those areas where the air quality objectives (as set out in the Air Quality (England) Regulations 2010) are not being met (or are likely to be shown to be at risk of not meeting them) and where people are likely to be regularly present, as Air Quality Management Areas (AQMAS).
44. Once an AQMA has been designated, Section 83A requires the local authority to develop an Air Quality Action Plan (AQAP), to include public consultation, and detailing a list of remedial measures to tackle the problem within the AQMA. The Council may amend or revoke an area as appropriate in the light of subsequent reviews.
45. In August 2022, DEFRA published the Local Air Quality Management (LAQM) Statutory Policy Guidance 2022 and introduced a new warning process for overdue AQAPs which came into effect on 30 June 2023. If AQAP submission requirements are missed, the enforcement approach sets out an escalation process, ultimately ending as a Section 85 Secretary of State direction to the relevant Local Authority Chief Executive specifying action.
46. The city's proposed new local annual mean target for NO₂ is legally non-binding and does not override any current or future legal targets set by central government.

Level of risk

47. A risk assessment is available for review at Appendix 2.

Equalities Impact

48. The delivery of the range of measures set out in this AQAP will reduce air pollution levels across the whole city, which in turn will contribute to reducing health inequalities. It is therefore expected that this AQAP will have a positive impact on reducing inequality in Oxford.

49. An Equality Impact Assessment is included in Appendix 3.

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Background Papers: None	