

BRIEFING PAPER: AIR QUALITY – A FOLLOW UP REPORT HOUSE OF COMMONS ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE

Introduction

On 14 November 2011 the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee published 'Air quality: A follow up report', as a follow up to its 2010 report on air quality. The 2010 report was issued due to the prospect of the UK incurring EU fines for non-compliance with air quality directives. The report stated that poor air quality is shortening the life expectancy of people in the UK by an average of seven to eight months and is costing society up to £20 billion per year and called for an urgent step change in policy to reduce pollution from transport.

Summary

The 2011 report states that government has failed to address the issues outlined in the 2010 report, and that currently 40 out of 43 UK assessment zones are failing to meet EU targets. The 2011 report calls on government to:

- Prioritise action across central Government by putting improving air quality in the Defra Business Plan, and set up a Cabinet Office lead Ministerial Group to oversee delivery of a new cross government air quality strategy;
- Engage with local authority leaders clearly to set out the risks of failing to act to improve air quality, and join up thinking across local authority departments so they all contribute to solving this problem;
- **Establish a national framework of low emissions zones to help local authorities reduce pollution from traffic;**
- Ensure that thinking on air quality is central to public health reforms that will transfer public health functions to local authorities;
- Launch a public awareness campaign to drive air quality up the political agenda and inform people about the positive action they could take to reduce emissions and their exposure to these.

Key issues raised

- The report calls for a 'joined up policy' approach to air quality, in particular with regards climate change policy. The report highlights the benefits carbon reduction policies have on both these areas, for example in the promotion of electric vehicles and other emerging technologies, and calls for a "coherent and consistent regulatory base" as essential to drive innovation and instil investor confidence in these products. (p12)
- The report also highlights the inherent conflicts that the above approach raises. For example in encouraging diesel vehicles over petrol ("diesel cars are generally more energy efficient and produce less carbon dioxide per mile than a petrol equivalent, but they can also produce up to 20 times as much PM10 emissions"). (p12)

Low emissions zones (p17-18)

- The report states that EU fuel standards and emissions limits have led to a significant reduction in emissions from road vehicles. However these standards cannot be used to control NO₂ or PM10 emissions in the same way. Emission and fuel standards work to reduce emissions of air pollutants from vehicle tail pipes. The report states however, that recent research shows that vehicle brakes and tyres emit at least as much particulate matter, and that these types of emissions remain unregulated.
- The report states that retrofitting is a fast-acting solution to minimise particulate emissions from diesel exhausts and to make older vehicle engines meet current and future emission standards. However in its application for an extension to meeting the PM10 EU limit value deadline until 2011, government concluded that a mass diesel retrofitting programme for all polluting road vehicles would not be cost beneficial compared to a partial exemption which would provide additional time to enable planned measures to come into effect.
- The report notes that the reductions achieved by EURO standards have been more modest than those resulting from fuel standards, as they are only mandatory for new vehicles, not the existing vehicle parc. In addition many NO_x abatement technologies used to achieve EURO emissions levels fail to work efficiently in urban driving cycles, and so, in larger cities, the emissions reductions have not been as good as predicted.

- The report highlights the German national framework for low emission zones (LEZs) which facilitates local implementation of LEZs and provides certainty to businesses that their fleets will be compliant with all emissions zones within the country, and notes that government response to the 2010 report focused on allowing local authorities to decide individual LEZs rather than implementing a national framework. Since this response DEFRA has conducted an impact assessment of the costs and benefits that such a scheme would entail. When account is taken of the costs of air pollution, this estimates a net monetary benefit for implementing a national framework. The report further notes that the Environmental Industries Commission regards a national framework for LEZs as a key driver in delivering 'green' economic growth.
- The report highlights the implementation of LEZs by TFL, and the use of certification of approved retrofit technologies, as a template which could form the basis of a nationally recognised standard, which local authorities could use as part of their own LEX schemes under a national framework, stating that this would make it easier for local authorities to set up a LEZ. In addition the report notes that “lessons must be learnt from the failure of EURO standards to deliver the anticipated emissions reductions. Approved technologies for an LEZ must be proven to work effectively under the driving conditions of particular LEZ areas”.
- The report concludes that **“As a matter of urgency, the Government must set up a national framework for low emission zones to establish a recognised standard for emissions and vehicle identification, supported by a national certification scheme of retrofit technologies”**.

Recommendations

- Further measures to address the causes of air pollution from particulate matter, which need to be more credible than spraying roads with adhesive.
- Government to set out how it intends to achieve EU targets in its response to the report.
- DEFRA to include progress towards achieving EU air quality targets for particulate matter and nitrous oxide in its business plan.
- Government to produce an action plan setting out how air quality is to be considered in policy developments across government, and to establish a ministerial group to oversee and ensure adherence to said plan. The Cabinet Office is best suited to take the lead on implementing this.
- Government to set up a national framework for low emission zones to establish a recognised standard for emissions and vehicle identification, supported by a national certification scheme of retrofit technologies
- Implementation of a public awareness campaign to inform people about the positive action that can be taken to reduce emissions and their exposure.

The full report can be accessed at:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmenvaud/1024/102402.htm>

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