

Jack Pease's Air Quality Blog

06 June 2023

Air Quality Consultants (AQC) is delighted to share some typically insightful thoughts from our friend Jack Pease.

In this blog Jack discusses **a report published by the UK100 grouping of local authorities on the barriers to moving to net zero and the synergies for Local Air Quality Management.**

These are, though, Jack's words and not those of AQC.



About Jack:

Jack Pease graduated as a Civil Engineer working for British Rail then became a journalist writing on the construction, transport, oil and truck industries before becoming editor of the Air Quality Bulletin and Noise Bulletin newsletters in 1998 until very recently.

LAQM has lessons for Net-Zero

Net Zero has got bad press. For some it is just a means to put off 'real' action, but pragmatists may point out that indirect action is better than no action.

A huge and well-researched report has been released by the UK100 grouping of local authorities on the barriers to moving to net zero. There are shared problems and solutions between net zero and the LAQM regime. Few reports have dwelled on the issues of powers, duties and funding as this one has, so many problems faced by LAQM over the years are now being faced by net zero.

Local Air Quality Management involved endless monitoring, reporting and eventually action planning. Action itself was not mandatory - and LAQM was thus criticised as toothless, but the decades of slow grind and data collection has paved the way for action - accelerated following the landmark ClientEarth High Court judgment.

Net zero now is much as in the early days of LAQM when there was monitoring, reporting, lofty aspirations and a piecemeal plan for delivery. A key thread in the UK100 Net Zero report is the difficulties at the local authority level for climate change action - funding, staffing, planning, two-tier government and a lack of policy lead by central Government.

The report notes that over 340 UK local authorities have declared a Climate Emergency: "There is a view in national government that because some local authorities have taken some radical measures, they all must therefore have sufficient powers to take similar actions. It is worth noting that many local authorities have taken some action, and some have taken many actions, but even the leading local authorities have not managed to take all the actions needed. These leading authorities are at the forefront of calls for greater powers and policy alignment."

The UK100 report identifies the powers that have been used to take these actions, but also the reasons why it is difficult for others to do so: "In the last decade or so, local authorities have experienced changes in targets eg National Indicators and undermining of policy support on climate change, leaving them with a patchwork of policies to rely on.

"Removal of indicators left a vacuum in clarity about what is expected of councils, and many councils have said that local climate strategies have been shelved. The lack of a duty has made it harder for councils to prioritise non-statutory action on climate change at a time of cuts.

"From 2013 local authority funding and government-supported schemes for climate change were significantly cut. For example, a decade ago, 2.3 million energy efficiency measures were installed annually through government-backed schemes. In 2021, fewer than 100,000 were installed. After 2015, further changes in policy and political focus meant that only the most determined local authorities and Combined Authorities which retained skills and the political will continued to work on climate-related matters." It was at this point that the ClientEarth judgment prevented air quality suffering a similar fate.

"Back to the present day, all local authorities have been affected by a decade of reduced resource and funding and have reduced staffing. This means that staff time is reduced and they have few resources to challenge the status quo. This is particularly marked in smaller, less urban authorities where it is harder to raise revenue (e.g. from developers) but which still have a full remit in terms of planning, transport, social and environmental services.

"It has become increasingly difficult for council officers to find time to work together across departments: such working is crucial for decarbonisation, for instance in ensuring that a local development has an environmentally sustainable transport plan or to increase active travel to schools."

The report has some wise words on the issue of duties, powers and policies which can often get muddled. "Duties are a legal obligation on a council, the things they must do or ensure. Powers are provided for in legislation as ways a duty is enabled, and that provide for actions they can do, but do not have to do. Policies help things to get done

“There is a difference between ‘Powers’ as defined in legislation, and the ‘Power’ to implement actions, which is built on a combination of legislated powers, political will, public engagement and support, policy support, removal of barriers, finance, capacity, determination, attitude to risk and, frequently, sheer persistence.

“When local authorities ask for more powers to deliver climate actions, it is clear that what is most needed is an overall supporting ecosystem to enable ‘power’ to act, as well as some key additional “powers’.”

The report notes - and air quality professionals will recognise these observations - that many legal and policy documents can be worded in ambiguous ways such as ‘where practicable, cost-effective and affordable...’ which can be open to interpretation, and which often serves to undermine efforts to be more exacting or ambitious. Sometimes a local authority may have powers over a partial element, such as local roads, while power over other elements rests elsewhere, for example, with National Highways.

Duties are needed to push local authorities, notes the report: “If action remains an option rather than a duty, it is at risk of dropping back off the priority list for council spending, if the political pressure to act is reduced. Without a duty, English local authorities will remain split into leading front-runners, and lagging authorities that simply cannot afford to put climate ‘ahead’ of the basic services they are obliged to provide.”

The report notes that a decade of funding cuts have fallen disproportionately across authorities and departments, and those departments that have power to make significant impacts on emissions have seen higher levels of cuts e.g. planning and enforcement, sustainability officers, environmental protection, transport subsidies and housing. Smaller local authorities in particular have lost the skills and knowledge needed to support action on climate change.

There are a lot of issues thrashed around in this UK100 report that have not been properly discussed to date. There is much that will interest air quality practitioners both by way of history of their profession - and lessons from that history to improve things going forward on net zero which is taking ever-increasing dominance.

A key take-home message from the report is that if weaker local authorities have no experienced officers, then large parts of the country will see little action. That might have been okay for air quality which is a more local pollutant, but clearly not okay for climate change.

Further Reading:

Powers in Place: The handbook of local authority Net Zero powers, www.uk100.org

<https://www.uk100.org/publications/powers-place-handbook-local-authority-net-zero-powers>