

Jack Pease's Air Quality Blog

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

In this blog Jack discusses **Defra's consultation on the draft revised Air Quality Strategy**.

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.

Defra's consultation on the draft revised Air Quality Strategy

Just ten days over Easter to shape a new air quality strategy? Luckily there are only a few pages to consider!

How things have changed. Defra's latest consultation on what should become the 2023 Air Quality Strategy demands a look at 41 pages of a draft strategy, and a 12 page questionnaire. The last full strategy released in 2007 was preceded by a two volume package with over 1,000 pages to read.

There have been updates in the intervening years, although it is sobering reading that 17 years ago the science was clear and Defra proposed that "when new objectives on particles are set, they should address the PM_{2.5} fraction as well". Well now there are fine particle targets - it is now down to English local authorities to do their bit to help deliver new PM_{2.5} aspirations. Easier said than done.

The consultation says: "We expect most action will be directed towards the three pollutants which have the majority of impact - fine particulate matter, nitrogen oxides and ammonia. While PM_{2.5} is not currently part of the LAQM framework, the government still expects all local authorities to effectively use their powers to reduce PM_{2.5} emissions from the sources which are within their control."

The latest consultation contains a mix of restatement of old policies and some new directions. The usual suspects are restated - active travel, low traffic neighbourhoods, cleaner vehicles and public information. These were relatively novel in 2007 but now commonplace, and by and large are making a difference to a legislative landscape dominated by NO₂ exceedances and AQMAs.

Statutory reviews & assessments, action plans and air quality strategies remain in place. Other bodies are drawn in – National Highways and the Environment Agency are now on par with local authorities with duties to improve air quality. Airports and ports are not, for some inexplicable reason.

With PM_{2.5} being a regional pollutant rather than a hotspot problem, new directions are needed. Don't expect detail in a 41 page document - but some issues are clearly flagged for further development.

Planning leads the charge. Lack of money to do anything to fix yesterday's problems leaves planning as an important means to avoid tomorrow's problems. But recent political dogma to cut regulation and planning 'red tape' has not been helpful.

Much is promised for the forthcoming planning revamp (part of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill). The strategy expressly warns that planning reforms will impact on air quality and changes will be incorporated if they become law.

There are likely to be new low emission benchmarks - a series of published emission estimates based on best-practice design for a range of land-use types. Developers compare their scheme against these best-practice values. Consultees are asked: "What are the merits or drawbacks of a design-stage emission prevention approach?"

If the front end of the draft strategy is a bit vanilla, things hot up towards the end with a few very open-ended questions. If Defra wanted comfortable answers it would have stuck to dull questions.

Clearly significant policy shifts cannot make it into this strategy, this time, but they may make future updates. Perhaps the 2023 strategy will be merely a stopgap 'caretaker' policy to comply with the 2021 Environment Act while more effective policy is thrashed out. Questions include:

- Domestic Burning: What more could local authorities do within the existing regulatory framework to reduce pollution from inappropriate domestic burning?;
- How do you feel local authorities can most effectively reduce pollution from industrial sources they are responsible for?;
- How do you feel local authorities can most effectively reduce pollution from agriculture (Steady on! If local authorities are to regulate agriculture this will dwarf current responsibilities!);

- How do you feel local authorities can most effectively improve indoor air quality (the consultations admits that recent court judgments on indoor mould have caught it out).

Also of note in the consultation is the return of Dire Warnings to local authorities who chose not to do anything (self identifying themselves as having clean air?), or cannot. (effectively bankrupt like Croydon or Thurrock).

The consultation says: “We have been clear in guidance to local authorities since 2016 that we expect local authorities to use their powers to reduce PM_{2.5}. We still have not seen sufficient action from the majority of local authorities. In light of the new targets, if further action is still insufficient, we will consult on introducing a standalone legal duty on local authorities to take action to reduce PM_{2.5} emissions.”

There is also a reminder that an audit is on the cards to “examine the reasons for why tools are not being used to improve air quality in poorly performing areas”. The virtually non-existent enforcement of smoke control legislation is top of Defra’s wish list. Close behind are local authority permitted processes (LAPC): “Local authorities should make sure that regular monitoring of permit conditions takes place and appropriate enforcement is taken when conditions are not met.”

That is pretty well the detail within the new consultation. But take a moment out to look back at the 2007 strategy which sets out policies that still look fresh and effective. It does beg the question as to why it has taken so long to get this far.

Absent from the latest consultation is 100s of pages of economic mumbo-jumbo on justifying action. No longer do we need endless cost-benefit analyses and introspection on risk factors to show that air pollution must be tackled.

Governments (in 2007 it was Labour²) had a choice of taking action then but chose not to - the fear now is due to Covid, the Ukraine war and the cost of living crisis, Government is in no position to spend money on air quality. It can only hope this new strategy emboldens local authorities to do their bit through clever thinking rather than big spending.

Further Reading:

Consultation on the draft revised Air Quality Strategy (here you will find the draft strategy itself (41 pages) and the accompanying consultation text (12 pages):

<https://consult.defra.gov.uk/air-quality-strategy-review-team/consultation-on-the-draft-revised-air-quality-stra/>

2007 strategy “The Air Quality Strategy for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland”:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/69336/pb12654-air-quality-strategy-vol1-070712.pdf