

Jack Pease's Air Quality Blog

10 July 2023

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

In this blog Jack discusses the **Environmental Audit Committee's probe into Outdoor and indoor air quality targets.**

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.

MPs seek answers on local action

MPs are investigating what should be done about air quality. This is the latest in a long line of select committee inquiries and perhaps the first to avoid knockabout grandstanding seen in past inquiries.

The current probe is by the no-nonsense Environment Audit Committee which is well advised and asks sensible questions. In the past, committees found easy targets such as Boris-inspired top level inaction under the banner of red tape cuts - Clientearth changed that and of late there has been central government funding and prodding and clean air zones are cleaning up some cities.

The committee therefore has had to think harder and look for bottom-up solutions. The elephant in the room is of course funding and the dire state of local authority capacity. There were calls for more monitoring, joined up thinking on net zero and don't mention woodburning - experts hate it but policy makers dare not propose outright bans.

Inevitably the inquiry started with medical experts saying why further action on air quality is needed despite there being little argument about the science. As this was a Parliamentary inquiry, Professor Frank Kelly of the ERG was able to be honest about the newly formed Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (part of the split-out of Public Health England, with UKHSA being the other half): *"I don't know if it is fit for purpose, to tell you the truth, but I think that it does have a major role to play - I hope that it does play it - in outdoor air pollution and indoor air pollution."* Not confidence inspiring.

The issue of targets came up - there is pressure from academics and activists to move towards tough WHO targets on PM_{2.5} but pragmatists note that such targets would be a stretch. Professor Alastair Lewis hinted that a compromise might be regional targets, a theme picked up by clean air champion Stephen Holgate: *"We need to concentrate much more on what we can achieve locally with removing the sources and emissions of pollution. The best way of achieving that is to know what the levels of pollution are locally. Having values that are recorded across the whole country with monitors 20 miles apart gives you a certain level of continuous exposure, but the thing that killed little Ella Kissi-Debrah was not what was happening 20 miles away. It was what was happening 25 yards away where the South Circular Road passed her house."*

"We need to have more visibility of what the air pollution levels are in our urban and rural settings. That information needs to be sent to primary care and hospitals and to be available to the public. We need to make sure that our public health communities and our local authorities that are responsible for planning and organising our roads are better connected such that they can make use of this data in the way we want to plan our urban environments going forward."

Holgate - very much an air quality sceptic when he held the reins two decades ago - is now a powerful advocate of air quality and continued: *"This is the other bit of the equation that is frustrating. There seems to be very little obvious connectivity between climate change issues and air pollution issues, yet 46% of the climate-forcing gases and particles come from air pollution. If we hit those, first, you would get the climate improvement much more quickly than you would if you just concentrated on CO₂. Secondly, you would have this incredible health gain as well, which should be much faster than you would achieve by getting CO₂ down."*

"I think that some effort needs to be made to bring these two communities together. The net zero climate change agenda has a huge energy around it in this country at the moment, which is great and I think that the public has bought into it in large part. We need to bring air pollution into that. If we could do that, it would ease the communication strategy considerably."

Professor Lewis warned on net zero: *"This is a slightly pedantic point, but it is not about not burning fossil fuels, it is about not burning fuels. If I take sustainable aviation fuel made from plant residues and burn it, it produces exactly the same air pollutants as burning a fossil fuel does. If I burn hydrogen, even if it is made in the most clean way with renewable energy, it will still produce NOx pollution."*

"There are many aspects of net zero strategies that will be excellent for climate change, but exactly how we implement them has enormous implications on air pollution. You can come up with a climate-neutral

fuel but the way you deploy that fuel can have implications on air quality. Broadly speaking, if we use fuel cells, for example, with a fuel it is completely clean. If we put it in an internal combustion engine or a boiler, it produces air pollution. The devil is in the detail of how net zero is delivered with the co-benefits for air quality.”

The academics having said what they wanted, it was time for the practitioners to inject some doom-laden reality to say what they'd get. Jim McManus of the Association of Directors of Public Health said: *“There is a real issue about funding. There has been no additional allocation provided for air quality indeed there is no specific money for air quality in the public health grant. The grant has been cut by over 26% in the last six years and that 60p has been taken out of every pound of local authority spending, I am not quite sure where the money for this (increased effort) will come from. Again, it is all very well putting duties on people, but if you cannot enforce them and have no staff, you just cannot do anything.”*

He continued: *“In the UK we have focused on individual responsibility, not social responsibility, because individual responsibility and health just does not work. Regulation on air quality has been too lax for too long in this country on almost every area of regulation, and we are paying the price now. It still feels to me like we are dragging our feet in policy terms, way behind what the science says.*

“We need to sit down with local authorities as partners and have an honest conversation about the fragmented and unhelpful network of regulations and the cat's cradle of stuff we currently have, and let us together rewrite it into something that will genuinely improve air quality. The second thing is to absolutely commit to giving local authorities the powers to enforce that, including the regulatory and enforcement methods and the powers.”

The discussion moved on to woodburners, experts noting that 40% are installed for aesthetics: *“People can go out and buy a log burner tomorrow with no knowledge and no information that this is going to create a pretty toxic living space for you in your own home environment.”*

Action on woodburners - or indeed traffic restrictions - can however be blocked. McManus noted that public health directors' are *“tied by having no money, no powers and a very well-funded industry lobby that uses the same techniques that industry always uses. The response is that it is down to individual responsibility and the industry is not that harmful. We need to counter that.”*

McManus - and other local authorities submitting written evidence - all warned that any strengthening of regulation and guidance needs to be funded. With Ukraine, high interest rates, failing utilities and rail companies, potholes and of course the NHS - one fears that however strong the science, further policy initiatives will be thin on the ground.

Further Reading:

Plenty more interesting nuggets can be found on the Environment Audit Committee inquiry transcripts:

<https://committees.parliament.uk/work/7686/outdoor-and-indoor-air-quality-targets/>