

Draft Air Quality Strategy for Somerset

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1. Summary

- 1.1. The multi-agency Somerset Air Quality Steering Group has drafted a new Air Quality Strategy for the county. The document identifies traffic pollution as the only major air quality concern in the county, and in particular in major urban areas. It proposes several measures to address this concern in the context of the current resource constrained environment. The proposed next step is to put this out for public consultation. The views of the committee on the draft strategy are sought to be incorporated into the formal consultation.
- 1.2. EU air quality limits are exceeded in parts of Taunton, Henlade and Yeovil. In general the worst air quality is found in close proximity to major roads, and as such there is an impact on health inequalities, as for a variety of reasons housing in close proximity to such roads tends to be occupied by people in lower socio-economic groups. Poor air quality also impacts on those with existing poor health, such as respiratory conditions, and is implicated in the development and exacerbation of asthma in children. Tackling air pollution requires partnership working across all sections of society.

2. Issues for consideration / Recommendations

- 2.1. Members are recommended to endorse a public consultation on this draft strategy. The Consultation would be conducted by SCC on behalf of the Somerset Air Quality Steering Group members, including all five district councils.
- 2.2. The Somerset Air Quality Steering Group has identified several measures it recommends are pursued locally, recognising the limited capacity and resources available at present, and which are presented in context in the draft strategy:
 - Develop a Somerset Air Quality website as a high quality resource providing information and guidance to all interested parties on addressing air quality, including the public, fleet operators, employers, public authorities, developers, transport operators and the media. The intention here is to provide an authoritative information resource, utilising links to existing third party websites as much as possible, so as not to duplicate effort.
 - Application of EPUK guidance “Land Use and Development Control: Planning for Air Quality” consistently in relation to large developments and cumulative impact. The intention here is to provide consistency in approach across the county, providing a degree of certainty for both

planners and developers as to when air quality impact assessments will be required.

- Consider using financial, procurement, and regulatory mechanisms to encourage and enable transition to less polluting vehicle types across all fleets and for employees. This recommendation recognises the need to use business-as-usual mechanisms as an opportunity to influence vehicle choice and fleet composition.
- Bring forward proposals for monitoring PM_{2.5}* particle (black carbon) pollution, in order to gain an understanding of where this is problematic in the county. There is a poor understanding of fine particle pollution due to a lack of monitoring to date. The equipment required is not expected to cost more than £5,000 between the partners, if approved. (*PM_{2.5} is a technical term for very fine particles that can pass from the air breathed into the bloodstream, sometimes called black carbon. These particles can be carried deep into the lungs where they can cause inflammation and a worsening of heart and lung diseases).

3. Background

- 3.1. There are three air quality management areas in Somerset, namely East Reach in Taunton, Henlade, and the whole of Yeovil. These have been designated as such for many years now on the basis of average nitrogen dioxide levels, and so breach EU law. The respective district councils have had in place action plans to attempt to address the pollution and levels have fallen, but much greater progress was expected from gradually tightening EU vehicle emission standards over the last decade. This improvement failed to materialise, and as has become clear through the VW “dieselgate” scandal, some vehicle manufacturers were gaming the official testing regime, knowing that real world emissions were well above, indeed in some cases many times above, the emissions claimed in laboratory tests.
- 3.2. It is important to note that the emission limits for nitrogen dioxide are just that: limits; not targets. Harm from nitrogen dioxides and very small particles (PM_{2.5}) to population health at levels below the limits is still significant. Levels in Somerset’s AQMAs are only a little above the limits, but as this table demonstrates estimates of mortality rates in Somerset from small particle pollution alone are comparable to other better known causes such as liver and respiratory disease.

Indicator in PHOF	Mortality rate, per 100,000
Preventable mortality (4.03)	157.3
Preventable cancer <75(4.05ii)	67.6
Preventable CVD <75 (4.04ii)	62.0
Preventable Respiratory disease <75(4.07ii)	15.8
Mortality attributable to PM_{2.5} <75 (3.01)	12.4
Preventable Liver disease <75 (4.06ii)	11.4
Suicide rate Persons (4.10)	10.7
Communicable diseases (4.08)	8.3

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(based on PHE data table with Somerset data)

3.3. The fact that the exceedances in Somerset above EU limits are not large means that Somerset has not been required to bring forward new action plans by Government, unlike nearby cities such as Bath and Bristol, where clean air zones are under consideration. There is an assumption by government that the air here will become compliant within a few years by the continued impact of the local action plans and in particular by the changes in the national vehicle fleet, in particular as older more polluting vehicles are scrapped and newer genuinely compliant vehicles replace them. However, given previous expectations there can be no guarantee that this will prove to be the case. Furthermore, the planned scale of development around Taunton and Yeovil has the potential to increase motor traffic and congestion, offsetting any improvement.

3.4. The Government has recommended that all local authorities, irrespective of their statutory air quality work, consider developing a local air quality strategy. The principal purpose of a strategy is to maintain good air quality and where appropriate improve air quality locally. This is often best achieved by working collaboratively in regional or County-wide groups. The Somerset Air Quality Steering Group, which includes representatives from SCC Public Health, Transport Policy, all district council environmental health services and Public Health England, has drafted a new air quality strategy for the county (attached).

In doing so, the Group has kept a watching brief on national developments, but also taken a pragmatic approach in the recommendations made due to the severe resource constraints affecting the relevant services at both district and county level. In short there is very limited staff and financial capacity in pollution control and transport policy, and as such the recommendations made reflect what can be delivered within current resources. If the councils wish to be more ambitious in attempting to reduce pollution more quickly, then additional resources, both capital and revenue will be required.

3.5. As the deadline for papers for Scrutiny Committee was imminent, DEFRA released a consultation document on air quality, but largely excluding motor traffic which will be the subject of a separate consultation later in the year. Any implications of the consultation document for this paper will be reported verbally.

4. Consultations undertaken

4.1. A public consultation exercise will take place following Scrutiny and subsequent Cabinet level decision.

5. Implications

5.1. If national measures prove ineffective and Somerset's AQMA areas continue to exceed statutory limits in the medium term, then there is a risk of the Secretary of State issuing a Direction to our local authorities requiring a timetabled action

plan to bring them into compliance.

6. Background papers

6.1. Appendix A Draft Somerset Air Quality Strategy

Note For sight of individual background papers please contact the report author