



Air Pollution

Parliamentary Briefing ahead of Labour debate on 18th November

Summary

Traffic-related air pollution is causing a public health crisis in Scotland. Scottish statutory standards continue to be broken across the country. Air pollution causes thousands of early deaths each year in Scotland and reduces the quality of life for many more, especially children, older people and people made vulnerable by chronic health conditions. It also has a damaging effect on ecosystems and wildlife. Taking action on air pollution can deliver health and wellbeing benefits, generate economic savings, and help Scotland achieve its Climate Change targets. It is welcome that the newly launched “Cleaner Air for Scotland” Strategy aims for Scotland to have the cleanest air in Europe, but the Strategy falls short of demonstrating how clean air will be delivered by 2020.

Background

Over the years air pollution has changed from the visible industrial smogs of the 1950s to invisible – but still harmful – traffic-related pollution. The solutions to air pollution therefore depend on (a) getting traffic off our roads by investing in walking, cycling, and public transport networks, and (b) improving vehicle emission standards through a network of Low Emission Zones in our most polluted towns and cities. These measures would make our cities more pleasant places to live and spend time in, bring multiple benefits for health and for local businesses, and help Scotland achieve its climate change targets.

Health impacts of air pollution

- Air pollution from fine particles (PM_{2.5}) is responsible for 2000 early deaths in Scotland each year according to 2014 research published by Public Health England.¹ Exposure to NO₂ also causes early death and the Committee on the Medical Effects of Air Pollutants is due to publish figures on how many early deaths are caused by NO₂ in 2016;
- In 2013 the WHO’s specialized cancer agency, the IARC, classified the cocktail of outdoor air pollution as carcinogenic to humans and named it as a leading cause of cancer deaths, with these conclusions applying to all regions of the world;²
- In January 2014, research from a European study found that long-term exposure to small and fine particles (PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5}) increases the risk of coronary events

¹ Public Health England, “Estimating Local Mortality Burdens associated with Particulate Air Pollution” (April 2014), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/estimating-local-mortality-burdens-associated-with-particulate-air-pollution>

² IARC Press Release, 17 October 2013, “Outdoor air pollution a leading environmental cause of cancer deaths” http://www.iarc.fr/en/media-centre/iarcnews/pdf/pr221_E.pdf

including heart attacks and unstable angina, with the link being seen even at levels of exposure below the current European and Scottish pollution standards;³

- Children, the elderly and the sick are disproportionately affected by air pollution.
- Ambient air pollution has been linked with restricted foetal growth in European countries, which is linked with adverse respiratory health in childhood;⁴
- It is estimated that air pollution costs the Scottish economy over £1.1 billion each year in days lost at work and costs to the NHS.⁵

Ongoing Breaches of Scottish and European Regulations

There are 32 Local Air Quality Management Areas (AQMAs) across Scotland⁶ where local authorities have had to declare that levels of pollution are dangerously high and breaking Scottish Regulatory Standards, which were due to be met in 2005 for Nitrogen Dioxide (NO₂) and 2010 for coarse particles (PM₁₀).⁷ Some AQMAs, such as those in Dundee and Perth cover the entire city.

Scotland is also breaking the EU Ambient Air Quality Directive, which required legal limits for NO₂ to be met by 2010, with the Commission granting a 5-year extension to the 2010 deadline for Edinburgh, Central Scotland and Northeast Scotland but not in respect of Glasgow. As a result of a legal action brought by ClientEarth against the UK, this April the UK Supreme Court required the UK Government to produce new Air Quality Plans to prove how it would deliver on its European legal obligations in as short a time as possible. Because air quality is devolved, the Scottish Government for its part has had to produce new plans to show compliance with European Law and it claims that its new “Cleaner Air for Scotland” Strategy (CAFS) is that Plan.

“Cleaner Air for Scotland”: Ambition to meet European, but not Scottish, limits

We welcome the vision of CAFS to achieve EU air quality limits by 2020, and we welcome moves to introduce a new regulatory standard for fine particles (PM_{2.5}) which are highly harmful to health. But there is a lack of a central plan within the Strategy which demonstrates how the legal limits will be met, and a lack of ambition to remove the 32 AQMAs in Scotland.

Specifically:

- While welcome the commitment to finalise and deliver the National Walking Strategy Delivery Plan by 2016 and to continue working with partners to deliver the shared vision of the Cycling Action Plan for Scotland 2013 (CAPS), there are insufficient actions on getting the most polluting traffic off our roads and enable meaningful modal shift. In relation to buses, CAFS announces reviews of current funding streams rather than concrete measures to improve services; and CAFS contains no measures to discourage car use such as parking charges or 20mph zones.

³ Research published in the British Medical Journal, “Long term exposure to ambient air pollution and incidence of acute coronary events: prospective cohort study and meta-analysis in 11 European cohorts from the ESCAPE Project” (Jan 2014) BMJ 2014;348:f7412, <http://www.bmj.com/content/348/bmj.f7412>

⁴ “Ambient air pollution and low birthweight: a European cohort study (ESCAPE)” The Lancet Respiratory Medicine, Volume 1, Issue 9, Pages 695 - 704, (Nov 2013), [http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600\(13\)70192-9/abstract](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600(13)70192-9/abstract)

⁵ Extrapolated from a Defra assessment that air pollution costs the UK economy as a whole £16 bn per year, based on 29,000 UK-wide deaths from air pollution: Defra, “Impact pathway guidance for valuing changes in air quality” (May 2013), https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/197900/pb13913-impact-pathway-guidance.pdf

⁶ An indicative list of air quality management areas can be found at <http://www.scottishairquality.co.uk/laqm/aqma>

⁷ The Scottish Standards are set out in the Air Quality (Scotland) Regulations 2000 and the Air Quality (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2002

- CAFS does not commit to meeting Scottish regulatory air quality standards, which are stricter than European limits and based on World Health Organisation guidelines;
- CAFS appears to lay out a lengthy timescale for the introduction of Low Emission Zones; however, it is welcome that officials have indicated an ambition to see Low Emission Zones up and running by 2018;
- CAFS makes no new commitment to fund local authorities to implement Low Emission Zones and support them more broadly to deliver compliance with Scottish air quality regulations;
- CAFS does not explain how compliance with the new standard for fine particles will be monitored and delivered (at present there are only 6 monitoring stations for fine particles across Scotland).

Recommendations

In response to its recent launch of the “Cleaner Air for Scotland” Strategy, we call on the Scottish Government to:

- Commit to meeting Scottish Air Quality Regulatory Standards by 2020 at the latest;
- Commit to introducing Low Emission Zones in key cities with air pollution problems by 2018;
- Commit to supporting local authorities’ implementation of Low Emission Zones through full funding;
- Work in conjunction with the relevant local authorities and Regional Transport Partnerships to develop road traffic demand management options for Scotland’s four major cities
- Revise Planning Advice Note 51 within a year to ensure that new developments are not allowed to worsen air quality in Air Quality Management Areas (AQMAs) or areas at risk of becoming AQMAs;
- Ensure that, as a result of the Planning Review, a revised Scottish Planning Policy introduces the same safeguards.

Contact

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