

London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies

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Response by London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies to Defra's May 2017 consultation on: 'Improving air quality: national plan for tackling nitrogen dioxide in our towns and cities'

Introduction

1. The London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies represents 130 local amenity and civic societies across London. We and they see tackling air pollution across London, and more widely in the UK, as a key issue.
2. The London Forum welcomes this consultation, but is very disappointed indeed by its limited scope and ambition.
3. Our main points are set out below, and summarised in the sub-headings to each section. These first cover our concerns about the narrow scope of the plan; and then address the specific proposals in the consultation document, especially in relation to Clear Air Zones (CAZs).

The scope of the document is too narrow – it should also cover PM emissions and emissions from other than road transport

4. We believe that the plan on which we are being consulted should address not simply how to achieve EU legal limits on nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), as this document does, but also how to achieve health and other benefits from reducing air pollution more widely, especially from reductions in particulate matter (PM).
5. This is because, without taking this wider view, the benefits, especially to health, of the measures discussed, and of other measures not proposed, are likely to be understated (because the benefits from reductions in PM and other pollutants reductions will not have been factored in).
6. The document also focuses narrowly on reductions in air pollution from road transport. But reductions in pollution from other sources should also be considered (including trains, ships and non-mobile sources such as industrial sites and domestic heating). The case for doing this is even stronger if other forms of pollution than NO₂ are addressed.

Too much is left for local authorities. And the Government should include tax changes to reduce emissions as part of this plan

7. The document says it is for local authorities to propose the appropriate set of measures for its area. Some discretion for local authorities is clearly sensible. But there are at least three major difficulties in this approach.
8. First, air pollution crosses local boundaries, and, especially for smaller urban areas, it will be difficult for local authorities to plan measures in isolation. It is also likely to have higher costs for each authority in terms of planning than more coordinated action.
9. Second, the document says it is still reviewing what changes if any should be made in taxation to address NO₂ pollution. But it could make a significant difference to what measures local authorities should to decide on, depending on what tax changes are made, for example in vehicle excise duty to incentivise low polluting vehicles. It would therefore be much better if the Government stated in this plan what tax changes it was actually proposing, so that local authorities could plan accordingly. If this is not done, it is not clear how local authorities can act in ignorance of what they are likely to be, especially in order to take urgent action.
10. Third, it seems unlikely to convince the EU Commission or the UK courts that the UK has a firm plan for achieving EU NO₂ limits, which is the aim of the document, if the Government cannot indicate now what measures will be taken in the towns and cities in question; hence the risk of further legal challenge at the UK or EU level is much greater.

Clean Air Zones – should be introduced in all towns and cities with pollution above EU limits – and all with charging systems involved

11. We note and agree with the technical report attached to the consultation document that Clean Air Zones are likely to be by some way the most cost effective means of reducing NO₂ pollution; and that these have the added advantage of relatively low costs for the public authorities by comparison with the benefits they are likely to bring.
12. However we are surprised that, in view of that, there is not a stronger message in the Government's draft plan that CAZs should be introduced in all the towns and cities that are expected to have significant NO₂ exceedences above EU limits, rather than containing a firm commitment only that they would be introduced in the smaller number of cities which the Government announced previously.
13. We also take issue with the principle in the document that CAZs involving charging systems should only be introduced if local authorities have carried out an analysis to show that there are no effective arrangements for CAZs that do not involve charging.
14. This is primarily because it is very difficult to see how local authorities could in practice carry out such an analysis. The technical report accompanying the Government's draft plan (section 4.2) states: "***Due to the variability in the type of projects implemented and the associated uncertainty in their effect on reducing NO₂ concentrations a formal modelling [of the impact on NO₂ from non-charging CAZs] has not been undertaken.***" . Accordingly it does not quantify the impact of non-charging CAZs; whereas it does quantify the (significant) beneficial effect of CAZs with charging. But if central Government has not been able to carry out such a modelling exercise showing the effect of non-charging CAZs, it is completely unclear how local authorities, in most cases with considerably smaller modelling resources, could carry out such an exercise.

15. Accordingly we believe that CAZs with charging should be introduced in all towns and cities that exceed EU limits, as is already proposed by the Mayor in London.

Vehicle emission limits – there needs to be a commitment that CAZs will soon require vehicles with better emissions performance than the current Euro 6 diesel standard

16. The government's draft plan suggests that the norm for light diesel vehicles entering CAZs should be Euro 6 emission standards or better. However we know that in real world conditions, the emissions performance of many cars and light vans accredited to Euro 6 standards is not nearly as good as in test conditions, a problem compounded by the documented cheating by Volkswagen and other manufacturers.
17. There is a considerable risk that, if the Government establishes the current Euro 6 as the minimum acceptable standard for diesel vehicles in CAZs, then that will incentivise the purchase of these vehicles, which would then form part of the vehicle fleet, including in polluted urban areas, for many years.
18. We therefore believe that the Government's draft plan needs to be amended to make it clear now that once a new and improved Euro 6 standard, reflecting real-world driving conditions, is agreed, then that will be the minimum acceptable standard for diesel vehicles in CAZs.

Impact of Heathrow expansion – Heathrow should be part of a charging Clean Air Zone

19. The Government has taken direct responsibility (rather than the Mayor of London) for the decision about Heathrow expansion. Its consultation document on airport expansion, issued earlier this year, indicates that planning consent for a third runway will be refused unless legal requirements on air quality are met.
20. However that document did not spell out what the legal requirements on air quality would be, which is a serious omission. Nor does the Government's current consultation document on tackling NO₂ make this clear. The Mayor of London has not so far proposed that the area around Heathrow should be covered by the expanded Ultra Low Emission Zone (the London equivalent of a CAZ), even though air pollution from road traffic around Heathrow is already among the worst in London.
21. This very poor level of air pollution around Heathrow is set to get worse if Heathrow is expanded. The deterioration would come both from increased lorry movements from extra freight using the airport, as the Government's Heathrow expansion consultation document expects, and from additional car movements from additional passengers and employees using the airport – as noted by Airport Watch, it does not appear credible that a significant proportion of these would not use cars.
22. Given that central Government is taking responsibility for Heathrow expansion, we believe it is important that the Government should make it clear that it expects the area around Heathrow to be covered by a charging Clean Air Zone, and that this should also be a condition of consent to a third runway, should Heathrow expansion go ahead.

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