



15 November 2023

Title	Air Quality Action Plan Review
Purpose of the report	To note the report for information
Report status	Public report
Report author	Ross Jarvis, Principal Air Quality Project Officer
Lead councillor	Councillor John Ennis, Lead Councillor for Climate Change and Strategy
Corporate priority	Healthy Environment
Recommendations	The Committee is asked: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. To approve the draft Air Quality Action Plan to be taken forward for consultation.2. To note that a further report will be brought to the March 2024 Committee following the consultation to adopt the final Air Quality Action Plan

1. Executive summary

- 1.1. Reading's air quality (Nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) is improving; however, we still have some locations which are above the UK and World Health Organization (WHO) air quality limits. The Air Quality Action Plan (AQAP) will target these locations but not just for compliance with UK or WHO standards, but to push further to improve air quality across the whole of Reading.
- 1.2. This Action Plan identifies the areas where we need to work together to improve air quality. The actions identified are those that officers plan to work towards implementing over the next five years to benefit people's quality of life, the environment and improve the community we live in by having cleaner air.
- 1.3. The purpose of this report is to present the draft AQAP to the Committee to be approved for consultation, as well as outlining the next steps for its adoption by the Council.

2. Policy context

- 2.1. The Council's new Corporate Plan has established three themes for the years 2022/25. These themes are:
 - Healthy Environment
 - Thriving Communities
 - Inclusive Economy
- 2.2. Full details of the Council's Corporate Plan and the projects which will deliver these priorities are published on the [Council's website](#). These priorities and the Corporate Plan demonstrate how the Council meets its legal obligation to be efficient, effective and economical.

- 2.3. The Environment Act 1995 requires Local Authorities to review and assess local air quality and to take action to improve air quality where exceedances of objective levels are identified. To this end Reading have declared an Air Quality Management Area and put in place an AQAP. Guidance recommends updating AQAPs every five years. The current action plan was adopted in 2016. Reading Borough Council is now fulfilling its statutory duty by updating its AQAP. These actions are linked to wider objectives including health and wellbeing, the climate emergency and social inequalities.

3. The Proposal

Current Position

- 3.1. The previous AQAP focused on actions to reduce Nitrogen Dioxide (NO₂) to achieve compliance with national objectives. Examples of some of the recent successful initiatives that have helped to improve air quality over this period include:

- Construction of Green Park Station, which formally opened in May 2023. The new railway station offers a sustainable travel alternative to private vehicle use, connecting the Green Park business area, Select Car Leasing (Madejski) Stadium and the Green Park Village residential area to the Great Western Railway line.
- Commencement of the Southern Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) corridor, offering a sustainable travel option connecting the south of Reading to central Reading which will be largely unaffected by local road congestion.
- Introduction of Park & Ride schemes at Thames Valley Park, Winnersh Triangle and Mere oak, to reduce the number of car trips to central Reading, thereby reducing congestion and emissions.
- Provision of the National Cycle Network 422, offering a safer east-west cross-town route, to encourage and prioritise active travel.
- Reading's bus fleet has received substantial investment in recent years, enabling the retrofitting of buses with newer, cleaner exhaust engines. 100% of Reading's bus fleet now comprises hybrid, natural gas or Euro 6 diesel engines, making the fleet one of the cleanest in the UK.
- In 2020, Reading Borough Council introduced a taxi emissions policy and reduced taxi licensing fees for ultra-low emission and electric vehicle drivers, by 25% and 50%, respectively. This will encourage the uptake of low- or -zero- emission taxis, reducing the air quality impacts these have on the local road network.

- 3.2. As a result of these and other initiatives our monitoring network shows there have been considerable improvements in NO₂ levels, as shown in the below table.

Table 1: Number of NO₂ Objective Exceedances and Borderline Exceedances

Year	Number of Exceedances of NO ₂ objective (annual average)	Number within 10% of Exceedance
2018	15	15
2019	5	8
2022	1	3

N.B: Monitoring in 2020 and 2021 was impacted by the lockdowns introduced over Covid-19 so does not represent normal conditions and as a result has not been included.

- 3.3. The new AQAP combines actions to continue to reduce NO₂ to achieve compliance with actions targeting PM_{2.5}. This is to align with the increasing evidence around Particulate

Matter, PM_{2.5} being the most harmful to health and the policy changes that have followed. The Environment Act 2021 has made it a requirement for new binding PM_{2.5} targets to be brought in. These were brought into force in the Air Quality Strategy 2023.

Table 2: Annual Average PM_{2.5} at Cemetery Junction Urban Background Site

Year	PM _{2.5} Level (annual average micrograms per metre cubed (µg/m ³) at Automatic Urban and Rural Network (AURN) background monitoring station (WHO target < 5 µg/m ³)
2018	7
2019	8
2020	8
2021	8
2022	8

- 3.4. Although the responsibility for achieving the targets is with the Secretary of State, the Government's Air Quality Strategy stipulates that all local authorities must take sufficient action to reduce PM_{2.5} emissions from sources within their control. In circumstances where the extent of measures from local authorities are deemed insufficient, the Government will consider implementing statutory duties on local authorities. PM_{2.5} has been given considerable weight throughout this AQAP. In February 2020 officers from Environmental Protection, with support from environmental consultants Phlorum, started work on updating the AQAP.
- 3.5. A steering group with officer representation from Strategic Transport, Planning, Public Health and Sustainability was set up to ensure the plan aligned with other linked policy areas such as: the Transport Strategy, Climate Change and Climate Emergency Strategy's, the Local Plan and Health and Wellbeing Strategy.
- 3.6. Work on the Air Quality Action Plan took place alongside the development of the Transport Strategy. Due to the impact of the pandemic on transport it was necessary to pause work on the Transport Strategy to establish new baseline information in 2022/23. Due to the close links between air quality and traffic emissions it was also considered necessary to also pause the completion of the Air Quality Action Plan until new baseline information was available to ensure the plans alignment and to maximise the opportunities to tackle one of the largest contributors of poor air quality.
- 3.7. As we have moved on from the most serious impact of the pandemic with a relative return to normal, Transport Officers have resumed work on the Reading Transport Strategy. The draft strategy was approved for consultation over the summer at the Council's Strategic Environment Planning and Transport (SEPT) Committee in June 2023.

Options Proposed

- 3.8. A draft AQAP has been produced for implementation (Appendix 1). Working with the support of consultants Phlorum, the plan:
 - Updates baseline data figures and trajectories.

- Updates to align with any changes to local and national policies that have been introduced in the last two years.
 - Updates the list of actions to align with the RTP and current thinking/ AQ practice.
 - Consulted members of the steering group for comment.
- 3.9. AQAP policy options will include direct policy interventions, infrastructure schemes, education or enabling options, to support Reading's ambitious plans and UK strategies going forward. As such, policy options will include strategies to encourage or accelerate the uptake of low to zero emission vehicles, non-diesel vehicles, increase modal shift and discourage vehicle usage in certain areas where people live or go to school. Active travel and health options are also prioritised in the AQAP, alongside measures to reduce particulate matter concentrations. As based on the conclusions of the above, the areas prioritised for action include:
- Priority 1 – reduce road NO_x & PM emissions throughout Reading, with emphasis placed on reducing emissions on Reading's Inner Distribution Road (IDR);
 - Priority 2 – reduce exposures of individuals and locations where vulnerable people (children, elderly and those with cardiovascular disease) live, work or visit;
 - Priority 3 – encourage, enable and support people and businesses to shift from high polluting to zero emission transport or energy options;
 - Priority 4 – inform and educate people on the financial, environmental and health benefits of active travel, modal shift and reducing emissions through our daily lives;
 - Priority 5 – inform, educate and enforce compliance (where necessary) on domestic wood burning regulations, to reduce local PM_{2.5} emissions; and
 - Priority 6 – improve our monitoring network and planning requirements to support other projects and ensure new developments align with the aims of this AQAP.
- 3.10. These priorities will be achieved via the actions listed in table 5.1-5.3 of the action plan including:
- Air quality planning guidance for construction sites and operational developments
 - Implementation of the EV Infrastructure Strategy
 - Smoke Control Area awareness campaign
 - School air quality awareness programme
- 3.11. Some refinement may still be required to the AQAP on receipt of further input from steering group members.
- 3.12. It is proposed that comments from the consultation will be reviewed and a final plan taken to March 2024 committee for adoption.

Alternative Option

- 3.13. AQAPs are a statutory requirement when an AQMA is in place and the review of our AQAP is already overdue.

4. Contribution to strategic aims

- 4.1. The development and delivery of the AQAP will help to deliver the following service priorities in the Council's Corporate Plan:

- **Healthy Environment** - Air pollution is associated with a number of adverse health impacts. It is recognised as a contributing factor in the onset of heart disease, lung conditions and cancer. The actions taken under the proposal would help to improve air quality which would directly contributing to the service priority from the Council's Corporate Plan
- **Thriving Communities** – Poor air quality disproportionately affects the most vulnerable adults and children. Those living in more deprived areas also tend to be exposed to higher levels of air pollution, therefore by improving air quality the proposal will help to tackle these inequalities in our society.

5. Environmental and climate implications

- 5.1. All the actions within the AQAP aim to improve local air quality. The main pollutants of concern for local air quality are Nitrogen Dioxide and Particulate Matter (PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5}), from sources of combustion. Measures to lower these pollutants, such as those encouraging active travel, or less/better burning of solid fuels simultaneously also lower Carbon emissions. In so doing these projects help the Council work towards the target of being zero carbon by 2030.
- 5.2. A Climate Impact Assessment has been completed in respect of this report. It suggests a 'net medium positive' impact arising from the adoption of the AQAP.

6. Community engagement

- 6.1. The consultation process as laid out in the Local Air Quality Management guidance will be followed to ensure that all stakeholders are able to comment on the proposed plan prior to adoption. This will include steering group members, statutory consultees and the public.

7. Equality impact assessment

- 7.1. Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149, a public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:
- Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act.
 - Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
 - Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
- 7.2. The strategy has been developed in line with these requirements and the delivery of individual elements of the strategy may be subject to further Equality Impact Assessments (EIA) as they are developed.

8. Legal implications

- 8.1. The Environment Act 1995 requires Local Authorities to review and assess local air quality and to take action to improve air quality where exceedances of objective levels are identified. Reading Borough Council is fulfilling its statutory duty by updating its AQAP.

9. Financial implications

- 9.1. The development of the draft AQAP used consultancy management support (Phlorum) paid for through grant funding. The redrafting work cost £5000, which is being covered by a combination of remaining grant funding and existing budget.

- 9.2. Some projects, such as those requiring policy, or enforcement will be progressed through officer time alone. Others will require external funding.
- 9.3. The schools air quality awareness programme was awarded funding (£327,000) by a Defra Air Quality Grant 2022/23. We will look to fund other projects through applying to this annually.
- 9.4. We are currently applying to the Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure (LEVI) scheme for funding to help implement the EV Infrastructure Strategy
- 9.5. Officers will look out for other funding opportunities.

10. Timetable for implementation

- 10.1. The redrafting of the action plan took place over the summer. It is now being circulated internally to the steering group.
- 10.2. The steering group consists of representatives from Environmental Protection, Transport, Public Health, Planning and Sustainability.
- 10.3. When approved the draft AQAP will undergo a statutory and public consultation process.
- 10.4. Comments received during consultation will be considered before the final version is taken to SEPT Committee in March 2024 for approval.
- 10.5. The approved AQAP will then be sent to Defra for approval before final adoption.

11. Background papers

- 11.1. There are none.

Appendices

1. Draft Reading Air Quality Action Plan 2024-2028