

Reading Friends of the Earth - Air Quality Press Release - November 2021

Less traffic – better town!

Traffic back at pre-pandemic levels and pollution three or four times WHO guidelines.

On 16th November 2021 Reading Friends of the Earth asked a Reading Council committee about progress on clean air and congestion.

In 2017 the environmental group had submitted a 400-signature petition calling for action so that Reading's air quality would meet World Health Organisation guidelines. Now those guidelines have been substantially tightened and in some places in town pollutant concentrations are expected to be around three or four times the new guidelines, which themselves are not safe limits.

Replying Councillor Page said "The new WHO guidance levels are a sobering reminder that air pollution causes a health impact on us all, especially the vulnerable, at much lower levels than everyone used to think. It shows that we must continue to work to reduce air pollution levels beyond the current target values, to ensure that the burden on the cardio-respiratory health of the residents of Reading is minimised as much as possible."

Councillor Page said that diesel vehicles produced over 90% of the nitrogen dioxide pollution. The Council would like to implement a Clean Air Zone but it would make little difference and would be too expensive for the Council without central government funding. He said the Council has plans to improve cycling, walking, and the bus service, and was finalising its Electric Vehicle Strategy, all of which will accelerate improvements in air quality.

Campaigner John Booth commented that if most diesels were up to current standards the only ways to improve air quality would be fewer diesels or fewer vehicles overall.

Calling for a re-assessment of tolling of the road bridges over the Thames to reduce through traffic he said the draft Transport Plan estimated that congestion cost Reading £95 million per year so some form of road pricing could raise significant sums as well as reducing congestion and pollution.

Councillor Page expected fuel duty revenues would decline as more vehicles were electric so government would introduce a national road user charging scheme. This would enable Reading to use local charging to raise funds for local schemes. Although overall traffic seemed to be at pre-pandemic levels it was too soon after Covid for the Council to finalise its strategy.

On micro-particles John Booth quoted the WHO document "Exposure to PM2.5 can cause diseases both to our cardiovascular and respiratory system, provoking, for example stroke, lung cancer and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)."

Councillor Page replied that micro-particles PM2.5 are responsible for 5.6% of deaths in Reading. The national background level was high and the Council was working to reduce local sources including those from solid fuel burning and vehicle emissions, including tyre

and brake wear as well as tail pipe emissions. The Council had applied for funding for sensors to monitor PM2.5.

John Booth commented that while background levels were high the local emissions alone seemed equivalent to the WHO guidelines in some places.

Councillor Page said electric vehicles will continue to contribute to congestion and pollution – he wanted to see fewer private cars on the roads.

Appendix - references:

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Reading Borough Council Strategic Environmental Planning and Transport Committee meeting 16th November 2021 – agenda and documents are at [Agenda for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport Committee on Tuesday, 16th November, 2021, 6.30 pm - Reading Borough Council](#) (link includes link to video of meeting).

Questions are submitted beforehand and the Council publishes answers just before the meeting. You can read the initial questions and answers starting on Page 7 of <https://democracy.reading.gov.uk/documents/s20028/AllQuestions.pdf>

Supplementary questions are asked and answered live at the meeting – so for these you have to watch/listen at https://www.youtube.com/embed/84fbb0lrI_8 from about 10.5 minutes in for about 20 minutes.

National Air Quality Objectives: [Air Quality Objectives Update.pdf \(defra.gov.uk\)](#)

Defra Air Quality factsheet: [September 2021: Air quality factsheet \(part 4\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

World Health Authority Guidelines: <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/what-are-the-who-air-quality-guidelines>

Press release about 2017 'Clean Air Everywhere' petition is at [http://www.anjoro.plus.com/RFOE/Documents/Petition Presentation to Cllrs PR.pdf](http://www.anjoro.plus.com/RFOE/Documents/Petition%20Presentation%20to%20Cllrs%20PR.pdf)