

East Herts Council Report

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date of meeting: 12 September 2023

Report by: Councillor Tim Hoskin, Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability

Report title: Air Quality in East Herts

Ward(s) affected: All

Summary – This report updates members on three issues relating to air quality in East Herts:

- a) the latest air quality figures for the three Air Quality Management Areas (AQMA) in East Hertfordshire
- b) progress on producing the new Air Quality Action Plan to submit to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)
- c) progress on the council's DEFRA-funded active travel project that started in April 2023.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- a) consider the latest air quality data for the council's three AQMAs and provide views to the Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability regarding the fact that air pollution is rising and the conclusion that multi-agency efforts to tackle this will need to be included in the draft Air Quality Action Plan**

- b) scrutinise the council's work to date in preparing a new Air Quality Action Plan and more specifically the proposed key themes for the plan, with any comments passed to the Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability for consideration prior to finalisation of the draft Air Quality Action Plan for public consultation**
- c) make suggestions to the Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability on who members feel the council's key partners are or should be regarding tackling air pollution, and what they could lead on, for consideration when drafting the Air Quality Action Plan for public consultation.**

1.0 Background

- 1.1 At its meeting on the 21st March 2023, members of the Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) Committee were presented with data on the air quality within the three AQMAs in East Hertfordshire. At the time of the report, the findings for 2022 were not available, thus members of the committee felt unable to come to an informed view on the direction of travel for air quality given that the impacts of new working arrangements following the COVID pandemic, such as home working, were still settling in. These air quality results are now available and form part of this report.
- 1.2 Additionally, at the March O&S meeting, work to prepare a new Air Quality Action Plan was also discussed. Included in with this report is a scoping document at Appendix A, laying out the priorities and themes for actions to be considered for inclusion in the action plan. O&S members are invited to give their views on these priorities and themes, while at the same time sharing their views on who they feel the council's key partners are or

should be regarding tackling air pollution and what those partners could lead on. O&S members' views will be considered by the Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability when signing off the draft plan for consultation. Importantly, a further draft, incorporating any changes following the public consultation, will then be presented to the O&S Committee in January for consideration.

- 1.3 For the purposes of this report, unless stated otherwise, all references to information on our website refer to our dedicated air quality page which can be found here – <https://www.eastherts.gov.uk/environmental-health/air-quality>

2.0 Air Quality Management Areas

- 2.1 The Air Quality (England) Regulations 2000 (as amended) set air quality objectives which are designed to protect the health of the public. Any level of nitrogen dioxide is a pollutant to clean air and has the potential for harmful effects, however, within the regulations maximum levels are set which if exceeded can cause harmful health effects, particularly for those people with certain respiratory health conditions.
- 2.2 There are two air quality objectives for nitrogen dioxide; one to protect residents and others who will be breathing the air for a long time and one to protect visitors who are just passing through the area. These are as follows:
- a) the short-term objective (for visitors) is $200\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ averaged over one hour
 - b) the long-term objective (for residents) is $40\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ averaged over a year.

- 2.3 With regard to the short-term objective, this means that there should be no more than 18 occurrences of the $200\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ hourly mean limit being exceeded in areas where people may be present for an hour, typically a busy shopping street, thus not within areas unlikely to have intensive pedestrian use, such as along Gascoyne Way. The hourly levels are imputed from East Herts Council's readings according to Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA) guidance. No breaches of the $200\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ limit as defined above have been found in East Herts.
- 2.4 Breaches of the long-term objective of no more than $40\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ averaged over a year have been recorded in the district. In an area such as Hertfordshire with a county council and district councils, it is the district council which declares the AQMA and thus, the council has declared three AQMAs.
- 2.5 Now the AQMAs have been declared, East Herts Council must carry out further work to monitor the air quality in the areas and identify what action can be taken to improve it. This work then leads to the publication of an Air Quality Action Plan which must be signed off DEFRA.
- 2.6 The three AQMAs in the district are in Bishop's Stortford, Hertford and Sawbridgeworth.
- a) Bishop's Stortford was the council's first AQMA, declared in February 2007. It covers the area in and around Hockerill Junction.
 - b) Hertford was the council's second AQMA, declared in 2010. It covers the area along and around the A414 (Gascoyne Way) as it passes through Hertford.

c) Sawbridgeworth was the council's third AQMA, declared in 2015. It covers the area along and around the A1184 (London Road) as it passes through Sawbridgeworth.

2.7 Maps and further details outlining the exact areas covered are published on the DEFRA website, with links to them from our website.

3.0 Update on air quality in the AQMAs

3.1 At the March 2023 meeting of the O&S Committee, members of the committee were presented with data running to 2021 for each of the three air quality management areas. This information showed a downward trend for pollutants in these areas over this period, however, there were upward movements in air pollution in all three AQMAs in 2021 compared with 2020, as the main period of the national Covid lockdown began to lift.

3.2 At the time of the committee meeting, data for 2022 had not been ratified by DEFRA and so members felt they could not come to a firm view on what the trend in air pollution was coming out of the pandemic. The air quality figures for 2022 have now been ratified and can be found at Appendix B, C and D to this report.

3.3 Members will note that the upward trend in air pollution from 2020 to 2021 has continued into 2022 in each of the AQMAs, albeit not to the 2019 air pollution levels. These increases are of concern and reinforce the need for the council and its partners to continue to work together to reduce the levels of pollution.

3.4 In order to remove an AQMA, there needs to be three years or more of data showing NO₂ levels below 36 µg/m³, that is, there is consistent record of air pollution being at least 10% *below* the

national objective of 40 µg/m³. The lockdown due to the COVID pandemic has led to guidance from DEFRA that does not allow the council to rely on the air quality data for 2020 and 2021 when considering removing an AQMA.

- 3.5 As the highest air pollution figure for any monitoring site in each AQMA was above the 36 µg/m³ figure, the council will clearly *not* be in a position to consider removing any of the AQMAs within the coming three years.

Air quality in Bishop's Stortford AQMA

- 3.6 From the data in Appendix B, members will note that of the four roads at the junction, air pollution on two (Dunmow Road and London Road) remain above the national Air Quality Objective of 40 µg/m³, and on the remaining two roads (Stansted Road and Hockerill Street) while currently below the National Air Quality Objective, air quality is deteriorating and trending towards breach levels. Air quality measurements are either marginally below or slightly above the levels present when the AQMA was first declared in 2007.

- 3.7 At this stage, because of the high pollution levels, the council cannot consider removing the AQMA in this area. Before the council can consider removing this AQMA, further work by the council, Hertfordshire County Council and others, along with behaviour change is needed.

Air quality in Hertford's AQMA

- 3.8 From the data in Appendix C, members will note that while they have increased, air pollution levels at all of the monitoring sites remain below the National Air Quality Objective of 40 µg/m³.
- 3.9 At this stage, however, because there isn't a consistent record of air pollution below 36 µg/m³, the council cannot consider removing the AQMA in this area. Before the council can

consider removing this AQMA, further work and potentially behaviour change is required to at least stabilise the pollution levels at four of the sites (Gascoyne Way, Old Cross, Castle Street and Hertingfordbury Road) before then reversing the current deterioration and achieving levels below $36 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$. Additionally, further work is needed at one site (West Street) to reduce the pollution level to be below $36 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$. All five sites show a deterioration in air quality from 2021 to 2022.

Air Quality in Sawbridgeworth's AQMA

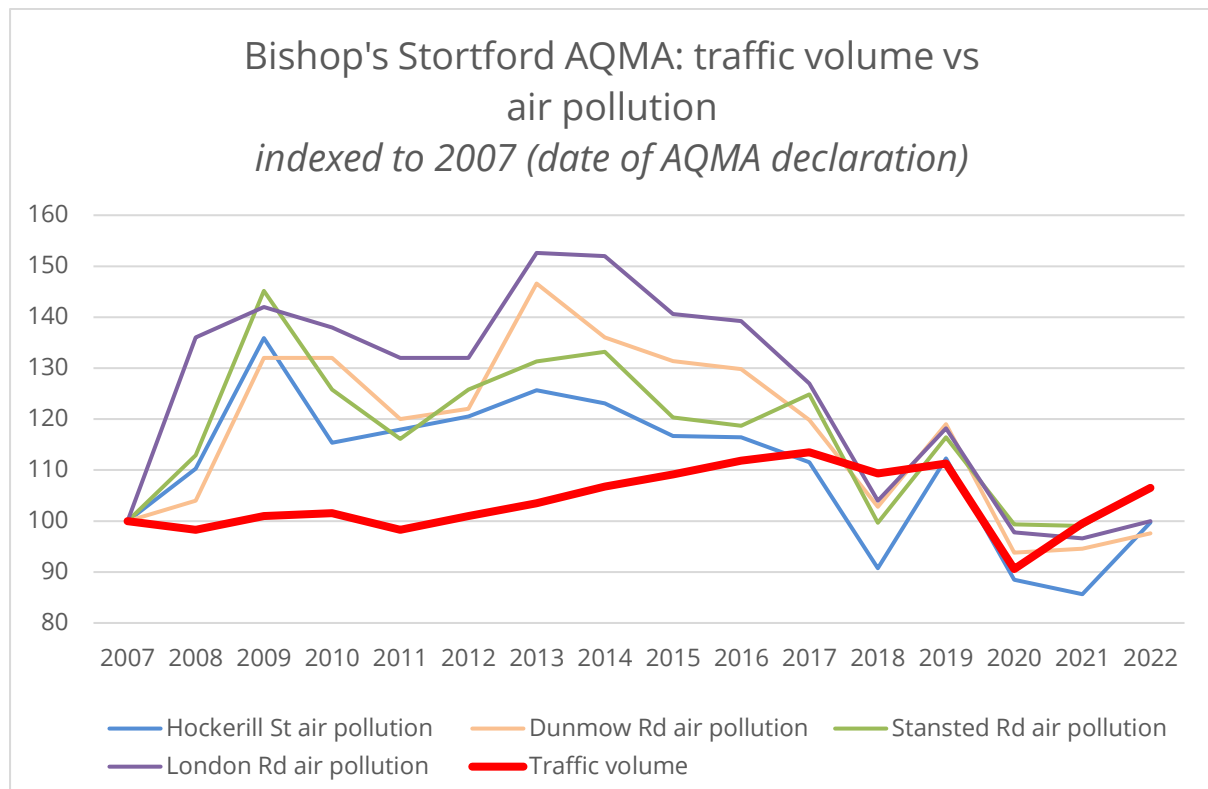
- 3.10 From the data in Appendix D, members will note that the NO_2 levels remain below the National Air Quality Objective of $40 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ at only one of the two monitoring sites (London Road) and neither sites show pollution levels below the $36 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ level needed to consider withdrawing the AQMA. Both sites show deterioration in air quality from 2021 to 2022.
- 3.11 At this stage, because of the pollution levels, the council cannot consider removing the AQMA in this area; further work and behaviour change is needed.

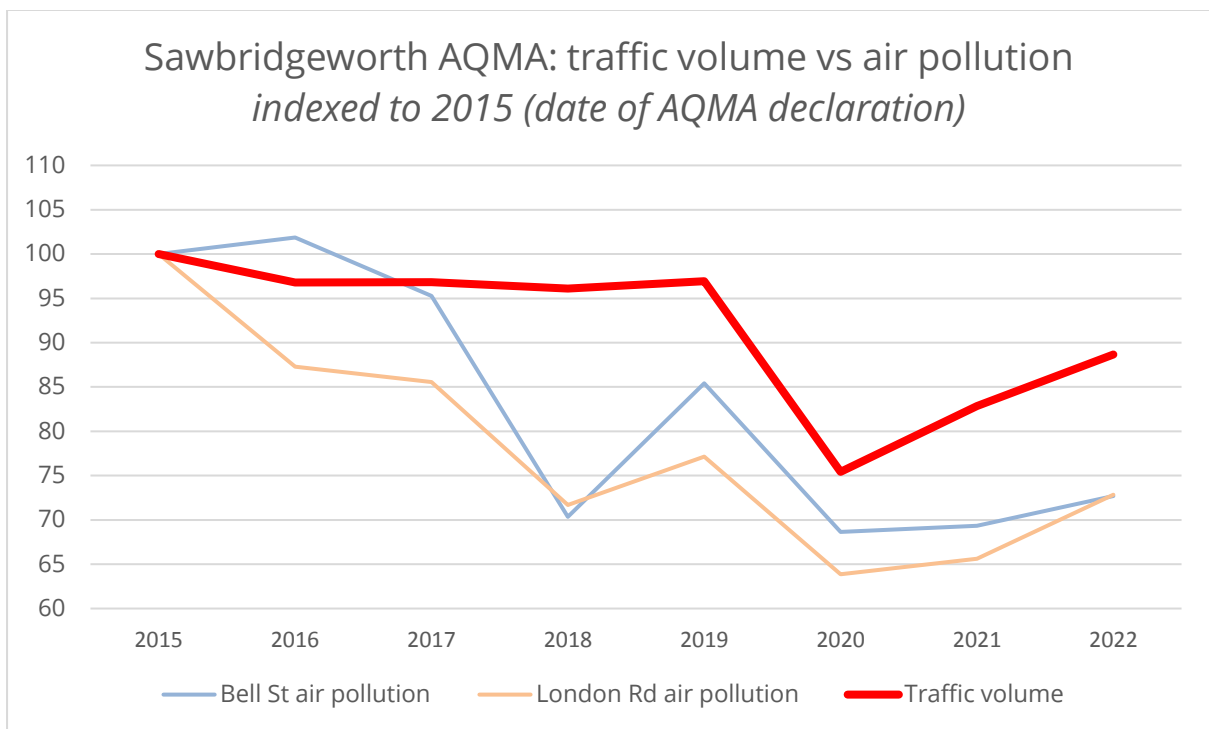
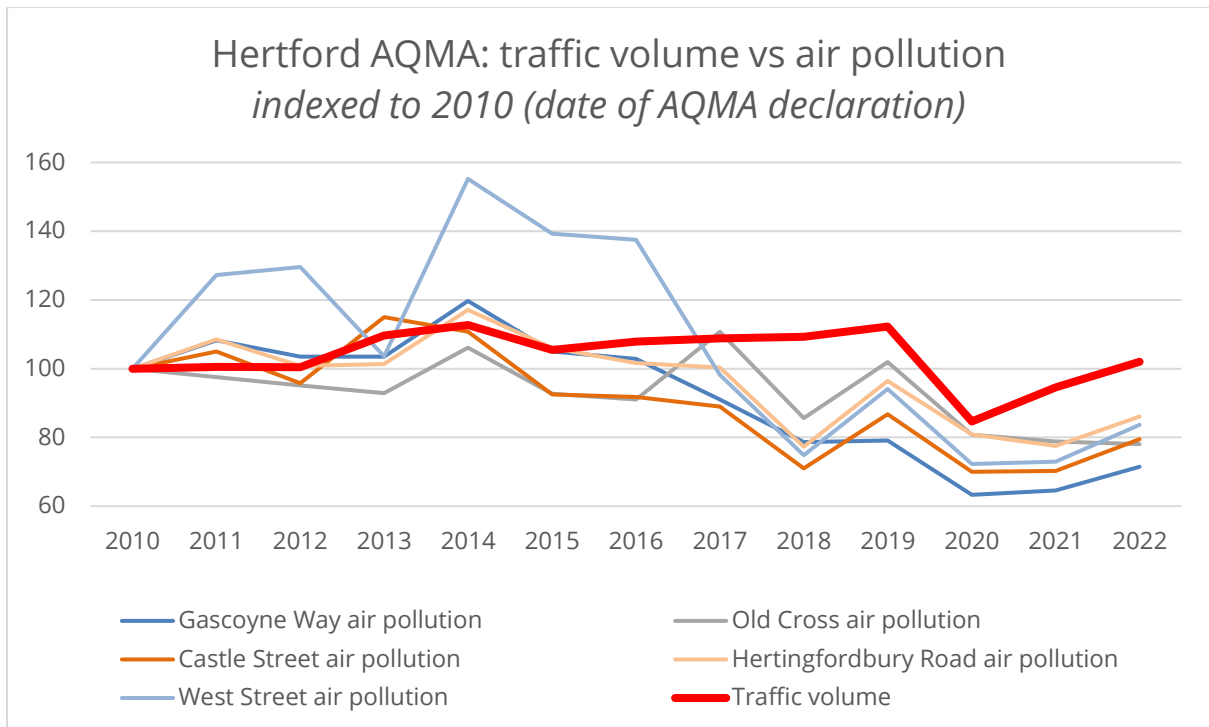
4.0 Air Quality Action Plan

- 4.1 The council's most recent Air Quality Action Plan was published in 2017, with timetabled actions running until 2020. Work has continued since then, however, as discussed at the O&S Committee meeting in March, there is now a need to produce a new plan and work is well underway.
- 4.2 Through the source apportionment work undertaken on behalf of the council, it has been confirmed that the main source of air pollution in all three AQMAs is road traffic. This begs the question, how is air pollution from road traffic best mitigated?

4.3 It is first worth exploring whether air pollution is simply linked to traffic volume alone. The graphs below show changes in traffic volumes and air pollution in each AQMA, with the figures indexed in relation to the year in which the AQMA was declared. Setting the first year of the AQMA as the base year, with a score of 100, allows changes since that date to be tracked. Figures over 100 represent growth in either traffic volume or air pollution since declaration of the AQMA, with figures under 100 representing a decrease. So, for example, an indexed score of, say, 90 in 2020, means the figure for 2020 was 90% of the baseline figure.

Traffic volume data used in the graphs below has been collated by the Department for Transport and is available at the [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk) website.





4.4 The key findings from the charts are:

- a) over the period of the AQMAs ***air pollution levels are not simply a result of more or less traffic***
- b) in each AQMA, ***reductions in air pollution outstrip growth or modest reductions in traffic***. There is a reduction in air pollution from the year the AQMA was declared to 2022, albeit small in Bishop's Stortford, despite increases in traffic in Bishop's Stortford and Hertford and only a modest reduction in traffic in Sawbridgeworth. Cleaner fossil-fuelled vehicles and more electric vehicles appear to have had a positive impact on air quality and so hastening the switch to lower emission vehicles should be a component of our new Air Quality Action Plan
- c) it cannot be overlooked however, that in each AQMA, ***between 2020 and 2022, there have been increases in both traffic volumes and air pollution***. Are air quality interventions to date losing their efficacy? How can air pollution growth be decoupled from traffic volumes? What can be done to curb increases in traffic as it's reasonable to assume this will reduce air pollution? Interventions in response to these questions should be included in our new plan.

Encouraging a swifter transition to low emission vehicles

- 4.5 As noted above, air pollution *can* be reduced to a greater degree than traffic volume reductions alone would suggest and so efforts to ensure what vehicles driving through the AQMAs are less polluting must be included in the Air Quality Action Plan.
- 4.6 The council is continuing to play a role in encouraging a switch to low emission vehicles, principally electric vehicles. Of note:

- a) e-v chargers have already been installed in several of the council's car parks including Gascoyne Way car park in Hertford and Northgate End car park in Bishop's Stortford
- b) the council is currently evaluating six high quality responses to its call for tenders for the installation of a minimum of 60 more e-v chargers, both fast and rapid, in its car parks and those of village halls
- c) the council has replaced all of its own diesel vans with e-vehicles
- d) since April this year, the council has the strictest taxi emissions standards in Hertfordshire; every taxi must be Euro 6 unless it is a specialist vehicle, such as one with wheelchair access.

4.7 There is a significant part for Hertfordshire County Council to play in this given its role as the local highways authority and its transport powers and duties. Of note, regarding encouraging low emission vehicle take-up, the county council has a key role to play in:

- a) facilitating the installation of on-street e-v chargers which draw power from lamp-posts and would see cables used on public footpaths
- b) marshalling distribution of the government's Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure (LEVI) funds in partnership with districts
- c) exploring with the council and others the concept of low emission zones to incentivise the switch to less polluting vehicles.

Reducing traffic volumes

- 4.8 Vehicles of whatever type contribute to air pollution to some extent, for example even electric vehicles will produce particulates from their brakes and tyres, thus reducing traffic volumes in the AQMAs is something that must be considered. The council does, and must continue to, work in partnership with the local highways authority, that is Hertfordshire County Council (HCC), and other key partners regarding traffic flows in the AQMAs. For example, HCC would be in the position to promote public transport alternatives to private car use, perhaps by seeking opportunities to extend the Herts Lynx demand responsive transport scheme to the southern part of East Herts and, over the longer term, marshalling the necessary resources for the east-west Hertfordshire and Essex Rapid Transit (HERT) scheme.
- 4.9 Examples of effective joint working to date include:
- a) Hertfordshire County Council's adjustment of the phasing of the traffic lights at the Hockerill junction to ease traffic queues. While not of itself likely to have reduced the number of vehicles, switching to smart traffic lights reduces the volume of traffic stopping and idling at the junction
 - b) joined up work between the county council and East Herts Council on DEFRA funded active travel schemes. The council's *Breathe Clean* scheme is currently working with local schools and businesses – see section 7 below
 - c) commencement of work on the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP). This is currently at the drafting and consultation stage. When complete, the plan will provide an evidence base for seeking funding and inward investment and making highways-related decisions. The

plan will be a key means of further promoting shifts to active travel.

4.10 More, however, could be done through partnership working. This could include new approaches to planning neighbourhoods such as:

- a) reducing the need to travel in newer neighbourhoods, enabled by the planning process. The Gilston Garden Villages and Birchall Garden Suburb being planned in East Herts, for example, are being developed along active travel principles
- b) exploring the concept of 15-minute neighbourhoods, where nearly all the facilities people need are within close proximity, thus reducing the need to travel. It would need to be borne in mind that the implementation of such an approach would require the full involvement of partners, including the county council, health services, developers and new residents themselves. East Herts Council could not act alone to instigate measures needed
- c) pushing EV car sharing and e-bike sharing schemes up the agenda in discussions with developers
- d) actively exploring within the planned District Plan review how to minimise the impact of new developments on increasing traffic flows through already congested roads.

4.11 Further ideas could take a more proactive stance on attempting to reduce the most polluting vehicles from passing through the AQMAs. Ideas could include:

- a) routing heavy goods vehicles (HGVs) away from the AQMAs

- b) exploring interventions aimed at restricting emissions implemented elsewhere in the country, for example, road pricing to deter private vehicle use and encourage a switch to active travel
- c) exploring, as referred to above, low emission zones.

5.0 Partnership, engagement and accountability

- 5.1 While it is the district council that is required to declare an AQMA when the need arises and, consequently, produce an Air Quality Action Plan aimed at reducing the air pollution, DEFRA recognises that it cannot simply be the role of the district council alone to tackle the problem. Genuine partnership, engagement and accountability is imperative, not least because some of the ideas for action that could be explored may not be universally welcome; the bolder an idea, the less palatable it may be.
- 5.2 The new action plan will need to detail the actions that all key players will need to undertake between 2024 and 2029 to improve air quality and reduce residents' exposure to air pollution.
- 5.3 It is proposed that to ensure actions are prioritised appropriately, they will need to support one or more of the following four priorities.
 - a) Manage the impact of future growth in East Hertfordshire.
 - b) Support healthier lifestyles for residents.
 - c) Reduce the impact of traffic on air quality and congestion.
 - d) Reduce the council's own impact on air quality.

- 5.4 Appendix A provides further information on these priorities and the themes for future actions.
- 5.5 Any new initiatives would need to be thoroughly explored in partnership with others within the public sector family, local residents and businesses. Thus, many of the actions that could make the biggest positive impact on improving air quality would require the involvement, agreement and ownership of many key partners including, though not limited to, East Herts Council, Hertfordshire County Council, Essex County Council, the police, educational establishments adjacent to AQMAs and town and parish councils as well as local businesses and the public. Accountability for actions will be paramount and options for joint member oversight between East Herts Council and Hertfordshire County Council will be worth exploring.
- 5.6 Given the importance of joint working, the Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability is keen to hear from members of the Overview and Scrutiny panel and indeed any members of the council with regards to suggestions on the following:
- a) who are the key partners that the council should be working with? and
 - b) are there any local community groups that the council should approach?

6.0 Air Quality Action Plan preparation timetable

- 6.1 Work is well underway on preparing the next Air Quality Action Plan for East Hertfordshire. The anticipated timetable is as follows.
- **Beginning of October 2023** – Public consultation on the draft Air Quality Action Plan will begin.

- **16th January 2024** – Overview and Scrutiny Committee will be presented with the final draft action plan following consultation. O&S members will be invited to consider the draft and make observations or recommendations to the Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability for consideration prior to the action plan being presented to the Executive.
- **13th February 2024** – The Air Quality Action Plan will be considered by the Executive, with a recommendation to endorse its submission to DEFRA for approval.

6.2 Once approved by DEFRA, the Executive Member, through delegated authority to be sought from the Executive at its meeting in February, will be in a position to formally adopt the Air Quality Action Plan on the council's behalf.

7.0 Government Grant Update

- 7.1 In July 2022, the government invited local councils across England to bid for funding from a £7 million pot to find innovative ways to improve air quality in their areas. The council submitted a bid to improve knowledge and information about air quality, raise awareness of air pollution as a health issue and promote alternatives to car travel.
- 7.2 In February 2023, the council received notification that it has been successful in its bid and had been awarded £126,408 to support this work. MP Smarter Travel have been appointed to deliver the projects on behalf of the council.
- 7.3 The funding is being used across Bishop's Stortford, Hertford and Sawbridgeworth to deliver the following outputs:

- a) purchase of three real-time air quality monitors, one for each AQMA
- b) delivery of 30 student workshops, reaching a minimum of 450 pupils across 15 schools in East Herts
- c) delivery of 150 social media posts across the year
- d) engaging six workplaces to promote active travel and promote behaviour change
- e) encouraging households to switch to active travel to replace regular school runs so as to have a positive environmental impact around target schools, for example by reducing air pollution, road danger, noise pollution and congestion and
- f) delivery of behaviour change incentives to create sustainable and longstanding changes in travel behaviour and thus improve local air quality in the longer term.

7.4 As of July 2023, the following outputs have been delivered:

- a) project specific webpage created (<https://www.eastherts.gov.uk/environmental-health/air-quality/breathe-clean-east-herts>)
- b) weekly social media posts around different aspects of air quality, raising awareness of the project and increasing understanding of air quality
- c) 11 schools have agreed to take part in the project
- d) 11 educational workshops have been delivered to 392 children at four schools

- e) through the educational workshops, MP Smarter Travel have created three student-led air quality awareness videos, with shorter versions for social media and
- f) work has commenced with Hertfordshire County Council identifying feasible locations for installation of the three real-time air quality monitors.

7.5 Appendix E contains the full update on this work, together with examples of the children's work produced as part of the campaign.

8.0 Conclusion

- 8.1 To conclude, while the council continues to work with key partners to undertake a wide range of activities aimed at improving air quality, further concerted action is needed to ensure the air pollution levels reduce to below $36 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ needed to remove the AQMAs and improve the health of the population.
- 8.2 The new Air Quality Action Plan will focus the council's limited resources, and those of others, at the areas which are likely to have the most significant impact on improving air quality across East Hertfordshire, in particular in the three air quality management areas.

9.0 Reason(s)

- 9.1 By members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee scrutinising the action plan proposals at this stage, it is hoped we can, through the Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability, build a draft action plan which focuses limited resources on this important topic ready for public consultation.

10.0 Options

- 10.1 Within the context of continuing financial pressures on the council, scale back or cease work on air quality – NOT RECOMMENDED as the declaration of AQMAs requires the council to work with partners to reduce pollution levels. Arguably, only continued work to produce a refreshed Air Quality Action Plan and seek external funding for projects will enable the council to play its part, alongside Hertfordshire County Council, national government and local communities and people, to build on the air quality gains seen to date. A corollary of ceasing air quality work would be that there'd be little in future for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to consider.
- 10.2 Adopt an ad hoc approach to working on air quality without renewing the Air Quality Action Plan – NOT RECOMMENDED as although this approach would likely see some benefits, the opportunities for joined-up working and the bringing together of actions could be lost. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee could, of course, continue to review actions from time-to-time.
- 10.3 Refresh the Air Quality Action Plan as discussed in this report and continue with joined-up actions – RECOMMENDED. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee could consider progress on a periodic basis.

11.0 Risks

- 11.1 There is a risk to health from inaction on air pollution in the district.
- 11.2 There is a reputational risk to the council if it were considered not to be taking the problem of air pollution seriously.

11.3 There is a financial risk as failure to work with all interested parties and communities on the reduction of air pollution could ultimately led to higher cost interventions, such as road closures, road pricing and the like, being required to tackle the problem.

11.4 There is a risk of DEFRA imposing financial penalties on the council for failing its statutory duty by not having an up-to-date Air Quality Action Plan.

12.0 Implications/Consultations

12.1 Community Safety

a) No

12.2 Data Protection

a) No

12.3 Equalities

a) Yes – Poor air quality can disproportionately impact people with particularly protected characteristics, notably disabled people with long-term health conditions such as asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and older people who are more likely to have such disabilities. Thus, efforts to improve air quality are likely to have significantly beneficial impact on people with this protected characteristic.

12.4 Environmental Sustainability

a) Yes – The work identified in this report will improve environmental sustainability.

12.5 Financial

a) No

12.6 Health and Safety

- a) No

12.7 Human Resources

- a) No

12.8 Human Rights

- a) No

12.9 Legal

- a) The declaration of AQMAs requires the council to work with partners to reduce pollution levels.

12.10 Specific Wards

- a) No. Although focused on the wards with AQMAs, the council work to raise aware of the issue of air pollution and take steps to curtail it apply across the district.

13.0 Background papers, appendices and other relevant material

13.1 Background Information:

- a) Overview and Scrutiny Committee minutes from 21/03/2023
<http://democracy.eastherts.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?Clid=515&MId=4070&J=5>
- b) Climate change emergency declaration 2019
<http://democracy.eastherts.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?Clid=158&MId=3508&J=3>
- c) Climate change emergency declaration 2023
<http://democracy.eastherts.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?Clid=158&MId=4215&J=5>

13.2 Appendices

- a) Appendix A - East Hertfordshire's Air Quality Action Plan scoping document
- b) Appendix B – NO₂ levels at Hockerill Junction, Bishop's Stortford Air Quality Management Area
- c) Appendix C – NO₂ levels Gascoyne Way, Hertford Air Quality Management Area
- d) Appendix D – NO₂ levels London Road, Sawbridgeworth Air Quality Management Area
- e) Appendix E – Status Report from MP Smarter Travel

Contact Member

Councillor Tim Hoskin, Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability

tim.hoskin@eastherts.gov.uk

Contact Officer

Jonathan Geall, Head of Housing and Health

Contact Tel. No. 01992 531594

jonathan.geall@eastherts.gov.uk

Report Author

Paul Thomas-Jones, Service Manager – Environmental Health

paul.thomas-jones@eastherts.gov.uk

and

Jonathan Geall, Head of Housing and Health

Contact Tel. No. 01992 531594

jonathan.geall@eastherts.gov.uk