Local air pollution: the role of active travel
Submission from Sustrans to the Royal College of Physicians working party
September 2014

Key points

Sustrans would like to urge the working party to keep three matters in mind:

- the co-benefits achievable by addressing our over-use of private motorised transport in urban and peri-urban areas, and the logic of cross-government and cross-sector action to maximise these
- the scale of travel behaviour change achievable, to deliver these benefits
- the unlikelihood that technology advances can make the problem disappear as quickly as its urgency demands.

And we make four recommendations:

Transport investment priorities need to change: local air quality improvement should be a priority objective in the fundamental planning of government spending on transport.

A significant, dedicated investment programme should be created for cycling and walking, to build on the successful Local Sustainable Transport Fund, and with a still clearer focus on shifting local transport choices from motorised to active travel.

Existing and planned developments and infrastructure should be ‘health-checked’, to ensure they are supportive of active travel, will not generate additional motor trips, and in particular will lead to improved local air quality.

NICE should be commissioned to deliver guidance on local strategies and measures to tackle air pollution and improve air quality.
Introduction

Sustrans is a leading UK charity enabling people to travel by foot, bike or public transport for more of the journeys we make every day. We work with families, communities, policy-makers and partner organisations so that people are able to choose healthier, cleaner and cheaper journeys, with better places and spaces to move through and live in.

Our practical work includes a major national programme of environmental interventions – working with many partners to create or improve walking and cycling infrastructure – including the National Cycle Network. We also run national programmes of behavioural interventions, working with one in ten English schools, for example, doubling cycling to school, increasing scooting by over fifty per cent, and sustaining walking levels.

The scale of behaviour change engendered by our work is enough to make a real difference to local travel, including air quality. In 2013, almost 5 million individuals made 423 million walking and 325 million cycling trips on the National Cycle Network. 150 million of these trips could have been made by car. Usage has increased every year since systematic monitoring began in 2000.

We believe this practical experience of creating travel behaviour change makes the Sustrans viewpoint relevant and important to your working party.

We have noted that the working party will focus primarily on how air pollution damages health. Nonetheless, we hope you will be able to touch on some of the practical things that can be done to tackle it. This submission is to look at some of those.

Overarching considerations

We hope members of the working party can keep in mind three overarching considerations while considering evidence and developing recommendations. These relate to transport in the context of strategies and measures to address the air pollution problem: there may be others relevant to other fields. They are introduced below.

The co-benefits achievable by addressing our over-use of private motorised transport in urban and peri-urban areas, and the logic of cross-government and cross-sector action to maximise these

In Sustrans’ view, policies and measures to address the problem of local air pollution can and should be developed with an eye to the gains that can be made on objectives in other, associated policy areas. Transport is a good example: change in travel behaviour contributes to numerous policy objectives, offering therefore exceptional value for money.

In the first place, private motorised transport is a major contributor to local toxic air pollution. Therefore we should take immediate and decisive action to reduce it, by promoting alternatives and by restraint measures, such as reallocating road space from motor traffic to pedestrians and cyclists. This is an imperative in its own right.

We have noted the working party’s commitment to consider the relationship between climate change and air pollution and we very much welcome this. The Royal College has been a leader on climate change policy for some time, and this too is welcome: medical
professionals, and your expert views, are trusted by the public and your leadership is valuable.

A shift to active travel will reduce climate change emissions as well as local toxic air pollution. At the same time, it reduces noise, improves road safety, increases social interaction, and above all by promoting physical activity it will cut cardio-vascular disease, various forms of cancer and type 2 diabetes, improve mental health and contribute to other health objectives.

The evidence on disease prevention through active travel is not at issue. There is a strong consensus, led by the four Chief Medical Officers of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland who state that “for most people, the easiest and most acceptable forms of physical activity are those that can be incorporated into everyday life. Examples include walking or cycling instead of travelling by car, bus or train.” This is backed up by the Government’s Foresight obesity team, The British Medical Association, the public health profession as a whole, and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) which offers a list of practical interventions in favour of walking and cycling, including road space reallocation, traffic calming, road user charging and network improvements as well as a range of motivational and information approaches. NICE says that “walking and cycling should become the norm for short journeys.”

At the national policy level, a shift from motorised to active travel for local trips offers a reduction in our dependence on fossil fuel imports, sometimes from unstable nations or regions, and an improvement in the balance of payments through lower energy import demand.

On top of all these benefits, investment in active travel is far, far better value for money than other transport spending. Using the Department for Transport’s assessment methodology, it offers much higher benefit to cost ratios (BCR) than traditional road schemes. DfT regards a BCR of 2:1 as a good return on investment: walking and cycling schemes regularly return BCR of over 10:1.

A review of published transport analyses, carried out in 2010 for the South West regional government office and the Department of Health, found that, “almost all of the studies identified report economic benefits of walking and cycling interventions which are highly significant. The median result for all data identified is 13:1 and for UK data alone the median figure is higher, at 19:1.”

The scale of travel behaviour change achievable, to deliver these benefits

The scale of potential change in local travel behaviour, modelled by Sustrans and others, is really significant: there is an opportunity to transform local air quality, along with the associated benefit areas described above.

Sustrans’ own work for the DfT has shown that in representative UK cities 47% of car trips could be replaced by walking, cycling or public transport, without major changes to existing infrastructure.

Even greater potential exists where significant investment is made in infrastructure to support these modes. Sustrans has called for a doubling of the share of trips made by walking, cycling and public transport: this is achievable, and would have very significant public health impact.
This is not a view unique to Sustrans: the Cabinet Office has calculated that people could replace 78% of their local car trips under five miles with walking, cycling or public transport\(^{(1)}\).

**The unlikelihood that technology advances can make the problem disappear as quickly as its urgency demands**

Sustrans is cautious about the idea that technological advances can solve problems associated with vehicle emissions, be they climate change gases or local pollutants. The motor industry has historically fought a successful rearguard action against tighter engine emission standards, but even were this to change the scale and severity of the air pollution problem is such that, put simply, we cannot wait. Technology may promise cleaner exhaust gases in the future, but people are dying now.

The other weakness of a tech-based approach to air quality policy is that it fails to deliver on many of the co-benefits listed above. If the UK vehicle fleet magically became all-electric tomorrow, it would still be sedentary transport, still severing communities and suppressing social interaction, and still creating road danger. This illustrates very well that an integrated approach to policy is desirable.

The technological solutions which we would support would be those which have a part to play in tackling the air quality problem by addressing the motor traffic which causes it. Real-time air quality monitoring, linked to variable traffic messaging to close roads to traffic when limits are breached, for example, would be appropriate use of technology. But the real issue illustrated here is one of national and local policy – this example is about having the courage and compassion to stop the traffic when the air is toxic, not particularly about the technology.

**Sustrans recommends**

The working party will no doubt identify urgently needed changes to policy and practice in a number of areas. As regards transport, we suggest:

**Transport investment priorities need to change: local air quality improvement should be a priority objective in the fundamental planning of government spending on transport.**

A significant, dedicated investment programme should be created for cycling and walking, to build on the successful Local Sustainable Transport Fund, and with a still clearer focus on shifting local transport choices from motorised to active travel.

Existing and planned developments and infrastructure should be ‘health-checked’, to ensure they are supportive of active travel, will not generate additional motor trips, and in particular will lead to improved local air quality.

**NICE should be commissioned to deliver guidance on local strategies and measures to tackle air pollution and improve air quality.**
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