

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-010-2021/22

Date of meeting: 26 July 2021-22



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: Planning & Sustainability – Cllr. N Bedford

Subject: Progress with the Portfolio Advisory Group on the Air Pollution Mitigation Strategy

Responsible Officer: Nick Dawe (07939449512).

Democratic Services: Adrian Hendry (01992 564246).

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- 1) For Cabinet to note the considerable progress made by the group since its inception and the number of additional ideas and suggestions made by the group that are currently being investigated prior to possible implementation; and**
- 2) To note that the group's success will be heavily dependent on the ideas generated by the group, the evaluation of these ideas and advice given on their implementation. All members of the group are thanked for their contributions to date but will need to remain active in this regard over the following months.**

Executive Summary:

The Council is keen to support a Local Plan that has sustainable growth at its heart and that takes due account both of the environment in which people live and the specific broader responsibility of the Epping Forest Special Area of Conservation (SAC). The key to the future, is that these issues are addressed alongside providing local housing and employment opportunities for the next generation which in itself will reduce to need for unnecessary travel.

The Council is already making significant progress with many of the environmental initiatives contained within the Local Plan, including bringing forward the first three of the green infra-structure projects and also significant developments in terms of Electric Vehicle (EV) charging, demand responsive transport and safer cycling routes. Specifically, in respect of air quality, the Council has implemented a published procedure where all new planning applications are scrutinised to determine whether they will deviate from the assumptions in the Local Plan air quality modelling, and to ensure that the necessary mitigation is built into their applications. Specifically, even with the release of small-scale developments, the environmental impacts of these are being re-evaluated, including held approvals, using the AECOM modelling approach.

In addition to the delivery of the environmental and air pollution strategies supporting the Local Plan, the Portfolio Holder for Planning has drawn together an advisory group to include opposition party members and contribution from Essex County Council and the Corporation of London.

The advisory group not only monitors progress but also advises on how the progress can be accelerated through a variety of further actions and initiatives linked to the (interim) Air Pollution Mitigation Strategy. With the recent increase in the pace of local improvements and an emergence of national policy towards issues such as electric vehicles, these should bode well for the future. Specifically, at this moment in time concentration is being given to reducing and making more consistent movement of traffic on the motorways and other cross-forest roads and a wider set of junction improvements.

Report:

PAG Update, 30th June 2021

1. The Group was set up after Full Council in February 2021. The group consists of a representative from each of the main political groups- Conservatives, Greens, LRA, and Liberal Democrats.
2. The PAG remit was to try and identify additional mitigation measures that were not already included in the air pollution mitigation strategy (APMS) that was adopted at the February Full Council.
3. The first meeting of PAG was held as agreed within one month of the February meeting and at the meeting the make-up of the group was discussed along with who we wanted to invite along as observers or advisors. Discussions around who we might want to give advice and any ideas that members thought appropriate were then set as an agenda for the second meeting.
4. At the second meeting a full presentation was given by AECOM to all members present and questions from the floor flowed well. All felt that this meeting helped outline the science behind the APMS and how the pollution levels had been recorded and used to define the requirements of the strategy.
5. The main point to come from this meeting was that since 2011, up to the data analysing the period around 2017/2018 had highlighted the high levels of particulates in and around the first 20m of the forest where it abuts the main roads. It was also noted that higher levels of Ammonia were now recorded in the tree canopy areas also abutting the roadways.
6. Once all were aware of this it became obvious that we would have to think of measures that would reduce the number of journeys through the forest particular those that were slow and by highly polluting vehicles. It was not a problem travelling through but at peak times of the day heavy traffic was building up with stationary traffic with vehicles still ticking over.
7. Our initial task is how do we reduce the queuing times at junctions and roundabouts and get traffic flowing better.

Ideas generated to date

- Reducing visitor parking in areas that abut the forest in particular forest wards in Loughton. How do we achieve this? Solution, the current parking schemes are six days a week and Sundays are practically busy. Residents parking spaces all but non-existent due to an influx of drivers looking for free parking. The group have asked officers to approach the parking partnership scheme and contact residents to see if they favour a seven day a

week restriction. This is being investigated as a good way forward to reduce pollution levels in surrounding forest areas, and will mean that the dedicated car parks in the forest are used. Revenue from these could be used to help put in place further Air Pollution mitigation measures. There is also a recreation pressure issue that is being addressed but not the business of the PAG.

- PAG looked at cycling and walking infrastructure opportunities that have not already been identified, and how these may play in to helping reduce the need for car journeys. The group are aware that one side of the Wake's Arms roundabout has a bike lane yet the Epping side does not. Is there an opportunity for road and footpath improvements on safety grounds?
- How do we keep traffic flowing? An idea to come from the group, which although not costed, would be the installation at a couple of key points time over distance cameras. Although unsightly, would encourage people to drive through the forest at constant speeds as opposed to speeding up and braking at roundabouts. When trialled on roads such as the M25 this was found to be highly effective in keeping traffic flowing.

8. At the third meeting of the PAG key points that were discussed included the following:

- The need to identify which trees are best suited to absorbing Carbon and which trees like ammonia in stronger concentrates. Two trees have been identified by officers at this stage: Yew trees (often found in graveyards) and Willow trees where wet conditions predominate. We need a strategy of planting many thousands of trees in woods and copse areas especially where we have high pollution levels. Our officers are already working on a green infrastructure project and it is hoped to bring that to council as soon as possible.
- Through education we need to encourage people to reduce their visits to the forest and make good use of Special Areas of Natural Greenspace (SANGS). One such walk that runs from Buckhurst Hill through to Theydon Bois has been identified.
- A very special piece of artwork in the form of large circles can be seen from the M11, and sits behind the Theydon Bois Cemetery. This route to this area was filmed by drone at the request of the group and the video was presented to the group at the last PAG meeting (part of the route -the area to the rear of the Bank of England site). It was noted that improvements to this route could result in more people accessing the site without the need for vehicles.
- Some improvements are already planned for the Roding Valley section with better signage and clearance of green material. Additionally better promotion would increase more use of a lovely walking and running area.
- Immediate work should be undertaken by EFDC to promote lifestyle and vehicle usage and changes in private motor vehicle usage. In effect we should increase signposting to more fuel-efficient vehicles, promote alternative fuel vehicles and through discussions with ECC & TFL discuss their plans for managing the vehicle fleet that passes through the district on a daily basis.

9. By applying pressure and giving time for fleet changes it is hoped that by 2025 buses will be the most modern available and not just 'cast offs' from other authorities. Officers should be engaging and asking ECC and TFL now the plans for the future, potentially offering EFDC as a trial area for new vehicles.

- It is noted that EFDC are currently trialling two new electric vehicles and that we should be looking to the longer-term future of the vehicle fleet we currently run at EFDC. The vehicle trial results should be fed back to the PAG as soon as they are available to enable further discussions about vehicle fleet management to be recommended going forward. We should be leading by example.

10. The group are now aware that the Corporation of London are introducing car parking charges across all the forest car parks and this is being rolled out in phases. Any money raised from these will be fed back into improving car parking and access to the forest as well as any future mitigation measures required. It was noted that EFDC are not involved with the car parking charges or revenue generation from these parking areas.

Ideas being investigated at this moment include:

- A consideration of further enhancements to the main highway junctions to allow vehicles to continue at a steady pace and therefore reducing the overall impact of pollution. These actions will need to involve further discussions with Essex County Council Highways and the Highways England.
- Further discussions are also intended with the Highway Agency to discuss the implementation of gantry speeds and advisory directions, to secure both a consistent transit speed on the M25 close to the forest and direction advice that advises commercial and heavy goods vehicles of routes so as to minimise the pressure on the town centres and forest.
- Early investigation is planned on what systems can be used to ensure transit of the forest by commercial vehicles not registered or based or have a supply chain end destination within EFDC could be considered as these vehicles add to pollution pressures and may offer little economic benefit to the area.
- Further consideration of seeking further environmental support is being undertaken. AECOM resources can support with a number of initiatives planned and the potential for earlier and more sophisticated pollution monitoring and management.

Summary

11. Considerable work has been undertaken with the inclusion of all EFDC major parties and other key partners. Further work is planned over the summer and further updates will be produced on a quarterly basis.

