

Improving air quality: national plan for tackling nitrogen dioxide in our towns and cities



Consultation response from the Aviation Environment Federation

14th June 2017

We respond only to the first question this in this consultation

How satisfied are you that the proposed measures set out in this consultation will address the problem of nitrogen dioxide as quickly as possible?

Very dissatisfied.

The Aviation Environment Federation is concerned exclusively with the environmental impacts of aviation. Airports can significantly impact air pollution as a result of emissions both from aircraft, and from staff, passenger and freight traffic on the ground. Among UK airports, Heathrow stands out as presenting a particular air pollution problem given (i) the scale of its operation (ii) the fact that background air pollution levels remain high, with roads near the airport remaining persistently in breach of NO₂ limits, and (iii) its plans for growth, on which the Government is consulting.

In the context of Heathrow's impacts on air pollution, we consider that the plan set out in the consultation fails to address the problem of nitrogen dioxide as quickly as possible for the following reasons:

1) It assumes that local authorities can be responsible for all pollution in their boroughs.

By placing responsibility for action on to local authorities, infrastructure decisions that are outside their hands but which can have major impacts face no effective regulatory control. It is notable that several local authorities in the vicinity of Heathrow Airport have expressed such strong opposition to the planned expansion, specifically on the basis of its air quality impacts, that they have committed to bringing a judicial review on this issue should the NPS be designated.

Under the air quality plan presented for consultation these authorities would be expected to deal with the mess caused by the projected increase in both freight and passenger transport to the airport, and the consequent air quality impacts, but they have no powers – except through the court – to stop the development taking place, or to regulate the airport's activity if breaches continue after construction of a new runway.

2) It assumes that infrastructure developers can take effective action to mitigate the impact of their projects.

At the same time, it is in the nature of National Policy Statements to place responsibility for mitigating environmental impacts on the developer. The Airports NPS makes Heathrow Airport itself responsible for limiting the air pollution impacts of expansion. Yet the Government's own analysis concludes that actions taken by the airport (which

are effectively, in any case, at its own discretion) are unlikely to have any impact on the question of whether the project causes non-compliance with NO₂ limits, since the area at greatest risk remains central London: any increase in vehicle emissions associated with the third runway could cause or worsen an exceedance on roads in central London that are close to or above the limit.

The emissions per vehicle are what make the critical difference to NO₂ limits, an issue over which Heathrow has no control. In this context it is notable – and concerning – that in the press release accompanying this consultation the Government specified “avoiding undue impact on the motorist” as one of its aims. Ruling out measures that could be necessary to achieve NO₂ limits as quickly as possible for the sake of political expediency is unacceptable in our view.

3) It ignores the impact of planned future infrastructure in its modelling.

We recognise that Heathrow expansion is not yet at the stage of receiving planning approval. Nevertheless if the NPS in support of expansion is designated – which could in theory be as soon as this autumn – it will be extremely difficult for the decision to be reversed. It is therefore essential for Parliament to have access to accurate information about the costs and benefits of the project before they are asked to vote on it.

The fact that Defra appears to be operating in a separate silo from DfT on this issue is alarming. Since there is no mention in the plan or the consultation of the possible impact of Heathrow expansion on the feasibility of meeting NO₂ limits in the shortest time possible we assume that the modelling presented is based on an assumption of a two runway airport. The analysis underpinning the NPS, meanwhile, was based on an earlier version of the air quality plan which has since been ruled by the court to be unacceptable and over-optimistic.

This means that (i) The NPS appears set to be presented to parliament for a vote with no information on the impact that the scheme would have on the UK’s updated air quality strategy and (ii) respondents to this consultation are being asked to comment on the effectiveness or otherwise of a plan that ignores the likely NO₂ impact of a major infrastructure project that is being pursued by the current Government.

4) It is silent on whether major infrastructure that would worsen air pollution should be ruled out until legal limits are being met.

The modelling that is presented, since it builds in new and less optimistic forecasts of vehicle emissions compared with the last plan, suggests that London could remain in breach of NO₂ limits even in 2030. The Heathrow third runway, meanwhile, is currently expected to open in the mid-2020s, with construction beginning several years earlier. The consultation implies that Defra is unable to demonstrate with confidence how legal limits will be met before this work begins.

We consider this unacceptable. Part of the air quality policy should be that no major planning decisions will be taken that could cause a deterioration in air quality until the UK is achieving compliance with legal limits.