



ARCBITE



Brokering Innovation Through Evidence

Community engagement in air quality actions: a review of local authority plans

Authors: Fiona Ward (ARC-NWC Equitable Place-based Health and Care (EPHC) theme, Lancaster University), Neil Joseph (Public Adviser) and Simon Kirby (Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council) **December 2020**

Background

Exposure to air pollution has a detrimental effect on health. Long-term effects include heart disease, lung cancer and respiratory disease and in the short-term it can exacerbate conditions such as asthma. There is also evidence that people living in disadvantaged areas are disproportionately affected.

The Applied Research Collaboration North West Coast's (ARC-NWC) health equity focus argues that communities should have a real voice in decisions that affect their lives and early consultation with ARC-NWC Members, Public Advisers and residents has identified air quality as an issue of concern. This research bite presents the findings from our review of community engagement in NWC local authority air quality plans and actions.

Each local authority has to review their air quality and report to the Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs (Defra). If they identify a location where pollution levels exceed set thresholds, they must declare an Air Quality Management Area and develop an action plan. When reporting on these reviews and developing plans there has to be consultation, and "bodies representing local business interests and other organisations as appropriate" are specified consultees.

Although residents are not specifically identified as statutory consultees, a Defra public health briefing states that "engagement with various stakeholders, including other members within the local authority, those in the local health sector and the wider community is foremost in ensuring air quality issues are tackled appropriately." In addition, the public-facing summaries of reviews are to be aimed at the lay reader so that the local public can more easily engage with local air quality issues.





What did we do?

During March/April 2020 we conducted on-line searches to find any documents relating to air quality and air pollution on the websites of local authorities across the ARC-NWC area. The most recent plans (in particular Annual Air Quality Status Reports and Air Quality Action Area plans) were examined – this amounted to 40 documents on 12 websites. Information was extracted about the type of public/community engagement, the methods used and the groups targeted.

We adapted an existing community engagement framework to categorise the approaches into: (i) community liaison and consultation; (ii) community capacity building; (iii) inclusive strategic decision making; and (iv) community control of the design or delivery of services. Because we found that a lot of the current activity was providing information and awareness raising, we included this as an additional element of community liaison and consultation.

What did we find out?

Information, liaison and consultation

- Most frequently, the emphasis in the local authority plans was on awareness raising and providing information to encourage residents to change their behaviour: they offered advice to residents about how they can ‘take responsibility’ or ‘make informed choices’ or ‘play their part to reduce air pollution and help improve air quality in their area’. Most authorities provided advice about how residents could do things differently and some highlighted services, grants, regulations and provided website links for further information. Local authorities also mentioned their media campaigns on topics such as anti-idling, bus travel, reducing school traffic and discouraging bonfires which often ran on National Clean Air Day. Some referred to communication plans and others to ‘greater targeting of messages’ or the need for campaigns to provide ‘clear and accurate information’. One council highlighted their social media toolkit and two have their own dedicated air quality websites.

"Air pollution can now be linked to thousands of strokes, cardiac arrests and asthma attacks a year, so it's clear that the climate emergency is in fact also a health emergency."

Simon Stevens, CEO, NHS England

Advice on, for example:

- Active travel
- Car servicing and driving tips
- Composting and garden fires
- Household energy saving
- Low emission vehicles
- Wood burners and coal fires

Information about services including:

- Bulky items collection
- Electric vehicle charging points
- Household waste disposal
- Public transport

Regulations and hotlines:

- Smoky vehicle hotline
- Smoke control areas
- Exempt appliances



- Local authorities were **actively liaising** with residents and local employees, providing schemes to help them change their behaviour. Schools were often targeted with some initiatives designed to be delivered to pupils and others aimed at staff or parents/carers. A number of authorities were developing resources for schools including one ‘clean air programme’ which was going to include ‘guidance and support for schools on developing a clean air strategy; lesson plans, activities and resources for teachers; [...] resources to deliver a clean air event, campaign and poster competition’.
- Our review found that most **community consultation** takes place as part of statutory process such as planning applications or in putting together Air Quality Action Plans or Clean Air Plans: a narrow interpretation of who constitutes a ‘statutory consultee’ is commonly applied to the Annual Status Report process, and the public are not usually involved. The value of wider consultation was recognised in one Air Quality Action Plan which stated that ‘[stakeholders] will need to take ownership of the action planning process and feel part of the overall decision-making process’. A range of face to face, on-line and postal consultation methods have been used. There were also examples of consultation on other strategies such as Walking and Cycling Strategies, Low Emissions Strategies and Highways and Transport Masterplans, although they did not always include residents. In addition, one authority mentioned a community engagement event in 2018 to feed into their response to the Government’s Clean Air Strategy.

Interactive schemes and ideas, including:

- Travel planning
- Car sharing
- Active travel (e.g. walk to school and cycling programmes)
- Delivering a Clean Air event

Community capacity building

- ‘Citizen science’ is one potential air quality community capacity building activity, enabling residents to take part in research projects and find out more about air quality in locations that are important to them. The review found, to date, citizen science projects have taken place in schools, although one local authority did mention plans for some community-based work. They said they will ‘support opportunities for citizen-led science and action to tackle air pollution, such as community planting and air pollution monitoring projects.’ The same authority also referred to a local centre ‘making pollution catchers [and] creating travel towers’ to frame conversations about travel to school.



Inclusive decision-making

- In the local authority plans we found references to existing air quality steering groups or task force and other authorities suggested they were going to be established. In some cases, membership was vaguely described as ‘relevant stakeholders’ whilst in others, members were listed and usually included councillors, officers and ‘key agencies’.
- Only in one case was resident involvement in a local forum mentioned, although it is not clear that it is a decision-making body. The same local authority indicated that a steering group would be formed in a new Air Quality Action Area which would include ‘external partners, businesses and local community groups’. Another local authority, in their 2018 Annual Status Report, referred to the development of ‘...local action groups. Opportunities to get involved will be posted on social media and in subsequent [Annual Status Reports]’.
- There are several examples of cycling and walking strategies and travel plans but it was unclear whether residents or communities had been involved in their development. Only one, a cycling strategy, specifically said it was overseen by a group that residents can join – it was described as an ‘active cycle forum where cyclists can get involved in local decision-making’.
- The review found several references to air quality communication strategies but examples of communities being involved in their production, despite them considering key issues such as methods ‘to encourage public engagement and deliver key messages related to air quality and to ensure effective joint working with external partners’ and to ‘increase knowledge and encourage behaviour change’.

Example of a local air quality forum:

Established in 2000, the forum meets annually, ‘bringing together representatives from the community to address local concerns regarding air quality’.

Members include local environmental and community groups, residents, local industry, health bodies (e.g. Health Protection England), Environment Agency, Council officers and local councillors.



Community engagement in service design/delivery

- The review found one reference to a local authority working with a community group to provide a new service. This was a local authority supporting a funding bid to provide electric vehicle charging facilities for residents who did not have off street parking at home. In the same area, the existence of a community interest company car club was also mentioned.
- In another local authority's documents, there was reference to a funding for air quality work as part of a programme to 'support social investment and innovation to enhance community wellbeing'.

What did we learn?

The longer-term aim of the EPHC theme's air quality work in the ARC-NWC is to illustrate how residents and local organisations can work together to take action that will result in improved air quality. This review of recent community engagement in NWC air quality plans and actions suggests this is an area which could be further developed in the North West Coast.

As a result of these findings, we have decided to review the wider national and international literature to find out more about approaches that have been used in engaging communities in air quality projects (further details of this review can be found in another ARC-NWC research bite). It is hoped that this will provide information that can help us as we move forward with residents, local authorities and other organisations in trying out new ways of working in our 'demonstration sites'.

For more information about the research, please visit the Equitable Place Based Health and Care Theme's webpages on the ARC-NWC website <https://arc-nwc.nihr.ac.uk/> or contact the EPHC theme at ephcenquiries@lancaster.ac.uk

What is NIHR CLAHRC / ARC North West Coast?

The Applied Research Collaboration North West Coast (ARC NWC) superceded CLAHRC NWC in September 2019. It is a partnership between universities, NHS, public, etc.

Its mission is to undertake applied research to improve public health, wellbeing, quality of care & reduce health inequalities across the North West Coast region. <https://arc-nwc.nihr.ac.uk/>