

Air quality in Bath: a blog by our lead on transport and air pollution, Patrick Rotheram – 18th June 18

Many of us, after suffering years of poor air quality, wonder when we will achieve clean air in Bath.

The proof of the air pollution pudding is in the monitoring. B&NES measures an extensive range of pollutants across Bath, and the system seems to be effective. The only pollutant that is currently in exceedance (ie above the level set by law) is nitrogen dioxide (NO₂).

It became obvious several years ago that the projections in the 2011 Bath Air Quality Action Plan of reducing NO₂ levels were not happening in reality. It transpired that the theoretical models for diesel vehicle emissions were faulty and that emissions tests were being rigged by the manufacturers. Ultimately that has been addressed by Government, but we have yet to see any significant reduction in NO₂ levels in Bath.

The good news is that, thanks to law firm Client Earth, the Government was forced to deal with the exceedances, and they passed the requirement on to B&NES. There is little doubt that without that mandate, B&NES would still be doing nothing.

We will get a Clean Air Zone, but it remains to be seen how effective that will be. Older vehicles will still be able to come into Bath, so long as they pay. New 'clean' vehicles may not turn out to be as clean as promised under the new emissions standards. What we really need is less traffic. The proof will be in the NO₂ data. If NO₂ fails to come below the legal limit, B&NES will have to take further action until it does. That is well and good, but the problem is that it is a very long cycle, and it could be years before we actually eliminate excessive NO₂.

So we may be in for further rounds of tightening control. We may also have confirmed what many of us fear, that diesel particulates are far more harmful than currently believed. Brake dust and rubber particles from tyres, which are a problem even with low or no-emission vehicles, may be the next areas of concern.

FOBRA has helped keep the issue in the public eye in Bath, but it seems clear that B&NES will not do anything more than is required to meet the legal requirements. FOBRA may have played a useful role by bringing to DEFRA's attention the NO₂ exceedances across Bath; B&NES was included in the final list of delinquent authorities, having been omitted from the original list.

Encouragingly, the issue is now high on the national political agenda, so the authorities can no longer avoid their responsibilities. FOBRA Members who want to maintain pressure on the Government to address air pollution can support the Healthy Air campaign <https://www.healthyair.org.uk/> or Client Earth <https://www.clientearth.org/>. Meanwhile, the Council's website at <http://www.bathnes.gov.uk/bath-breathes-2021> has much useful information.