

A GREEN LIVING PLAN FOR THAME

Air quality and monitoring – a note from the RSA Thame Group – Feb 2016

Introduction - The issue of air quality and its monitoring is an increasingly hot topic in South Oxfordshire. Thame is *not* regarded as being at risk to the same extent as Henley, Wallingford and Watlington, but given the pace of development in Thame and the increasing pressure on the High Street, similar issues apply here also. We should be able to benefit from research and actions being proposed to alleviate the worst effects being experienced by these other towns. These notes pick up comments now being discussed by SODC and local sustainability groups. They are not intended to be a *strategy* for Thame as such but to provide useful input into the debate here and the development of the GLP. Some of the issues are already referred to in the TNP or in the RSA suggested additions for the GLP for Thame (see high level issues paper). We believe that all are worth some consideration for possible inclusion in an overall Thame Transport Plan.

Low Emissions Strategy - SODC has published a draft Low Emissions Strategy for 2016¹ on which it is undertaking public consultation. This may be a worthwhile exercise. Apparently SODC do have some form of air quality monitoring device(s) installed in Thame. Does TTC know where they are/ have access to the reports on air quality arising?

1. The hazard

The SODC introduction states that 'vehicle emissions **could** damage health.' It is believed that there is enough evidence to show that they **do** damage health. DEFRA itself admits that there are more than 50,000 premature deaths each year caused by air pollution. In Wallingford, where vehicle emissions are reckoned to be 25% above EU limits (and have been for at least 10 years) that would amount to some 5 deaths a year. The first stage seems to be to monitor small and large particulates in a number of town locations.

2. Helping people reduce emissions from vehicles

- 2.1 Where vehicles cannot be diverted or their numbers reduced the main issue seems to be to encourage traffic to *keep moving slowly* in the central areas
- 2.2 A **20mph speed limit** to replace the current 30mph limit across the whole town. This has been shown to reduce emissions by at least 8%. (*RSA note: it is believed that this largely becomes a voluntary restriction as there are very limited chances of enforcement, but it may be enough to slow down careful drivers who will in turn slow down others.*)
- 2.3 Ensuring good alternatives to driving: regular bus services, subsidised where necessary, well-lit level footpaths and cycle routes from edge-of-town residential areas, perhaps park and ride services and bikes for hire.

3. Support electric and low emission vehicles

- 3.1 There is ever improving electric car and hybrid technology but as yet the take-up is relatively low. We can however expect this to improve and various types of electric vehicles to become more common. The take-up will be assisted by the availability of suitable charging stations.
- 3.2 It has been suggested that there is a charging point for electric cars in every public car park with more than 20 spaces. Campaigners hope that that SODC might lead the

¹ www.southoxon.gov.uk/lowemissions

way with a green Travel Plan, electric pool cars and perhaps help set up a car club with electric vehicles.

4. Freight

- 4.1 A key point is to keep heavy goods vehicles out of central/ residential areas so far as possible.
- 4.2 The issue needs to be thought about in terms of siting of any new locations likely to require heavy traffic movements. In Wallingford a delivery and service plan approach is being suggested, based on the industrial estate.
- 4.3 Goods vehicle weight limits to be more rigorously enforced – but by whom?

5. Buses and taxis – These typically sit in the centre of town with engines running, potentially adding substantial pollution where people most congregate.

- 5.1 Buses need to serve the town centre but should have engines switched off when stationary. Electric/hybrid minibuses can be considered for other routes with a possible park and ride facility from a suitable site - electric minibuses.
- 5.2 Taxis using the town centre to switch off their engines when stationary.

6. Reducing the impact new developments have on air quality

All new developments will generate extra traffic and therefore **will** have an adverse effect on air quality. The current SODC "Guidance for Developers" considers new developments in isolation, whereas there will be a cumulative effect on vehicle numbers and thus emissions. The new Local Plan and GLP must be allowed to consider the cumulative effects of new developments on air quality.

7. Restricted access

- 7.1 Restricted access is a more extreme possibility but not to be wholly discounted. Wallingford is considering whether it could limit access to the bridge over the Thames to *some* vehicles at *certain* times – not a complete ban.
- 7.2 A survey might be useful for Thame. For example a traffic survey carried out for OCC in 2009 found that 22% of traffic travelling along Wallingford High Street was through-traffic. If those drivers used the bypass, the air quality problem would be much improved. This would however depend on the flow of traffic along the bypass being maintained, which in turn depends on the number of exits and roundabouts and their effect on traffic flow.
- 7.3 Restricted access could be combined with 20mph speed limits through town, traffic calming measures on other arterial roads (but see above) and "shared streets" in the centre of town to discourage through traffic and prioritise pedestrians. This would have the added benefit of enhancing the town centre for visitors coming to shops and cafes.
- 7.4 A more radical solution (which is mentioned re Wallingford) would be a congestion charge! We suspect that, apart from other issues, the cost/benefit for Thame would not add up.

SODC has published its Air Quality proposals and is running a public consultation until 25 March. It is claimed that the website and consultation survey are simple to use and the whole process can be completed in **5 minutes** if just the multi-choice questions are answered.

RSA Thame Group 23.2.16