

# Jack Pease's Air Quality Blog

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Air Quality Consultants (AQC) is delighted to share some typically insightful thoughts from our friend Jack Pease.

In what we hope will become a regular feature, Jack considers a recent report on air quality by the UK Government's Public Accounts Committee.

Jack Pease graduated as a Civil Engineer working for British Rail then became a journalist writing on the construction, transport, oil and truck industries before becoming editor of the Air Quality Bulletin and Noise Bulletin newsletters in 1998 until very recently.

AQC was missing Jack's commentary on air quality issues, and we hope that others will enjoy what he has to say. These are, though, Jack's words and not those of AQC.



## MPs struggle to find easy answers on air quality

MPs have concluded a fifth Parliamentary Inquiry into air quality. The all-powerful Commons Public Accounts Committee has asked some awkward questions of government - and got good answers - but struggled to make sense of it all.

MPs heard in detail from top civil servant bosses of the transport and environment departments and National Highways. These three were talkative and well-briefed and the 'Tackling local air quality breaches' transcripts should be essential reading to keep on top of policy albeit a long read (see 'best bits' below).

But while MPs were given the facts, they could not process the detail and resorted to conclusions that will do little to take air quality matters forward. Don't waste your time too much on the six headline conclusions, which focus on making public information accessible, partnership working, integrated approaches, updated plans and so on. These are all common sense suggestions that are worthy but won't change much.

Instead drill into the detail of the report and transcripts to find out - perhaps for the first time - how the spread of clean air zones is going. It is too early for hard data to determine whether or not clean air zones deliver the forecast improvements - not helped by Covid-altered traffic patterns - but this is the best evidence to date of 'boots on the ground'. Proof of the pudding will follow.

Given that the number one conclusion of MPs is "It is far too difficult for the public to find information about the air quality in their local area and what is being done about it" it is worth highlighting the reasons why solving this will be hard. Air quality professionals will already know this - and they may chuckle when they see how much detail was thrown at MPs on modelling and monitoring and how little they were able to absorb.

Yes, it comes back to that old chestnut of monitoring v modelling, seemingly the existential question for air quality. MPs may struggle with the assertion that data is +/- 30% accurate but professionals will consider even that an optimistic figure. The individual accuracy of an FDMS or a Fusion tube (sic) may be 30%, but by the time you add locational uncertainty (which side of the pavement?) and weather (hard to forecast and hard to measure), then errors compound.

Promising that individuals can put in their house location and get an accurate 'number' for their exposure to 'pollution' is fanciful. Which pollutant are we worried about, for a start?

And statistics can mislead, by way of example National Highways has pulled a blinder by convincing MPs that its strategic road network is only responsible for causing breaches of legal limits at 240-250 houses across England. Seriously?

The belief that information is lacking assumes that an ordinary person actively seeks data on air quality. In practice experience suggests that only a small proportion are engaged with environmental issues in general and air pollution in particular.

It is well known that the public may say they care about the environment but what they mean is that they want someone else to change their behaviour. Observe the reality of increased sales of heavier, larger and faster cars, driven increasingly fast and aggressively. And despite the huge cost of fuel, the congestion, speeding and idling seem as endemic as ever.

All is not lost - the quiet majority of those that can afford new cars are now opting for hybrid or fully electric. These will make a difference - there was a little-reported example of a northern market town whose taxi fleet switched from diesel Passats to hybrid Prius' and overnight, town centre pollution collapsed. The same is likely nationwide if current buying patterns continue.

## Recommended links

Tackling local air quality breaches:

MPs conclusions:

<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/30473/documents/175902/default/>

Transcripts of evidence:

<https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/10479/default/>

Best bits (of the transcripts pdf):

- Q8: Where we are with modelling and monitoring and good analysis of post-Covid changes to traffic patterns. Acceptance that PCM failed in some local areas, e.g. Leeds (cleaner than expected) and Southampton (dirtier than expected);
- Q12: Guildford is National Highways 'highest' exceedance - and a 9 metre air pollution barrier is planned but the 'three storey-height structure is not straightforward';
- Q46: The burden on local authorities, and progress being made on Clean Air Zones (or not);
- Q51: For those who are sceptical that information alone drives behaviour change coercion seems to work: "In Bath 25% of residents said they would start changing their behaviour as a result of the Clean Air Zone. In Birmingham, it was 39%.";
- Q57: "The UK-AIR website is relatively impenetrable. It is not great. We are having a complete scrub off all our web-based products;
- Q61: Analysis of "imperfect' national modelling.