

Jack Pease's Air Quality Blog

13 December 2022

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

In this blog Jack discusses public reactions to planned clean air zones and considers whether we are currently in a sweet spot for setting up low emission zones where local benefits can be proven.

These are, though, Jack's words and not those of AQC.



About Jack:

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.

Are clean air zones popular?

Shhhsh. Don't tell anyone. The backlash that might have been expected against charging 'dirty' vehicles to drive in clean air zones appears to have been avoided.

Days after Bristol introduced its clean air zone which includes charging pre-Euro 6 diesel cars, and London's plan to widen its ultra low emission zone, outrage seems oddly absent. Is it due to the cost of living crisis, the Ukraine war and a turbulent Government giving the public more pressing matters to worry about?

AQC has been working on clean air zones in Birmingham and Bath and recently reviewed zones across Europe. Ipsos MORI has also analysed public reactions to planned zones such as Birmingham, Leeds and Essex. These considered pieces of research suggest more public acceptance than might be expected.

Ipsos says: "Attitudes toward the measures were more positive than negative, with support varying from 42% to 57% and opposition varying from 12% to 34% across residents surveyed in Basildon, Birmingham and Leeds."

Less considered research might involve gauging 'real' public opinion via the comment section on the Daily Mail website. Love it or loathe it, the DM has a way with words: "'Will YOU pay for my new car, Sadiq?': Fury as London Mayor confirms ULEZ expansion comes into force on August 29 next year - forcing 200,000 drivers of older vehicles to pay £12.50-a-DAY just to 'drive five minutes down road'."

And then scroll down to the comments - all 7,000 of them! Best rated is "It's got nothing to do with cleaner air, just another tax" (9,000 likes/ 115 dislikes) and the worst rated is "Well done Mayor Khan - you've got my vote" (711 dislikes/164 likes).

Actually for the Daily Mail this is not bad, note the absence of endless shock-horror follow ups or a 'people's campaign'. This is surprising because of the sheer scale of the ULEZ expansion - reaching right out to the M25 and affecting several million people, eclipsing the likes of Bath and Bristol. It also disproportionately affects White Van Man, very much the Daily Mail demographic!

Contrast that with the reaction to low traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs) which have succeeded in grabbing headlines and remaining in the headlines. Perhaps a lesson is that if you intend to introduce restrictions on traffic, blanket schemes may create less 'unfairness'. Losers' vitriol generates a lot of heat, while little is heard from the few winners who are quietly supportive.

However before anyone becomes trigger-happy about extending clean air zones/ULEZs, bear in mind Manchester's experience. Manchester escaped early attention from Government on the need to introduce a zone, bizarrely initial modelling suggested the conurbation was 'clean'.

Once reality took hold, a clean air zone was developed but created a huge backlash and the scheme was delayed. Even the popular Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham has been unable to quell the unrest and it is entirely possible that the scheme can never be acceptable to a sensitised population.

Could it be that while Bath, Bristol and Greater London have clear core areas with obvious air quality problems, Greater Manchester is a dispersed conurbation where the zone is simply too large to gain local traction? Manchester average earnings are also considerably less than those down south, and then there is a legacy of poor public transport.

Manchester aside, experience in Bath, Birmingham, Bristol and London does suggest it may be a favourable time to highlight the positives of clean air zones.

The AQC review of European clean air zones notes that early adopters suffered the problem that Euro standards did not actually deliver emission saving due to Dieselgate gerrymandering. "Most studies to date show little or no measurable impact as a result of the LEZ, especially for older zones, often for reasons, e.g. a low level of ambition with the 'clean' vehicles being mandated having a similar (or even worse) real-world performance to those being replaced."

Such unwelcome conclusions might be seized upon by scheme opponents saying ‘the science’ proves they do not work (much as we’ve seen with climate change and Covid). If looking back fails to find solid evidence, looking forward may also be problematic with scheme benefits being eroded over time by the natural turnover of the fleet.

Now may therefore be the sweet spot for setting up a low emission zone where local benefits can be proven. But beware of then assuming the same level of support for the far more draconian zero emission zones. These are targeted at climate change - local pain for wider gain is far harder to sell.

Further Reading:

Bristol CAZ (28 November 2022):

<https://www.bristol.gov.uk/residents/streets-travel/bristols-caz>

London ULEZ expansion (29 August 2023):

<https://tfl.gov.uk/modes/driving/ultra-low-emission-zone/ulez-expansion-2023>

IPSOS baseline report (includes public reactions):

https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/publication/documents/2021-02/15012_localno2plans-baselineresearchfindings.pdf

AQC review of clean air zone performance across Europe:

<https://www.aqconsultants.co.uk/news/october-2022/aqc-supports-the-clean-cities-campaign-by-quantify>