

Air Quality in Scotland

July 2017

Air quality represents the greatest environmental threat to human health and currently commands significant domestic and international interest. It has been estimated that air pollution could be contributing to 15,000 early deaths in Scotland a year. The top three Scottish streets most polluted with nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) in 2016 were Hope Street in Glasgow, St John's Road in Edinburgh and Wellington Road in Aberdeen.

Elevated pollution levels, usually located in urban areas with high volumes of road traffic, have been associated with a number of health issues, including heart disease and lung cancer. Air pollution can also have damaging effects on the environment. The sources of air pollution are distributed across many sectors, but transport is the key issue and probably the most challenging to address.

The Scottish Government published a strategy for tackling air pollution in Scotland in 2015 – "Cleaner Air for Scotland: the road to a healthier future" which sets targets for Scotland. Since the strategy was launched the EU has introduced a new directive to reduce air pollution and there has been a High Court judgement in relation to the adequacy of the UK response, including Scotland. The group that brought the challenge, ClientEarth said: "The draft plans for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are simply plans for more plans."

UNISON has long campaigned on environmental issues and we are part of the umbrella campaign group Stop Climate Chaos Scotland. We have members with specific responsibilities in relation to air quality in local government and SEPA, health members who have to deal with the consequences and many more who are suffering from poor air quality in their own homes and workplaces.

While everyone can agree on the need for action, the types of action required also have consequences for UNISON members. For example, access restrictions or pricing mechanisms can impact on members getting around at work. Vehicle incentives don't recognise that older cars are driven by low paid staff. Challenging travel habits that can be deep rooted. We have therefore been cautious about supporting some of the more radical solutions including:

- Traffic management schemes that reduce vehicle access to parts of towns and cities.
- Congestion charging that puts extra costs on driving polluting vehicles.
- Greater use of public transport for work including active travel plans.
- Electric pool cars and incentives for staff using their own vehicles to buy lower polluting cars.
- Cutting parking spaces and increasing charges.
- New speed restrictions, including 20 MPH zones.

UNISON Scotland has also highlighted funding and staff shortages, which are preventing councils from implementing strong air quality measures and policies.

The Scottish Parliament's Environment Committee is conducting an inquiry into air quality and is likely to consider a range of options. If you have a view on this issue and in particular, the opportunities and challenges of transport restrictions, please email Dave Watson (d.watson@unison.co.uk) by 1 August 2017.

For more information please contact UNISON's Bargaining and Campaigns team on 0141 342 2811, or email d.watson@unison.co.uk

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