



PRESS RELEASE

UK100 responds to Highways England's new air pollution obligations

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Welcoming the decision to [designate National Highways a relevant public authority](#), UK100's Chief Executive Polly Billington says:

"This is a move UK100 has advocated for and one which allows National Highways and local authorities to work together effectively on reducing air pollution."

"Toxic air doesn't recognise local authority borders, and many sources of local pollution are outside local authority control. The national road network is a major source of pollution, so it is critical to get local leaders and National Highways to work together. No one stakeholder can tackle air pollution alone."

"Up until now, our members have found effective engagement with National Highways difficult; they have struggled to find out information, get tangible support and secure funds for air quality action. We hope this move is a sea change in the relationship between local leaders and National Highways. But we will keep a close eye on developments to ensure National Highways are acting on their new responsibility to work with local authorities to help deliver cleaner air for communities across the country."

On the other measures announced, Polly added:

"Any moves to strengthen air quality action and make our towns and cities more breathable are welcome, but they don't go far enough."

Earlier this summer, UK100 [coordinated a letter](#) from over 20 local leaders and metropolitan mayors pledging to meet WHO standards on PM2.5 pollution by 2030 and urging the government to do the same.

Upon signing the letter, London Mayor Sadiq Khan said:

"The passing of the new Environment Act last year should have provided the impetus Government needed to tackle some of the most pressing environmental concerns of our age. Instead, we're being offered nothing but more dither and



delay as ministers set unambitious targets that condemn yet another generation of children to the risk of developing stunted lungs, asthma and a whole host of other health issues.”

“The setting of targets should never be seen as an end in and of itself, but strategic and measurable targets can make a huge difference in working to protect our environment and our city’s residents from the consequences of pollution. That is why I urge ministers to think again about the scope of these targets and commit to doing much more to protect the next generation from the scourge of toxic air.”

Polly adds:

“Local and regional leaders throughout the country, and across the political divide, are desperate to clean up the air in their towns and cities. But they can't do it alone. I urge whoever takes the keys to Number 10 to listen to the plea from local authorities and give them the support they need to take decisive action.”

"As the [National Audit Office's report](#) makes clear, the Government needs to urgently step up its action on clean air and bring forward its goal to meet WHO guidelines. At the same time, ministers need to enable local leaders to meet their air quality ambitions by providing the powers and support they need to implement regional air pollution plans that mean residents can breathe easily. Designating National Highways is a step in the right direction, but there is a long way to go."

UK100 recently [released a Clean Air Net Zero \(CANZ\) report](#) looking at the co-benefits and win-wins of a joined-up approach to air quality and climate action. Polly concludes.

"Action on clean air comes with added benefits. Many of the measures that will help the UK progress on cleaning up our air will also accelerate action on Net Zero, cut health costs, enhance our economy and improve everyone’s quality of life."

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UK100's response to the consultation on designating Highways England a relevant public authority

The following is UK100's response to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' consultation seeking views on the designation of National Highways as a relevant public authority.

Consultation questions

Do you agree or disagree with the proposal to designate National Highways as a "Relevant Public Authority"?

Strongly agree

Designating National Highways as a "Relevant Public Authority" who can then be required to act as 'Air Quality Partners' within the LAQM Framework is essential to effectively reduce air pollution within LAQM areas. Many sources of local pollution are outside local authority control, a major source being the Strategic Road Network, and so the engagement of public bodies which are in part responsible for poor air quality, particularly National Highways, is critical. No one stakeholder can tackle air pollution alone, and so it is necessary to require all relevant stakeholders to work together on improving air quality within LAQM areas.

But many UK100 members have found that effective engagement with National Highways is difficult, and they struggle to find out information from them or gain tangible support from National Highways for air quality action. Our members have reported struggling to gain money from National Highways for improving air quality within LAQM areas within their local authority area. Our members have found that the duty of National Highways to cooperate within local authorities hasn't been enough to get National Highways to agree to significant action to reduce its contribution to local air quality problems. Our members agree that National Highways should be required to be more transparent on what exactly their contribution to air quality is, through providing more air quality monitors, as it is hard to find out what National Highways' contribution to local air pollution is, as they have not provided data on this when requested to. Our members have found that National Highways engages with local authorities more on the movement of traffic and planned works - but much less on their contribution to air pollution.



Our members have reported that when they have tried to engage with National Highways on air quality action, it has been difficult to get them to agree on what they were responsible for. National Highways should be held to the same standards as local authorities on air quality management area designation and responses. It is understood that National Highways do not currently have enough people responsible for working on air pollution or enough money to spend on action to tackle air pollution, when considering their significant role in contributing to local air pollution. However, National Highways does have access to national funds for tackling air pollution, which is more than most local authorities which have almost nothing unless they have successfully bid for pots of funding. Therefore National Highways will need to contribute more in terms of funding to Local Air Quality Action Plans, unless local authorities are given more funding for this purpose.

However, our members noted the issue that AQMAs are a highly localised way of addressing air pollution but it is very hard to resolve the problems through local actions only. To effectively reduce air pollution we need to decarbonise road transport, drive a modal shift to public and active transport and reduce the volume of car traffic. Highly localised action such as reducing congestion on a particular junction at a motorway will be ineffective in reducing air pollution long term compared to action to decarbonise vehicles and reduce car traffic.

It is critical that National Highways is required to identify improvements which they can make to promote and prioritise active travel and public transport to both reduce air pollution and reach Net Zero. It is imperative that the designation of National Highways as a Relevant Public Authority requires them to implement actions to prioritise public and active transport on the Strategic Road Network within their contribution to Local Air Quality Action Plans, they need to take action beyond just traffic management and encourage the reduction of car traffic. This requires a rethinking of National Highways' Strategy, to think past road expansion and focus on a modal shift from private to public and active transport, which would reduce both air pollution and congestion.

Would you agree or disagree that designating National Highways as a “Relevant Air Public Authority” would increase the effectiveness of local air quality management?

Strongly agree

What do you think of the draft statutory guidance “working with National Highways” (please see Annex A)?



The guidance seems to be logical and if implemented effectively will significantly improve the current situation. However, it will be most important to ensure that roles and responsibilities are clearly defined at the outset for the partnership to be successful. Moreover Defra and National Highways need to be mindful of local authority capacity and resources. LAs are often achieving a lot with a limited internal capacity and this is why underpinning the who will do what and a clear set of expectations at the outset of the partnership is a fundamental consideration for the draft statutory guidance.

We would encourage Defra to include a point in the draft statutory guidance about the role of traffic reduction measures in reducing NO₂ emissions - including for National Highways to contribute to improving active and public transport infrastructure on the Strategic Road Network, such as separate bus and cycle lanes.

UK100's key air pollution asks

Key ask

- For the UK Government to bring forward the proposed deadline to meet the PM_{2.5} target of 10 ug/m³ from 2040 to 2030, in line with the WHO's interim guideline, and to provide local leaders with the powers and funding to meet this target. [See the recent letter from local leaders to the Government](#)

Secondary asks ([see Local Net Zero Delivery Clean Air progress report](#))

- For the UK Government to establish a longer-term target to meet the WHO's updated guideline for PM_{2.5} of 5ug/m³. Many areas across the country already meet the PM_{2.5} guideline of 10 ug/m³. This is still not considered to be a safe level by the WHO, and so it is important that a 35% population exposure reduction target is put in place for areas already meeting 10 ug/m³.
- Establish a national public awareness campaign around the health impacts of air pollution and its causes, and the benefits of [Clean Air Net Zero \(CANZ\)](#) approaches. Domestic combustion from burning wood and coal is one of the largest contributors to PM_{2.5}, yet many people are unaware that their heating choices are producing toxic emissions.
- The UK Government should support [CANZ](#) as an approach to improving air quality and decarbonisation simultaneously, and put in place mechanisms to enable compatible cross-cutting policies

About UK100



UK100 is a network of the most ambitious local leaders working towards Net Zero as soon as possible but no later than 2045. We help them collaborate to take decisive action in their communities.

Our members represent more than 37 million people in towns, cities and counties across the UK.

We facilitate knowledge-sharing between members, partnership-building and leadership mentoring. And support them to harness their collective power to affect vital national change.

Warm homes, affordable energy, clean air, and healthy landscapes make thriving communities.

And UK100 members have pledged to deliver a Net Zero future that delivers for people and planet.

[UK100.org](https://www.uk100.org)