

Brief for Caroline Lucas - 2014 Sussex-air conference:

Introductory comments

It's a pleasure to be here this morning and thank you so much for inviting me to speak. Your meeting could scarcely be more timely, with the headlines today reporting that air pollution in many areas is at dangerous levels. Air pollution is a silent and deadly killer – yet very rarely makes the headlines in the way it should – and in the way it has done today.

I was delighted to be asked to open this conference because, as I imagine many of you will be aware, Brighton and Hove has some real challenges in terms of air pollution, primarily due to the number of vehicles on our roads. And because, as a Green MP for the city, tackling the problem innovatively, as Sussex Air is doing, is something I believe is a clear public health as well as environmental priority.

Air quality is a growing environmental challenge Sussex wide, not just in our cities. It poses a risk to the environment, with impacts for species and biodiversity as well as for human health. Although Sussex is predominantly rural, air pollution affects the counties through a combination of local and regionally transported pollution.

So today's conference is a welcome opportunity to learn more about Sussex wide initiatives to improve air quality and reduce emissions. There are some excellent examples of best practice across the region with Sussex Air Quality Partnership (Sussex-air) playing a leading role. And before proceedings get underway, I want to take the opportunity to

tell you a little about what's been achieved so far in the region, and to set out what more I think we could be doing.

Air pollution – the challenge

Let me begin though with a reminder of the scale of the challenge we face.

The EU's Environment Commissioner has said that air pollution is the biggest cause of premature death in Europe.

He warns that it is an invisible killer that prevents many people from living a fully active life. The Commissioner has estimated that over 100,000 people a year die prematurely as a result of air pollution.¹

An estimated 29,000 of those premature deaths are in the UK ² - this is the price we pay for having one of the worst records in the EU when it comes to nitrogen dioxide emissions.

A report from MIT has also estimated that in 2010 there were more than twice as many premature deaths caused by traffic emissions across the UK than by road fatalities. ³

Air pollution from nitrogen dioxide and PM10s is recognised by the government and medical experts as the second-biggest public health threat after smoking.

¹ (Daily Mail 21st Feb 2014).

² COMEAP

It's long been linked to lung problems and heart failure and last year the World Health Organisation confirmed that air pollution is also a leading cause of cancer. ⁴

Here in Brighton and Hove air quality at street level has adverse implications for the health of residents of our city. Nitrogen Dioxide in particular is persistently at levels above those considered safe for health in a number of areas.

As well as costing many people their lives, air pollution costs the UK an estimated £20bn a year.

And, air pollution is damaging 60% of Europe's prime wildlife sites in meadows, forests and heaths.⁵

Nitrogen emissions from cars, factories and farming are threatening biodiversity, including by making acidic soils too acidic to support their previous mix of species and by encouraging the spread of common aggressive species like grasses, brambles and nettles, to the detriment of more delicate species like lichens, mosses and harebells.

Positive solution

It's clear then that on health, environmental and economic grounds, we must take steps to improve air quality.

³ BBC 17th April 2012 – 5,000 from air pollution.

⁴ "Air pollution is a leading cause of cancer" <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/17/us-cancer-pollution-idUSBRE99G0BB20131017>

⁵ The Nitrogen Deposition and Natura 2000 report

Sussex Air's leadership role involves working with NGO's, Universities, the Environment Agency, Public Health England, national government departments (DEFRA, DH, DfT) and with EU partners to look at air quality challenges.

Locally, Sussex has 13 declared "Air Quality Management Areas" including central Brighton and many other urban locations. Brighton and Hove City Council as well as other authorities are working with partners like Sussex-air to look into research and to deliver improvements in reducing harmful emission to the air.

For example Sussex Air Quality Planning Guidance encourages emission reduction from transport in all new developments.

The Brighton Bus Low Emission Zone, which you'll be hearing much more about later, is another of their key projects. Fleet vehicles are major contributors to air pollution, as seen in city centre pollution hotspots like Brighton's North Street and the Clocktower. So the city has agreed a Low Emissions Zone with the bus company, and is working on an agreement with the taxi trade too.

Sussex-air has also led research into the impacts of ozone on the environment and on the impact of pollution episodes and hospital admissions in Sussex.

The partnership provides over 550 people across Sussex with the free airAlert service to warn of forecasted pollution events and help manage associated health risks. They have worked with the public health authorities, the British Lung Foundation Breath-easy groups and other

voluntary groups to provide respiratory and cardiovascular sensitive groups with a service to manage their conditions.

Sussex-air is also leading on the first electric vehicle rapid charging network for the South East of England, to encourage the take up of lower emission vehicles. By creating the infrastructure for electric vehicles, they hope to encourage less polluting vehicles into polluted zones to reduce people's exposure and drive down carbon emissions. Nigel Jenkins from Sussex-air will be telling you more about this later and I believe you may also have the opportunity try out one of the vehicles.

B&H Leading the way

Brighton and Hove's Green led administration in particular has made reducing air pollution levels in the city a top priority.

They've been making it easier to choose sustainable transport through reliable bus services, including new bus lanes such as on the Lewes Road. They've been promoting safer cycling facilities, such as dedicated cycle lanes on the Old Shoreham Road, Lewes Road and new bike racks across the city. And they've been supporting car clubs with new bays.

Their work on Low Emission Zones to regulate vehicles entering a particular area (due to come into force Jan 2015), and to secure funds from the Greener Bus Fund to retro fit buses with cleaner engines, has helped target efforts at stubborn pollution hotspots in the city centre.

As a result of these and other initiatives, Brighton and Hove has had among the highest growth rates in the country in bus and cycle use. In

the last census we saw the highest increase in cycling to work outside of London. And figures from the census and other research⁶ show we're turning around the growth rate in new private vehicles on our roads.

UK's shameful record

With sufficient political will and the fantastic support of experts, such as those at Sussex Air, it is possible to make a tangible difference.

Which makes it all the disappointing that successive UK governments have done so little to address the problem.

The UK Government is currently in breach of the EU Air Quality Directive and could face fines of up to £300 million.⁷ And yet instead of doing what is needed to protect UK citizens from poor air quality, the UK Government has actively lobbied at EU level both to delay the deadlines by which it must comply with targets, and to avoid possible infringement action.

And to add insult to injury, although local authorities are working hard towards improving air quality despite little support from central Government, there is always a danger that under the Localism Act the EU fines could be handed down to councils.

The Government has also, in the name of local empowerment, tried to remove the requirement for local authorities to monitor air quality on

⁶ [SMMT](#)

⁷ (Daily Mail, Guardian and BBC 20/21 Feb 2014).

the basis that this would free up sufficient resources to mitigate the various effects of air pollution.

Perhaps – if the move was conditional on any money being ring fenced for such mitigation.

But simply refusing to measure the problem will not improve air quality or help meet EU limits, as the UK will still be obliged to do.

Thankfully, Ministers scrapped the proposal after an outcry, but the fact that it was consulted upon, is yet another indication of how lightly the Government takes air pollution.

More to be done

Southern England has been hit today by high levels of air pollution – a very real and immediate reminder of how important it is to do whatever we can to improve air quality.

DEFRA fear that the levels of pollutants in the air will be at the highest level possible on the measuring scale - 'level 10'. This is the level at which the Government advises people to reduce strenuous exercise and those with medical conditions to avoid activity wherever possible.

That's why, in Parliament, I've called for a number of measures, many of which underpin the work being done by Sussex Air.

As a member of the Environmental Audit Select Committee, which has undertaken an inquiry into air pollution, I've called for the Government

to stop putting thousands of lives at risk by trying to water down EU air quality rules instead of prioritising action to cut pollution on UK roads, and to launch a public awareness campaign to drive air quality up the political agenda.

In the long term, our planning laws ought to reduce the need for travel. Policies to make it easier for people to work from home, such as improving high speed internet connections, can help to reduce the overall number of journeys travelled. In addition, ensuring that in all urban areas, and wherever possible in rural areas, basic shops and services such as post offices, doctors, and pharmacists are all within easy walking or cycling distance would greatly reduce the amount of travelling undertaken to access these important facilities.

Changing the way we travel is critical too and we need a framework that makes that easier to do. Re-regulating the currently privatised bus industry, for example, with local authorities having responsibility for setting routes, frequency, service quality, and fare prices. The comparative success of the London bus system, the only regulated service in the country, shows the value of following this approach. I've also been campaigning against cuts to the Bus Service Operators' Grant and increased support instead, so that fares can be lowered, frequency and quality improved, and the bus network improved.

We can make sustainable options even cleaner, significantly reducing emissions from public transport. I'd like to see Government support to encourage and incentivise the hybridisation and electrification of all new taxis too.

And we should be doing more to empower people. The public needs to know about air quality in their area. Digital displays in city centres, alert systems, and the inclusion of air pollution warnings in all weather forecasts would all help raise awareness of the problem and the dangers.

So there's no shortage of practical steps that can be taken to clean up the air on our cities and towns. Today is an opportunity to learn more and be inspired.

But I want to end by saying that we also need our Government to push for even stronger EU wide air pollution laws, rather than trying to water down the rules we already have. Because, despite the impressive improvements happening at a local level in Sussex and in other parts of the country, air quality is too important not to also have a coherent, ambitious national strategy designed to deliver measurable improvements – matched with sufficient dedicated resources to enable local authorities deliver on the ground.

I hope you take much away from this conference – I am confident that you will. But if you do just one thing moving forward, I hope you will use your influence, as professionals but also as individual citizens, to demand nothing less from Government.

More info if required

Global issues:

Air Pollution is linked to over 7 million deaths across the globe in 2012 according to a recent World Health Organisation (WHO) report. **One in eight global deaths were linked with air pollution**, making it "the world's largest single environmental health risk", the WHO said. *(Nearly six million of the deaths had been in South East Asia and the WHO's Western Pacific region, it found).*

- Dr Maria Neira (WHO) said: "The risks from air pollution are now far greater than previously thought or understood, particularly for heart disease and strokes." **Few risks have a greater impact on global health today than air pollution.** "The evidence signals the need for concerted action to clean up the air we all breathe." **Reducing air pollution could save millions of lives, said the WHO**". (BBC 25th March 2014)

The recent IPCC report released this week highlights the threats of climate change due to continuing emissions. Projections suggest an increase in extreme weather events, such as heavy rainfall, more intense storms and heat-waves. (BBC 31st March).

- Increased heat waves are likely to increase ozone pollution regionally, which will in turn create severe health implications for vulnerable people such as older people and those with respiratory and cardiovascular conditions. Increased ozone concentrations have serious implications on natural vegetation, such as Sussex grasslands and crop production (Sussex-air/EU InterregIV research 2009).

UK

London is now developing an Ultra Low Emission Zone in 2020, to focus on encouraging ultra low/zero emission vehicles into London, such as electric taxis, hydrogen and other electric-hybrid type vehicles. It is also undertaking the development of a wider electric vehicle network with a Parisian style electric car club in the near future (to be run by the French company Autolibre).

The Sussex Air Quality Partnership (Sussex-air)

Background

The Sussex Air Quality Partnership (Sussex-air) is a partnership made up from the East and West Sussex county councils, the Sussex city, district and borough councils, the Environment Agency, the Sussex and Surrey Health Protection Agency representing the Sussex Health Authorities plus the Universities of Brighton and Sussex.

The partnership provides:

Information

- Current air pollution information – www.sussex-air.net and www.airalert.info.
- Providing linkage to other authorities, UK and EU bodies or expert groups.
- Health, Air Quality and Climate Change

Support:

- Training, Planning, Transport, Industry, Waste, Airports, Seaports
- Development of policy relating air quality and low emissions.
- Air quality modelling, emissions and monitoring, Transport planning measures and targets

Air quality related initiatives:

- EU and UK programmes
- Low emission strategies
- airAlert/coldAlert
- Climate change
- Electric vehicle infrastructure

Members of the Sussex Air Quality Partnership 2013/14

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| Adur District Council | Mid Sussex District Council |
| Arun District Council | Rother District Council |
| Brighton and Hove City Council | Wealden District Council |
| Chichester District Council | Worthing Borough Council |
| Crawley Borough Council | East Sussex County Council |
| Eastbourne Borough Council | West Sussex County Council |
| Hastings Borough Council | The Environment Agency |
| Horsham District Council | Surrey and Sussex Health Protection Unit (Public Health England) |
| Lewes District Council | |