

# **West Berkshire Council: Proposal for Revocation Report In fulfilment of Part IV of the Environment Act 1995 Local Air Quality Management**

## **Comments by Thatcham Town Council**

### **1 Introduction**

Thatcham Town Council thanks West Berkshire Council's proposals for receipt of its Proposal for Revocation Report In fulfilment of Part IV of the Environment Act 1995 Local Air Quality Management.

The Town Council notes the statement that "This report will provide the Council with robust evidence as required under the LAQM guidance, LAQM.TG (22), to enable it to revoke the two AQMAs subject to consultation." However, it believes that this Report has not taken into account all parts of the LAQM guidance and that the evidence is not statistically robust – in particular, in relation to the impact of COVID.

Thatcham Town Council places great importance on the health of its residents, including the absence of pollution in the air that they breathe. The AQMA for Chapel Street has historically made an important contribution to delivering this.

The Town Council therefore believes that the AQMA for Chapel Street Thatcham needs to be kept in force for at least one more year, in particular to properly assess the impact of COVID. Its reasons for this conclusion are described below.

### **2 Shortcomings in the evidence base for proposed revocation of the AQMA**

#### **2.1 The process and criteria for revoking an Air Quality Management Area**

Section 2.4 of the report quotes one paragraph of the Government guidance "Local Air Quality Management Technical Guidance (TG22) - August 2022 (referred to subsequently as the 'guidance').

"The process for the revoking an AQMA is set out in the DEFRA Local Air Quality Management Policy and Technical Guidance (22). It states that:

"3.57 The revocation of an AQMA should be considered following three consecutive years of compliance with the relevant objective as evidenced through monitoring. Where NO<sub>2</sub> monitoring is completed using diffusion tubes, to account for the inherent uncertainty associated with the monitoring method, it is recommended that revocation of an AQMA should be considered following three consecutive years of annual mean NO<sub>2</sub> concentrations being lower than 36µg/m<sup>3</sup> (i.e. within 10% of the annual mean NO<sub>2</sub> objective). There should not be any declared AQMAs for which compliance with the relevant objective has been achieved for a consecutive five-year period."

However, the revocation report does not take into account other important parts of this guidance, which are considered below.

#### **2.2 The impact of development**

##### Recent Warehouse Development

The guidance states that new developments and planning applications should be considered in the assessment of air quality. For Annual Progress Reports (APR), which are required in Scotland, the guidance states:

"3.31 The APR should detail any new developments that may affect air quality, with relevant exposure nearby, such as:

- Developments leading to a significant change in road traffic flows or other transport sources;”

“3.35 APRs provide the opportunity to log planning applications for new developments under consideration to give a picture of areas where changes in air quality may take place and where combined impacts from several developments may become important.

3.36 The information provided in this section of the APR could therefore include a list of the major planning applications under consideration that might affect air quality. ...”

“3.40 The APR should provide a summary of any conclusions reached from the consideration of any new local developments that have the potential to affect air quality.”

For England, the guidance for Annual Status Reports (ASR, which are required in England) states:

“3.34 Whilst this section does not form part of the ASR, where such needs have been identified, any additional supporting technical information in relation to changes in air pollution sources (which may include new local developments) should be presented in an Appendix – see paras 3.43 to 3.46 for further information.”

In the last few years, substantial new warehousing developments have been brought into use in Colthrop and Theale, and a planning application has been granted for further warehousing to the east of the Colthrop industrial estate. These will significantly increase the number of lorry movements on the A4 through Thatcham.

There is no annex in the Annual Status Reports for West Berkshire that addresses these issues, and neither are they addressed in the revocation report.

### Draft Local Plan Air Quality Assessment

West Berkshire Council commissioned a detailed Air Quality Assessment by WSP as part of its Regulation 19 evidence base for the draft Local Plan. This should also form part of the evidence base.

## **2.3 The impact of traffic congestion**

The Thatcham AQMA is focused on the section of Chapel Street between its junctions with The Moors and The Broadway. This is the most congested section of the A4 through Thatcham, with traffic queues caused by the traffic lights at these junctions. This congestion is largely caused by the traffic lights being triggered to allow vehicles to exit these two roads onto the A4. The concentration of NO<sub>2</sub> is driven both by the number of vehicle movements along this stretch of the A4 and the period that each vehicle spends there.

During COVID restrictions, there will for some periods been a substantial reduction in car traffic, but a smaller reduction in lorry traffic. The traffic on the two side roads is largely cars, and the reduction in car traffic during the COVID would have reduced the number of traffic light changes, and therefore the level of congestion. Therefore, the reduction in NO<sub>2</sub> concentration in the AQMA is likely to have been greater than the reduction in total traffic levels on the A4.

## **2.4 The impact of COVID on the trends in NO<sub>2</sub> concentrations**

Paragraph 3.54 of the guidance states:

“It is not advisable for the revocation of an AQMA to be based solely upon compliance in a year not representative of long-term trends. For example, compliance being reached in 2020 may not be representative of long-term trends in pollutant concentrations due to the change in activity observed across the UK as a result of COVID-19 and associated lock down measures. Where 2020 is one of many consecutive years of compliance, this may be considered for revocation.”

Figure 3.1 shows that two of the monitoring locations have shown significant increases in NO<sub>2</sub> concentration post COVID. However, as paragraphs 3.57 and 4.18 of the guidance says “Where NO<sub>2</sub> monitoring is completed using diffusion tubes, to account for the inherent uncertainty associated with the monitoring method ...” and “Care should be exercised in discussing trends, as changes in concentrations can occur from year to year due to weather conditions. It is normal practice to only consider a trend as being significant when five years’ worth of data are available”.

Given the uncertainty in an individual annual value, two years of results is insufficient to predict where the annual results will stabilize, which might be below the pre-COVID values due to the factors described on page 7 of the revocation report, or above the pre-COVID values due to the increase in traffic caused by development.

### 3 Conclusions

#### 3.1 The need for a West Berkshire Air Quality Strategy

The guidance states:

“3.59 If a local authority in England no longer has any declared AQMAs remaining, from 2023, the local authority should put in place a local air quality strategy to ensure air quality remains a high profile issue and to ensure it is able to respond quickly should there be any deterioration in condition. Further, those authorities in England who have not had to designate AQMAs and produce AQAPs will, from 2023, be required to draw up a local Air Quality Strategy.”

West Berkshire Council does not have an Air Quality Strategy.

#### 3.2 Conclusions and recommendations

For the reasons described above, Thatcham Town Council believes that the evidence base is incomplete, and that it is therefore premature for West Berkshire Council to revoke the Air Quality Management Area for Chapel Street in Thatcham.

West Berkshire Council should not consider the revocation of this AQMA until the following have been completed:

- Analysis of NO<sub>2</sub> concentration measurements for 2023 and the trends in concentration post-COVID.
- The preparation of an Annual status Report for 2023, including an appendix that considers the impact of recent warehouse developments in Colthrop and Theale, and the Air Quality Assessment prepared for the draft Local Plan.
- The preparation and approval by West Berkshire Council of an Air Quality Strategy, which is required after the AQMAs in Thatcham and Newbury have been revoked.



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