

Statement in relation to the Epping Forest Special Area of Conservation

The Council has undertaken Air Quality related monitoring of the Epping Forest Special Area of Conservation (EFSAC) to understand what the current on-site conditions are. This is so that we can compare the current situation with where we thought we would be when we prepared the Epping Forest District Local Plan evidence base and the Council's EFSAC Interim Air Pollution Mitigation Strategy. (See the 2018-19 AECOM document).

We are now in a position to publish the results of the on-site monitoring of the levels of atmospheric pollutants of concern being Nitrogen Oxides and Ammonia. (the AECOM Final Report 2024 document). We are really pleased to say that the results show there has been a significant improvement in the background concentrations of these pollutants when compared with the previous monitoring.

We have shared the results of this latest monitoring with Natural England who have confirmed in their letter dated 17 December 2024 that positive improvements to the background concentrations of air borne pollutants have been shown. Natural England has identified some further work that the Council needs to undertake before it can provide further advice on adverse effect on the integrity of the EFSAC, and whether mitigation will be required and what this would look like. Natural England has also indicated that, as it currently stands, ammonia levels are the focus of concern because of the effect the levels potentially have on lichens and bryophyte interest features. Ammonia arising from traffic comes from catalytic convertors but there are other sources that make a material contribution to ammonia levels that are not related to local plan development.

However, based on these latest results, we are hopeful that we can demonstrate to Natural England that alternative measures, some of which Natural England has helpfully suggested, would be a more proportionate approach to managing the effects of development on the EFSAC. We are moving at pace to undertake the further work that Natural England has asked us to do so that we can then secure its formal advice on whether mitigation measures continue to be needed and what these should be. This includes whether there is a need any more for a Clean Air Zone.

As well as the publication of the Air Quality monitoring results we have also published traffic data that has also been collected on traffic levels. This has shown that the growth in traffic on the roads assessed as part of the EFSAC evidence used to support the Local Plan is, in the vast majority of cases, lower than had previously been assumed in the Local Plan evidence base.

Once we have worked through the timetable for pulling together the further information that Natural England has requested, some of which will need to be undertaken by external consultants, we will publish an update on when we anticipate being able to secure Natural England's formal advice.

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