

Cabinet

Report Title	Sandwell Air Quality Action Plan
Date of Meeting	Wednesday, 30 July 2025
Report Author	Andy Thorpe
Lead Officer	Director of Public Health
Lead Cabinet Member(s)	Cabinet Member for Adult Services, Health & Well-being
Why is this a key decision?	To be significant in terms of its effect on communities living or working in an area comprising two or more wards of the Borough.
Wards Affected	(All Wards)
Identify exempt information and exemption category	Open
Is the report urgent?	No
Appendices (if any)	1. Draft updated Air Quality Action Plan

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 Approval is requested to consult the public and other stakeholders on Sandwell's draft Air Quality Action Plan (2025-2030) before submission of the final plan to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) by October 31 2025.
- 1.2 The AQAP is produced as part of the Council's statutory duty to work towards Air Quality Strategy (AQS) objectives as required by The Environment Act 1995 (Part IV) and to meet the requirements of the Local Air Quality Management (LAQM) statutory process. Air pollution has been a longstanding problem in Sandwell and in 2005 the Council declared a borough wide Air Quality Management Area (AQMA). The AQAP shows how Sandwell will work towards meeting its air quality objectives.

2. Recommendations

The Cabinet is recommended to:

- 2.1 Delegate authority to the Director of Public Health to consult the public and other stakeholders on Sandwell's draft Air Quality Action Plan (2025-2030) before submission of the final plan to Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs by October 31 2025.

3. Proposals – Reasons for the recommendations

- 3.1 The AQAP is produced as part of the Council's statutory duty to work towards Air Quality Strategy (AQS) objectives as required by The Environment Act 1995 (Part IV) and to meet the requirements of the Local Air Quality Management (LAQM) statutory process.
- 3.2 Air pollution has been a longstanding problem in Sandwell and in 2005 the Council declared a borough wide Air Quality Management Area (AQMA). At that time the national annual mean objective for nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) was being exceeded in 22 separate locations. The Council's monitoring of NO₂ concentrations shows that, although there has been a downward trend, exceedances of the annual mean objective have continued at a small number of the sites until recent years.
- 3.3 The latest data shows that there have been no exceedances at any of the sites in the last three years. The marginal nature of the data means however that Sandwell will continue to be recognised as an AQMA for a further two years, during which time it is hoped that there will be no exceedances at any of the sites in order to be confident that Sandwell's AQMA status can be revoked. An AQAP will therefore continue to be required to show how Sandwell will work towards its air quality objectives.
- 3.4 The current AQAP was adopted by the Council on 23 March 2021 and subsequently accepted by Defra's Local Air Quality Management team. Ongoing monitoring and reporting, specific projects and promotional activities have taken place since it was adopted. An updated AQAP was planned for 2025, for which work started in late 2024.
- 3.5 A draft updated AQAP will be available in late June 2025. Along with the consultants involved in developing the technical aspects of the update work, a steering group has informed the process of revealing the issues involved and determining potential courses of action to improve air quality. The range of these will need to be consulted upon, therefore the draft AQAP will be made available for a formal consultation of the public and other stakeholders. The draft AQAP must also be sent to Defra. Permission to consult is therefore being sought from Sandwell Council's Cabinet.
- 3.6 It should be mentioned that the legal direction placed on Sandwell and other local authorities in 2018 to address areas identified by Defra where nitrogen dioxide levels exceeded legal limits was revoked on 14 May 2025. Defra has formally notified the Leader of Sandwell Council, Cllr Kerrie Carmichael, by emailed letter. The revocation follows specific work to successfully reduce nitrogen dioxide levels at the locations involved, although, as the letter to the Leader states, Sandwell's statutory responsibilities under the LAQM arrangements will be retained until its AQMA status can be revoked following a sustained five year period of no exceedances of the national objective for nitrogen dioxide at any of our monitoring sites.

- 3.7 It should be further mentioned that the nitrogen dioxide situation described above and in relation to the AQAP update work refers to “legal compliance” and that much work still needs to be done to improve air quality for health reasons. The air quality thresholds that relate to legal compliance are above what would be considered as “healthy compliance”, although in practice, there are no safe levels of air pollution. On this basis, when the AQMA status is removed, an Air Quality Strategy for Sandwell will be produced that will provide us with the opportunity to address a wider range of air pollution concerns (including industrial pollution) beyond road-based nitrogen dioxide levels. Fine particulate matter emissions (PM2.5) are now viewed as a much greater problem to solve than NO2 emissions because of their growing association with a much wider range of serious health problems. Furthermore, out of the seven constituent West Midlands local authorities, Sandwell continues to report the highest concentrations of PM2.5.

4 Alternative Options Considered

- 4.1 There are no alternative options because Sandwell Council has a statutory duty to have an AQAP and is required to produce it using the process prescribed by Defra. The process involves a consultation exercise to ensure that the measures proposed in the AQAP can be amended where necessary and are generally supported by stakeholders.

5 Consultation

- 5.1 The AQAP update has primarily involved consultants in its preparation, which can be summarised as follows:
- Stage 1 - Baseline emissions review and source apportionment (i.e. what air pollution emissions contribute to Sandwell's air quality), comprising a summary of modelled and monitoring data, any existing reporting or relevant strategic plans and additional measures undertaken by Sandwell Council.
 - Stage 2 - Development of a long list of potential actions, and some technical consultation and engagement with both internal Sandwell Council stakeholders and key external stakeholders.
 - Stage 3 - Development of actions to be included in an updated draft AQAP.
- 5.2 Following stage 3, the draft updated AQAP will be formally consulted upon and then the document finalised, taking on board the consultation comments made, before adoption by Sandwell Council and submission to Defra.
- 5.3 Consultation with stakeholders has taken place through three well-attended steering group meetings. A long list of actions has been identified, which will form the basis of the public consultation, following Cabinet approval to do so.
- 5.4 The proposed programme for the next stages in the process to update Sandwell's Air Quality Action Plan is tabulated below.

Task	Time Frame
Draft updated AQAP to be completed by consultants	30 June 2025
Report to Cabinet - To seek approval to formally consult on the draft updated AQAP.	30 July 2025
Publish draft updated AQAP for Consultation.	Commence on 31 July 2025 for six weeks.
Submit draft updated AQAP to Defra.	31 July 2025
Review consultation comments and amend draft updated AQAP.	Begin immediately after consultation period is over. Review time two weeks.
Report to Cabinet - To seek approval for adoption of the updated AQAP and for submission to Defra.	15 October 2025
Submit updated AQAP to Defra.	On or before 31 October 2025.

- 5.5 The Cabinet Member for Member for Adult Services, Health and Wellbeing (Cllr Jackie Taylor) has recently been consulted on the Air Quality Action Plan and the process of the proposed public consultation.

6. Financial Implications

- 6.1 As described in paragraph 5.1 above, consultants were appointed to carry out the AQAP update work for a period of six months, with support from the Pollution Control Team based in Public Health.
- 6.2 Consultancy assistance was needed to enable Sandwell Council to submit an updated AQAP to Defra on time because the expertise needed to carry out the emissions modelling and source apportionment work, a major requirement from Defra for AQAP updates, does not exist in Sandwell Council.
- 6.3 The value of the contract is £24,598 plus VAT (approved by the Council's Consultancy Approval Forum, case reference CAF No: 076, and subsequently by the Head of Procurement). Consultants AECOM Ltd were appointed through a Crown Commercial Services framework, having demonstrated historical success and expertise in the field of Air Quality Action Plan work.
- 6.4 The budget expenditure was made available from the Public Health cost centre for air pollution related work.
- 6.5 No specific budget has been identified for the implementation of AQAP measures requiring additional funding. Many of the measures would however be funded through officer time through partnership working across the Council. Funding for specific projects will be the subject of future reports to Cabinet. Other likely sources of funding and income will also be sought to assist.

7. Legal and Governance Implications

- 7.1 The AQAP is produced as part of the Council's statutory duty to work towards Air Quality Strategy (AQS) objectives as required by The Environment Act 1995 (Part IV) and to meet the requirements of the Local Air Quality Management (LAQM) statutory process. The Council is also required to update the air quality action plan and implement it as part of these statutory duties.

8. Risks

- 8.1 The Environment Act 2021, was expected to set lower target thresholds for fine particulate matter emissions (PM_{2.5}) by October 2022 because of the significant health risks associated with this ultrafine dust. Although this did not happen, it could still be a possibility because there is no safe level for PM_{2.5}. This because when it enters the bloodstream through the lungs it can travel to all internal organs causing a range of health conditions such as strokes, heart disease and lung cancer. The need to address this problem could result in applying further restrictions to reduce the exposure of people to such pollution and might therefore have implications for the scope of future air quality work in Sandwell, along with new development schemes.
- 8.2 The Council is required to update the Air Quality Action Plan and implement it as part of its statutory duties. The risk is not taking any action and allowing mortality rates to increase due to poor air quality.
- 8.3 The AQAP would be supported by a risk register to identify and assess the key risks that will need to be managed in order to ensure the successful delivery of the AQAP. This would also assist in the allocation of finite resources to the AQAP.
- 8.4 Risks would include matters such as:
- Programme/project governance arrangements
 - Financial resources to deliver the AQAP actions
 - Performance and assurance framework to assess the effectiveness of actions included in the AQAP
 - Communication and stakeholder buy-in of the AQAP
 - Alignment of the AQAP to other council documents and processes, including but not limited to procurement rules, cabinet reports, planning policies, and office accommodation plans.

9. Equality and Diversity Implications (including the public sector equality duty)

- 9.1 The worst air pollution levels are seen in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods. Elderly, young and deprived people are more vulnerable to the effects of air pollution.

10. Other Relevant Implications

Health and Wellbeing

- 10.1 Air pollution is associated with a number of adverse health impacts. It is recognised as a contributing factor in the onset of heart disease and cancer, plus recent research has suggested links between air quality and both cognitive function and sight health. Additionally, air pollution particularly affects some of

the most vulnerable in society: children and older people, and those with heart and lung conditions. There is also a strong correlation with equality issues, because areas with poor air quality are also often the less affluent areas.

- 10.2 The annual health cost to society of the impacts of particulate matter alone in the UK is estimated to be around £16 billion. Sandwell Council is committed to reducing the exposure of people to poor air quality in order to improve health.

Social Value

- 10.3 In the long term, proactive intervention taken now to improve air quality should reduce the burden on the NHS and local health care services and help ensure health equality.

Climate Change

- 10.4 Council resources which might be dedicated to funding climate change interventions, needed to achieve the required step change in behaviour, will in most cases also help to address air quality problems.

11. Background Documents

None.

12. How does this deliver the objectives of the Strategic Themes?

This report will support the delivery of the following Strategic Themes:

- Growing up in Sandwell
- Living in Sandwell
- Healthy in Sandwell
- Thriving Economy in Sandwell
- One Council One Team Approach.

12.1 Growing up in Sandwell

Young children are at particular risk of emissions in the borough, both short-term (air quality) and longer-term (climate change). The Air Quality Action Plan (AQAP) also aligns with the council's commitment to becoming a UNICEF Child Friendly Community (CFC). It offers a comprehensive overview of air quality in Sandwell and outlines targeted measures to reduce the impact of air pollution on children.

12.2 Living in Sandwell

Addressing air pollution will contribute towards adaptation and resilience to the impacts of climate change.

12.3 Healthy in Sandwell

Air pollution and climate change are key threats to the health of our population and a driver of health inequalities. Addressing air pollution and climate change will reduce health inequalities and increase the perception of Sandwell as a clean, safe borough.

12.4 Thriving Economy in Sandwell

Sandwell's reputation will be increasingly linked to its action on climate change and clean air, which will be important for attracting investment in green jobs.

12.5 One Council One Team Approach

Partnership working across the Council will be required to enable delivery of some of the AQAP measures, for example: Highways, Transportation Planning, Council Fleet, Planning Policy. (There is also ongoing regional partnership working with the West Midlands Combined Authority through their West Midlands Air Quality Framework.)

Relevance Check

Budget Reduction/Service Area:

Service Lead

Date:

In what ways does this Budget reduction have an impact on an outward facing service? How will the service feel different to your customers or potential customers?

N/A

If not, how does it impact on staff e.g. redundancies, pay grades, working conditions? Why are you confident that these staff changes will not affect the service that you provide?

N/A

Is a Customer Impact Assessment needed? No