

Maidstone House
King Street
Maidstone, Kent
ME15 6JQ

h 01622 673349
o 01622 602073
e franwilson@maidstone.gov.uk

Dr Therese Coffey MP
Department for Environment,
Food and Rural Affairs
Nobel House
17 Smith Square
London
SW1P 3JR

6 February 2017

Dear Minister

Local Air Quality Management System

Thank you for your letter dated 14 November regarding the government's intention to review the national air quality plans for 2017 and requesting an update on air quality within Maidstone Borough Council.

Maidstone is in an interesting position lying in a topographical valley with a number of major road networks converging on the town. We have always taken a proactive stance on air quality and took the bold step in 2010 of creating one Air Quality Management Area covering most of the town centre and adopting an ambitious action plan to match this large area. This approach has led to the issue of air quality being high on the agenda for the authority.

In terms of source apportionment we have identified that transport within the AQMA is the highest contributor of pollutants with buses contributing significantly to the particulate and NOx levels we monitor. Officers have a well-established record of receiving Defra grants to encourage the local bus providers to retrofit older vehicles, and we have recently taken over the management of the A20 corridor grant (from Tonbridge & Malling B C) to implement improvements with the bus company to the vehicles using this route into Maidstone. The delivery of this project will continue in 2017/18.

Maidstone has recently applied for £90K grant from DEFRA's most recent air quality funding round to retrofit 6 more buses to work with local bus operator to achieve a significant improvement in the buses using the High Street.

Maidstone has facilitated the installation of electric vehicle charging points to car parks and new housing developments, as well as specifying within planning conditions standards for environmental efficient boilers. We also support a Zip

Car scheme that provides 3 vehicles within the town for Maidstone BC and KCC staff to use during office hours.

Maidstone BC has had a programme of reducing or replacing our fleet vehicles with cleaner vehicles. As new technology becomes available, the Council is actively exploring opportunities to deliver improvements to its fleet including the use of electric vehicles where appropriate. The replacement programme also ensures older vehicles are replaced as a priority, with most vehicles under 5 years old. In addition, the implementation of mobile technology to enable the dynamic allocation of work has already reduced the number of unnecessary journeys undertaken by our frontline workforce. The Council also continues to work closely with the waste collection contractor, Biffa Municipal Ltd, to ensure the fleet provided offers the most efficient solution for Maidstone. This has resulted in new vehicles being used to cover downtime, the rotation of vehicles where possible and exploration of co-locating workshops to reduce unnecessary journeys.

We have supported the Kent Messenger Charity 'Walk to School' Campaign for a number of years and this year we are receiving a Special 2017 Partnership Award from the KM for the Walk on Wednesday Campaign. Other behavioural programmes are also supported such as Workplace Travel Challenge, Kent Journey Share.

Working with other partners in the county we have been successful in securing improvements to the town centre gyratory road system and a £8.9m bid from the Local Growth Fund for improvements for junction 5 on the A20/M20, A229/A274 (Wheatsheaf junction), A20 Willington Street junction, A274 Willington Street and Wallis Ave junctions and the A20 Hermitage Lane junction.

An Integrated Transport Strategy has been produced as part of the evidence for the emerging Maidstone Local Plan which recently was the subject of Examination in Public. This ITS and the transport policies in the Local Plan seek to reduce the levels of traffic congestion in Maidstone Borough.

The Inspector in his Interim Findings (published in December 2016) found the Local Plan Strategy on housing distribution an appropriate one. However, he highlighted the need to deliver on the transport mitigation proposed in the Local Plan and ITS, in particular bus prioritisation and other sustainable transport improvements in order to offer a real choice to the car. Delivery will mean working closely with the highways authority i.e. Kent County Council.

We are conscious that there is no simple answer to the problems presented by air pollution and that it requires a holistic approach on the part of the council. With this in mind we are considering a Low Emissions Strategy that will span the service areas that can influence air quality. Currently there is a working group of members from the Communities, Housing and Environment Committee and the Strategic Planning and Sustainable Transport Committee considering the action plans to sit within the document. We anticipate feedback from this group in May 2017 and the final LES being approved this summer. The areas being

considered are planning, Transport, Public Health, Carbon Management and procurement and of course the specialist officers maintaining a coordinating role with the experts in the wider air quality disciplines. The Environmental Health and Planning Services will be working together to propose a Maidstone version of the Kent and Medway Supplementary Planning guidance on Air Quality and take this to the Strategic Planning and Sustainable Transport Committee for adoption. This will provide a robust framework for developers to work to, reducing emissions and improving the sustainability of developments in the borough.

Given the current infrastructure and development pressures placed on us it is unlikely that we will revoke the current AQMA, however a better understanding of the area and more sophisticated modelling, may enable us to amend the current AQMA to a much smaller one, during 2017

With regard to the governments Clean Air Zone framework consultation, DEFRA's desire to achieve consistency of Clean Air Zones means that they are likely to prohibit buses other than Euro VI. Maidstone will look closely at whether such proposals are of benefit to the borough, however there are currently no Euro VI buses operating in the Borough and therefore in the medium term we may take a more incremental approach through the adoption of a Low Emissions Zone. We have applied to DEFRA to fund a Low Emissions Zone feasibility study, focussed on Maidstone High Street. Generally this is viewed as a more economically pragmatic approach that would provide an incremental approach to improving emissions to enable the commercial operators time for compliance in a structured way.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'F' and 'W' followed by a horizontal line.

Cllr Fran Wilson
Leader of the Council