



Findings from the Clean Air for Colchester Community Engagement

July 2020



CLEAN
AIR
COLCHESTER



Introduction

From October 2019 to January 2020 Colchester Borough Council spoke to over 3,000 residents, schools and businesses about pollution as part of a two-year behaviour change project, Clean Air for Colchester, which aims to reduce pollution levels across the borough.

We wanted to get a better understanding of what people currently know about air quality and the impact it has on health, whilst also exploring driving habits and how people could be encouraged to take action to lower pollution levels.

In this report we will highlight what you told us and how we plan to use the feedback to shape the next phase of the project.

Background

Air pollution is an ongoing issue in Colchester and can cause both short-term and long-term effects on health, as well as impacting the environment and economy.¹

Children, older adults and people with pre-existing lung and heart conditions are most at risk from its effects.¹

Air pollution reduces life expectancy and is linked to 1 in 20 deaths in Colchester.² It is recognised as a contributing factor in the development of lung conditions, heart disease and cancer.³ There is also evidence from studies highlighting possible links between air pollution and diabetes, dementia and underweight births.^{1, 3}

The main source of Colchester's air pollution is exhaust fumes, namely Nitrogen Dioxide. Road traffic is estimated to contribute to 80% of nitrogen oxide and nitrogen dioxide at the roadside from exhaust emissions.¹

Air pollution (such as Particulate Matter) is also produced from non-exhaust emissions by vehicles. This includes from break, tyre and road surface wear and re-suspended road dust.⁴

In Colchester there are three [Air Quality Management Areas](#) where the pollution levels are higher than we would like them to be, exceeding national guidelines.

Our AQMA's cover the town centre, but also residential areas such as the lower end of Mersea Road, Magdalen Street and Brook Street - a narrow residential street

¹ Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs; Department for Transport, 2017 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/632916/air-quality-plan-technical-report.pdf

² Public Health England, 2014 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/estimating-local-mortality-burdens-associated-with-particulate-air-pollution>

³ Royal College of Physicians, 2016 <https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/projects/outputs/every-breath-we-take-lifelong-impact-air-pollution>

⁴ Air Quality Expert Group; Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2019 https://uk-air.defra.gov.uk/assets/documents/reports/cat09/1907101151_20190709_Non_Exhaust_Emissions_typeset_Final.pdf



used by over 100,000 vehicles each week as well as being the main walking route for children attending nearby primary schools.

In 2019 the Council was awarded funding from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) for a 2-year behaviour change project, Clean Air for Colchester, to tackle pollution in the borough.

Clean Air for Colchester is focused on encouraging walking and cycling for short journeys and getting people to switch off their engines when they are not moving.

Why? Because we know from research that small easy changes to driving habits, such as switching the engine off whilst stationary, can cut pollution by up to 30% and the effects are immediate!⁵

The project is part of a wider programme of sustainability and climate change work being carried out by the Council, which in July 2019 declared a [Climate Emergency](#) and has published a Climate Emergency Action Plan.

Community Engagement

Through our engagement we wanted to speak to as many people as possible to get a better understanding of what is currently known about air quality and the impact it has on health, whilst also exploring driving habits and how people can be encouraged to take action to lower pollution levels.

It was important that our approach to engagement was inclusive, interactive and varied. We wanted to make it easy for people to get involved and give us their thoughts in a way that suited them. As a result, we used an online survey alongside ‘touring question’ sessions in public spaces, attendance at meetings and door knocking to reach people.

Clean Air Survey

The Clean Air Survey ran online from October 2019 to January 2020 and was promoted extensively on social media, through the Centurian, via the Colchester Gazette, Cloud FM, resident’s association newsletters and was shared through our network of schools, Travel Plan Club Members, local contacts and stakeholders.

1,181 people filled in the survey equating to 0.76% of the borough’s population aged 16 and above. 350 respondents subscribed to receive regular project updates by email. As a benchmark we looked at results from surveys across the UK, the closest comparable survey we could find, conducted by Birmingham City Council received 1,104 responses equating to 0.13% of the population aged 16 and above.⁶

⁵ Bristol City Council, 2018 <https://www.cleanairforbristol.org/noidling/>

⁶ Birmingham City Council, 2017 <https://www.birminghambeheard.org.uk/economy/birmingham-air-quality/>



Clean Air Film

The clean air [film](#) was made by Colchester company Larkrise Productions and featured local residents, teachers and healthcare professionals talking about pollution, its impacts and simple actions we can all take to make a difference. The aim was to bring the issue to life and encourage people to get involved in the engagement process. To date the film has been watched over 4,500 times and has been shared extensively across social media channels.

Touring Question Sessions (Participatory Appraisal)

40 touring question sessions were held in public spaces throughout Colchester. In total we asked 5 key questions from the survey, one question per session, in a range of locations and at differing times of the day. Locations we visited included FirstSite, Leisure World, the Library, North Station, University of Essex, Colchester General Hospital, Lions Walk, Doctors Surgeries and the town centre Market. The aim was to generate a high volume of responses from a wide, varying audience reaching those that wouldn't otherwise engage with the Council or fill in an online survey. During these sessions we spoke to over 1,800 people about air quality and its impacts.

Group Discussion and Information Sessions

We attended 24 meetings with businesses, schools and community groups where we introduced the project, gathered views and encouraged people to get involved with the project.

Door to Door Engagement

Door to door engagement was conducted in Brook Street, East Street, East Hill and the lower end of Ipswich Road (part of our Air Quality Management Area's) and over 200 households were visited. This gave us valuable insight into resident's perceptions of air quality and enabled us to provide households with information about the project and how to get involved.

Key Findings – What You Told Us

Air Quality

87% of people told us they are concerned about the air quality in Colchester.

41% of people think the air in Colchester is highly polluted.

55% of survey respondents were surprised that '1 in 20 deaths in Colchester are linked to pollution.'

68% were surprised that pollution levels are up to 12% higher inside cars than outside.



90% of people had not heard of AirText - a free service that sends local air quality updates by SMS text message.

Journeys

The most common short journeys (under 10 minutes) people make in their car are:

- Shopping (**34%**)
- Visiting friends (**22%**)
- Going to work (**19%**)

Other common short journeys people said they make included medical visits, popping into town and taxiing children around.

Driving habits

Only **15%** of people said they regularly switch off their engine when their car is not moving.

20% override their car's automatic switch off technology, with the majority of people saying they do so to keep up with the traffic and move off quicker. It is unclear whether these drivers are aware that the function decreases fuel consumption and decreases idle time therefore reducing vehicle emissions. When given more information about air pollution only **13%** would then choose to still override this function.

The most common reason given for leaving the engine running whilst parked was 'defrosting windows' which was given by **30%** of respondents.

Warming the engine, dropping off and picking up passengers, sitting in traffic, waiting at traffic lights and going through drive-thru's were also common times people said they sit with their engines running.

56% of people said 'knowing how long I will wait at traffic lights and level crossings would encourage them to regularly switch off their engine when parked or stationary.

49% said knowing their actions make a difference would encourage them to switch off

45% said roadside signs would help them remember to switch off.

84% will switch their engine off regularly now they know more about pollution and its effects

What is important to you

In the survey people told us that they care most about:

- (1) 'protecting the health and wellbeing of myself and those I care about'
- (2) 'protecting the environment' and
- (3) 'improving the area in which they live'



Living within the Air Quality Management Area

Residents we spoke to within the Air Quality Management Area told us they were concerned about the health impacts of pollution on their household (**26%**)

13% were concerned about or affected by noise pollution

9% could see or were affected by visible dirt within their home suspected to be from vehicles; and

22% blamed air pollution on roadworks, traffic lights and increased housebuilding in their area.

Next Steps - How We Are Turning Your Feedback into Action

The main source of Colchester's pollution comes from vehicles and we know from research that small easy changes to driving habits, such as switching your engine off when you are not moving, can cut pollution by up to 30% and the effects are immediate.⁵

84% of our survey respondents said that having read more about pollution and its effects they would now be willing to regularly switch off their engine when not moving.

This demonstrates a link between awareness and action which we would like to build on through our future work.

1) Engine Switch Off Campaign

From our research we know people care about their health and we know people were shocked by the impacts of pollution on health. The engagement findings highlighted that once people were aware of pollution and its effects they were more likely to think about changing their behaviour. We will therefore be working with a marketing partner to launch a Switch Off awareness campaign starting in September 2020. The campaign and its resources will be created in partnership with the local community and will aim to raise awareness of the effects of pollution on health and get more people switching off their engine when stationary in a bid to cut pollution.

2) Roadside Reminders

In response to the survey findings stating that roadside reminders would encourage people to regularly switch off, the Council submitted a bid to DEFRA for additional funding to explore signage for the borough. We were successful in our bid and have been awarded an additional £59,785 as part of the [Air Quality Grant Programme 2019-2020](#).

The funding will cover work into both signage and a feasibility study of driver facing traffic signal countdown timers (information below).

The signage funding will be used to test both the effectiveness and long-term impact of psychological messaging on behaviour change. Most signage locations have been finalised with Essex County Council and it is expected that the signage will go up in September 2020.



3) Traffic Light Feasibility Study

Knowing waiting times at traffic lights was the number one thing people told us would encourage them to regularly switch their engines off. Part of the additional funding we received from DEFRA from the Air Quality Grant 2019-20 will be used to determine whether it is possible to have timers on existing traffic lights. A feasibility study will be undertaken to explore the economic cost and technicalities of installing the timers to encourage drivers to switch off their engines at red lights in Colchester. This study will not result in the installation of countdown timers, but instead it will assess the effectiveness of the use of such technologies.

4) Active Travel

A key objective of the clean air project is to get people walking and cycling short journeys. We know that a quarter of all car journeys in Colchester are under 2 miles and the most common journey people said they make in their cars is to the shops.

Through this project we will be working closely with a resident area which has good walking and cycling infrastructure, somewhere in which we know people are driving short distances through the air quality management areas. We will also be working closely with 4 schools to explore ways to encourage an increase in active travel.

The first phase of this work is an evaluation of Bikeability which is offered in schools. We will be looking at how it currently works and exploring ways to enhance it so we can get more children cycling and cycling more often.

5) Covid-19

We are closely monitoring the impact of Covid-19 on travel habits and health awareness so we can build on and support any positive changes in behaviour that have resulted to date. This includes increased walking and cycling and more flexible working which has resulted in less cars on the road.

We will work with partners to promote any resulting infrastructure trials such as pop-up cycle lanes and wider walking spaces.

It should be acknowledged that the increased use of private transport as a preference over public transport as Covid-19 restrictions are eased may risk air pollution levels increasing beyond pre-lockdown levels.⁷ This is something we will continue to monitor.

⁷ All-Party Parliamentary Group on Air Pollution, 2020
<https://appgaq.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/clean-air-exit-strategy.pdf>

