Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee

Inquiry into air quality in Scotland

Written submission from Linlithgow Town Centre Business Improvement District

Are there conflicts in policies or barriers to successful delivery of the air quality objectives?

The town centre of Linlithgow failed its most recent air quality assessment as shown in the last air quality report commissioned by West Lothian Council (January 2016). Air quality and traffic have been causes of concern for several years for both town centre businesses and those visiting the town centre.

The most recent Scottish Parliament briefing on air quality (May 2016) shows that of local authorities in Scotland, West Lothian Council has the fifth highest proportion of total deaths being associated with particulate (PM) pollution. Edinburgh and Glasgow occupied the top positions.

West Lothian Council declared an Air Quality Management Area (AQMA) in April 2016. This started a formal process to develop a plan to tackle air pollution in Linlithgow’s town centre. The next stage is to assess proposed measures and agree an Air Quality Action Plan (AQAP).

Linlithgow town centre Business Improvement District (BID) has played a proactive role in helping to shape the steering group’s work in the early stages of developing traffic management plans. This was important to ensure that a business perspective informs the final plan, and that the costs and benefits for businesses are understood.

The BID commissioned a survey of town centre businesses and those who visit the town centre on a regular basis (residents and visitors). In February 2017, nearly 200 people and 75 businesses were surveyed.

Local businesses, residents and visitors spoke highly of the town citing a wide range of benefits including shopping, eating and drinking, scenery and cultural attractions. But they were almost of one voice in identifying the town’s weaknesses as congestion and parking.
Linlithgow is feeling the strain of an increasingly busy road network across West Lothian and rising numbers of people wanting to commute from the local train station. The train station lacks the parking and facilities of towns like Bathgate and commuter’s cars are spilling over into the town centre, often for most of the day.

More than one in four people driving to Linlithgow’s town centre are travelling onwards by public transport, most likely by train. More than three quarters of local businesses said parking was the most significant issue they faced.

Both free and pay-and-display parking is available in the town centre. But with commuters increasingly using spaces Linlithgow has effectively become a subsidised park and ride for Edinburgh. Through lost revenue and increased costs town centre businesses are losing around £340,000 each year.

Town centre congestion was cited as an issue by pedestrians nearly as frequently as drivers. Parents were increasingly concerned about walking along the high street with young children because of busy traffic and badly parked cars.

More than one quarter of people walking to Linlithgow’s town centre said they spent less time there due to congestion and parking and nearly 40% said they visited less often.

Police Scotland enforces parking regulations sporadically, this seems to have had limited impact on deterring poor behaviour. Enforcement was a significant concern for most businesses, 61% wanted better enforcement of parking regulations while (18% of businesses did not).

It’s unlikely that parking regulations will be enforced more regularly by Police Scotland under the current system. A return to traffic wardens would need parking to be decriminalised and enforced by West Lothian Council.

If decriminalisation were considered a local parking plan could look at more flexible use of parking spaces or longer waiting times. Most importantly it would allow the town centre to shape regulations for the benefit of those using the town centre during the day and discourage commuters from taking their car to the train station.
The guidance suggests Decriminalised Parking Enforcement (DPE) regimes should be financially sustainable as far as is possible. However, it is unclear as to the scope of costs and benefits that should be included within a business case. For example, benefits to local businesses, the local community and improvements in health (and thus reduced costs to health boards).

In tackling pollution in our town centres it is important that policy making at local level reflects the joined-up approach set out for Scotland. The costs and benefits of tackling pollution fall across different stakeholders and can strongly influence local solutions.