Background

Better care for Belfast’s environment is a key objective and priority for Belfast City Council (BCC) in providing a clean, green city now and for the future. One aspect of ensuring we achieve this is through protecting and improving air quality for the health and well-being of the citizens and visitors of Belfast.

In August 2004, the Council identified and declared four Air Quality Management Areas (AQMAs) within Belfast where the health based air quality objectives are being exceeded. These AQMAs are along the M1 / Westlink Corridor, the Ormeau Road, Upper Newtownards Road and Cromac Street to Short Strand. A location map of these areas is provided in Figures 1-4 of Appendix A; the blue lines on each map indicate the boundaries of the AQMAs.

In 2006, the Council, along with relevant partner organisations launched an Air Quality Action Plan for the city designed to address these areas of air quality concern, safeguard good air quality and to achieve national air quality strategy objectives and EU limit values by 2010. Around 90% of the Action Plan was complete by the 2010 deadline but, although the air quality limit values for particulate matter have now been achieved, limit values for nitrogen dioxide continue to be exceeded and give cause for concern in some locations.

In order to fulfil our statutory obligations under the provisions of the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002, the Council committed to the development of a new Air Quality Action Plan (AQAP) for the city to tackle the outstanding nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) pollution issues.

Belfast Air Quality Action Plan

BCC in partnership with relevant organisations have developed a new Air Quality Action Plan. It is proposed that the new action plan will consist of a package, rather than discrete measures, to tackle air quality throughout Belfast in order to achieve the air quality objectives / limit values. It draws upon all forms of air quality and transport planning activities, including sustainable transport options as well as engineering solutions.

The package of measures included in the action plan are designed to reduce background concentrations of nitrogen dioxide throughout the city which will further improve the situation here. It is considered that successful implementation of the measures as provided below will improve road vehicle operations and promote and enable a shift onto more sustainable modes of transport to achieve compliance with the nitrogen dioxide EU Limit Value by 2020.
Air Quality Action Plan Draft Measures

Measures Proposed by the Department for Regional Development (DRD)

1. **Belfast Multi-Modal Transport Model**
   Development of a computer-based multi-modal transport model and support services in order to assist the Department for Regional Development and its partners to plan and prioritise transport investment in the greater Belfast area and across Northern Ireland.

   The model will be applied to test impacts of potential new highways, public transport, walking and cycling schemes at the planning and prioritisation stage. The model will forecast how travellers will change their routes, mode of travel, time of travel or even their destinations in response to the new choices and network conditions created. This model will potentially contribute to improvement in road traffic, reduce road congestion and improve air quality.

2. **Belfast Rapid Transit System**
   Belfast Rapid Transit (BRT) is a new bus-based public transport service which will help to address the current and future transport needs in Belfast and support sustainable economic growth and regeneration. BRT will provide a modern, safe, efficient and high quality service which will encourage people to travel by public transport instead of by car. It will help to integrate communities and link people to jobs, shops, leisure, health and education services.

   The BRT system is expected to lead to a beneficial impact for air quality in the city centre with introduction of the CITI, Upper Newtownards Road AQMA with introduction of the EWAY route and along the Westlink / M1 AQMA with introduction of the WWAY route. This is a result of mode shift to BRT from private cars and therefore reduced overall traffic volumes.

3. **Belfast Transport Hub (Great Victoria Street)**
   Translink and the Department for Regional Development in conjunction with the Strategic Investment Board have identified the potential to create a first class leading integrated Public Transport Hub in Belfast. The Hub is set to be located on the site of the existing Europa Buscentre and Great Victoria Street Train Station.

   Around 7 million passengers use the existing facilities each year and as more people choose to use the bus and train this is estimated to increase to around 13 million passengers by 2030. This hub will enable a shift to more sustainable modes of transport and in the long term contribute to a reduction in background concentrations of nitrogen dioxide.

4. **e-carNI – electric vehicle charging infrastructure**
   The Go Ultra Low Cities scheme funded by the Office for Low Emission Vehicles (OLEV) is an opportunity for cities to cultivate a regional, national and international reputation for their uptake of ultra low emission vehicles (ULEVs). The £35 million fund is being made available for 2-4 Cities (Regions) to put in place measures that will increase uptake of ULEVs, improve air quality and allow successful bidders to show that they are an exemplar region for innovation in electric vehicle usage.

   The Department for Regional Development and Department of the Environment were recently successful in the screening phase of the scheme with a Northern Ireland
regional bid entitled ‘EVangel’. The final bid is due in August 2015 and the Department is working with the Public, Private, Voluntary and Community Sectors to secure the funding.

The Northern Ireland bid proposal will include the creation of a number of incentives to encourage the uptake of electric vehicles across Northern Ireland such as the establishment of an ‘EV-Diesel Scrappage Scheme’ and ‘Electric Vehicle Car Clubs’. Other activities will include the creation of an ‘NI Silicon Valley for EV’s’ to support innovation and growth in EV technology, including IT platforms and mobile applications. A major marketing and communications campaign the ‘Million-Mile-Move’ will also be proposed as well as other low carbon policy ideas which will contribute to the growth of the electric vehicle sector in Northern Ireland and improvements in air quality.

5. NI Cycling Strategy
In November 2013, a dedicated Cycling Unit was established within the Department for Regional Development. The Unit will be working to ensure that cycling provision is a key element in both transport strategy and delivery and to develop and promote the bicycle as an everyday mode of transport throughout Northern Ireland.

Since being established the Cycling Unit has developed a draft Bicycle Strategy that sets out a vision for the kind of cycling community we would like Northern Ireland to be in 25 years. Increased levels of cycling could contribute to better urban design, reduced congestion, improved air quality, less noise pollution and a cleaner environment.

6. Park and Ride
Park & Ride schemes aim to reduce traffic travelling and parking within the city centre by establishing an out of town car park and using buses (or trains) to travel into the centre. The objective is to improve accessibility and service for existing PT users and attract new PT users / trips from car based work and leisure travel.

The Department of Regional Development (DRD) produced a Strategic Park & Ride Delivery Programme 2013-15. The aim of this Programme was to create at least an additional 1,000 Park & Ride and Park & Share spaces across Northern Ireland. By the end of its term in 2015 the Programme will have significantly exceeded its objectives, by delivering over 2,000 additional spaces. This will bring the total number of Park & Ride spaces to over 7,600, an increase of over 30% in the number of spaces in the last 2 years.

7. York Street Interchange Scheme
The York Street Interchange will provide full grade separation for traffic travelling on the strategic network between the Westlink, the M1 and M2. These proposed improvements to this key junction will provide continuous links between three of the busiest roads in Northern Ireland, the M2, M3 and Westlink. This project is a high priority within the DRD Programme.

In terms of air quality, the scheme is considered as a means of reducing localised emissions on connecting roads (i.e. as a result of relieving a significant congestion hotspot) and, to a lesser extent, incremental reductions in background emissions, which of course will have a wider impact on exposure.
Measures Proposed by Translink

8. Bus Fleet Improvement Commitment
Translink are working towards achieving their 7-year fleet procurement programme, which covers 2013 – 2020. The programme includes upgrading current bus fleet by replacement and renewal to bring in greater proportion of newer, lower polluting vehicles, and reducing the average age of the fleet.

These new buses will be amongst the first vehicles in Northern Ireland to meet the latest Euro VI emission standards making them some of the most fuel efficient and environmentally friendly buses in the region. Combining lower air quality emissions with attracting more people out of their cars will help to provide a healthier city environment for all. Calculations undertaken by the Council have demonstrated a 17% decrease in NOx emissions from the Metro Fleet between October 2011 and October 2014 along the Upper Newtownards Road AQMA.

9. Promote Public Transport
Annual programme of publicity campaigns and events – encouraging commuters to use public transport instead of private cars.

These campaigns may initially have a low impact on air quality, but will provide long term benefits in encouraging the use of public transport. Increasing the use of public transport should reduce single occupancy car use, improve air quality and result in a beneficial effect on health. Further information on Translink campaigns is available on their website at http://www.translink.co.uk.

Measures Proposed by the Freight Transport Association and Road Haulage Association

10. Assess Feasibility for a Freight Consolidation Centre
Goods/deliveries moved into centre from edge of town warehouse, for example at a site close to a city Port. FCC combined with the use of low emission vehicles would have a significant impact on emissions level.

The idea of a Freight Consolidation Centre was believed to be a good one but it would need to be made mandatory to be successful. Further investigations on options available and the feasibility of developing a Belfast freight consolidation centre will have to be considered.

11. Loading Bays & Servicing Parking
More loading bays in the city would reduce engine idling caused by vehicles having to wait for suitable parking space. It would also reduce the occurrence of double parking therefore reducing traffic congestion.

The Freight Transport Association is keen for this to be further investigated and have requested the provision of additional loading bays within Belfast City Centre. TransportNI are scheduled to carry out an overall review of loading bays in Belfast City Centre in 2015 and will liaise with all the main stakeholders in relation to this matter including the Freight Transport Association and Road Haulage Association.
12. Investigate Introduction of the ECOStars Scheme to Belfast

The ECO Stars (Efficient and Cleaner Operations) Fleet Recognition Scheme is a free, voluntary scheme designed to provide recognition, guidance and advice to operators of goods vehicles, buses and coaches. The scheme encourages operators to move towards a cleaner fleet and improve fuel efficiency.

Belfast City Council are currently working with the Freight Transport Association and Road Haulage Association to investigate the scheme in more detail and identify any associated air quality benefits of introducing the scheme to Belfast.

Measures Proposed by Belfast City Council

13. Belfast Public Bike Hire Scheme

The development of a Public Bike Share scheme is identified as a partnership project in the Council’s Investment Programme 2012-2015. Phase 1 of the scheme will initially include 300 public bikes, and up to 30 bike-docking stations in the city centre.

Belfast public bike hire scheme will provide a sustainable and inexpensive transport system for local people and visitors. It will help reduce traffic congestion and vehicle emissions, improve air quality and result in a beneficial effect on health. The scheme is due to be operational by Summer 2015.

14. Manage the Councils Transport Emissions

Belfast City Council’s fleet of vehicles is one of the Councils biggest assets, with over 400 vehicles and items of plant with a value over £14 million. In June 2013, the Council approved a high-level improvement plan based on recommendations from an external fleet consultant following review of the existing fleet.

The recommendations will allow the council to put into place a more effective and appropriate means of managing, controlling and utilising the fleet. Ultimately, this will enable us to have a better value for money approach to fleet provision, and create strong foundations so that we can deal with the current and future financial and environmental challenges and take a pro-active approach to managing emissions from our own transport activities.

15. Support Belfast Active Travel Plan

Belfast City Council is taking part in a three-year programme funded by the Public Health Agency (PHA), to encourage staff to get active by walking or cycling to work. This programme is part of the new Belfast Active Travel Action Plan (which the Council support through the Belfast Strategic Partnership) and links in with the Council’s own Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

The active travel plan aims to try to make Belfast a more vibrant city where people are healthy, fit and well connected with one another, and use physical activity as part of their everyday lives. Taking an alternative mode of transport will also reduce air pollution making the City a better place to live and work.
Health Effects of Air Pollution

In addition to the measures above we are committed to working with the Public Health Agency to identify any correlation between poor air quality and associated illness.

We will also continue to operate the extensive network of monitoring that we undertake and use this information to reduce public exposure to air pollution by integrating air quality considerations through the planning process.

Organisations Represented on the Belfast Air Quality Action Planning Steering Group.

Belfast City Council.
Department of the Environment Northern Ireland
Department for Regional Development (Northern Ireland)
Freight Transport Association.
Road Haulage Association
Translink

Further Information and Consultation Process

The full version of the draft Belfast Air Quality Action Plan will be available for public consultation over the summer months in July and August 2015.

To view the draft Air Quality Action Plan go to www.belfastcity.gov.uk/buildingcontrol-environment/pollution. Any comments should be submitted to envhealth@belfastcity.gov.uk

If you have any further questions regarding air pollution throughout Belfast, please contact:

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Appendix A: Map of AQMA Boundaries

Figure 1: M1-Westlink AQMA

Figure 2: Cromac Street and Albertbridge Street AQMA

Figure 3: Upper Newtownards Road AQMA

Figure 4: Ormeau Road AQMA

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