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Your reference: EMcG 02112020
Our reference: CORR-2032-2020
Date: 24 November 2020

Dear Ms McGoldrick

CLEAN AIR STRATEGY

Thank you for your letter of 16th November 2020 concerning the development of the first Clean Air Strategy for Northern Ireland.

I welcome Belfast City Council's interest in the development of the Strategy as well as its commitment to protecting public health. I can see from your letter that the Council recognises the environmental health risk created by air pollution. My officials and I share these concerns and seek to develop an effective Clean Air Strategy for Northern Ireland which will deliver meaningful improvements in air quality across Northern Ireland.

I also support the Council's detailed assessment of nitrogen dioxide and particulate matter within Belfast and my Department has offered £125,000 in this financial year to assist with this project.

I note the Belfast City Council motion passed on 2nd November, proposed by Councillor O'Hara and seconded by Councillor Groogan, requesting the immediate development of a Clean Air Strategy for Northern Ireland rather than a discussion document.

Air quality is a complex issue. It is influenced by policy across government, for example, through emissions that come from transport, agriculture, industry and domestic heating. Likewise, the impacts of poor air quality are felt right across our society and have consequences for health, the environment and the economy.

Due to the complexities and cross-cutting nature of the issue, I am adopting a two-stage approach in the development of the Clean Air Strategy. Initially a Clean Air Strategy Discussion Document, which presents an in-depth analysis of air quality in Northern Ireland and sets out current policy and evidence, was launched to a 12 week public consultation on

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Monday 23rd November 2020. The Discussion Document seeks views on a wide variety of matters relating to air quality. It does not set out policy options or indicate a particular policy position. It includes a series of questions to promote discussion around some of the issues that relate to air quality in Northern Ireland. It is likely that issues relating to Clean Air Zones, World Health Organisation standards and socio-economic deprivation will be raised at that stage and I welcome input from everyone at that time.

The public consultation will help to identify gaps in current policy and contribute to developing effective outcome-based measures that will reduce levels of air pollution across Northern Ireland. The consultation will provide an opportunity for all stakeholders to respond to the document and to put forward any suggestions.

Following this period of public discussion, responses received will be reviewed, options considered and range of proposals formulated. Once I have considered the options and decided on a policy direction, officials shall begin to draft the first Clean Air Strategy for Northern Ireland. This will be a more focussed and shorter document than the Discussion Document and will contain specific proposals relating to policy and other measures which can improve air quality. This draft Clean Air Strategy will be subject to an additional public consultation and due to the cross-cutting nature of the policy area, Executive approval will also be sought at that time.

Developing the Draft the Clean Air Strategy using a two-staged approach and based on analysis of the evidence, assessment of current policy and legislation and stakeholder views, ensures that final policy direction and Strategy will receive stakeholder buy-in. Rather than delaying the process, this ongoing and thorough, best-practice approach will result in an effective Clean Air Strategy which delivers positive improvement in air quality for the people of Northern Ireland.

I encourage Belfast City Council to review to the forthcoming Clean Air Strategy Discussion Document and I welcome their response to the questions posed in this document.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Edwin Poots'.

EDWIN POOTS MLA
Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs