

Transport Delivery Committee

Date	8 June 2020
Report title	TDC Air Quality, Congestion and Environmental Sustainability Lead Member Reference Group – Impacts of Covid-19
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Report has been considered by	Councillor Richard Worrall, Lead Member Air Quality, Congestion and Environmental Sustainability

Recommendation for action or decision:

Transport Delivery Committee is recommended to:

Note the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on air quality, congestion and carbon emissions in the West Midlands, and the possible actions that could be taken in light of these impacts.

1. Purpose

1.1 To update Transport Delivery Committee (TDC) on the impacts of Covid-19 on the areas considered by the Lead Member Reference Group.

2. Background

2.1 The TDC Air Quality, Congestion and Environmental Sustainability Lead Member Reference Group terms of reference are:

Group Terms of Reference

-To monitor and report on the future development of measures to reduce road traffic congestion in the West Midlands. Plus measures to monitor and cut its associated negative air quality and associated environmental impacts, including any measures supporting the delivery of the environmental objectives within the West Midlands Strategic Transport Plan and other strategic planning documents.

-To monitor progress on programmes seeking to effect cuts in congestion and its associated health and environmental impacts in line with WMCA policies, strategies and timescales.

-To monitor and support work with public transport operators passenger groups and members of the public to support the delivery of reduced congestion on the roads, plus general improvements in air quality across all forms of private and public transport.

-To give guidance and input during the preparation and clearance of reports within the portfolio area which are to be considered at any Transport Delivery Committee meeting

2.2 The three main areas of interest for the Group in relation to the impact of Covid-19 are:

- air quality
- road traffic congestion
- carbon reduction

2.3 These are considered in turn:

Air Quality

2.4 The current Covid-19 pandemic has led to dramatic reductions in nitrogen dioxide levels in the West Midlands as a result of lower traffic volumes. This reflects reductions across the UK.

2.5 In early April, nitrogen dioxide levels reduced by the following percentages, compared to the previous five year average for the same time period:

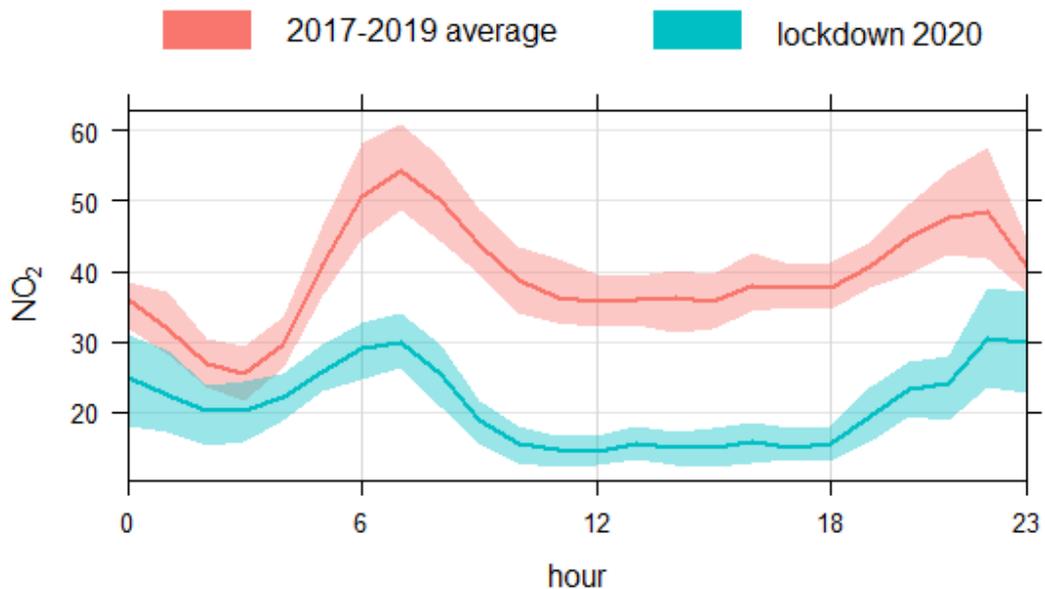
Nitrogen Dioxide Levels April 2020, Percentage Reduction Compared to Previous Five Year Average

Leeds	48%
Cardiff	45%
Newcastle	45%
Glasgow	44%
Birmingham	42%
Manchester	39%
London	36%
Bristol	31%
Belfast	30%
York	11%

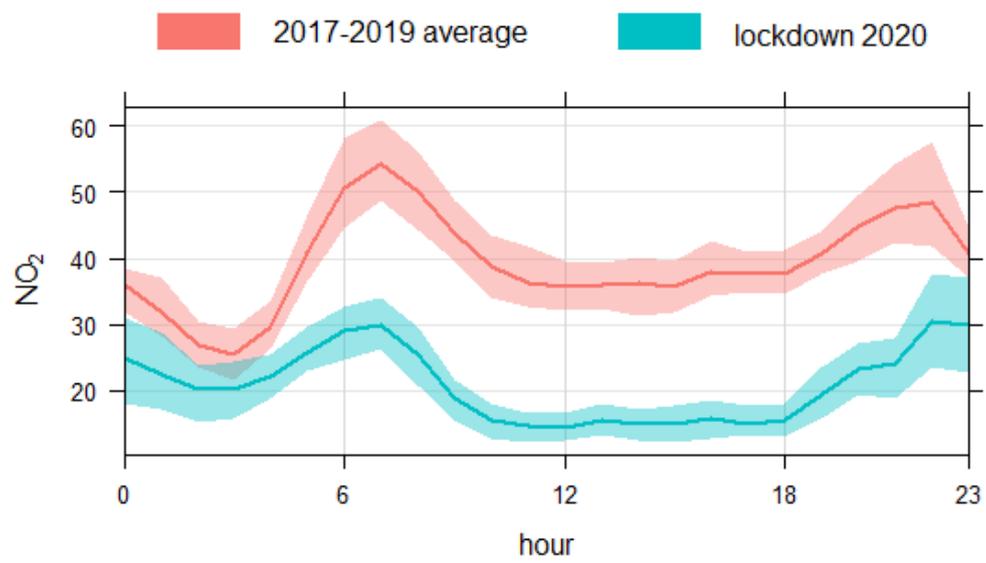
<https://theecologist.org/2020/apr/24/pollution-falls-during-coronavirus-lockdown>

2.6 Monitoring as part of the WM-Air Project, led by the University of Birmingham, shows reductions in NO₂ levels at sites across the West Midlands. This is compared to 2017-19 averages:

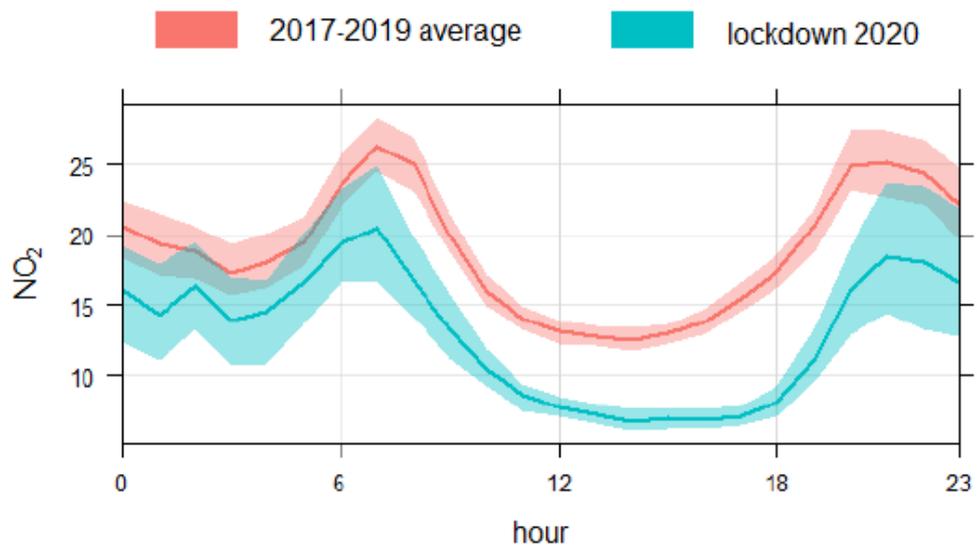
Birmingham (A4540 roadside)



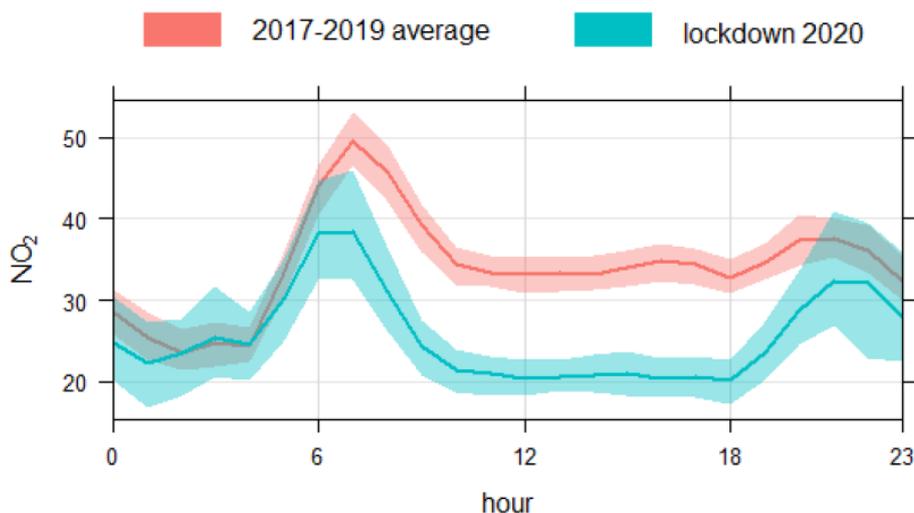
Acocks Green



Coventry Allesley



Oldbury

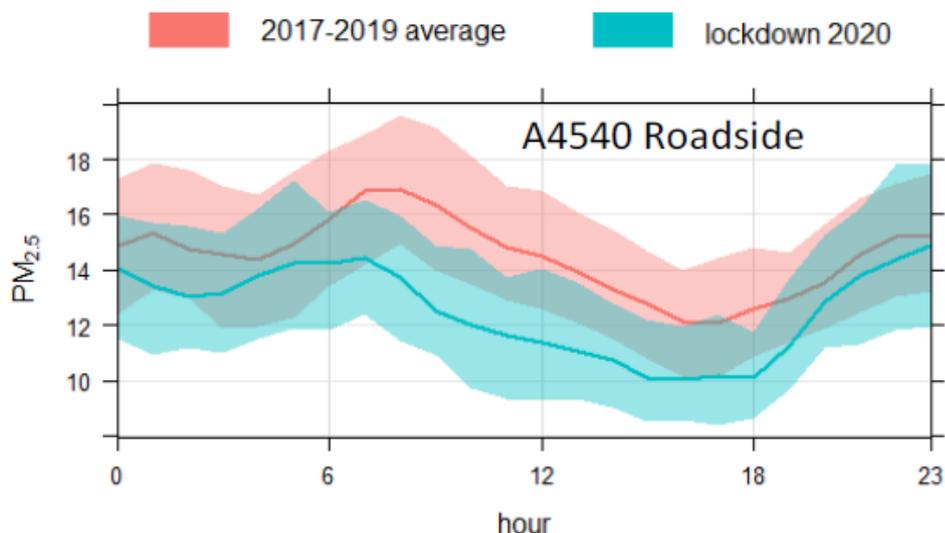


- 2.7 There have been some smaller reductions in particulate levels in the West Midlands. However, there have been episodes of high levels of fine particulates (PM_{2.5}) in march across England and Wales. This reflects the many sources of fine particulates, not just motor vehicle emissions – potentially including garden waste burning, agricultural muck spreading, and industrial and other emissions blowing over from continental Europe, which occurred to an unusual extent in spring 2020.

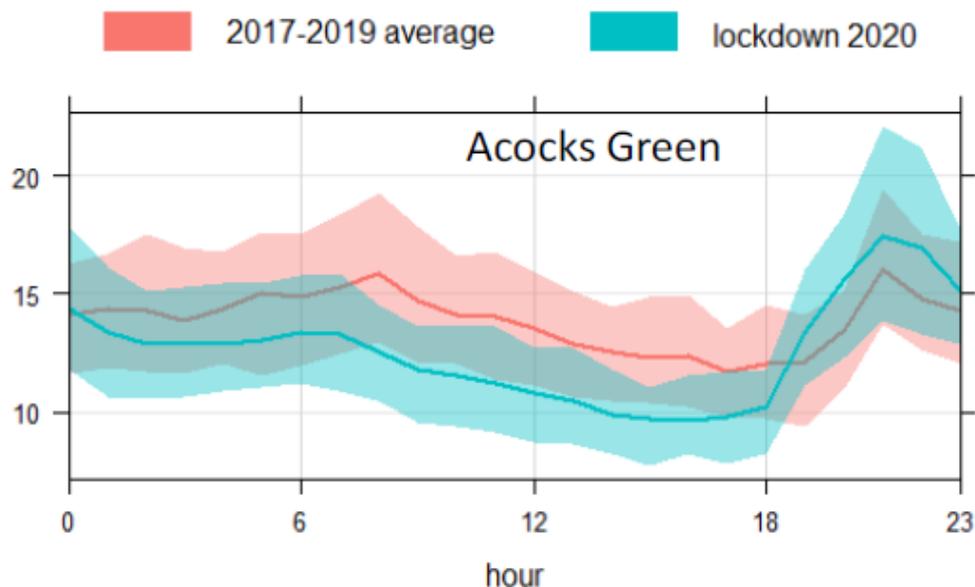
<https://airqualitynews.com/2020/05/04/air-quality-making-headlines-during-the-coronavirus-lockdown/>

- 2.8 Monitoring of PM_{2.5} levels at sites across the West Midlands, as part of the WM-Air Project shows these reductions:

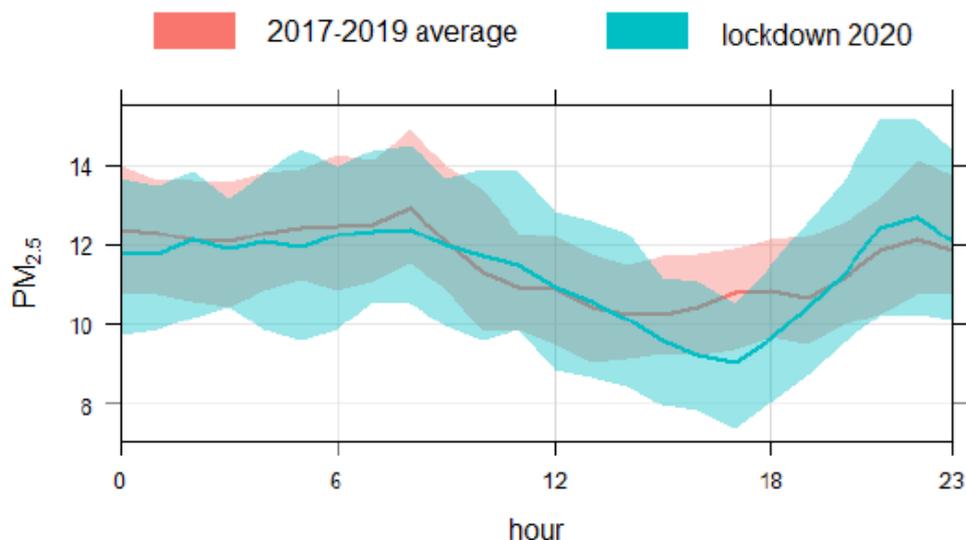
Birmingham A4540 Roadside



Acocks Green



Coventry Allesley



2.9 Commentary on these findings is provided by University of Birmingham in the interim report. This states:

“Implications for Clean Air Science

Changes in behaviour and economic activity arising from the Covid-19 outbreak have improved air quality in some aspects – nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) levels have fallen significantly in most urban regions, driven by the change in emissions. Changes in PM levels are less directly apparent in the data, and will require longer term analyses to quantify – reflecting the wider range of PM sources, and importance of regional, as well as local, emissions. The weather remains a key factor affecting public perceptions of clean air, and must be taken into account in analyses of measured levels. The changes observed give confidence that future policies to reduce vehicle emissions in individual cities – whether through lowered traffic levels or switches to cleaner vehicles – will

reduce NO2 levels. Reductions in PM will require coordinated, regional approaches across a wider range of emissions sources / sectors.”

(extract from “ Air Quality in the West Midlands : Impacts of Covid-19 Restrictions, March-May 2020, *an interim briefing note from the WM-Air Project*”; 12 May 2020; William Bloss, Zongbo Shi, Daniel Rooney, Nicole Cowell, Congbo Song - University of Birmingham)

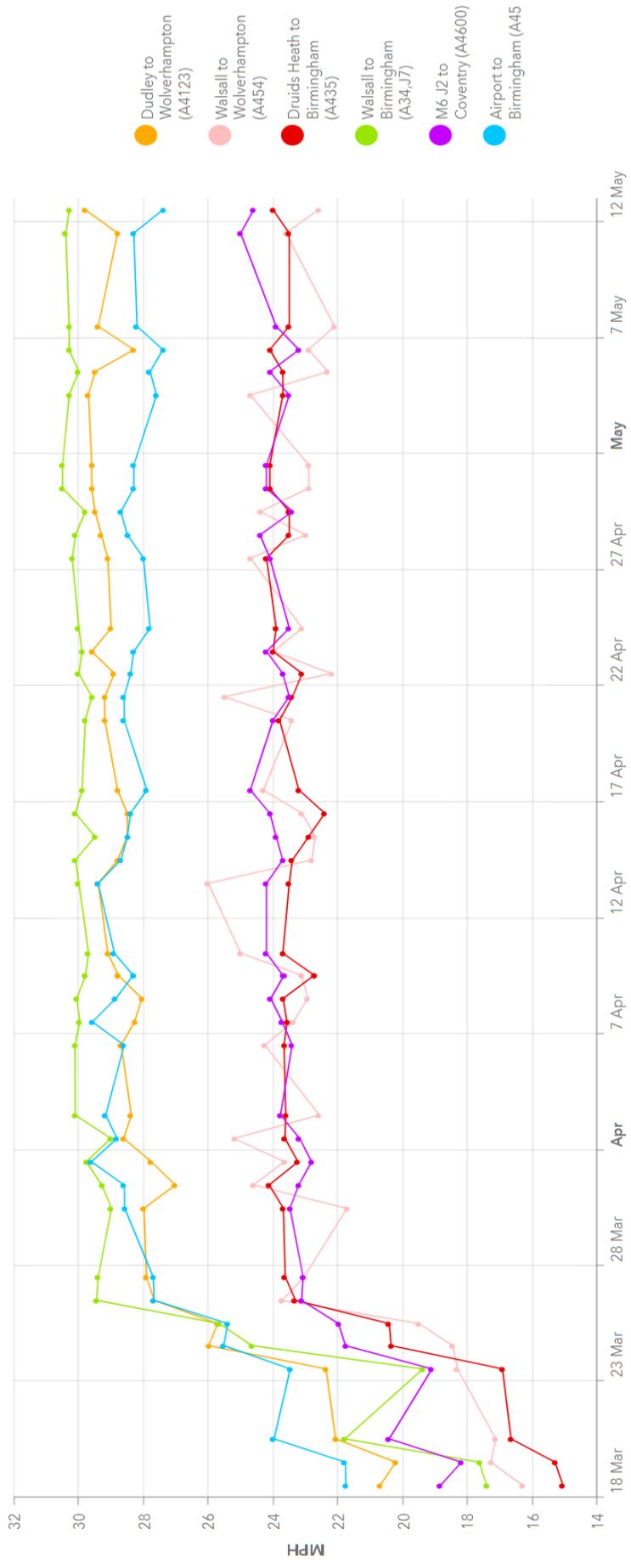
- 2.10 If members wish to receive a copy of the full interim report then they should contact Jake Thrush, Associate Policy Advisor, TfWM Jake.Thrush@tfwm.org.uk.
- 2.11 Traffic is a significant contributor to NO2 pollution and agreed ways to secure less nitrogen dioxide emissions from transport need to be continued. This includes the potential for some home working to continue. Ways to reduce fine particulates will require a wider strategy, covering other sectors (homes, agriculture, industry) as well as transport.
- 2.12 Due to the impact of the Covid-19 crisis, Birmingham City Council will now introduce its Clean Air Zone in January 2021 at the earliest.

https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/news/article/567/birmingham_s_clean_air_zone_and_the_impact_of_covid-19

Road Traffic Congestion

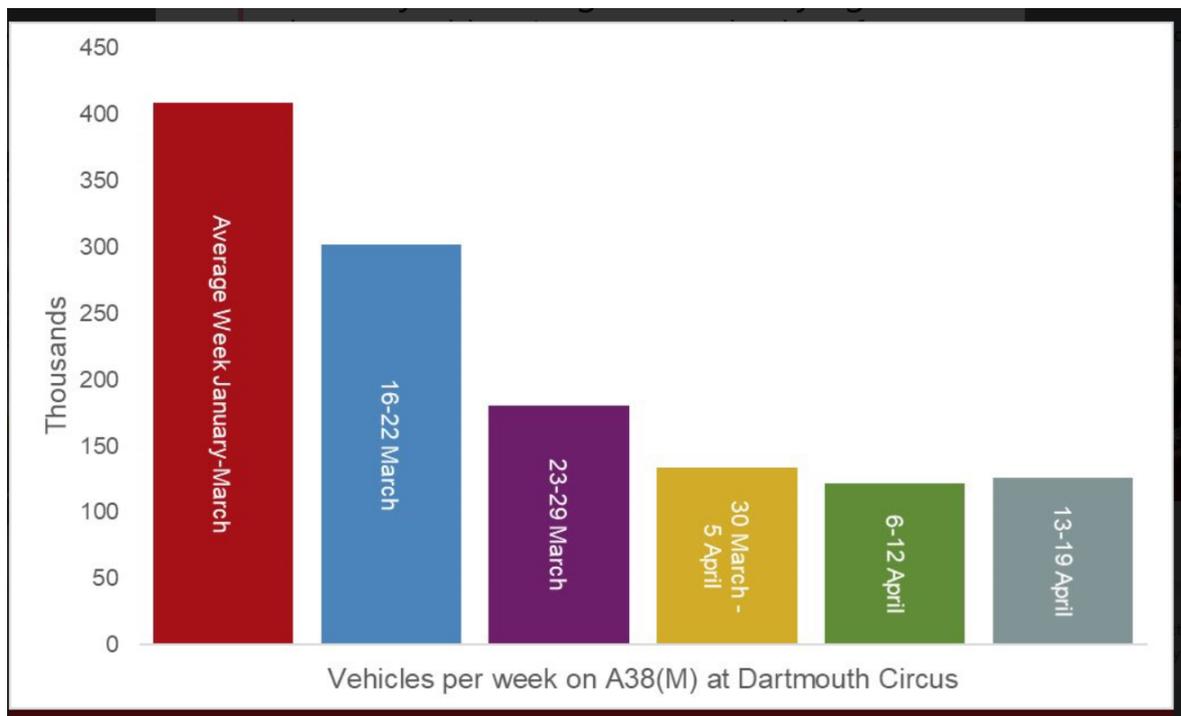
- 2.13 Traffic speeds have increased in the West Midlands, reflecting significantly lower traffic levels. The figure below shows average am peak speeds for six locations across the West Midlands. In early May, three of the six sites started to see speeds drop again, reflecting increases in traffic:

Weekday AM Peak (0630-0830)
Average Traffic Speed



Daily data from Waze, updated by TfWM

- 2.14 Traffic levels in Birmingham in April were typically 30% of normal levels for March/April in the city: (Source: Birmingham City Council)



- 2.15 The recent Government announcement for £2bn funding for walking and cycling, including £250m for early measures, will support the promotion of these modes rather than private car use. Public transport use is not currently promoted, due to the existing capacity restrictions with social distancing. However, in the medium and longer term, public transport will need to return to its key role in a sustainable transport strategy of moving large numbers of people across the West Midlands by environmentally-friendly means.
- 2.16 The potential for some home working to continue also needs to be considered. This is to help reduce short and longer term demand pressures on the transport system at peak times.

Carbon Reduction

- 2.17 There have been reductions in carbon emissions related to recent reduced traffic levels. UK figures from Sia Partners show UK emissions have reduced by 36% from the start of the lockdown to early May.
- 2.18 However, carbon emissions will rise as traffic levels increase again. This shows the importance of the WMCA's long term net zero carbon strategy. WMCA officers are now working on the final #WM2041 Zero Carbon White Paper. The aim is to have a high level long term strategy with more detailed five year plans with carbon budgets to meet interim carbon reduction targets.

- 2.19 The review of the Movement for Growth strategic transport plan will be informed by the development of this overall strategy to achieve a net zero carbon West Midlands by 2041.
- 2.20 West Midlands strategy will also need to be in accord with national policy. On March 26 the Department for Transport (DfT) published “Decarbonising Transport: Setting the Challenges”. This green paper sets out how DfT intends to work with others to develop a transport decarbonisation plan (TDP) by the end of 2020. It also sets out the challenges faced to reduce transport carbon emissions in line with the Government’s statutory duties under the Climate Change Act 2008 (ie. to ensure net-zero emissions by 2050). TfWM is engaging with DfT to support the development of this national strategy.

3. Legal Implications

- 3.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from this report

4. Financial Implications

- 4.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

5. Equalities Implications

- 5.1 There are no direct equalities implications arising from this report.

6. Inclusive Growth Implications

- 6.1 Promoting sustainable transport use and improved air quality supports inclusive growth in accord with the following themes:
- Affordable, safe, and connected places
 - Sustainability
 - Health and Wellbeing
 - Economy

7. Geographical Area of Report’s Implications

- 7.1 The Group’s remit covers the Combined Authority constituent authorities. Improvements to the West Midlands transport system and environmental performance will provide wider benefits for sustainable connectivity with the wider Combined Authority area.

8. Other Implications

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9. Schedule of Background Papers

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