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Speech by Jim Fitzpatrick MP on Air Quality at the Clearer Future Conference, Sheffield - 17 September 2009

Good morning everyone. Thanks for the intro Ian.

It's a great pleasure to be in Sheffield this morning, because it affords me the chance to talk about our shared strategy, to combat air pollution, and raise awareness of its dangers.

Shortly after taking up my post in June, I was asked to chair an air quality meeting of key local government and regional officials, from across England. This meeting was intended to share best practice, to explore possible barriers to achievement of air quality objectives, and to act as a prelude to a larger, more comprehensive air quality summit, later in the year.

At the meeting, there was a large degree of consensus, (I can't tell you how many times I heard the word 'bus') – and no shortage of ideas: stronger links with transport policies; a national approach to Low Emission Zones, best practice examples to encourage eco credentials and green policies such as South Yorkshire's ECO Stars Fleet Recognition Scheme. There was also talk of gas fleet incentives, promoting anaerobic digestion, modal shift from cars to walking, improving inter-departmental dialogue and so on.

Today's event will be a further opportunity, to build on that considerable knowledge and experience. We all know air quality does not exist in isolation – it is connected to, and affected by, a wide range of themes including transport, health, social equity, urban planning, biodiversity, waste management, and others. This means that tackling air pollution must be done at central, regional and local government level. The work of Beacon authorities, together with the Low Emissions Strategies project, have demonstrated the importance of having a joined up approach, using technology, planning and behaviour to make a change.

Prior to coming here today, I looked on the Care4Air website, and one thing that struck me immediately, was the fun design of the site, and its focus on raising awareness of air pollution, particularly among young people. Reducing pollutants such as Nitrogen Dioxide is a difficult task, and I can understand how easy it must be to get disillusioned at times, with the scope of the problem, and the difficulties, practically and economically, in fighting it. The rewards can sometimes be unclear. But the Care4Air Campaign makes it clear, in bold, bright colours, to the individual in the street, to organisations, schools and businesses. It also states, that if we are to tackle air pollution, we must do it together, and we must do it, not just because the law says so, but because it is in our best interests, and the interests of our children and future generations.

Raising awareness, educating all of society, on the dangers of air pollution is vital – but we cannot expect the public to solve air pollution as a policy objective; we simply cannot see Nitrogen Dioxide or particulate matter smaller than the width of a human hair.

Technology can provide solutions, through retrofitting, low emission vehicles or other measures, but in the long-term the achievement of our goals will rely more, on a willing and voluntary change in the public's attitudes and behaviours, as well as direct action to combat air pollution. Walking, cycling, eco-driving, minimising our use of electricity, insulating our homes, – not only do these benefit the environment and improve our health, but they also save us money. It is at this level that organisations and environmental campaigns can have their greatest success. 'What can I do? Have fun! Ride your bike instead of using the car' – this is the language of the Care4Air website; it is the kind of language we need to use to engage the public, not only in Yorkshire, but throughout the United Kingdom.

At last year's Care4Air conference, the keynote speech, delivered by [Dr] William Bird of Natural England, emphasised what is clearly the most important consideration: the cleaner the air we breathe, the better our health and our way of life. It's as simple and as important as that.

We are continually breaking new ground, in quantifying the effects of exposure to air pollutants on human health – in particular, the long-term effects of exposure to particulate matter, as recently reported by the Committee on the Medical Effects of Air Pollutants this year. As the science improves, so does the evidence. And the evidence is clear: long-term exposure to particulate matter and other air-borne pollutants, increases the risk of mortality – reducing life expectancy in the UK by an average, of 7-8 months.

While further studies are needed, to better quantify the associative risk of ambient nitrogen dioxide on human health, we know that in traffic-dominated areas there is a strong correlation between NO₂ and primary particles, and that to ignore one at the expense of the other, would be to our detriment.

Some facts are non-negotiable: in the UK, air pollution causes up to 24,000 deaths per year (nine times more than traffic fatalities); children living in heavily built up areas, often in poorer conurbations, are more likely to develop chronic respiratory problems; those who suffer from asthma, lung and heart disease, are at greater risk from air pollution. Cardio-Obstructive Pulmonary Disease affects 3 million people in this country, and is Britain's fifth biggest killer, costing the NHS an estimated £1.5 billion per year. With other pollution-related illnesses the hospital bill comes up to a staggering £20 billion per year.

What we need to do, following the good example of a number of local authorities, and organisations such as Care4Air, is to get these facts out to the public, not in the format of a scientific report, but in a way that is relevant to our day-to-day lives.

For those individuals who feel their contribution would be too small to make any difference, we need to tell them, that small things, taken together, can produce large effects; that the influence of a single child riding his or her bike to school, can set in motion a chain reaction far greater than their one individual effort.

Air quality will change for the better, when we have changed for the better, in our minds, in the way we think, in the way we view our environment and our place in it.

Ladies and gentlemen, in conclusion, today's event is to help us take a further step down that road.

I would like to thank you for participating in the conference today, and for the commitment you have shown, and continue to show, in our joint endeavour to improve air quality.

Thank you once more for inviting me and for your attention and I hope the rest of the day goes well. Thank you very much.

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