

Opinion – by the Transport Convener on Low Emission Zone proposals

by Councillor Lesley Macinnes, Transport and Environment Convener

Every year, Clean Air Day gives us pause for thought. Is it acceptable that poor air quality affects the health and wellbeing of some of our most vulnerable members of society, linking to hundreds of deaths across Scotland each year?

On the eve of the annual event, we're preparing to ask that question as Transport and Environment Committee considers the preferred option for a [Low Emission Zone \(LEZ\)](#) in Edinburgh.

This moment has been years in the making and follows a great deal of evidence-led research, in close partnership with Transport Scotland, the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) and a range of other organisations.

In 2019, when we consulted on our initial proposals, people told us how important cleaner air is to them, reinforcing the need for action. But they also shared concerns and questions about the original proposals for city centre and citywide LEZs, and how they'd be implemented.

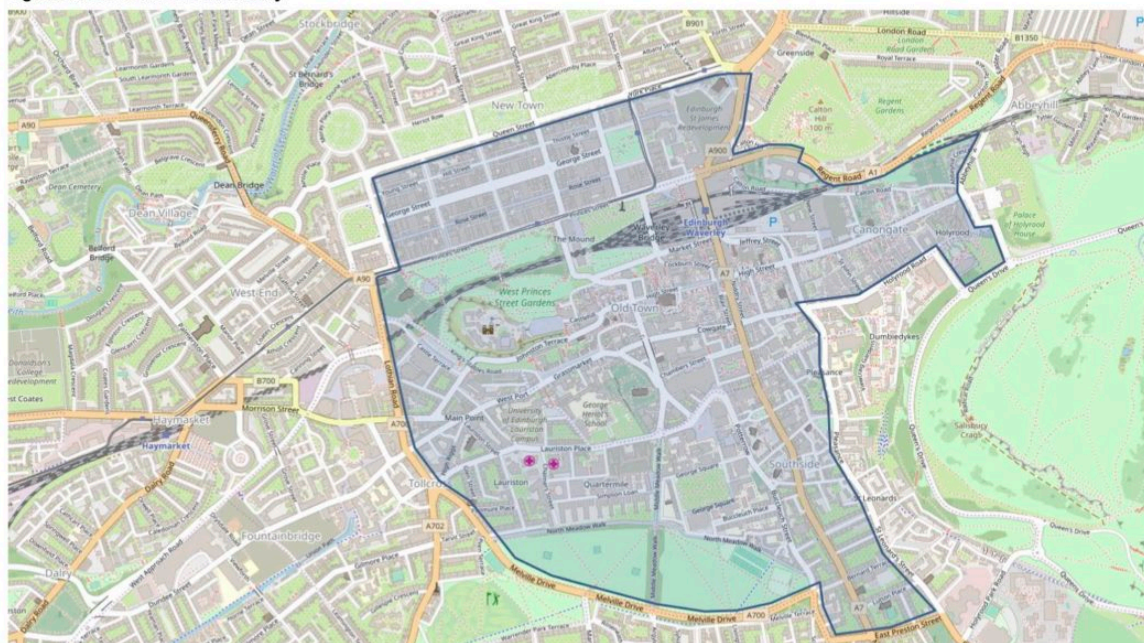
We've taken this feedback into account to develop objectives for the LEZ scheme, notably a reduction in NO₂ and greenhouse

gas emissions, but also to minimise any resulting traffic displacement and, importantly, to align with our broader sustainable transport ambitions.

Working to these objectives and in line with the National Modelling Framework set by SEPA, officers have spent months appraising LEZ options for Edinburgh, incorporating traffic, emissions and air dispersion modelling to assess the impacts of any scheme. As a result, a city centre LEZ, applying to all motor vehicles except motorcycles and mopeds, has been put forward.

This is different from our original proposal in that it doesn't include a citywide option affecting only commercial vehicles. This decision wasn't taken lightly but was led by the evidence. For a start, air quality is getting better across the city, which is having a positive impact on Air Quality Management Areas outside of the centre.

Figure 1.2: Alternative LEZ boundary



Analysis of commercial-type fleet shows improvements are

already being made – in 2020 up to 95% of Heavy Goods Vehicles (HGVs) were compliant, while smaller vans had increased in compliance from 7% in 2016 to 48%. Buses are becoming more efficient too, with a commitment from Lothian Buses to be fully compliant by the end of this year and 60% of all other companies' coach and bus fleet currently meeting LEZ requirements.

These findings are promising and reflect the air quality benefits experienced in other cities, where LEZs have had a knock-on effect on the surrounding areas, with cleaner vehicles entering the zone and travelling further afield, spreading the benefits.

The preferred option means we can focus resources on the densely populated city centre, where traffic pollution is highest and where many people are subject to its negative effects.

If approved by committee, we'll be carrying out a public consultation in the coming months, with a view to introducing an LEZ by spring next year. To help people adjust to the changes we'll be allowing a grace period, which has been extended from one year to two to support the city's economic recovery post-pandemic. Exemptions for blue badge holders and other essential vehicles will also be in place.

Though the LEZ will mean a step-change for the way we tackle poor air quality in the capital, it's just one of a range of tools to reduce air pollution. As part of our City Mobility Plan we're focused on facilitating and promoting healthy, sustainable travel, while City Centre Transformation, along with associated projects to improve walking and cycling infrastructure, will create a truly people-friendly city.

It's through initiatives like these that we'll be able to enjoy an environment worthy of Clean Air Day in years to come.



Councillor Lesley Macinnes, Transport Convener at Braid Road, one of the first to be affected by Spaces for People measures.. Photo: Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com