Challenges for achieving clean air — lessons from ten cities across Europe

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Air pollution Environment and health Policy instruments

Implementing EU air quality legislation to protect human health and the environment from pollution can be demanding for countries and cities. The European Environment Agency (EEA) has worked together with a number of European cities to better understand policy implementation challenges. The EEA’s new report, published today, summarises key findings on the cities’ progress over the past five years and highlights on-going challenges for improving air quality at the local level.

Europe’s growing cities need coherent and effective air quality measures to successfully implement EU air quality legislation and to curb air pollution. The EEA report ‘Europe's urban air quality — re-assessing implementation challenges in cities’ analyses the implementation of EU air quality legislation at the urban level and identifies some of the reasons behind persistent air quality problems in Europe's cities.

The EEA produced the new report in cooperation with 10 of 12 cities that were involved in a 2013 Air Implementation Pilot project, namely: Antwerp (Belgium), Berlin (Germany), Dublin (Ireland), Madrid (Spain), Malmö (Sweden), Milan (Italy), Paris (France), Plovdiv (Bulgaria), Prague (Czechia) and Vienna (Austria).

Five years on from the original assessment, the cities involved in the project have all improved their air quality management, particularly in their use of tools and methods to quantify the effects of proposed and implemented measures. In general, there is also an increased understanding of the sources of local air pollution.

Nevertheless, cities report that a number of important challenges remain, including communicating and engaging with citizens on air quality issues, and making the case for new air quality measures, including highlighting co-benefits for health, noise reduction and climate change mitigation and adaptation. The report also shows that achieving policy coherence across administrative and governance levels is challenging, as are efforts to generate political and public support for improving air quality beyond the minimum EU standards.

In the ten cities participating in the project, expanding district heating, promoting cycling, lowering speed limits and issuing congestion charges were the most common measures to improve local air quality. Other common initiatives included relocating industrial facilities, modernising household stoves and boilers, using cleaner fuels for heating, switching to cleaner buses or trams and introducing low-emission transport zones.

The EEA’s 2018 ‘Air quality in Europe’ report has shown that, while strong policies and local actions have helped decrease levels of pollution in Europe’s cities over the past decades, most Europeans living in urban areas still suffer from pollutant levels that are above the World Health Organization’s recommendations for the protection of health. According to the EEA estimates, poor air quality causes about 400,000 premature deaths in EU urban areas every year.