



Subject:	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs consultation on the Draft Air Quality (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 to tighten annual average particulate matter (PM ₁₀ and PM _{2.5}) limits, targets, and objectives in Northern Ireland.
Date:	11 th August 2026
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Is this report restricted?	Yes ☐ No ☒
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Insert number. ☐	
1. Information relating to any individual. 2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual. 3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information). 4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter. 5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained. 6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction. 7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation, or prosecution of crime.	
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?	
After Committee Decision	☐
After Council Decision	☐
Sometime in the future	☐
Never	☐

Call-in	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes ☒ No ☐

1.0	Purpose of Report / Summary of Main Issues.
1.1	The People and Communities Committee is advised that the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) is presently consulting upon legislative proposals to tighten existing annual average particulate matter (PM ₁₀ and PM _{2.5}) limit values, targets and objectives in Northern Ireland in order to reduce harmful air pollution, protect public health, and align Northern Ireland more closely with international World Health Organisation (WHO) guidance and emerging standards across the United Kingdom and Ireland. Current short-term air quality standards for particulate matter will remain, unaltered.
1.2	This report serves therefore to provide an overview of the evidence and guidance that DAERA have considered in developing the revised annual average particulate matter health-based air quality standards for Northern Ireland and regarding the separation of regulatory obligations to achieve the revised PM ₁₀ and PM _{2.5} air quality standards between Northern Ireland Government Departments, district councils and competent authorities, to be provided for via amendments to The Air Quality Standards Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 and the Air Quality Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003.
1.3	As part of the consultation process, DAERA have posed 14 questions for respondents to consider and respond to. Proposed responses to the 14 questions have been provided at Appendix 1 to this Committee report.
2.0	Recommendation.
2.1	The Committee is requested to: • Note the contents of this report concerning DAERA proposals to tighten annual average particulate matter (PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5}) limits, targets, and objectives in Northern Ireland. • Agree that the proposed consultation response, provided at Appendix 1 to this report, be submitted to the DAERA by the consultation deadline of 31st August 2026.
2.2	Upon Committee agreement, the consultation response will be provided to DAERA by 31 st August 2026, indicating that the consultation response remains subject to ratification at a meeting of full Council on 1 st September 2026, and that the consultation response may therefore be subject to amendment.
3.0	Main Report.
3.1	DAERA have highlighted that particulate matter is comprised of primary components (those directly emitted) and secondary components (those formed in the atmosphere), and that the potential adverse impacts of particulate matter upon human health are well established. PM _{2.5} (airborne particles with an aerodynamic diameter of 2.5 micrometres (µm) or less) and PM ₁₀ (airborne particles with an aerodynamic diameter of 10 micrometres (µm) or less) can both act directly as respiratory irritants in the airways. For PM _{2.5} , in particular, the particles may cross from the lungs into the bloodstream, where they may have indirect systemic effects, such as increasing the risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke.
3.2	DAERA have additionally highlighted that The National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory, 2025 publication entitled, ' <i>Air Pollutant Inventories for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland: 2005-2023</i> ' indicates that for primary PM _{2.5} , key emission sources within Northern Ireland include domestic burning (26.1%); industrial combustion (9.1%); road transport (16.9%) and; solvent use and industrial processes (10.1%).

3.3	For PM ₁₀ , key emission sources include agriculture; industrial processes; residential, commercial and public sector combustion and; transport. Agriculture produces 97% of current ammonia (NH ₃) emissions, which can persist in the atmosphere, be transported for long distances and can react with other ambient pollutants, including nitrogen dioxide (NO ₂) and sulphur dioxide (SO ₂), to form ammonium aerosols, which are precursors to particulate matter formation, including PM ₁₀ and PM _{2.5} . The Committee will be aware that particulate matter is regarded as a transboundary pollutant.
3.4	Northern Ireland legislation currently regulates ambient levels of PM ₁₀ and PM _{2.5} through two distinct but complementary legislative pathways.
3.5	The Air Quality Standards Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 transpose the various provisions of <i>'Directive 2008/50/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 21st May 2008 on ambient air quality and cleaner air for Europe'</i> into Northern Ireland legislation, thereby establishing a PM ₁₀ annual average limit value of 40 µgm ⁻³ and a 24-hour mean limit value of 50 µgm ⁻³ , the 24-hour mean limit value not to be exceeded more than 35 times per calendar year; and an annual average limit value and a target value of 25 µgm ⁻³ for PM _{2.5} , the limit value to be achieved by 1 st January 2015.
3.6	For clarity, a <i>'limit value'</i> means a level fixed on the basis of scientific knowledge, with the aim of avoiding, preventing, or reducing harmful effects on human health and/or the environment as a whole, to be attained within a given period and not to be exceeded once achieved. A <i>'target value'</i> alternatively means a level fixed with the aim of avoiding, preventing, or reducing harmful effects on human health and / or the environment as a whole, to be attained where possible over a given period. Target values are therefore intended to be attained where possible, whilst limit values are mandatory concentrations that are not to be exceeded.
3.7	The 2010 Regulations place a statutory duty upon Northern Ireland government Departments to ensure that concentrations of PM ₁₀ and PM _{2.5} do not exceed the respective limit values. In zones, where concentrations of the particulate matter pollutants are below limit values, Northern Ireland Departments are additionally required to ensure that concentrations are maintained below the respective limit values and to endeavour to maintain the best ambient air quality, compatible with sustainable development.
3.8	The 2010 Regulations place a further statutory duty upon Northern Ireland government Departments to ensure that all necessary measures, not entailing disproportionate costs, are taken to ensure that concentrations of PM _{2.5} do not exceed the target values.
3.9	DAERA have highlighted that the annual average limit and target values for PM _{2.5} , as detailed within schedules 2 and 3 of The Air Quality Standards Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010, are equivalent at 25 µgm ⁻³ , and so consequently ineffective. DAERA have therefore proposed a more stringent target value.
3.10	The Committee will be aware that Part III of The Environmental (Northern Ireland) Order 2002, concerning ambient air quality, separately places a statutory duty upon district councils to periodically review and assess ambient air quality within their council areas against a series of health-based air quality objectives, established via the Air Quality Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 and reiterated within the July 2007 Air Quality Strategy for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

3.11	With regard to particulate matter (PM₁₀), the schedule to the Air Quality Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 establishes a PM₁₀ 40 µgm⁻³ annual mean objective and a 50 µgm⁻³ 24-hour mean objective, not to be exceeded more than 35 times per annum, both to have been achieved by district councils and competent authorities by 31st December 2004. Competent authorities include government Departments, other district councils, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation. These Regulations contain no objectives for PM_{2.5}, although the Committee will appreciate that PM_{2.5} is a subfraction of PM₁₀ and so actions to improve ambient concentrations of PM₁₀ will also have a beneficial impact upon PM_{2.5} concentrations, where there are common emission sources.
3.12	The Committee is advised that annual mean limit values and objectives apply at all locations where members of the public may be regularly exposed, including at building façades of residential properties, schools, hospitals, care homes etc. They do not apply at façades of offices or other work locations, where health and safety at work legislation applies, at hotels, at gardens of residential properties, at kerbside sites or any other location where public exposure is anticipated to be short term.
3.13	The Committee will recall that in 2021, the World Health Organisation (WHO) published Global Air Quality Guidelines (AQGs) for particulate matter (PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀), ozone (O₃), nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), sulphur dioxide (SO₂) and carbon monoxide (CO). The WHO publication therefore provides updated air quality guideline values for PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀, together with a series of four interim targets, although the WHO have advised that the interim targets should be regarded as steps towards the ultimate achievement of the Air Quality Guideline values at a point in the future, rather than being regarded as end targets in themselves. The interim target values have been designed to deliver successive improvements in ambient air pollution, with WHO interim target 4 the most stringent air quality target, sitting just below the final Air Quality Guideline level. This WHO approach therefore allows for a gradual progression towards achieving cleaner air, taking account the need for policy change, infrastructure investment, and realistic timescales for implementing effective change.
3.14	In terms of proposals to tighten annual average particulate matter (PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5}) limits, targets, and objectives for Northern Ireland, DAERA have suggested the following reductions:
3.15	The Air Quality Standards Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010; <i>applicable to Northern Ireland government Departments.</i> PM₁₀ - the annual average limit value for PM₁₀ should be reduced from the current 40 µgm⁻³ to 20 µgm⁻³; equivalent to interim target 4 of the WHO guideline values. PM_{2.5} - the annual average limit value for PM_{2.5} should be reduced from the current 25 µgm⁻³ to 10 µgm⁻³; equivalent to interim target 4 of the WHO guideline values. PM_{2.5} – the annual average target value for PM_{2.5} should be reduced from the current 25 µgm⁻³ to 8 µgm⁻³. For clarity, the WHO Air Quality Guideline annual average value for PM₁₀ is 15 µgm⁻³ and 5 µgm⁻³ for PM_{2.5}.

3.16	The Air Quality Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003; <i>applicable to district councils and competent authorities.</i> PM₁₀ - the annual average objective value for PM₁₀ should be reduced from the current 40 μgm^{-3} to 20 μgm^{-3}; equivalent to interim target 4 of the WHO guideline values. The WHO Air Quality Guideline annual average value for PM₁₀ is 15 μgm^{-3}.
3.17	DAERA have advised that adoption of interim target 4 for PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5} of the WHO guideline levels puts Northern Ireland on a path to achieve the Air Quality Guideline levels for PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5} at a point in the future but that further policy interventions will be necessary before more stringent particulate matter standards are introduced. DAERA have further advised that to ensure consistency and to provide a 'lead in' time, all of the new annual average limits, targets and objectives will have an intended compliance date of 1st January 2028 and each calendar year thereafter.
3.18	In terms of the DAERA proposed compliance date of 1st January 2028 and having considered the approach employed by Defra when setting a PM_{2.5} target for England, based on robust scientific trajectory scenarios and modelling assessments, it is unclear if DAERA have undertaken an equivalent particulate matter trajectory and achievability assessment for Northern Ireland. As a consequence, it is recommended that dates for achieving the proposed strengthened Northern Ireland particulate matter standards should be informed by an equivalently robust scientific trajectory assessment. Accordingly, it is considered that 1st January 2028 is an unrealistic compliance date, in terms of the various strategies and policies that will need to be developed and mitigation actions that may need to be taken by Departments and councils to achieve the newly proposed limits, targets and objectives for particulate matter.
3.19	In order to characterise the likely regulatory impact of the new particulate matter standards, DAERA have undertaken a review of historical annual mean particulate matter monitoring data across Northern Ireland from 2019 – 2024. For PM_{2.5}, DAERA have advised that most recently, in 2024, 10 monitoring sites achieved both the proposed new annual average limit value of 10 μgm^{-3} and the proposed new annual average target value of 8 μgm^{-3}. For PM₁₀, DAERA have advised that 13 monitoring sites achieved the proposed new annual average limit value / objective of 20 μgm^{-3} for PM₁₀.
3.20	As an addition, the Committee is advised that for 2025, monitored PM₁₀ annual mean concentrations at the Belfast Centre urban background and Stockmans Lane roadside monitoring sites were 13 μgm^{-3} and 19 μgm^{-3} respectively; both in compliance with the proposed 20 μgm^{-3} annual average objective value for PM₁₀.
3.21	Similarly, the 2025 PM_{2.5} annual mean, monitored at the Belfast Centre urban background monitoring site, was 8 μgm^{-3}; in compliance with the proposed 10 μgm^{-3} annual average limit value and equal to the 8 μgm^{-3} annual mean target value.
3.22	It should be noted, however, that background PM₁₀ concentrations within the Belfast City Council area have been estimated by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) to be up to 14.2 μgm^{-3} during 2026; more typically around 10-11 μgm^{-3} in built up areas and that background PM_{2.5} concentrations have been estimated to be up to 8.6 μgm^{-3} during 2026; more typically 6-7 μgm^{-3} in built up areas. Defra have clarified that the total concentration of an air pollutant comprises contributions from explicit local emission sources such as roads,

	chimneystacks, etc., and those that are transported into an area by wind from further away, adding that if all of the local emission sources are removed, what remains is pollution that comes from further away; the 'background'. The Committee is therefore advised that a significant proportion of PM₁₀, (and indeed PM_{2.5}) experienced within the Belfast City Council boundary, arises from distant background particulate matter sources, that Belfast City Council has limited opportunity to address via its statutory Local Air Quality Management functions.
3.23	The Committee will recall that Council Air Quality Officers and Aecom consultants completed a detailed assessment for nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) and particulate matter (PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5}) for the Belfast City Council area during 2023. The detailed assessment considered a 2019 pre-Covid base year, and a forward projection year of 2028. The outworkings of the detailed assessment were considered by the People and Communities Committee at agenda item 12 of its hybrid meeting of 13th June 2023. https://minutes.belfastcity.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=166&MIId=11151
3.24	For PM₁₀, for the forward projection year of 2028, Aecom advised that the highest levels of PM₁₀ would occur where local source contributions coincided with elevated background concentrations and that the highest annual mean modelled concentration at a discrete sensitive receptor location in 2028 was therefore predicted to be 20.3 µgm⁻³, near to the A12 Westlink in the area of Barrack Street. This predicted maximum annual mean PM₁₀ concentration in 2028 would be marginally in excess of the proposed 20 µgm⁻³ annual average objective value applicable to district councils, and the 20 µgm⁻³ annual average limit value, applicable to government Departments.
3.25	For PM_{2.5}, Aecom indicated that for the 2028 forward projection year, the highest levels of PM_{2.5} would again occur where local source contributions coincided with elevated background concentrations and that the highest predicted PM_{2.5} annual mean concentration in 2028 at a discrete sensitive receptor location was predicted to be 13.1 µgm⁻³, again near to the A12 Westlink in the area of Barrack Street. This predicted maximum annual mean PM_{2.5} concentration in 2028 would be in excess of both the proposed 10 µgm⁻³ annual average limit value and the 8 µgm⁻³ annual average target value for PM_{2.5}. The Committee is advised, however, that responsibility for achieving the PM_{2.5} limit and target values will fall to government Departments.
3.26	DAERA have also provided an overview of PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀ annual mean limit, target and objective values in other United Kingdom devolved administrations, and for Ireland, by way of contrast. England and Wales currently apply a 40 µgm⁻³ annual mean limit, whilst Scotland has adopted a stricter 18 µgm⁻³ standard. Ireland, aligning with WHO guidance, has set an interim annual mean target 3 of 30 µgm⁻³ by 2026, 20 µgm⁻³ by 2030, and the WHO Air Quality Guideline of 15 µgm⁻³ by 2040.
3.27	For PM_{2.5}, England has adopted a 12 µgm⁻³ annual mean limit value, to be achieved by 2028, and the WHO interim target 4 of 10 µgm⁻³ for 2040. Scotland already applies the WHO interim target 4 of 10 µgm⁻³. Wales currently applies the WHO interim target 2 of 25 µgm⁻³ but has recently consulted on adopting target 4; 10 µgm⁻³ by 2035. Ireland has set staged WHO aligned targets: target 3 - 15 µgm⁻³ by 2026, target 4 - 10 µgm⁻³ by 2030, and the WHO guideline of 5 µgm⁻³ by 2040

3.28	DAERA have advised that the Department will monitor compliance with the proposed revised particulate matter air quality standards through the publication of an annual report covering a range of ambient air pollutants monitored in Northern Ireland, including PM ₁₀ and PM _{2.5} , adding that this report will highlight details of cases where levels of pollutants have exceeded limit, values, target values and objectives.
3.29	In addition, DAERA have advised that the Air Quality Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 require district councils to periodically review and assess the quality of ambient air within their areas and that the reviews must consider current and future air quality and assess whether air quality objectives are being met or are likely to be achieved within relevant periods.
3.30	DAERA have stated that the Department will ensure that the above-mentioned annual reports will continue to be produced to ensure compliance with the new limits, targets and objectives to inform the public, government, and wider air quality community within Northern Ireland.
3.31	Proposed amendments to annual average particulate matter (PM ₁₀ and PM _{2.5}) standards detailed within The Air Quality Standards Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 and the Air Quality Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 are to be brought about via The Air Quality (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026, to be made later in 2026.
3.32	By of consultation response summary, it is considered that Belfast City Council should support DAERA's ambitions to improve ambient air quality across Northern Ireland through the proposed tightening of the various particulate matter standards. However, whilst the Council recognises the importance of good air quality and the associated benefits to human health, we are strongly of the view that the current legislative framework underpinning the Local Air Quality Management regime within Northern Ireland urgently requires additional amendments and changes, alongside the introduction of a clear and ambitions policy direction from key government Departments, to include DAERA, in order to bring about the necessary positive changes. We would reiterate that particulate matter emissions may be transboundary in source and nature, as highlighted within section 3.22 of this paper.
3.33	We would consequentially advocate that the Northern Ireland Assembly should consider designating a lead government Department, tasked with ensuring delivery of necessary Local Air Quality Management functions across government Departments, as it is considered that government Departments are best placed to effect the various policy changes necessary to reduce particulate matter and other emissions from, for example, road transportation and combustion and heating sources for existing and new commercial and private buildings across Northern Ireland. Moreover, it is our strong view that Northern Ireland ambient air quality legislation requires the introduction of a statutory responsibility upon a lead government Department, such as DAERA, to co-ordinate the development and delivery of air quality action plans, alongside the development and implementation of achievable regional policy plans in order to successfully deliver beneficial changes in ambient air quality at a regional level.
3.34	DAERA have invited consultees to respond to a number of questions as an aspect of the consultation process. Belfast City Council Air Quality Officers have considered these questions and provided suggested responses at Appendix 1 to this report.
3.35	<u>Financial and Resource Implications.</u> There are no immediate financial or resource implications associated with the council's consultation response concerning DAERA's proposal to tighten annual average particulate

	matter (PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5}) limits, targets, and objectives in Northern Ireland. Council officers will, however, continue to submit annual applications to the DAERA Local Air Quality Management grant process to support the council's delivery of its statutory local air quality management functions, including in connection with any necessary addition particulate matter monitoring, which currently attracts 100% grant funding for: temporary monitoring, feasibility studies and equipment, in connection with establishing new sites; new enclosures and ancillary works; and new analyser hardware and associated set-up costs. Council officers will additionally continue to provide phased Updating and Screening Assessment (USA) and / or Progress Reports to DAERA on an annual basis in accordance with the reporting timetable established via LAQM.TG(22). These reports will be developed and submitted to DAERA from within existing air quality staff resources.
3.36	<u>Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment.</u> There are no equality or Good Relations / Rural Needs Assessment implications associated with the council's consultation response concerning DAERA's proposal to tighten annual average particulate matter (PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5}) limits, targets, and objectives in Northern Ireland.
4.0	Appendices
4.1	Appendix 1 – DAERA consultation on the Draft Air Quality (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 to tighten annual average particulate matter (PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5}) limits, targets, and objectives in Northern Ireland.