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Mayor Andy Burnham and Cllr Andrew Western
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Dear Andy and Andrew,

Thank you for your letter of 13 May about next steps on the Greater Manchester local NO₂ plan.

It is positive to hear that work on the review is well underway and we look forward to its conclusions by 1 July. It is important that we get the right measures to improve air quality and recognise we are seeking to address the impacts on public health, whilst being cognisant of the cost of living for individuals and businesses. Central Manchester has the highest rate of hospital admissions for asthma in the UK. That is why you were right to describe the city's air pollution as "a health issue that can't be ignored," to state that "we just can't carry on like this" and to say that action in GM must be "urgent." That is also why this government has driven action to deliver cleaner air for everyone across the country, supported by local authorities who know their areas best.

Your previous approach to the problem was to propose by far the largest charging Clean Air Zone in the country, covering the entire city region of almost 500 square miles, 30 miles across at its widest point and with a population of 2.8 million. You have now gone to the opposite extreme, suggesting the same effects can be achieved without any charging measures at all, anywhere.

As the Prime Minister has made clear, we regard a region-wide charging CAZ, covering many rural and semi-rural areas with very low levels of air pollution, as the wrong answer. But as you said on 2 February this year, there remains a need for a "highly-targeted approach to non-compliant vehicles in areas with continuing air-quality exceedances" which could include "a smaller Category C scheme" (that is, charging non-compliant taxis, buses and goods vehicles, but not cars)¹.

It is for you to prove that any new proposal you make meets this need and your legal obligations, which are: to achieve compliance with NO₂ limits in the shortest possible time, and by 2026 at the latest; and to reduce exposure to NO₂ levels above the legal limit as quickly as possible.

¹ <https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/news/i-am-now-proposing-that-the-sos-issues-a-new-direction/>



In discussions with us, it has been indicated that you have acquired little robust evidence to show that a proposal based purely on exhortation and incentives could in fact meet these obligations in the shortest possible time. Indeed, in your February 2 statement, you explicitly say that a non-charging approach could not achieve compliance sooner than 2027.²

Consistent with what you said in February, a highly-targeted Category C charging scheme, over a small area where NO₂ impacts are most concentrated, in practice Manchester city centre, could represent a path between two extremes, achieving most of the public health benefits of the original scheme while greatly reducing the potential impacts on local businesses. Early thoughts by my department are that you should be challenging yourselves to a reduction of the zone by some 95% or more. Similar or more ambitious schemes have been introduced or are soon to be introduced in several other city centres which suffer less serious air quality problems than Manchester's.

Impacts on business could be further reduced if you were to release more of the substantial funding we have already given you to help those with non-compliant vehicles switch to cleaner ones. As you know, we have provided Greater Manchester with £132m, more than the full amount you asked (£116m). However, most of this funding is still unspent, since you have indefinitely paused your scheme to help van, coach and taxi owners change their vehicles, which was due to begin in January. Transparency for the people of Manchester so we can help deliver this spending is something I am very keen to see. As stated on numerous occasions, we stand ready to work with you to deliver benefits for the population of Greater Manchester, to bring both health and economic improvements. We look forward to proposals for early release of this funding within your review.

Greater Manchester has long had a deserved reputation as a peer group leader in transport and I know you will want to maintain this. I want to continue to work with you to deliver cleaner air for the city region, and I agree it would be useful to meet to discuss next steps. I will ask my office to liaise with yours.



RT HON GEORGE EUSTICE MP

² Ibid