

KEY POLICY CHANGE SURROUNDED IN CONFUSION & MYSTERY

- Until December 2010 the Council were routinely revealing what are called 'raw' or 'unvalidated' figures for air quality levels, in terms of one 'marker' pollutant NO₂-Nitrogen Dioxide..
- That month, when DEFRA changed their guidelines on measuring air pollution to clarify an issue residents had identified was *inevitably* leading to under estimating of the pollutant by the Council, the release of the raw figures stopped.
- Once the change in policy became evident, by February 2011. when the non release was confirmed, the residents immediately began asking on what basis this change had occurred but were given no answer---until a few days ago.
- The answer as to how and why this decision was taken raises more questions than it answers although it shines a light on the lamentable state of public governance in the city.

There are clear internationally accepted guidelines on the need for public authorities, whether Governments, Local authorities or Councils, across the free world to treat the data they collect on behalf of the public as a public right—after all these organisations, far more than Global corporations, Banks or Big Business are meant to be paid for by the people and accountable to the people.

Levels of pollution occurring in the air where people live, and any rises liable to occur, are the exactly the sort of figures that are routinely released. This is both expected, often protected by legal safeguards and simply regarded in most authorities as customary practice

This was the case in Edinburgh until December 2010, but bthat changed early in 2011..

Faced with the sudden ending of the release of figures in 2011 residents immediately requested information on the meeting at which this policy change had been decided with a view to being able to understand the reasons for the change.

Before last week the only reason residents had ever been given for the change in policy and the sudden suppression of these figures had come in an informal meeting when a Council Officer told a residents group that 'You would only misuse them.'

Following information last week from a number of senior officers of the council it is clear to residents that this conclusion was arrived at in a series of discussions, none of them formal and none of them minuted.

These informal discussions, and email exchanges, involved a host of senior figures across the CEC administration including Sue Bruce the Chief Executive, Mark Turley Director of Services for Communities, Dr Andrew Mackie, Head of the Scientific Services Department responsible for environmental monitoring, Alan Bowen, Andy Conway and others.

The only evidence of 'misuse', of what are after all simple figures, that has been given are just two newspaper articles; the responsibility for which does not rest with the residents of course, but the journalists and editors of those papers, who gave the City of Edinburgh ample chance to comment and put their own rebuttal arguments to the points raised.

The fact is that this idea that any ordinary citizens cannot be trusted with data is a bizarre idea in the 21st Century and in reality simply a fig leaf to try and stifle meaningful engagement and debate by preventing the oxygen of facts.

Indeed in 2010, when the release of figures was discontinued, the residents had pointed out a simple error, arising from an unthinking application of a mathematical formula that didn't account for a real world fact---the presence of on street parking in Edinburgh --- that led to a change in the guidelines published on the web by DEFRA, the UK Government department responsible for air quality monitoring and its accuracy.

This discovery of the error would not have been possible had the figures been suppressed at that time.

Even more seriously, for the period that the data figures were not released, the figures were not only held back from the residents but also from the *councillors* themselves. During a vital

period when councillors were attempting to carry out their duties as elected representatives in overseeing the management of the project ;by the same people who were preventing these figures from being released to them.

The image of a series of disconnected emails or phone calls, and 'coffee machine' meetings in corridors, all without minutes or public accessibility, nevertheless leading to the decision to cut off the flow of raw data, on the risible basis that residents were spreading alarm across the City, is at odds with the avalanche of assertions by Edinburgh Council testifying to their commitment to open government, consultation and public participation.

This rhetoric of openness, especially but not only, in connection with the Edinburgh Tram Project is belied by this reality.

These figures, suppressed for over a year during which vital decisions on the future of the Tram project, including those concerning traffic displacement, were made, are vital in illustrating the trend of figures that are amongst the most graphic illustrations of the threats and concerns of residents.

In the absence of formal environmental health impact studies, or noise studies, they are almost the only hard data by which the claims for the project can be measured against the emerging reality.

With the governance of the city under scrutiny by the prestigious United Nations Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee in Geneva, it may be that this process has prompted a u-turn on the suppression of this data and it's sudden resumption of release. But this is impossible to say especially as the basis of the *original* decision to suppress the data early last year remains so shrouded in mystery due to the lack of any clear record, or minutes, to show responsibility and reasons.

FOR MORE information on the issues above - Alistair Laing on [0131 225 3624](tel:01312253624), or Allan

Alstead on [07787 151 003](tel:07787151003) – Dr Ashley Lloyd, the Chairman of the Process, is out of the country on business and unfortunately cannot be contacted for this reason, however both Allan Alstead and Alistair Laing participated in the workshops and will be able to comment on the issues.

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