

# Local Air Quality Management vs Localism - Assessing the potential for local action to achieve EU limit values

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## 1. Introduction

The UK Government has failed to meet EU air quality limit values for ambient concentrations of particulate matter (PM<sub>10</sub>) (European Commission 2011) and nitrogen dioxide (Defra 2009) under the Council Directive on Ambient Air Quality and Cleaner Air for Europe (2008/50/EC). Failure to comply with the EU limit values may incur penalties of ~£300 million (ENDS 2009). The number of local authorities (60%) having declared Air Quality Management Areas (AQMA), primarily for traffic-related pollutants (NO<sub>2</sub> and PM<sub>10</sub>), has grown steadily since 2001 (Figure 1), and despite the production of local Air Quality Action Plans (AQAPs) there have been no traffic-related AQMA revocations solely on the basis of their implementation. The Government's localism agenda threatens to reduce the top-down governance of LAQM whilst also introducing the potential for EU fines to be passed to local authorities where limit values are exceeded. At the same time, the UK Government has outlined changes that will put more emphasis on the development of local measures to achieve EU limit values.

## 3. Where next for Local Air Quality Management?

There has been a move to reduce the bureaucratic burden on local authorities under the Government's „Freedoms and Flexibilities“ agenda since the publication of the Local Government Act 2000 (section 6) (HM Government 2010). However, the current UK Government is making this a political imperative through the „localism“ agenda.

LAQM has been undertaken by local authorities in England, under guidance from Defra, since the process commenced in 1997. The localism agenda threatens to reduce the reporting regime that has kept LAQM on the local agenda and could also allow EU fines to be devolved to local authorities. At the same time, Defra has outlined changes that would more closely align local AQAPs with the national objective to meet the EU limit values.

The decentralisation of power and devolution to local authorities could be seen as potentially damaging for the future of LAQM as there is a risk that if the statutory responsibility is removed, and local authorities are left to devise their own priorities, then air quality will come second to other more tangible or visible local needs. The £6.5bn public funding cut that local authorities will face over the next two years will also serve to undermine the relative importance of air quality. Although the potential financial liability of failing to meet EU limit values may help to raise the local priority for air quality, this clause has been described as „unfair“ by local authorities whose legal remit was to develop AQAPs „in pursuit“ of achieving the national air quality objectives and with no direct responsibility to the EU (Local Government Association 2011).

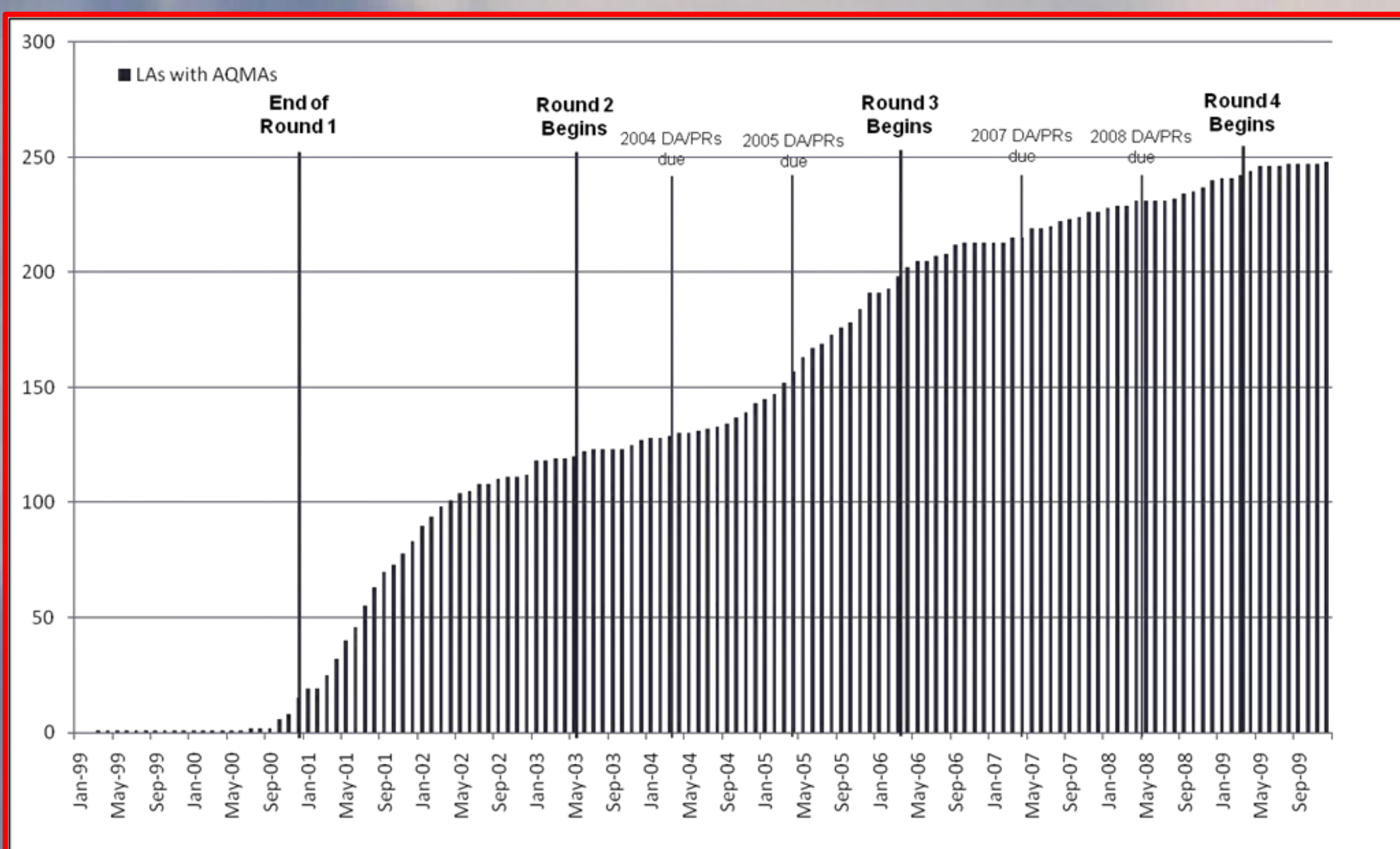


Figure 1: Number of local authorities in the UK with one or more AQMAs (September 2009)

## 2. Why are limit values being breached?

The national strategy to reduce NO<sub>2</sub> has focused predominantly on emission reduction strategies, primarily relying on the integration of Euro standard vehicles into the national fleet. Partly on the basis of the predicted reductions in emissions, traffic levels were allowed to continue to grow. Recent work has shown these vehicles to be underperforming compared to expected emissions factors (Carslaw 2011).

There is a recognised lack of interdepartmental communication at a national and local level stemming from a lack of political prioritisation for air quality, especially when compared to drivers for economic development (Carmichael 2011).

The relative lack of importance attributed to air quality issues means that measures to reduce human exposure to pollutant concentrations >national air quality objectives (or EU limit values) are underfunded and AQAPs are ineffectual.

There are difficulties in communicating the importance of air quality issues due to the inherent scientific uncertainty in assessment and health impacts (Figure 2).



## 4. Conclusions

The need for LAQM to be able to bring about widespread and significant reductions in air quality was initially underestimated. Over the following 14 years however, local authorities have risen to the challenge of LAQM and have excelled at diagnosing air quality problems. Their ability to successfully devise and implement AQAPs subsequently, however, has been constrained by other political priorities and a seeming lack of appreciation of the significance of air quality issues by departments outside of environmental protection, both at a local and a national level.

In addition to identifying the difficulties that UK local authorities have faced to date in managing local air quality, this paper has indicated that the forthcoming localism agenda is unlikely to improve this situation and may have the potential to reduce local authorities' ability to meet national air quality objectives and, therefore, EU limit values.

At the same time, the failure of the UK Government to achieve EU limit values has finally brought to Defra's attention the value of local AQAPs. What remains to be seen is how the government propose to ensure that they can rely on effective local action in the event of devolved power and, moreover, how they can best assist and support local authorities to bring these plans to fruition.

## 5. References

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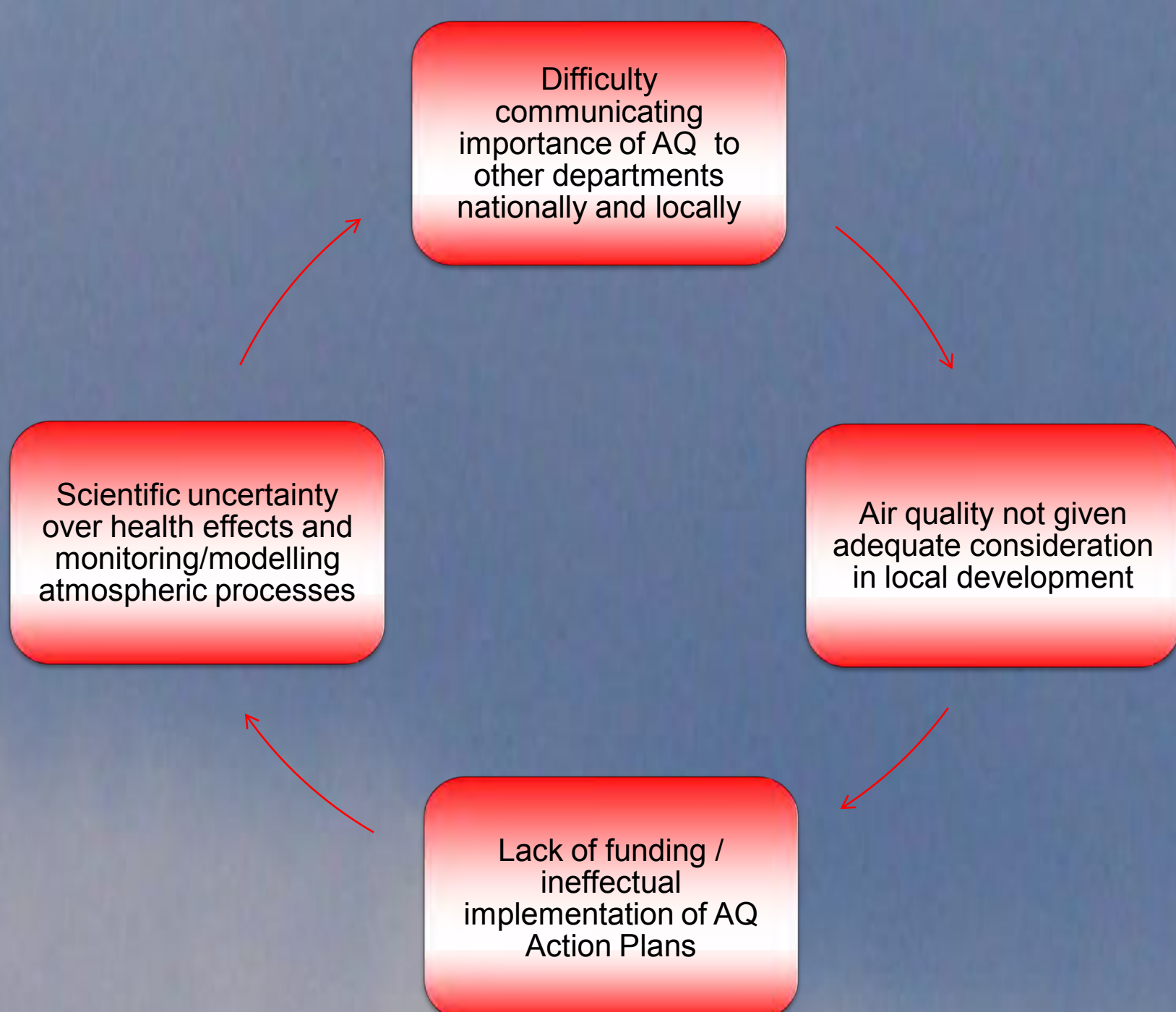


Figure 2: Cycle of the failure of UK air quality management