Sustaining long-term policy progress towards cleaner air

Policy Brief







Breathe Cities

An initiative delivered by Bloomberg Philanthropies, Clean Air Fund and C40 Cities.

Foreword

Across the globe, cities are setting bold, ambitious targets to tackle air pollution, mitigate climate change, and protect the health of all residents. Yet, the path to cleaner air is rarely predictable. Priorities change, economic conditions shift, and new challenges emerge. Achieving lasting progress requires more than effective policies; it requires the resilience and capacity to keep moving forward in a changing environment.

At Breathe Cities — a global initiative, delivered by Bloomberg Philanthropies, Clean Air Fund, and C40 Cities — we recognise that improving the air we breathe and protecting the health of residents is a complex challenge that no municipality can solve in isolation. From expanding access to data to building an ecosystem of air quality partners and champions, the initiative is supporting cities to build and use the tools, collaborations and interventions needed to drive sustained, long-term policy change.

A core pillar of our work is knowledge sharing — communicating evidence of what works across and between cities, to inspire and support even more cities to act. This policy brief draws on insights shared by cities during two Breathe Cities global workshops in 2025, which together convened 20 cities, in Johannesburg (May 2025) and Bangkok (September 2025), to explore the types of activities city teams need to undertake to sustain long-term progress towards air quality policy goals. These insights are complemented with wider examples from leading cities in C40's Clean Air Network.

We hope this brief serves as a practical, inspiring guide for air quality professionals everywhere. By establishing strong foundations for clean air action, we can turn ambitious air quality goals into lasting change, ensuring our cities become healthier, cleaner places for everyone.

- Cecilia Vaca Jones, Executive Director, Breathe Cities



Introduction

The path toward cleaner air is not always easy. City leaders are often tested by political, economic, social, and technical hurdles. However, by anchoring action in strong foundations and long-term planning, cities can build the resilience needed to overcome these inevitable challenges and drive lasting change.

This policy brief draws upon the experiences of leading cities participating in Breathe Cities and the C40 Clean Air Network to illustrate six essential building blocks for sustaining long-term policy progress on air quality. It is designed as a practical guide for air quality professionals in municipalities of any size, and covers the why and how for each building block, alongside questions for reflection, real city examples, and links to further resources.

Six essential building blocks for long-term progress:

1. **Clear long-term vision and political commitment**
2. **Strong cross-government collaboration frameworks and governance**
3. **Robust data and evidence**
4. **Ecosystem of empowered communities, allies and advocates**
5. **Strategy for finance mobilisation**
6. **Plan to showcase the benefits of action**

These building blocks should not be viewed as sequential steps, but as interconnected elements that each support sustained action across the entire policy process. While this brief examines city action on each of these elements in turn, it is the sum of the action across different building blocks that truly helps to strengthen the foundations for long-term progress. This is illustrated in the final two case studies from London and Mexico City, which reinforce how building city capabilities in one area helps catalyse and drive progress in others.

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1 Clear long-term vision and political commitment

WHY?

Sustaining progress towards cleaner air begins with a long-term goal on air quality and a clear understanding of how this will support the city's wider vision for the future. Understanding the priority areas and levers for action to improve air quality and the opportunities to align these with city-wide plans and priorities can help establish long-term political commitment and buy-in from different agencies and departments. This buy-in is essential for securing the resource and support needed to sustain air quality action, despite competing pressures.

HOW?



Assess the problem and powers

Build a picture of the key sources and sectors that contribute to air pollution and how it is impacting residents in different neighbourhoods [see Building Block 3]. **Identify which departments or levels of government (local, regional, or national) have jurisdiction over these sources and sectors.** If this exercise has been carried out in the past, consider reviewing and updating it as both the sources themselves and the relevant jurisdictions can change over time. **Use this information to identify priority areas for action,** including opportunities to integrate action into wider city urban development and climate plans. **Set out a long-term goal and strategy for city air quality action;** this is often captured in documents such as Air Quality Management Plans.



Secure and signal political commitment

Mayoral commitment can be a powerful signal and catalyst for action. **Engage leadership early to secure buy-in for the vision,** communicating how air quality action will help to achieve wider mayoral priorities and the overall vision for the city. To support long-term accountability, **consider making these commitments public** through published plans, statements, and/or signing up to established global frameworks and platforms.

KEY QUESTIONS FOR CITIES TO CONSIDER

- What will the city look like in 5, 10, and 20 years' time under the current policy trajectory? Will we be able to achieve WHO air quality targets or is further action needed?
- What are the top three pollution sources that we need to tackle? Are there sources of information to verify this?
- For pollution sources outside the air quality department's direct control, who does have formal control, and what soft powers could we use to advocate for collaboration and action?
- How does our goal contribute to other city-wide priorities and agendas?
- Do we have the mayor's support to defend this policy if it is challenged? What evidence do we need to empower the mayor to defend the policy?

EXAMPLES


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SPOTLIGHT ON BOGOTA

Securing long-term political leadership

Over many years, the city of Bogotá has recognised the importance of political leadership to drive ambitious air quality improvements across the city. Successive political leaders in Bogotá have prioritised air quality action, each recognising that these actions can play an important role in delivering wider mayoral priorities, from transforming public spaces to promoting social equity. In 2020, Bogotá affirmed its commitment to improving air quality at a global level by signing up to the C40 Clean Air Accelerator[1]. In 2021, the city launched its air quality plan, Plan Aire, which established an emissions reduction target of 17% for PM_{10} and 22% for $PM_{2.5}$ by 2030[2]. This long-term commitment over multiple political cycles has enabled the city to make significant transformations. Bogotá is now home to the longest cycle path network in Latin America, new cable car lines, and one of the world's largest electric bus fleets. The city's dedication was recognised in 2025, when it was awarded an Earth Shot Prize under the category "clean our air".[3]


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SPOTLIGHT ON NEW YORK CITY

Overcoming limitations in city powers

New York City recognised that air pollution from freight vehicles was a growing problem in the city. However, federal law prevents US cities from enacting certain local restrictions, including European-style low emission zones.[4] NYC decided to tackle the problem in a different way: by regulating large warehouse facilities that attract these mobile sources of pollution (predominantly trucks).[5] In 2024, the Mayoral Administration and City Council committed to advance an "indirect source rule" for warehouses, incentivising them to take up zero-emission technologies and other mitigation strategies.[6] This creative approach to tackling air pollution illustrates how cities can target mobile sources by imposing requirements on the stationary infrastructure that they use.[7]

Practical Resources

- Guidance for developing an Emissions Inventory & Source Attribution Study
- Powering Inclusive Climate Action in Cities – analysis highlighting how cities are using both formal and soft powers to drive action
- Integrated Air Quality and Climate Management Plan (AQCMP) Template

2 Strong cross-government collaboration frameworks and governance

WHY?

Taking a cross-government approach to air quality action can help to sustain progress by integrating valuable data, expertise, and financial resources to implement and make the case for climate, health, and air quality action. This involves aligning and coordinating action across different levels of government – local, regional, and national (often referred to as "vertical integration") – as well as across different parts of the municipality ("horizontal integration"). The cross-sectoral nature of air quality makes both types of integration essential to securing long-term action. Progress that benefits all residents depends on collaborative action across sectors, from transport to welfare, housing to health. Long-term success often requires municipalities to address emissions sources that are beyond the city's direct control, such as transboundary pollution, or from sectors that are regulated at a different level of government. Leading cities are showing that even when they don't have the legal authority to mandate change, they can use their soft powers to convene partners, build coalitions, and demonstrate political leadership to bring others along with them.

The opportunities to align air quality with wider city benefits are explored in more detail in a dedicated Breathe Cities report: Clean Air, Healthy & Thriving Communities: Opportunities for City Leadership.

HOW?

Identify opportunities for cross-government alignment and collaboration

Based on your understanding of city powers and alignment between air quality and the wider city vision [see Building Block 1], **map agencies and/or departments across city, regional, and national levels that could support with potential policy levers** targeting priority sources/sectors. Just like at the mayoral level, taking the time to understand these stakeholders' priorities and how they align with air quality objectives is key to securing support that is sustainable throughout, and despite, administrative and leadership changes.

Formalise processes and governance

Buffer against siloed working practices by establishing formal structures and processes for collaboration and decision-making, such as working groups, taskforces, and boards/committees, documented via clear terms of references.

KEY QUESTIONS FOR CITIES TO CONSIDER

- → How do the policy actions we've identified help colleagues in transport, health, welfare, and finance (for example) meet their specific objectives? Do we have a robust estimate of the potential co-benefits to make the case for cross-departmental collaboration?
- → Do we have formal mechanisms in place for cross-departmental collaboration and/or the sharing of information and resources across relevant departments?
- → If the current administration changes, are these structures, processes and relationships established enough to survive the transition?

EXAMPLES



SPOTLIGHT ON QUEZON CITY

Building cross-government collaboration

Despite strong ambition to improve air quality, Quezon City did not have the established mechanisms needed to work across the city and turn these goals into action. In recent years, however, Quezon City has approved its first Air Quality Management Plan (AQMP) – a comprehensive strategy to improve air quality through cross-sectoral measures – and established an Air Quality Technical Working Group to monitor and operationalise the plan. An executive order of the Office of the Mayor sets out membership of the working group (including representatives from the departments of transport, city planning, sanitation, and youth development), and mandates all member departments to provide the data, expertise, and resources necessary to meet the group's objectives. This approach signalled high-level political buy-in for a collective and coordinated approach, and established a practical mechanism through which the city could successfully implement its AQMP.

The city is also part of the Metro Manila Airshed Governing Board (established under the Philippine Clean Air Act), and coordinates with neighbouring municipalities through the Metro Manila Council – both of which provide platforms to address transboundary pollution. Together, these structures give Quezon City a layered governance model, connecting cross-departmental delivery inside city hall with the multi-jurisdiction coordination needed to tackle air pollution.

Practical Resources

- Clean Air, Healthy & Thriving Communities: Opportunities for City Leadership – report setting out how air quality goals can contribute to other city-wide priorities and agendas
- Clean Air, Healthy Planet: A Framework for Integrating Air Quality Management and Climate Action Planning – guidance supporting cities to enhance the climate action process to include air pollution-related health benefits





3 Robust data and evidence

WHY?

By investing in the city's capacity to measure, analyse, and communicate air quality data, cities can build a clear picture of pollution and how residents are impacted by it; target, shape, and evaluate clean air policies; engage and empower local communities; and build the necessary support for long-term policy impact. While air quality data provides a strong foundation, combining this information with additional datasets (for example, health, demographic, social, and spatial data) can help target policy resources to where they can have the greatest impact. This in turn provides further evidence of the value of action, helping cities to build and maintain support over time.

The opportunities to use data to drive air quality action are explored in more depth in a dedicated Breathe Cities report, Strength in Numbers: How Cities Are Innovating through Data to Unlock Ambitious Clean Air Action.

HOW?

Build internal infrastructure and capacity

Invest in air quality monitoring infrastructure to build a detailed air quality picture, using reference monitors and leveraging new technologies (such as low-cost sensors) to pinpoint local emissions hotspots and sources. **Build in processes and resources to maintain infrastructure, and staff capacity** to measure and analyse data regularly and consistently throughout the policy lifecycle. Staff should also **establish data-sharing processes and relationships with other departments to combine air quality data with other datasets (e.g., health, socioeconomic, demographic)** to generate meaningful, actionable, and more targeted information.

Seek out external expertise

Partner with local academic institutions, community groups, and subject matter experts – for example through independent expert panels or participatory community monitoring initiatives – to bridge immediate data gaps, enhance technical capacity, and bolster the credibility of city initiatives. **Draw on expertise and datasets from beyond city borders,** tapping into regional and national agencies, international organisations like the World Health Organization and OpenAQ, and global peer networks to align local efforts with international best practices.

KEY QUESTIONS FOR CITIES TO CONSIDER

- → Do we have access to the air quality data (air pollutant emissions inventory; source apportionment study; representative monitoring network, including low-cost sensors) we need to support evidence-based policy making?
- → Are there established partnerships (internal and external) that could enhance the city's data capacity?
- → Do we have designated staff responsible for coordinating the generation and use of data for our air quality work?
- → Do we have established processes to collect and integrate other data types (e.g., social, demographic, economic, health outcomes)?

EXAMPLES


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SPOTLIGHT ON ACCRA

Developing low-cost sensor networks

Accra, like most cities, did not have the resources to establish and operate a wide network of reference-grade monitors. To address this, the city leveraged partnerships and new low cost sensor technologies to enhance its ability to monitor air pollution. In collaboration with Breathe Cities, Accra deployed a network of 60 low-cost sensors that provide neighbourhood-level insights into pollution patterns, complementing three new reference monitors deployed by the city[8]. This network is paired with an open-access website that displays station locations and real-time air quality index values. It also shows interactive visualisations such as monthly $PM_{2.5}$ trends and a daily average calendar with intuitive colour gradients, making it easier for residents to recognise patterns and identify higher-risk days. The city's network has been further enhanced through partnerships with local universities, international academic institutions, and non-profit organisations, which have conducted short-term measurement campaigns across the city, producing complementary datasets and helping to fill spatial and temporal gaps in the official network. This evidence base directly benefits policy design, allowing the city to evaluate where interventions may be most impactful and to track trends that would not be captured by reference-grade monitoring stations alone.


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SPOTLIGHT ON BANGKOK

Investing in data infrastructure

The city of Bangkok has invested in its underlying data capabilities over many years, building a data infrastructure that provides a granular picture of air quality across neighbourhoods and supports evidence-based decision-making. Over recent decades, the city's air quality monitoring network has expanded to more than 70 reference monitoring stations managed by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration[9] complemented by additional stations owned by the national government.[10] Alongside these, 1,069 low-cost sensors have been deployed by partners from the academic and private sectors, providing detailed air quality data in locations not covered by reference stations, such as schools. The city integrates air quality data with other information and is currently developing a database and dashboard that will combine air quality and public health data to help guide city decision-making. These underlying data capabilities are helping to establish an evidence base for the implementation of low-emission zones and the development of a district-level Air Quality Action Plan, as well as providing a basis for communication to the public via air quality apps and school flags.

Practical Resources

- Strength in Numbers: How Cities Are Innovating through Data to Unlock Ambitious Clean Air Action – case studies, resources and a city toolkit designed for air quality officials to assess current data capabilities and identity priority actions
- Sensing Change – report providing more examples and case studies about how cities are utilising and deploying low-cost sensor networks
- EPA: Air Sensor Toolbox – resources from the US Environmental Protection Agency, covering the latest science on the performance, operation, and use of air sensor monitoring systems

4 Ecosystem of empowered communities, allies and advocates

WHY?

Building a diverse ecosystem of allies and partners beyond city government can help secure a policy's success and longevity, by ensuring there is widespread acceptance and sustained demand for ambitious, inclusive clean air action. Leading cities are showing that engaging affected communities throughout the entire decision-making process helps shape policies and programmes that respond to people's needs, provides communities with data and information so they can make informed choices; builds trust and buy-in; and empowers residents as clean air champions. Transparent information and active engagement also support community groups and civil society organisations to advocate for continued investment in air quality action, celebrate bold city initiatives, and maintain the pressure for greater ambition.

This topic is explored in more depth in a dedicated Breathe Cities report, Local Voices, Cleaner Air: How Cities Can Harness the Power of Communities to Drive Ambitious Clean Air Action, which is designed to support cities to implement meaningful community engagement to drive more effective air quality action.

HOW?

Engage communities in decision-making

Develop a plan for how and when to engage all residents in decision-making processes, prioritising those disproportionately affected by air pollution and climate. Consider the following phases: i) identify who to engage based on who is affected, who has relevant lived experience, and who can help make clean air action work in practice; ii) determine the right engagement approach or approaches for each group – from sharing information to co-shaping solutions to enabling community-led change; iii) identify the resources, relationships, mechanisms, and processes needed to put this engagement into practice.

Identify and empower champions and advocates

Start by mapping various organisations (e.g., community groups, civil society, academics, industry representatives) with interests in the policy or sector in question and develop a plan for how and when to engage these actors in the decision-making process. Think about which actors could be "champions" for a particular policy, and consider the most appropriate mechanisms and channels for communication and collaboration. These could be informal or formal, and will depend on a particular city's unique context and history.

Make data open, engaging, and accessible

Support residents, community groups and civil society organisations to access and interpret local air quality data. Offer tools like open data platforms, and develop community-led monitoring initiatives that involve residents as active partners in measuring local air quality.

KEY QUESTIONS FOR CITIES TO CONSIDER

- → Have we mapped out all relevant stakeholders (e.g., organisations, affected communities) for the planned policy?
- → Does our policy development process include active consultation and engagement of the local community? Are we asking for feedback after a decision is made, or are we creating a genuine opportunity to inform policy design and implementation?
- → Do we have formal or informal partnerships with non-government stakeholders to support this policy?
- → Which organisations or actors could help champion this particular policy?
- → Have we set up a governance mechanism for this broad coalition to inform our work on an ongoing basis?

EXAMPLES



SPOTLIGHT ON SOFIA

Building health champions

The city of Sofia identified that there was limited public awareness on the health impacts of air pollution, and that addressing this gap was important in building support for its air quality work. The city leveraged trusted messengers (medical professionals) via Air4Health, a network of health experts across Bulgaria, to spread awareness of the dangers of air pollution. This included organised webinars, public events, and advocacy campaigns. Air4Health also presented recommendations during a parliamentary roundtable and follow-up meetings with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Environment, creating further support for clean air action beyond residents and city policymakers. It also conducted a couple of training sessions on the health aspects of air pollution both for municipality experts and for journalists from the main media outlets.



SPOTLIGHT ON JAKARTA

Engaging communities in decision-making

The city of Jakarta recognised that community engagement would be crucial to design and implement a low emission zone (KRE) that supported and was supported by local communities. The city worked with local partner Empatika to conduct a series of participatory focus group sessions with vulnerable communities, including street vendors, health workers, and women's groups. The participants walked through the potential KRE location, observing the readiness of inclusive infrastructure and how different groups interact with the surroundings. Special attention was given to how vulnerable groups – including women with children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities – navigate and participate in public spaces. This engagement highlighted some important insights for the city to take into account when developing its KRE. Learnings included the need to provide accessible options for transition to low-emission transport and the importance of active involvement of local leaders to communicate and mediate between authorities and residents.

Practical Resources

- *Local Voices, Cleaner Air: How Cities Can Harness the Power of Communities to Drive Ambitious Clean Air Action* – practical guidance and case studies for cities on embedding meaningful engagement into air quality policy processes
- Inclusive Community Engagement Playbook – comprehensive resource supporting cities to deliver inclusive engagement, including a section on identifying and prioritising key stakeholders (Section 3)

5 Strategy for finance mobilisation

WHY?

While a policy serves to capture a city's vision or intent, a finance plan is the practical means to enact it. Since municipal budgets are often limited, cities typically cannot rely solely on existing internal resources to implement sustained air quality actions. Leading cities are showing how innovative finance strategies can ensure project bankability, sustainability beyond initial construction, and compliance with accounting frameworks and (fiscal) integrity by protecting against cross-subsidisation for other policy initiatives. To support this, there are several steps air quality officials can take to ensure their finance departments can develop bankable projects.

HOW?

Conduct a lifecycle cost analysis of the project

Conduct a lifecycle cost analysis for the project that accounts for both initial capital (CAPEX) and long-term maintenance (OPEX), and work with finance departments to provide any technical data required to lower uncertainty and risk.

Assess local borrowing capacity

Assess local borrowing capacity and any requirements under the relevant national regulatory framework, which sets out how local authorities can manage, generate, and invest financial resources. This assessment will help identify the most appropriate financing options.

Establish diversified and appropriate mechanisms for financing and funding

- **Identify funding available from municipal sources,** including opportunities to leverage cross-departmental synergies to secure and pool resources and national or regional grants.
- **Scope appropriate financing mechanisms** (e.g., loans, bonds) and map institutions for project development (such as project preparation facilities) and project financing (such as multilateral development banks and national development banks) according to the project stage.
- **Estimate revenues linked to the air quality action (e.g., user charges and fees) and other available municipal revenue streams (e.g., taxes, fines).** Assess their potential to repay any debt/financing needs and to cover either operational or maintenance costs under a reinvestment plan.

KEY QUESTIONS FOR CITIES TO CONSIDER

- → Have we identified the total lifecycle cost and potential revenue streams of the proposed action?
- → What funding is likely to be available to us from municipal sources, including by leveraging cross-departmental synergies?
- → Have we identified potential external sources of financing and funding?
- → Have we clearly documented our approach to finance mobilisation?

EXAMPLES


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SPOTLIGHT ON GUADALAJARA

Identifying financing routes

The city of Guadalajara needed to explore financing options for the implementation of its clean air zone (Zona AIRE). Complex governance between the municipality, metropolitan area, state, and international partners made it even more important for the city to identify realistic opportunities to structure bankable projects and secure financing. The city worked with a consultant and C40 to estimate the initial investment required for different elements of their clean air zone in the short-, medium-, and long-term. They looked for institutions that could provide technical assistance and financing at different phases of development, from concept to finance mobilisation, ultimately identifying the City Climate Gap Fund and two national development banks (Banobras and NAFIN) as potential sources of support. This process highlighted the importance of collaboration with other municipalities when mobilising financing, as the city plans to submit a joint loan application with other municipalities from the state of Jalisco. Identifying these investment and collaborative opportunities has given the city a clear picture of the financing options open to them and a defined path ahead for the implementation of the clean air zone.

Practical Resources

- Urban Climate Finance Guidance: Mobilising Resources for Clean Air Zones (CAZ) – comprehensive guidance including examples and case studies of how cities are financing clean air zones


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6 Plan to showcase the benefits of action

WHY?

Assessing and communicating the early impacts of air quality action is essential – not only for evaluating and fine tuning a policy or programme, but also for demonstrating "proof of concept". Measuring impacts that resonate with people's lives, such as how the policy is improving health or public transport access, can help to build public support and momentum for future action. Complementing these short-term evaluations with longer-term impact studies is important for building the political capital needed to sustain public and legislative support for years, such as by building a city's profile as a regional and global leader, inspiring other cities to take action.

HOW?

Make a plan to measure the impact from the start

Integrate a monitoring and evaluation framework into your plans before implementation begins. Define success for your immediate outputs, short-term outcomes, and long-term impacts – and measurable indicators for all of these. Consider assessing holistic impacts such as job creation, traffic reduction, and public health gains, as well as pinpointing who (which communities or sectors of society) the actions benefit. Pay attention to which indicators could help provide early evidence of impact, and develop a plan (processes, roles, resources) to establish a comprehensive baseline so you can monitor and communicate progress from Day 1.

Continue to evaluate and communicate impacts over time

Allocate sustained resources and collaborate with academic partners [see Building Block 3] to **track and communicate longer-term outcomes and impacts in the months and years following implementation** of the policy or programme. Longer-term impacts such as changes in life expectancy, longer-term health outcomes, and economic savings can be powerful tools for sustaining public and political support and securing lasting cultural and behavioural shifts. Acknowledge in your communications that some impacts take time to evaluate, and establish a predictable, transparent reporting cadence to share these evolving findings with the public.

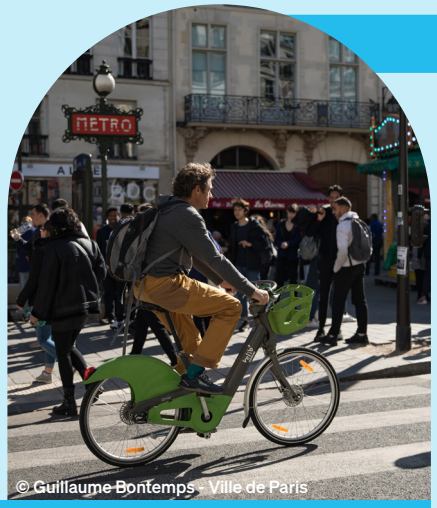
Communicate with a human-centred approach

Use data and evidence to **communicate the impact of the policy in a more memorable, personal and persuasive way,** by highlighting the lived experience of a particular protagonist and how a policy directly removed barriers or improved their daily life. Consider working with local communications experts to tailor the message.

KEY QUESTIONS FOR CITIES TO CONSIDER

- → Does my team have trusted relationships with local community leaders and partners who can tell the stories and share their lived experiences from the ground about the impact of my policy?
- → Do we have a robust plan in place to monitor and evaluate the impacts of the action over time? Does this plan include assessment of holistic benefits (e.g., health, economic, equity) that people can actually feel?
- → Do we have a strategic communications plan to transform the evidence of these impacts into people-centred stories that resonate with diverse audiences? Are formal collaborations in place with communications colleagues or external organisations to execute the communications plan?
- → Could I explain the success of this policy in a 30-second "elevator pitch" that focuses on people rather than pollutant concentrations?

EXAMPLES



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SPOTLIGHT ON PARIS

Showcasing policy impact

Paris introduced "school streets" in 2019, motivated by evidence linking air pollution exposure to adverse health impacts in children, especially in early childhood. The initiative, which restricts vehicle access outside schools during key hours to reduce pollution, noise, and safety risks, has expanded steadily to around 300 designated school streets as of 2025[11]. Unlike temporary street closures used elsewhere in Europe, many of Paris's school streets have been permanently pedestrianised, with greening measures helping create cooler, safer, and more inviting spaces for children and the rest of the community. To make the case for continuation and expansion of this initiative, the city plans to assess conditions before and after pedestrianisation, including reductions in NO_2 concentrations near the schools, and improvements in noise and heat exposure. By framing school streets not only as a traffic intervention but as a response to documented air pollution, noise, and heat risks, Paris has aligned the initiative with wider city objectives, including public health protection and neighbourhood liveability, and made visible improvements in children's everyday environments.


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SPOTLIGHT ON VOICES OF BREATHE CITIES

Making clean air a personal ambition

Across the Breathe Cities initiative, cities are implementing ambitious policies that are not just improving air quality but are transforming cities into healthier, more comfortable places for residents to live, work, and play. To the residents who are driving action as clean air advocates, directly improving health and quality of life for themselves and their loved ones, air quality is a personal issue. With support from the Breathe Cities initiative, several cities are now sharing these personal, first-hand air-quality narratives, including a new video series that features local residents in London, Accra, Mexico City, Sofia, Rio de Janeiro, Bangkok, and Jakarta. By placing residents at the heart of these narratives, the videos help build empathy with local viewers, instil wider understanding of the impacts of air pollution, and inspire community support.

Practical Resources

- The Air Quality Management Exchange Platform (AQMx) – curated guidance for air quality managers across eight areas, including health impact assessment
- If Cities Want Public Support for Clean Air, They Need to Change How They Talk About It – blog post on communicating about air quality, including how to move from technical language to messages that resonate with people
- C40 Air Quality Communications Toolkit – step by step guidance on developing an air quality communications strategy



Taken together, these building blocks provide a solid foundation for ambitious and enduring air quality action in cities. The following pages showcase how London and Mexico City have brought these different building blocks together to drive long-term progress.



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MEXICO CITY

Since the late 1980s, Mexico City has made remarkable progress in improving its air quality. The implementation, over several decades, of a comprehensive, environmental strategy, supported by robust evidence and frameworks for collaboration, has led to significant reductions in various air pollutants. By meaningfully improving the health and overall life expectancy of its residents, the city is now regarded as a global reference point for sustained improvements in air quality.

1. Clear long-term vision and political commitment

In 1990, an assessment and review was carried out of emission sources across the Mexico City Metropolitan Area (ZMVM) . This evidence base led to the establishment of the city's first coordinated instrument between government departments and agencies, known as the Comprehensive Programme Against Air Pollution – a multi-sectoral instrument setting out objectives and targets for the reduction of pollutant emissions. In 1992, efforts began to secure the support and commitment of agencies with jurisdiction across the metropolitan area to design and implement emission control and reduction programmes, leading to the creation of the Commission for the Prevention and Control of Environmental Pollution in the Mexico City Metropolitan Area.

ProAire, the Air Quality Management Plan for the city and its metropolitan area, was first introduced in 1995 and was typically designed to span 10 years, with updates through successive phases. By 1996, the Metropolitan Environmental Commission (CAM) had been established, and included actions and strategies across the 16 boroughs of Mexico City (then the Federal District) and 18 municipalities in the State of Mexico, with the participation of what was then the Federal Ministry of the Environment, Natural Resources and Fisheries among other state ministries.

2. Strong cross-government collaboration frameworks and governance

Translating the city's long-term vision into coordinated regional action, the CAM was responsible for coordinating measures to reduce air pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and health risks for almost 20 years, by implementing ProAire for the ZMVM. In 2013, the CAM was replaced by the current Megalopolis Environmental Commission (CAMe), which, in addition to the 16 boroughs of Mexico City, now includes all the municipalities in the states of Hidalgo, Mexico, Morelos, Puebla and Tlaxcala, and in 2017 incorporated the state of Querétaro. All of these federal entities are included either because they influence air quality within the ZMVM, or because they are affected by it.


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3. Robust data and evidence

- The Atmospheric Monitoring System (SIMAT) is supported by the Environmental Analysis Laboratory, providing the analytical capacity to carry out elemental analysis, gas chromatography, and gravimetric and aerosol studies on samples collected by more than 40 monitoring stations.
- Extensive collaboration with national and international research institutions, universities, and scientific centres ensures that the actions and strategies set out in ProAire are based on best practice and sound technical and scientific evidence. Key partnerships include the National Autonomous University of Mexico and the Molina Center for Energy and the Environment.
- As part of Breathe Cities, Mexico City is currently working to deploy its first city-owned network of low-cost sensors. Recognising the connection between data and community, sensors are expected to be deployed at community hubs across the city that bring millions of residents together for community-led cultural and recreational activities, as well as health services.[12]


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4. Ecosystem of empowered communities, allies and advocates

Culture and public participation are key dimensions of ProAire. The city held workshops with representatives from government, academia, the private sector, and civil society to identify and prioritise actions aligned with the city's climate and air quality commitments for 2030. In addition, training sessions and literacy workshops were provided for journalists and the media on how to report on air pollution and its health impacts. Work is also being carried out with various government agencies to integrate air quality criteria into their public awareness programmes.

5. Strategy for finance mobilisation

ProAire is largely funded through a combination of federal and local budgets, official development assistance, and private-sector contributions for specific initiatives.


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6. Plan to showcase the benefits of action

Data from the city's Atmospheric Monitoring System, SIMAT, is recorded, processed, and communicated through annual reports, websites updated hourly, mass media, and, more recently, an enhanced smartphone app. In addition, ProAire incorporates mechanisms for regular monitoring and evaluation so that progress towards committed actions can be measured, areas for improvement identified, and the environmental benefits of implementation estimated on an annual basis.



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LONDON

Over recent decades, London has achieved remarkable progress in improving its air quality through consistent political leadership, a comprehensive, integrated environmental strategy, robust data, and collaboration with wider stakeholders. Ambitious policies in the city have contributed to such substantial pollution reduction that London met legal NO_2 limits for the first time in 2024, almost 200 years earlier than expected.[13]

1. Clear long-term vision and political commitment

In 2018, London published its first integrated Environment Strategy, bringing together policies on air quality, climate change, green infrastructure, waste, adaptation, and noise under a single comprehensive vision. The strategy set out an ambitious long-term aim for London to *have the best air quality of any major world city by 2050, going beyond the legal requirements to protect human health and minimise inequalities.* Within this overarching framework, the city used a step-by-step approach to tackle vehicle emissions. Building on the city's T-Charge, which was introduced in 2017 and aimed to discourage the use of older, more polluting vehicles, the city introduced an Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) for central London in 2019, which was expanded incrementally to a London-wide ULEZ in 2023. The ULEZ is now the largest clean air and pollution-charging zone in the world, covering all 32 boroughs across Greater London (over 1,500 square kilometres, or 580 square miles) and impacting approximately 9 million residents.

2. Strong cross-government collaboration frameworks and governance

Achieving London's long-term vision and air quality targets required the city to establish robust relationships, structures, and processes across multiple levels of government. The Greater London Authority (GLA) works closely with London's 32 borough councils, which are responsible for local air quality monitoring and localised interventions through the London Local Air Quality Management framework. The GLA and Transport for London, the government body responsible for most of London's transport network, collaborated closely to design, manage, and enforce the ULEZ.

3. Robust data and evidence

London's air quality policies have been heavily underpinned by a comprehensive monitoring network and highly robust environmental data and health evidence. A central pillar of this evidence base is the London Atmospheric Emissions Inventory 2022, which provides the most comprehensive and up-to-date emissions and concentrations modelling for the city. London has strong links with academic institutions and has made use of an independent advisory committee to validate key impact methodologies, adding essential robustness, transparency, and scientific credibility to its policy impact evaluations.


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4. Ecosystem of empowered communities, allies and advocates

To ensure the successful implementation of the ULEZ, London actively built a broad coalition of supporters across various sectors of society. City Hall formed vital partnerships with civil society and environmental organisations to build public backing, notably collaborating with the “Clean Air Wins” campaign to emphasise the widespread benefits of the schemes. Additionally, the city fostered close collaborations with academic and medical institutions, securing the vocal support of health professionals representing over a million workers who highlighted the policy's necessity.[14]

Recognising the connection between community and data, the Breathe London Communities programme also provided low-cost sensors to 60 community groups across 24 boroughs to support their efforts in ensuring cleaner air near schools, green spaces, and other areas of communal importance.[15]


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5. Strategy for finance mobilisation

A critical component of London's approach was a clear strategy for mobilising finance to ease the transition for communities affected by the policy and fund cleaner transport alternatives. The Mayor of London funded a scrappage scheme, which eventually helped remove or upgrade nearly 54,000 non-compliant, highly polluting vehicles by offering grants of up to £2,000 (approximately US$2,686) to eligible residents, charities and businesses.[16] Furthermore, any net revenue generated from the ULEZ daily charges is legally ringfenced and reinvested directly back into running and improving London’s public transport infrastructure, such as the Superloop express bus network in outer London.


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6. Plan to showcase the benefits of action

To maintain public trust and justify the scheme's continued expansion, London consistently assesses and showcases the immediate benefits as well as the longer-term impacts of its air quality policies. Transport for London has published numerous impact reports, recently revealing that the ULEZ expansions resulted in harmful roadside NO2 concentrations dropping by an estimated 27% across the city.[17] Beyond air quality metrics, evaluations and related communications from the city and well-respected academic institutions have highlighted the associated benefits for public health, including reduced air pollution exposure for children, lower health inequalities, and progress towards climate and transport objectives.

Endnotes

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