

CATEGORY | Environmental Hero (Air Quality)

WINNER | Stephen Moore, Cannock Chase

District Council



INTRODUCTION

On 5 September 2016, reports were received regarding a fire at a site used for the illegal storage and disposal of what appeared to be chipped wood waste. Efforts to extinguish the fire were thwarted by the challenging nature of the material and the conditions onsite. The smoke produced by the low temperature fire had little buoyancy and the plume adversely affected residents in nearby communities. The deployment of the National Air Quality Monitoring Cell to provide reassurance was considered and dismissed, as the incident did not meet the appropriate threshold, so responsibility for monitoring fell to the Council. Public pressure for monitoring was growing amid concerns about the possible content of the smoke given past illegal waste activities. Stephen was allocated the task of identifying potential monitoring sites and sourcing suitable AQ monitoring equipment that could be deployed rapidly to reassure the public.

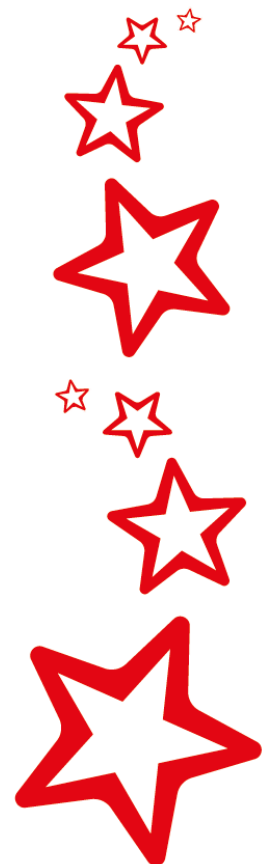
Public Health England indicated that monitoring should concentrate on particulates and an EnviroGuard PM10 monitor was selected accordingly. Stephen identified two static locations and undertook site visits to assess their suitability. A school and a local pub, both of which were downwind of the fire, were selected. The necessary arrangements were agreed with the headteacher and publican regarding the deployment of the equipment.

Monitoring equipment capable of providing air quality data on a 24/7 basis, that could be accessed remotely was hired and Stephen oversaw their installation on site.

In response to the outcry at a public meeting on 19 September, it was considered prudent to provide reassurance to the public regarding the health impact of the smoke as it was apparent that the usual advice of staying inside and keeping doors and windows closed would not suffice in the protracted circumstances of the incident.

Stephen liaised with PHE to produce daily reports between 27 September and 23 November 2016 covering the level of pollution from smoke, the wind speed and direction, the communities potentially downwind of smoke emissions and, using DEFRA's Daily Air Quality Index, an indication of the health advice appropriate. A page on the Council's website was quickly configured and Stephen prepared the results, prior to posting on the website.

I am not aware of any other instance where such relatively 'live' information on air quality monitoring has been employed in relation to an ongoing emergency incident.



The website averaged 45 hits per day in the initial week falling to 3 per day by mid-November, testifying to the effectiveness of the approach.

The information provided reassurance to the public on health impacts and enquiries to the Council and partner agencies reduced.

Officers now have a better understanding of the deployment of the National Air Quality Monitoring Cell and have put contingencies in place to hire monitoring equipment in a emergency. Assistance has also been provided to other local authorities on the approach taken and the lessons learnt are to be presented at a seminar later in this year.