

Clean air and the Environment Bill

Healthy Air Campaign briefing

Air pollution affects everyone, from the womb to old age, but is particularly dangerous for the most vulnerable individuals, including children, older people and those with existing health problems. They can also suffer the greatest exposure to air pollution, alongside outdoor and transport workers, people from deprived backgrounds and ethnic minorities.

We have the opportunity to become world leaders in the fight against air pollution: protecting the health of people across the UK and developing the solutions others need. To achieve this, we need new clean air laws to set an effective framework for action and enshrine the right to breathe clean air into domestic law.

Stronger legally binding targets

A government that is serious about protecting people's health must make a legally binding commitment to meet World Health Organization (WHO) guideline levels for particulate matter pollution by 2030. This should be part of a long-term framework that also establishes new binding commitments to reduce people's exposure to pollution, with a need to prioritise pollution reduction around schools, nurseries, playgrounds, care homes and hospitals. Binding targets should be set in a way that responds to the latest evidence on the health impacts of pollution and drives further reductions beyond 2030.

Action at all levels through a clean air duty on public bodies

Central government is best placed to ensure that binding targets are met across the UK. However, to ensure effective and coordinated action, all levels and arms of government need to play their part. We need a new 'clean air duty' that requires all public bodies to factor air pollution into all their decision-making. Currently, there is no such explicit, broad statutory duty on local authorities or wider public bodies, such as Highways England.

A national Healthy Air Plan

As part of a national Healthy Air Plan, central government should set out concrete, impact-assessed measures necessary to deliver against binding pollution and exposure reduction targets. The Plan must address all relevant sources and commit sufficient resources to do so as part of a long-term UK Government-wide strategy. It must include and prioritise measures to protect vulnerable groups from the health impacts of air pollution, including children, older people and people with chronic illnesses, as well as those who suffer the highest exposure to the problem, such as outdoor and transport workers.

A right to clean air in the UK

When we leave the EU, people's current right to breathe clean air should be given clear statutory footing within domestic law. The public must be able to hold the government to account off their own back and on their own terms in a timely and affordable manner, rather than being solely reliant on any new environmental watchdog.

Providing transparency and a more comprehensive understanding of the problem

Monitoring and alerts: Evidence that urgent action is required to protect people's health from air pollution is overwhelming. However, we need a more comprehensive, transparent and easily understood monitoring system to inform the public's and decision-makers' understanding of and response to the problems we face.

Central government should bring the existing but disjointed national and local monitoring regimes together into a central monitoring network and database. This should provide a coherent picture of local and national air quality, which includes a better assessment of pollutants such as fine particulate matter. This information should be accessible to the public and support a proactive alert system for pollution episodes, particularly for vulnerable groups such as children, older people and people with chronic illnesses.

Reporting: The government should monitor and report annually on the impact of air pollution on people's health, including, for example:

- number of people living in areas where pollution is over legal limits and WHO guideline levels and the number of schools, care homes and hospitals in these areas;
- hospital admissions for health conditions linked to pollution;
- number of children and adults with respiratory illnesses living in high pollution areas.

Urgent policies

Delivery of more ambitious targets will require rapid progress across many different sectors, with road transport an immediate priority. Alongside new legislation, the government should bring in policies to urgently clean up this public health crisis, including a national network of Clean Air Zones, help and support for people and businesses to move on to cleaner forms of transport and stronger restrictions on domestic solid fuel burning.

This briefing is supported by:

