



Reducing air pollution in the UK: Progress report 2018

In 2016 the Royal College of Physicians published the ground-breaking report *Every breath we take: the lifelong impact of air pollution*,¹ setting out the scale and breadth of the harm to health caused by air pollution.

In the two years which have passed, the scale of the air pollution crisis has largely been recognised, as has the need for action at national and local level. However, the immediate and robust action needed to tackle this crisis has not materialised. Indeed, the government's 2017 air quality plan² was a missed opportunity to show the commitment and leadership required to tackle the UK's dirty air crisis. >>>

75%

of British public believe the prime minister has a moral obligation to act

65%

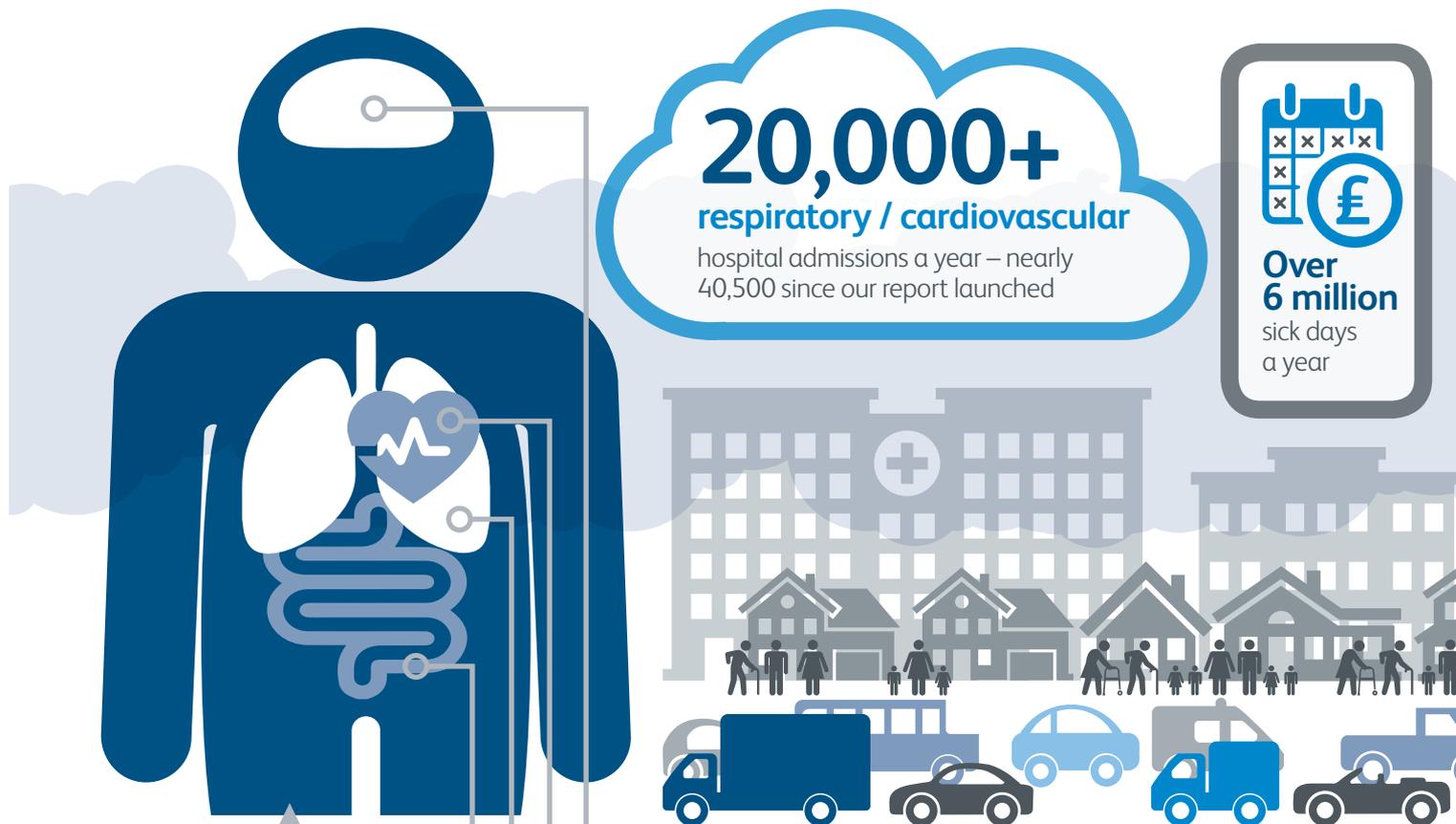
of British public would support a new Clean Air Act

44/51

UK cities in WHO's 2016 air pollution database

exceeded their recommended limit for particulate matter³





Air pollution is linked to cancer, asthma, COPD, stroke, heart disease, dementia, obesity and diabetes

As our report acknowledged, there are changes we can all make in our daily lives (for example active travel) which will help reduce air pollution. However, it lies with government to provide leadership: to create the enabling environment in which people can safely and easily make these changes and, ultimately, to apply sanctions where voluntary action has reached its limits.

Every Breath We Take: the evidence

- 40,000 deaths a year are attributable to exposure to outdoor air pollution: 80,000 since our report launched.
- Air pollution is linked to cancer, asthma, COPD, stroke and heart disease, diabetes, obesity and dementia.
- The damage to health caused by air pollution is evident across the life course.
- Air pollution causes over 6 million sick days a year.
- Air pollution has an estimated total social cost of £22.6 billion per year.
- Air pollution causes over 20,200 respiratory and cardiovascular hospital admissions a year: nearly 40,500 since our report launched.
- Air pollution is harmful to everyone. However, some people suffer more because they:
 - live in deprived areas, which often have higher levels of air pollution
 - live, learn or work near busy roads
 - are more vulnerable because of their age or existing medical conditions.

€22.6 billion

estimated total social cost per year

802
schools

and a high proportion of hospitals and clinics in London are located in highly polluted areas

‘...a public health emergency...’

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs committee, 2016



The crisis: growing not reducing

In October 2017 the RCP and the *Lancet* published a report assessing the links between health and climate change as part of the *Lancet*'s ongoing project to track progress on climate change.³

The report included analysis of current air pollution levels across the UK and found that 44 of the 51 UK cities in the World Health Organization's 2016 ambient air pollution database exceeded the WHO's recommended limit value for particulate matter smaller than 2.5 microns (PM2.5) of 10µg/m³, while 13 exceeded the PM10 limit (20µg/m³).³

Although most of these cities are within the EU annual limit values (25 and 40µg/m³ for PM2.5 and PM10, respectively), the WHO's limits represent a safer threshold. Moreover, there is considerable cause for concern when considering the most polluted areas, nitrogen dioxide levels, and daily rather than annual limit values. Many urban areas in the UK regularly exceed EU air quality limits, particularly for nitrogen dioxide.⁴

The analysis by the *Lancet* and RCP also highlighted that in London alone 802 schools and a high proportion of hospitals and clinics are located in highly polluted areas, putting the most vulnerable people at highest risk.³

Government response

As evidence of the scale of the air pollution crisis has continued to grow, so too has criticism of the scale of the government's response to the health emergency created by pollution, not only from civil society but also from cross party parliamentary committees, the judiciary and the United Nations.

In 2016 the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs committee declared air pollution to be a 'public health emergency'.⁵ In September 2017 Baskut Tuncak, United Nations special rapporteur, said that he had found that 'air pollution continues to inflict grave harms on the rights of children, women, older persons and people with disabilities, with limited accountability for perpetrators globally'.⁶

When ruling against the government at judicial review, Mr Justice Garnham commented that 'the continued failure of the government to comply with directives and regulations constitutes a significant threat to public health'.⁷

The Government has taken some positive steps to address air pollution, such as the promise to ban the sales of diesel and petrol cars by 2040. This will deliver important public health benefits in the long term. However, we need immediate action that will deliver health benefits in the shortest time possible.

Pockets of innovative policy and clear political will to effect change are emerging in local governments and cities across the UK. For example, the mayor of London has made tackling air pollution a priority and the city's Clean Air Action Plan for London introduced the 'T-charge' for the most polluting vehicles and an Ultra-Low Emissions Zone (ULEZ).

What must government do?

The RCP has been calling for a new Clean Air Act to enshrine in law the right to breathe clean air and the government's commitment and duty to reduce air pollution and protect people from its effects. A YouGov survey in 2017 showed 65% of the British public would support a new Clean Air Act and three quarters (75%) believe the prime minister has a moral obligation to act.⁸

The UK's imminent withdrawal from the European Union presents both threats and opportunities for the air pollution agenda. Whatever the outcome of the Brexit process, retaining the current level of regulations and legal protections is the bare minimum required. Indeed, the RCP believes this may be an opportune moment to increase resolve, energy and ambition in order to tackle the root causes of air pollution. Whether under the auspices of a new Act or by utilising existing legislation and policy levers, we call on the government to take immediate action in the following areas:

- Commit to new and ambitious targets for reduction in air pollution based on World Health Organization guidelines.
- Set a UK-wide framework for the expansion of Clean Air Zones in towns and cities (including ships in docks and airports), with increased funding for their implementation and a clear mandate for charging zones in the most polluted cities.
- Urgently accelerate funding in support of the shift zero emissions transport, implementing policies which incentive low emission vehicles and which disincentivise the use of diesel (eg effective scrappage schemes for diesel vehicles and increased taxation on diesel fuels).

- By 2020, increase investment in active transport to at least £10 per capita and, in addition, promote safer road design and provide the infrastructure and necessary incentives to increase levels of walking, cycling and public transport use. This could include expansion of cycle networks, requiring cycle training at school, promoting safe active alternatives to the 'school run', encouraging employers to support alternatives to commuting by car, and promoting leisure cycling.
- Empower local authorities to protect public health when air pollution levels are high. When these limits are exceeded, local authorities must have the power to close or divert roads to reduce the volume of traffic, especially near schools.
- Recognise that the polluter must pay. Where industries are found to be breaching emissions regulations, the government should hold them to account and enforce financial penalties.
- Require national agencies and local authorities to protect those most at risk and to reduce exposure to air pollution among vulnerable groups such as children, older people and those with pre-existing health conditions. Gather local and national data on air pollution in major urban areas and near schools and distribute the data publicly through smog warnings and other methods, in a clear way that everyone can understand.

For more information and the progress report references, visit:

rcplondon.ac.uk/EBWT2018

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