

Improving air quality

House of Commons, Backbench Debate
Thursday 28 June 2018

About the BMA

The BMA is a professional association and trade union representing and negotiating on behalf of all doctors and medical students in the UK. It is a leading voice advocating for outstanding health care and a healthy population. It is an association providing members with excellent individual services and support throughout their lives.

At the BMA's 2017 ARM (Annual Representative Meeting), a motion calling for greater action to tackle the illegal, lethal levels of air pollution in the UK, which are breaching international standards set by the EU (European Union) and the WHO (World Health Organisation), was passed. We have repeatedly called for more decisive action from the Government – recommending it uses both national and local levers to protect the public and create a cleaner future. To read more about the BMA's position on air pollution, [visit our website](#).¹

The BMA is a founding member of the UKHACC ([UK Health Alliance on Climate Change](#)), a coalition of major health institutions committed to increasing awareness and encouraging better approaches to tackling climate change that protect and promote public health, whilst also reducing the burden on health services from the impact of climate change.

We welcome this topical debate as an opportunity for the Government to set out clearly what measures it is taking, in both the short and long-term, nationally and locally, to address the critical impact that air pollution is having on public health.

BMA key recommendations for action:

- Reduce emissions and facilitate environmentally-friendly behaviour by (i) funding and creating an energy efficient infrastructure; and (ii) providing clearer information for consumers on emissions produced by new vehicles
- Empower local authorities to take remedial action when air pollution levels are high
- Monitor air quality and pollution effectively
- Make the NHS an exemplar for clean air and safe workplaces

Background: the impact of air pollution on public health

It has been estimated that exposure to air pollution leads to a loss of 15 minutes of life expectancy each day,² and is associated with 40,000 premature deaths each year in the UK.³ The air pollution causing this alarming level of harm is largely the result of the burning of fossil fuels in cars, lorries and power stations.⁴

¹ Available here at: <https://www.bma.org.uk/collective-voice/policy-and-research/public-and-population-health/climate-change>

² Royal College of Physicians, 'Brexit: What does it mean for air quality?' Available at: www.bma.org.uk/-/media/files/pdfs/about%20the%20bma/legal%20policies/bma-modern-slavery-statement-may2017.pdf?la=en

³ The BMA's infographic demonstrates the wide ranging health impact of air pollution on the body: <https://www.bma.org.uk/collective-voice/policy-and-research/public-and-population-health/climate-change>

⁴ UK Health Alliance on Climate Change, 'A breath of fresh air', 2016. Available at: www.ukhealthalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/UK-Health-Alliance-A-Breath-of-Fresh-Air-Final-Report.pdf



Health problems resulting from exposure to air pollution are very costly – not only to those who suffer from illness and premature death but in financial terms, too, to our health services and to business. In the UK, these costs add up to more than £20 billion every year.⁵

Widespread concern

UK Parliament

A parliamentary ‘super inquiry’⁶ on air pollution scrutinised the Government’s strategy for the UK to meet legal limits on air quality. The committees undertaking the inquiry described air pollution as a “national health emergency”, warning that the “Government cannot continue to put public health at risk”. They concluded that there is an “urgent need for national leadership and consensus-building to bring about a step change in how the problem of air quality is tackled”.

European Commission

Last month, the UK was referred to Europe’s highest court for failing to tackle illegal levels of air pollution. After a final warning from the European Commission, in January, was not heeded, the UK’s handling of air pollution has now been escalated to the European Court of Justice. According to the Commission, the UK and five other nations have failed to deliver “credible, effective and timely measures to reduce pollution as soon as possible, as required under EU law”.

UN (United Nations) & the WHO (World Health Organisation)

The UN’s special rapporteur has gone on record to say he is “alarmed that despite repeated judicial instruction, the UK Government continues to flout its duty to ensure adequate air quality and protect the rights to life of health of its citizens”. The international body’s representative further stated, “It [the UK] has violated its obligations”.

Furthermore, the WHO’s director of public health has highlighted the particular impact of air pollution on the most vulnerable members of society: “while air pollution knows no borders and puts everyone at risk, those most vulnerable – pregnant women, children, the elderly, those already ill or poor – are particularly at risk”.

Authoritative bodies across the board have told the UK Government that the current level of air pollution is a public health emergency. We believe the Government must take immediate, comprehensive action to bring about a cleaner future. Failure to do so puts the public at risk, in full knowledge of the warnings that have been issued from national and international experts. The following section outlines our key recommendations for action.

BMA key recommendations:

(1) Reduce emissions and facilitate environmentally-friendly behaviour: (i) energy efficient infrastructure & (ii) clearer information for consumers

Transport is a huge contributor to air pollution. Thus, policy makers should look to fund and create infrastructure that is energy-efficient, and which facilitates environmentally-friendly behaviour. Measures to reduce the use of polluting vehicles and to enable active transport are key (e.g. cycle lanes and safe areas for walking).

In addition, we believe that clearer information should be provided to consumers about vehicles’ emission levels. Not only will this encourage people to purchase ultra-low emission vehicles (such as electric vehicles and hybrids) instead of diesel cars, it could lead to a more fundamental transition towards active transport – resulting in many major health benefits by helping to reduce obesity, diabetes, coronary heart disease, stroke, road traffic accidents, and improve mental health.⁷

⁵ Royal College of Physicians, ‘Every breathe we take: the lifelong impact of air pollution’, February 2016

⁶ Parliamentary inquiry into improving air quality by these select committees: Environment Food and Rural Affairs, Environmental Audit, Health and Social Care, and Transport: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmenvfru/433/433.pdf>

⁷ The case for action, Active Transport for Healthy Living Coalition, 2013

(2) Empower local authorities to take remedial action when air pollution levels are high

The BMA has called on the Government to ensure that local authorities in England are provided with enough financial resource to implement the air quality plans they have been mandated to adopt, in DEFRA's new Air Quality Strategy, by the end of 2018.

The Government's 'New Clean Air Fund'⁸ to help local authorities implement these clean air proposals is welcome, but we believe it is still nowhere near enough for the task at hand – especially when stretched across the most affected urban cities in the country. The shortfall of this £220 million fund is clear when compared to Transport for London's much more robust £875 million budget solely to improve air quality in London (by 2021/2022).⁹

(3) Effective monitoring of air quality and pollution

Air pollution often remains an invisible threat to individuals. We would like to see systems created that regularly monitor air pollution – especially around hospitals, health clinics, schools and other public places – to increase awareness of the pollution levels in our immediate surroundings. The data could also be used to conduct frequent assessments of the effectiveness of intervention strategies, as they develop.

(4) NHS as an exemplar

The BMA would like to see the NHS become an exemplar for clean air and safe workplaces to ensure that those who are most vulnerable to the impacts of air pollution – notably children, the elderly and infirm – are protected. Key measures include:

- **Environmentally friendly NHS transport** – require all NHS vehicles to meet certain criteria for minimising air pollution (e.g. switching from polluting fuels to hybrid/electric vehicles within a specified timeframe).
- **Monitoring air pollution associated with NHS procurement** – require NHS trusts to report this data, and progress made in reducing their footprint, against their Sustainable Development Management Plans.
- **Energy-efficient** – as one of the UK's most energy-intensive organisations, it should continue to switch to clean energy providers and adopt on-site renewables, where possible.

Conclusion: time for a new legislative agenda

We believe legislation is needed to achieve real success at delivering the policy objectives, outlined above, to reduce air pollution and bring the UK back within legal limits. This should encompass:

- Legislating for the phase-out of coal by 2025
- Expanding ultra-low emission zones (beyond the current scope of Greater London)
- Continuing to implement vehicle taxation to discourage the use of diesel and petrol
- Empowering local authorities to take action on air pollution by providing them with the necessary legal powers.

These measures should be supplemented by the provision of financial assistance to help people switch to hybrid and electric vehicles, and clear information for consumers about the emissions that are produced by new vehicles.

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⁸ Funded by higher VED (Vehicle Excise Duty) on diesel cars bought after 1st April 2018, the Fund will offer £220 million of investment to support local action on air pollution.

⁹ Details available here: www.tfl.gov.uk/info-for/media/press-releases/2017/june/mayor-launches-plan-to-improve-air-quality-on-the-tube