

Joint health briefing: Environment Bill 2019-20 Second Reading

Key points:

- Air pollution presents a major public health threat – it is estimated that up to 36,000 deaths per year in the UK are attributable to poor air quality.
- Exposure to fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) is linked to a variety of health problems and can increase the risk of lung, heart and circulatory diseases, stroke and cancer especially amongst vulnerable groups including children.
- If strengthened, the Environment Bill provides an opportunity for the UK to become a world-leader in the fight against air pollution and protect the nation's health.

This briefing sets out key ways in which the Bill must be improved to protect against these risks. Key recommendations include:

1. A legally binding commitment to meet World Health Organization (WHO) guideline limits for PM_{2.5} by 2030 at the latest.
2. A clear roadmap outlining how to achieve these targets, including time-bound commitments and interim milestones to be set and reviewed by independent experts.
3. A 'clean air duty' to ensure that all public bodies and levels of government have responsibility for, and contribute to, improving air quality.

The health impact of air pollution

Air pollution presents a major public health threat – it is estimated that up to 36,000 deaths per year in the UK are attributable to poor air quality. Exposure to PM_{2.5} is linked to a variety of health problems and can increase the risk of lung, heart and circulatory diseases, stroke and cancer. Poor air quality affects everyone, but for vulnerable groups including children, these toxic emissions can leave children with lasting health problems such as stunted lung growth and an increased risk of asthma and pneumonia which not only impacts their health now, but limits their opportunities later in life.

There is overwhelming evidence that shows the devastating impact air pollution has on our health:

- British Heart Foundation (BHF) analysis has shown that heart and circulatory disease deaths attributable to toxic air in the UK could exceed 160,000 over the next decade unless urgent action is taken;
- A report from the British Lung Foundation (BLF) found that over 2,000 hospitals or GP surgeries are in areas with dangerous levels of air pollution;
- Around 15 million people live in areas across the UK where average levels of PM_{2.5} exceed WHO guidelines – almost a quarter of the population;
- Unicef UK analysis has found that at least 4.5 million children in the UK are growing up in areas with unsafe levels of particulate matter – 30% of 0-18 year olds in the UK.

Not only is air pollution a burden on our health services, it also carries a huge economic cost to society. It is estimated to cost at least £23 billion to society every year due to increased use of the NHS and lost working days.

The Environment Bill presents a golden opportunity for health – if strengthened

The Government's 2019 Clean Air Strategy was a welcome first step to frame the issue of air pollution in the context of health and to set out the Government's ambition to tackle this problem. The Environment Bill now provides a once-in-a generation opportunity to build on the Strategy, for

the UK to become a world leader in the pursuit for clean air and to improve and protect the health of the nation.

It was encouraging to see the Government explicitly recognise that air pollution is the greatest environmental risk to our health and we welcome their decision to prioritise the Environment Bill. However, Government must go further, faster. For the Bill to be a truly world-leading piece of legislation that ensures efforts to reduce air pollution truly achieve meaningful health outcomes, particularly for those most vulnerable, the following improvements must be made:

1. Government must commit to stronger legally binding targets that better protect people's health

According to the WHO, there is no safe level of air pollution, but stricter limits are vital in order to minimise the known harm to health. Whilst it is positive that the Bill commits to establishing a new binding target for PM_{2.5} it stops short of committing to the WHO recommended guideline limits.

This is concerning from a health perspective, particularly as the Bill doesn't require the new air quality targets to be set until October 2022, potentially delaying action for another two and a half years which leaves millions of people in the UK, including children, at risk in the meantime. Furthermore, the Bill does not clearly outline how or what criteria will inform the setting of this new target. Without a requirement for targets to show real ambition to protect people's health, there is no certainty that this target will be set to realise health benefits and improve upon existing legal protections.

To reduce exposure to this toxic pollutant in a way that supports health, and for the UK to be a true world leader, the Bill must include a legally binding commitment to meet WHO guideline limits for PM_{2.5} by 2030 at the latest, with a further commitment to non-regression. It must also prescribe that independent expert advice, including from health experts, must be sought when setting the new air quality targets, which must be at the earliest opportunity.

2. Government must be required to provide a clear roadmap on how to achieve air quality targets

The Bill shows some ambition to embed environmental principles into decision-making, as demonstrated by the requirement for Government to publish an Environmental Improvement Plan that sets out the steps it 'intends to take to improve the natural environment'. However, the Bill does not explicitly require an Environmental Improvement Plan to include measures that ensure that air quality targets are met.

To ensure that targets are ultimately met, the Bill must require Government to produce and implement a clear, cross-departmental plan that includes timetabled and impact-assessed interim milestones, as well as measures to protect those more vulnerable to the effects of air pollution. These should be set and reviewed by independent experts. Where targets are missed, the Bill should commit Government to doing all it can to meet them 'in the shortest possible time'.

3. All government and public bodies must take responsibility to act, through a 'clean air duty'

The Bill provides some welcome new powers and clarity for local authorities around air quality, but it risks putting the burden of responsibility solely on them. Whilst local action is needed, it is not enough to tackle the issue alone and must be accompanied with an increase in the resources, funding and tools available to support local councils to take robust action. There must also be a requirement for central Government and other public bodies to take ambitious action on a national and regional scale that protects people's health across the UK.

The Bill must introduce a new 'clean air duty' which requires all levels of government and public bodies to contribute to achieving binding air quality targets and reduce the harmful health impacts of air pollution through their decision-making to ensure the best outcomes for health.

This briefing has been produced by the British Heart Foundation and UNICEF UK. For more information, please contact Alex Kenney, Public Affairs Manager, at BHF: kenneya@bhf.org.uk.