Pollution-busting

Air pollution: It’s time

How has the UK been able to ignore current levels for so long – and what can be done?

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The air pollution issue is one of those ‘elephants in the room’ – a potentially huge unspoken legacy that this generation may leave for the future.

In the UK, the main Government advisory body on air pollution, the Committee on the Medical Effects of Air Pollutants (COMEAP), has indicated it believes the impact upon mortality rates to be as high as a 6% increase for every ten micrograms of fine particle pollutants – 2.5 micrometers in diameter, designated PM2.5s – for each m$^3$ of ambient air.

‘Clean’ air by the highest EU standards would have no more than 5mg per m$^3$, but the UK Government seems to have decided on a 25mg limit. Taking this into account we are looking at 60 000 unnecessary deaths each year if we all inhale those levels of pollutants at Government limits.

The main cause of everyday PM inhalation is exposure to traffic fumes, and the European Union has begun the legal process of taking Britain to court for ignoring European air pollution laws concerning the levels of PM10s (pollutants ten micrometers in diameter) in urban areas and near major roadways. If found guilty, the UK Government could face unlimited daily fines until it complies with regulations. This poses the question: how has the UK Government been able to ‘get away with it’ for so long?

The threat to public health

The immediate issue is PM10 pollution – the minute sooty particles emitted primarily by diesel engines which, when inhaled by both humans and animals, can lead to serious health problems including asthma, cardiovascular and respiratory problems and premature death.

Scientists claim PM10 pollution contributes to the premature deaths of between 12 000 and 24 000 people a year in Britain – a higher number than the deaths attributed to alcohol consumption and far more than those linked to passive smoking. The Rogers Review of local authority priorities – put together by Peter Rogers, Chief Executive of Westminster City Council and previously of the West Midlands Travel Group – in April 2007 estimated that particulate pollution alone cost Britain £9.1-£21bn a year in knock-on health costs. That’s a staggering figure.

The UK Government has had over a decade to clean up its act on PM10s, but has fallen short, seemingly breaking its own laws since 2005. Now, new laws mean the Government must also start to address nitrogen dioxide (NO$^2$) pollution, which again comes largely from traffic, but also from power stations and industry – yet there is no plan for this.

Recent air pollution maps shown by the Campaign for Clear Air in London indicate the UK tops the league for toxic traffic fumes in Europe, with London coming out as the most polluted capital city. Yet while full buses are obviously less damaging than single-occupant cars, even with Euro 5-compliant engines, Government (Treasury and DfT) policy is adding to the problem by its inaction.

Different standards

While passive smoking is rigorously policed in workplaces and public areas, both by local authorities and the public, car pollution is largely ignored. Allow a single cigarette to be lit in public and you’re a social pariah, liable to heavy fines.

Threaten the health and well-being of large numbers through PM10 or NO$^2$ pollution and no-one takes it seriously. So why, after widely-publicised successes with CFCs and
Air pollution: It's time to clean up our act

Pollution-busting compliance with them. This legal action must be broadened legal standards for dangerous airborne particles (PM10) action from the European Commission for breaching eventually it will have to meet these directives.

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Britain had been given six years by Europe to reduce its PM10 levels after air legislation was introduced in 1999. This passed into British law in 2005 but documents obtained by the Campaign for Clean Air in London (CCAL) show limits have been widely breached since then and that more than 20 UK cities and conurbations broke the pollution rules in 2006. These are expected to be the basis of the EU’s legal case against Britain. The case could take two years to come to court, and could prove embarrassing in the run up to the Olympic Games in 2012.

Exacerbating the problem

A directive, which came into force in June 2008, demands levels of NO, air pollution be reduced on some busy streets by more than a third by the end of this year. Unlike PM10 pollution, which mostly affects people living close to traffic corridors, NO, is much more widespread; nearly half of all emissions come from road vehicles, with 25% coming from power stations. Thus the only feasible way Britain can meet its new NO, target is by tackling traffic congestion with schemes such as low emission zones, which bar the most polluting vehicles from entering areas, or congestion charging schemes like the one operating in London.

The Government plans to hold a three-month consultation and then apply for a time extension to meet its NO, target. Nine other EU countries are also applying for extensions. Simon Birkett of the Campaign for Clear Air in London (CCAL) said: “Legal action to enforce health-based air quality laws is long overdue. We urge the Government to say urgently how it will comply fully with these laws. It can try to delay introducing measures to reduce air pollution but eventually it will have to meet these directives. “The UK is already on the receiving end of legal action from the European Commission for breaching legal standards for dangerous airborne particles (PM10) and missing the deadline to apply for a time extension to comply with them. This legal action must be broadened and escalated rapidly unless the UK comes up with a convincing plan to justify a time extension.”