



Light Rail (UK) Group

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Failure to act has led to thousands of air pollution related deaths

307,000 premature deaths were attributed to chronic exposure to fine particulate matter;

The UK Government could have avoided thousands of deaths in 2019 had it acted to reduce air pollution, according to [new figures](#) from the European Environment Agency.

According to the analysis, in 2019 fine particulate matter (PM2.5) was responsible for more than 33,000 deaths annually in the UK and nitrogen dioxide (NO2) was responsible for 5,750 deaths.

The UK was in the top five European countries with the most premature deaths resulting from both PM2.5 pollution and NO2 pollution.

Half of these deaths from PM2.5 could have been avoided if the UK had followed the latest recommendations by the World Health Organisation (WHO).



The country's new Environment Act has just been passed but campaigners have warned that the UK has missed an opportunity to follow WHO guidelines for PM2.5.

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Andrea Lee, clean air campaign manager at ClientEarth said: 'The world's leading experts have made it clear that there is no level of air pollution that's safe to breathe – and this is why our government must be doing all it can to keep our exposure as low as possible.

'That starts with reflecting the best possible science in the law. The current legal limits for air pollution just do not cut it. We need to see the WHO guidelines reflected in legislation as soon as possible, to protect us and our children. The air we breathe today shapes our lives forever.'

Ref: <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/health-risks-of-air-pollution/health-impacts-of-air-pollution/>

Key messages

- In 2019, air pollution continued to drive a significant burden of premature death and disease in the 27 EU Member States: 307,000 premature deaths were attributed to chronic exposure to fine particulate matter; 40,400 premature deaths were attributed to chronic nitrogen dioxide exposure; 16,800 premature deaths were attributed to acute ozone exposure.
- Premature deaths attributed to air pollution decreased in 2019 in relation to 2018.
- Reaching the EU standards and WHO guideline levels for fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) in ambient air across the EU-27 in 2019 would have delivered different potential benefits*.
- Achieving the current EU annual limit value for PM_{2.5} of 25 µg/m³ would have left premature deaths unchanged in 2019; the WHO interim target 4 for PM_{2.5} of 10 µg/m³ (the 2005 WHO air quality guideline) would have reduced related premature deaths by at least 21%; and the new 2021 WHO air quality guideline for PM_{2.5} of 5 µg/m³ would have reduced related premature deaths by at least 58%.
- The Zero Pollution Action Plan target is to reduce the number of premature deaths due to exposure to fine particulate matter by 55% by 2030, as compared to 2005. Based on the EEA estimate of 456,000 premature deaths attributable to fine particulate matter in 2005, this would be equivalent to reducing the number of premature deaths in the EU by 250,800.
- Compared to 2005, in 2019 premature deaths attributed to exposure to fine particulate matter decreased by 33% in the EU-27. If this rate of reducing premature deaths is maintained going forward, then the EU is expected to reach the Zero Pollution Action Plan target.
- **Had the new WHO air quality guideline for PM_{2.5} of 5 µg/m³ been attained across the EU-27 in 2019, then this would have delivered a reduction in premature deaths of at least 72% compared with 2005 levels.**

*Note: Our assessment of potential benefits assumes that all areas in the EU-27 that in 2019 were above each respective standard or guideline for PM_{2.5} had instead reached each respective standard or guideline, while all other areas maintained the concentrations observed in 2019. As such, these estimates represent the minimum benefits resulting from potential improvements in air quality across the EU, with reductions in premature deaths also likely to be seen in areas where standards and guidelines were already achieved.

Courtesy: Air Quality