



# Light Rail (UK)

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## Children are breathing dirty air – and parents are being left to fix it

Clean Air for Children is a new parent-led programme to tackle air pollution near schools. When will the government act too?



Photograph: David Bagnall/Alamy

Last year it was estimated that over 2,000 schools and nurseries were within 150 metres of roads with illegal levels of air pollution.

For parents, there is nothing worse than worrying about the health and wellbeing of your child. Unfortunately, we have now reached the point where across the UK the air that children are breathing is damaging their health.



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In many areas of public health we have rightly taken action to protect children, such as guidelines on what pregnant women can safely consume or banning smoking in cars with children. But when it comes to air pollution we do not know how many of our children are being put at risk just from going to school.

There is some evidence to show that many schools could be affected by illegal and dirty air. Last year it was estimated that over 2,000 schools and nurseries were within 150 metres of roads with illegal levels of air pollution. So, we find ourselves in a situation where we rightly banned advertising for smoking near our children's schools, but at the same time allow them to be poisoned by dirty air from road transport and other sources.



The WHO study found that children are particularly vulnerable to air pollution because pollutants are often more concentrated nearer to ground level.

It added that their developing organs and nervous system are also more susceptible to long-term damage than those of adults.

“Air pollution is stunting our children's brains, affecting their health in more ways than we suspected,” said Dr Maria Neira, WHO director of public health and the environment.

The study found that 600,000 children die from acute lower respiratory infections caused by dirty air and 93% are exposed to one of the most damaging pollutants – PM2.5.

In poorer countries, 98% of all children under five are exposed to PM2.5 above WHO guidelines.



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Pregnant women are particularly vulnerable, with dirty air linked to premature and underweight children. Air pollution also increases the risk of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease later in life.

Tedros, writing in the Guardian on Saturday, described air pollution as the “new tobacco”, saying the simple act of breathing is killing 7 million people a year and harming billions more.

In the UK, most urban areas have illegal levels of air pollution and ministers have lost three times in the high court after challenges over the inadequacy of their action. The latest government action plan, called “pitiful” by environmental lawyers, revealed air pollution was actually much worse than previously feared.

Globally, with smoking on the decline, air pollution now causes more deaths annually than tobacco. However, researchers think the harm known to be caused by air pollution, such as heart attacks and lung disease, is only “the tip of the iceberg”.

Today’s report found that both indoor and outdoor air pollution was causing significant health problems. It said burning fuel such as wood or paraffin for heating, cooking and lighting

## UK's children denied basic human right to clean air, says Unicef

Children are more vulnerable to breathing in polluted air than adults. For their size, they breathe more air each minute than an adult. Buggies and prams put them at the level of car exhausts. Breathing illegal and harmful levels of air pollution triggers asthma attacks and can make those attacks more severe, increasing the risk that they will end up in hospital or worse. It can also stunt their lung growth, causing further health problems as they grow up.

They are at greater risk of cancer when they are older and suffer more from infections like pneumonia.

Legal limits of air pollution should have been met in 2010, but government projections suggest that, without further action, this will not happen until 2028 in London and 2021 in other urban areas. Much of the UK suffers from levels of some pollutants that are over World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines that are based on the latest scientific evidence.

We need to take action on air pollution and we need to do it quickly, as it affects all of us in many areas of the country. But we can and should go much faster to protect our children.



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That's why we're proud to launch the Clean Air for Children programme on Wednesday. The programme has been put together by parents across the country who have joined the Clean Air Parents' Network. It calls for emergency measures to protect children and babies' lungs from illegal and harmful levels of air pollution where they learn and where they play.

Without delay, the government must monitor and identify all schools affected by illegal and harmful levels of pollution. Parents rightly want reliable, transparent information of a school's exam results. It is inexcusable that we do not have the same for air pollution.

But an audit must be accompanied by action. We should be bringing in traffic exclusion zones to help reduce children's exposure to pollution. This approach has worked in places across the UK, such as Edinburgh, Solihull and Hounslow, but it needs to happen faster and in many more places.

We also need to stop building schools, nurseries and playgrounds in pollution hotspots. Research suggests that in England alone over 6,000 new school places have been approved in locations that are on or near illegally polluted roads since 2012. And we need to consider new laws in the forthcoming environment bill to safeguard our right to breathe clean air with limits based on the WHO guidelines.

These are practical solutions to protect our children from the harm air pollution can cause.

We could do all of this with political will. This must be an alliance of local government and national government, but national government needs to step up. Just £150m could help roll out emergency measures to prioritise the health of children where they learn and where they play.

This matters because the damage dirty air can do to children's lungs may never be reversed and it could put them at higher risk of developing further health problems in later life. This is a public health emergency and it is about time we started treating it as such.

Maria Miller is the Conservative MP for Basingstoke and a former secretary of state for culture, media and sport; Ed Miliband is the Labour MP for Doncaster North and is a former Labour party leader

Courtesy: Guardian Newspaper



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**Maria Miller and Ed Miliband**

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