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Why the next government must invest in clean air

25.11.2019

[LEGISLATION, VIEWPOINT](#)

[PENNY HOSIE](#) AIR QUALITY

Many noble words on air pollution have been uttered by government ministers in recent months – but funding for measures to tackle the problem rarely appear to stack up. With a new government, this must change, writes Penny Hosie.



The Queen's Speech promised to introduce 'ambitious, legally targeted' standards on air quality as part of the government's much delayed Environment Bill, but the devil was in the detail, and the Bill itself only promised targets would be announced before 2022.

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This was swiftly followed by the PM, Boris Johnson, announcing his intent to chair a new cabinet committee on climate change.

However, there is concern that the government has yet to state what these emission cutting standards might be, or a timeline. This has frustrated many clean air campaigners, who say breathing clean air is a human right and air pollution is a public health emergency.

Campaigners also fear that the Office for Environmental Protection – the new watchdog announced in the Environment Bill – won't have the legislative rigour to issue fines to those in breach of clean air regulations.

There's an encouraging groundswell of support from the British public for the introduction of legally binding air pollution targets which match WHO guidelines. According to a YouGov survey by ClientEarth, two-thirds of those surveyed want to see this happen. British environmental campaigner Baroness Worthington, from the European Defence Fund (EDF), believes that if better monitoring were in place and the public became aware of a breach in air pollution targets through air pollution spikes, 'they wouldn't stand for it'.

Systematic damage

Certainly, the health and fiscal grounds for cleaning up the air are strong. Air pollution is now thought to contribute to 36,000 premature deaths every year in the UK. Several recent studies now equate living, or working, next to main roads as the equivalent of passively smoking up to 10 cigarettes daily, causing systemic damage to all parts of the body.

Babies and children, being lower to the ground, are most at risk from the invisible but harmful PM2.5 and PM10 particulates. Carbon has also been found in the placentas of pregnant women. This compelling evidence can no longer be ignored by policymakers at government or council level. Last year, Public Health England (PHE) estimated that if poor air quality isn't addressed then the health and social care costs of air pollution, in England, could reach a staggering £5.3bn by 2035.

Policy contradictions surround other recent government measures. While final Heathrow and HS2 expansion plans are pending, the government's continued support of London City Airport's expansion plans is puzzling. Although privately funded (with initial costs rising from £344 to £480m) the proposed 600+ extra flights a week will cause intolerable levels of air and noise pollution to residents in Newham and other neighbouring boroughs.



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Infrastructure 'revolution'



Additionally, in his Autumn Spending Review, the Chancellor Sajid Javid promised a huge £29bn 'infrastructure revolution' investment on new roads and motorways, a move counterbalanced by a paltry spending of just £220m for electric buses.

Campaigners think that this contradiction negates the government's clean air intentions, as well as perpetuating a false myth that building new roads will reduce congestion.

There are other grounds for cynicism as the latest figures, presented by the Department of Transport's Vehicle Licencing Statistics (Sept 2019) illustrate that there is a considerable way to go to reduce carbon emissions due to the numbers of polluting vehicles on the road.

At the end of June 2019, 38.7 million vehicles were licensed for road use in Great Britain and, although it was positive that the number of polluting diesel cars registered for the first time in 2019 declined by 16% compared to 2018, the purchase of second-hand diesel vehicles has increased.

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Also concerning is the fact that this year's first-time registration of 14,649 ultra-low emission vehicles (ULEVs) has decreased 6% from 2018. This could further decline if the government's reported intention to remove subsidies of £3,500 for new pure-electric vehicle purchasing goes ahead, although Transport Secretary, Grant Shapps, has yet to announce the removal date.

The 2040 vision

Phasing out this subsidy also appears at odds with the government's plan to reduce UK emissions and its 'Road to Zero' strategy, requiring all new cars to produce 'effectively zero' emissions by 2040.

A combination of technological advances and more EV charging points being placed around the UK makes the purchase of electric vehicles an increasingly attractive prospect.

Shapps is reputedly considering bringing forward the ban on the sale of petrol and diesel vehicles from 2040 to 2035 but campaigners want it reduced further, referencing Ireland and 11 other European countries with their more ambitious target of 2030.

The scene seems set for a further intensification of the debate on electric vehicle subsidies and scrappage schemes. The Chancellor also promised UK councils £30m to help them lower their nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) emissions.

Certainly, ClientEarth's legislative eagle eye has provided all UK councils with the clear message that they must meet evidence-based carbon reduction targets and ensure these are central to planning policy.

These decisions need to be especially mindful of vulnerable groups such as the very young, the elderly and those with respiratory illnesses. There is also a growing body of evidence to demonstrate that poor air quality disproportionately affects the poor and people from different ethnic groups, so approving plans to build new hospitals, schools and homes on busy main roads, where they may live, must be avoided.

Cllr David Renard, the Local Government Association's environment spokesman, acknowledges the challenges, saying: 'Councils want to lead the environmental improvement agenda, but need to be empowered to do so. 'National climate change expectations and air quality targets are unlikely to be met unless councils are given long-term funding, devolved powers and easier access to complex government funding pots.'

Budgetary challenges aside, a decision in September 2019 by the Court of Appeal further emphasises why clean air targets must be met. The Court confirmed a High Court ruling that a 330-home scheme in the Kent countryside, submitted by land promoter Gladman, was refused at appeal due to the UK's failure to meet EU air quality standards.



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Professor Stephen Peckham successfully argued that the homes would be heavily dependent on car-based transport and that building them would only worsen already unacceptable levels of air pollution along the A2.

This decision had made Silvertown tunnel project campaigners hopeful that London's Mayor Sadiq Khan will place it permanently on hold. Estimated to cost a staggering £1bn, campaigners argue that facilitating the daily movement of 30 buses through the tunnel is counterbalanced by the considerable health risk, to local residents and schoolchildren, of HGV vehicles moving north to south of the river – some to HGV lorry parks situated either side of the tunnel.

However, the mayor has now signed the contract, a retrograde move that has angered clean air campaigners who see industry profits again being put ahead of legitimate concerns over local residents' health.

Targets

There's even more reason for their optimism following the announcement, at the C40 World Mayors Summit in Copenhagen, that the Mayor will comply with the World Health Organisation's (WHO) guideline limit – reducing fine particulate PM2.5 concentrations to 10 µg/m³ micrograms per cubic metre.

Given that indoor air pollution also contributes to the premature deaths tally, councils must examine their thermal efficiency programmes to ensure their existing housing stock is well insulated and free from damp. Ignoring these risks, a huge bill further down the line in the form of emergency hospital admissions and increased childhood asthma rates, which have increased by a third over the last decade.

One north-west London borough, which failed to recognise the health impact of their planning decisions, reputedly saw a 2.5% increase in child asthma deaths amongst its poorer children. Councils also need to appreciate the impact of poor air quality on their residents, especially those working on building sites, driving cabs, or patrolling the streets.

Some UK councils are responding to funding challenges by sourcing external funding to fulfil their clean air obligations. York residents will, this month, benefit from their council's investment in 21 new double-decker electric buses – the largest electric bus fleet outside of London.

The project was funded by First York and the Office for Low Emission Vehicles (OLEV) to the tune of £1.6m and is in place to prepare for the Clean Air Zone which will come into force from 2020.



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Social inequalities



Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Professor Jon Fairburn from Staffordshire University, an expert in environmental health inequalities, cites various European cities, such as Oldenburg in Germany and Amsterdam in Holland, as being positive examples of what can be done if planning prioritises bikes and walking rather than cars.

The reduction in levels of obesity is an additional health benefit many councils will want to replicate. In the UK car-free days and School Streets are being embraced by many councils, including Hackney. John Burke, one of the borough's councillors, says their ultra-low emissions streets can potentially generate a revenue of £1,000 per vehicle over a five-year period.

This has encouraged some residents to ditch their polluting vehicles in favour of less polluting ones and others to relinquish car ownership completely, a prime example of council policy encouraging positive behaviour change. Hackney's collaboration with Islington and Tower Hamlets, to encourage

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businesses to distribute their goods to customers via e-bikes to reduce carbon emissions, also seems sensible, given that TfL data reveals that around 39% of vans are less than a quarter full.

Professor Fairburn also believes that a greater recognition of the harm caused to health by woodburning (stoves, open fires, BBQ's and pizza ovens, etc) will necessitate councils strictly enforcing their clean air zones.

According to the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) woodburning accounts for 38% of harmful PM2.5 particle emissions compared to 12% which is attributable to traffic emissions. Such is the level of harm; Professor Fairburn believes that in years to come 'woodburning will be considered as antisocial as smoking in public used to be.'

The government must be listening: its new Environment Bill will give local authorities the power to issue fines of up to £300 if smoke is emitted from a chimney where a smoke control area has been declared. It's a start but many clean air campaigners believe it needs aligning with a strong public health messaging campaign (on the scale of the anti-smoking ones) for people to fully recognise the harm woodburning causes to health.

The future good health of our children and young people depends on politicians being thoughtful and ambitious in their plans to meet the considerable challenges of cleaning the air.

Canny politicians will do well to recognise that if the infrastructure is put in place to encourage more people to walk and cycle the benefits to physical and mental health will result in clear fiscal savings, too. As the election campaign intensifies, voters will be wise to ask which party will be brave and bold enough to drive the clean air agenda forward and take real legislative action, rather than continue spouting a load of hot air. It may also prove a vote winner.

Courtesy: Air Quality News.com 26 November 2019