

Breathing Cities Campaign - FAQ

Hasn't air quality been improving over time (so what is the fuss about)?

The Clean Air Act of 1956 brought all political parties together to create a revolutionary piece of legislation that phased out coal from towns and cities. But although our air is no longer blackened by pollution, toxic particles are present in the air in invisible forms, and are still contributing to an estimated 40,000 early deaths in the UK each year. In the last assessment of UK air quality (September 2017), the 37 out of 43 zones across the UK that were breaching legal NO₂ air pollution limits in 2015 are still being illegally polluted today¹. Even the United Nations has condemned the fact that the “UK government continues to flout its duty to ensure adequate air quality and protect the rights to life and health of its citizens”. That the UK is still full of toxic air is all the more frustrating as we know of the technologies and policies needed to clean our air, including huge investment in public transport, walking and cycling, and a national network of Clean Air Zones that charge all diesel cars - all we need are leaders who will roll them out with ambition.

How is the UK doing compared to the rest of the world?

Not well. People in the UK are 64 times as likely to die of diseases related to air pollution as those in Sweden and twice as likely as those in the US, 2017 figures from the World Health Organisation reveal². Britain has a mortality rate for air pollution of 25.7 for every 100,000 people, which is worse than Brazil and Mexico – and it trailed far behind Sweden, the cleanest nation in the EU, with a rate of 0.4³. In November last year, the European Environment Agency also revealed that in 2013, the UK was second only to Italy in Europe for the highest number of annual deaths from NO₂⁴. It also ranked London's Marylebone High Street as the most polluted site in Europe⁵. On the other hand, other countries are taking concrete actions to reduce air pollution: Paris just held its third city-wide “car free day” on the 1st October. In Amsterdam and the Hague up to 70% of journeys are by bike. Trains are cheaper across Europe than they are here⁶. In Bogotá (Columbia) a bus-first public transport system has been a huge success⁷.

Is the Green Party against cars?

The Breathing Cities campaign is about moving from cities and streets that are designed for cars, towards cities and streets that are designed for people. The more people choose to drive, the more the urban system is re-designed to accommodate drivers. And vice-versa if more people choose to walk, cycle and use public transport. Breathing Cities is about enabling people to use public transport, walk and cycle conveniently, and without the stress and danger of congestion, noise and pollution. The problems of air pollution and congestion are two really

¹ <https://www.clientearth.org/clientearth-demands-urgent-clarification-uk-governments-air-quality-plans/>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/may/17/air-pollution-kills-more-people-in-the-uk-than-in-sweden-us-and-mexico>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/may/17/air-pollution-kills-more-people-in-the-uk-than-in-sweden-us-and-mexico>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/nov/23/uk-has-second-highest-number-of-deaths-from-no2-pollution-in-europe>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/nov/23/uk-has-second-highest-number-of-deaths-from-no2-pollution-in-europe>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2016/jan/04/action-for-rail-357-season-ticket-37-rome-95-berlin>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/aug/27/buses-future-of-urban-transport-brt-bus-rapid-transit>

good reasons to focus on making our city transport systems less car dependent. Everyone will get around faster with fewer cars. It has also been shown that the noise that traffic produces means that people walking nearby are less likely to talk, be patient, or help strangers, no matter how inviting the pavement may be. Even the sound of light car traffic can trigger stress. Breathing Cities is about making streets places that people choose to spend time in.

What if people cannot afford to buy a new electric car?

One of Breathing Cities' national calls is for a targeted diesel scrappage scheme funded by national Government (rather than local authorities). The money raised by the diesel scrappage scheme will subsidise public transport, low emissions car club memberships, cargo bikes and electric bikes, and clean vehicle infrastructure, including subsidies specifically targeted at lower income drivers and small businesses.

Ultimately, the vision in Breathing Cities is to move away from the need for car usage by enabling better transport through lobbying for huge investments in public transport, walking and cycling.

How is Breathing Cities different from The Labour Party's position on clean air?

Labour is also calling for a new Clean Air Act, but it is not backed by anything substantial in their manifesto. The only other mentions of clean air in The Labour's manifesto are:

- transport public freight in publicly owned railway that will free roads of traffic and clean our air.
- retrofit diesel buses to Euro 6 in most severely polluted areas (the Green Party would push for this to happen across the whole country).
- protect air quality when adding to airport capacity (the Green Party is against airport expansion).

The Green Party's ten point plan to tackle air pollution is much stronger and more detailed (see "What would a Clean Air Act look like" below).

Is Clean Air a climate change campaign?

Campaigning on clean air is an ingenious way to tackle climate change locally, in a way that is relatable to people's lives. Carbon dioxide (CO₂) is the most common greenhouse gas contributing to global warming. Transport was the largest GHG emitting sector in the UK in 2016, with 26% of total UK GHG emissions (121 MtCO₂ equivalent)⁸. We know that for most people climate change seems like a distant (spatially and in time) issue, something that they cannot see or control. This campaign – which will focus both on the immediate impact of emissions and on actions that local communities can take to reduce them – will help break down that barrier. The policies required to reduce car usage and reduce air pollution will at the same time help tackle climate change in an effective, locally-driven way. Examples of essential policies that tackle both air pollution and climate change are:

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<https://www.theccc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/2017-Report-to-Parliament-Meeting-Carbon-Budgets-Closing-the-policy-gap.pdf>

- shifting towards more sustainable forms of travel including walking, cycling and public transport,
- a targeted diesel scrappage scheme,
- rolling out the use of electric vehicle infrastructure.

If climate change is to be truly tackled, air pollution needs to be addressed, and vice versa.

How much will this campaign cost?

There are no cheap fixes when it comes to cleaning up the air we breathe. However, it is estimated that the economic costs of the health impacts of exposure to air pollutants (PM 2.5, PM10 and NO₂) range from £1.4 billion to £3.7 billion per year only in London⁹. Funding for improving air quality could potentially be sourced from fines on car companies who have cheated emissions for example. The net economic analysis of Oxford's zero emission zone showed initial negative costs, but a cost saving of £4,490,000 by 2035¹⁰.