

## UK air pollution and public health

The UK Government released its latest consultation documents for controlling air pollution on May 5. Under European law, the UK has a legal obligation to protect public health by minimising the impact of environmental pollutants, including particulate matter and nitrogen dioxide. The UK has been in breach of the European directive since 2010, and has been the target of legal action by environmental groups.

The new proposals (open for consultation until June 15, with a final government paper to be published on July 31) are candid enough to state how poor air quality is the largest environmental risk to public health in the UK. Reduction of nitrogen dioxide emissions from diesel engines is to be prioritised, but with vague proposals for how this is to be achieved, possibly including the retrofitting of cleaner engines for larger goods vehicles, and consideration of scrappage schemes for older diesel cars. Extending clean air zones from the five UK cities currently mandated for pollution control efforts by 2020 will be crucial to future progress—yet the latest report

contains no detail on how many new zones are planned, and their location.

“Woefully weak” and “toothless” are some of the words used by commentators in response to the latest proposals, including the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan. Most striking is the fragmented approach that will inevitably arise as hundreds of local authorities (tasked with implementation) attempt to follow central government guidelines, and the ability of the government to measure progress and hold failing local authorities to account. Furthermore, the UK will need to create a strong national legislative framework for air pollution targets once it has left the European Union.

Outside the UK, there are regions of the world, notably in Asia, that bear the greatest disease burden from air pollution, highlighted in the Global Burden of Disease paper in this issue. But given a dismal track record thus far, the UK urgently needs courageous leadership on this key environmental problem to protect public health. It is hard to see where this is going to come from. ■ *The Lancet*



For the UK Government draft report *Improving air quality: national plan for tackling nitrogen dioxide in our towns and cities* see <https://consult.defra.gov.uk/airquality/air-quality-plan-for-tackling-nitrogen-dioxide/>