



**Fair Transition Unit**

# **CLEAN AIR**

**BRIEFING 3:  
NATIONAL  
GOVERNMENT**

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## ABOUT THIS PAPER

This briefing paper covers some of the main issues and opportunities for national government to act on clean air with an emphasis on addressing the barriers to local leaders being able to act with greater urgency to improve air quality. Further detail can be found in the main report. This work draws on interviews, focus groups and workshops with members of the public, local authority officers and councillors, desk-based research, and councillor polling.

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# SUMMARY AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The government's air quality targets are not ambitious enough. There are no safe limits for exposure to PM<sub>2.5</sub>, and the impacts of air pollution are disproportionately felt by those on low incomes and from minority ethnic groups, as well as children, older people and people with health conditions. **Government should adopt the World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines with a target to achieve them by 2030.**
- Local authorities have many of the powers they need to act on clean air, but lack the resources to make changes on the scale required. Interventions are most effective as part of a range of measures. **Government should provide sufficient non-competitive and longer-term funding for local authorities to improve air quality.** There should be more power devolved to local authorities to raise revenue and provide high quality, affordable public transport services.
- Although 81 per cent of local councillors supported adopting WHO guidelines as targets, the highly politicised nature of air pollution can dissuade local authorities from acting at pace on something that is predicted to result in the premature deaths of up to 36,000 people per year (OHID 2022). **Government must be vocal in its support and demonstrate widespread consensus on the need for urgent action.** This should be in conjunction with a public health campaign on the need to act on clean air.
- Where improving air quality is challenging for local authorities, government has a role to play in shifting purchasing choices, setting standards or introducing regulation. This includes indoor air quality, agricultural and industrial emissions and changes to the planning system to reduce reliance on private cars.

## BACKGROUND

Urgent action is required to clean our air and address the impacts of air pollution on our health.

As well as improving health, there are multiple co-benefits to cleaner air. Acting to improve air quality would also reduce carbon emissions, support people to live more active lives, help make our towns and cities more pleasant overall through creation of green spaces and people-friendly streets, and save the UK economy billions of pounds.

However, the levers available to decision-makers to act on clean air are unclear and held by a number of different actors, each of which have different priorities, incentives or constraints. National government, local and regional authorities, national agencies, businesses, and individuals each hold varying degrees of power to act on clean air. This lack of clarity makes it easy for no-one to take responsibility.

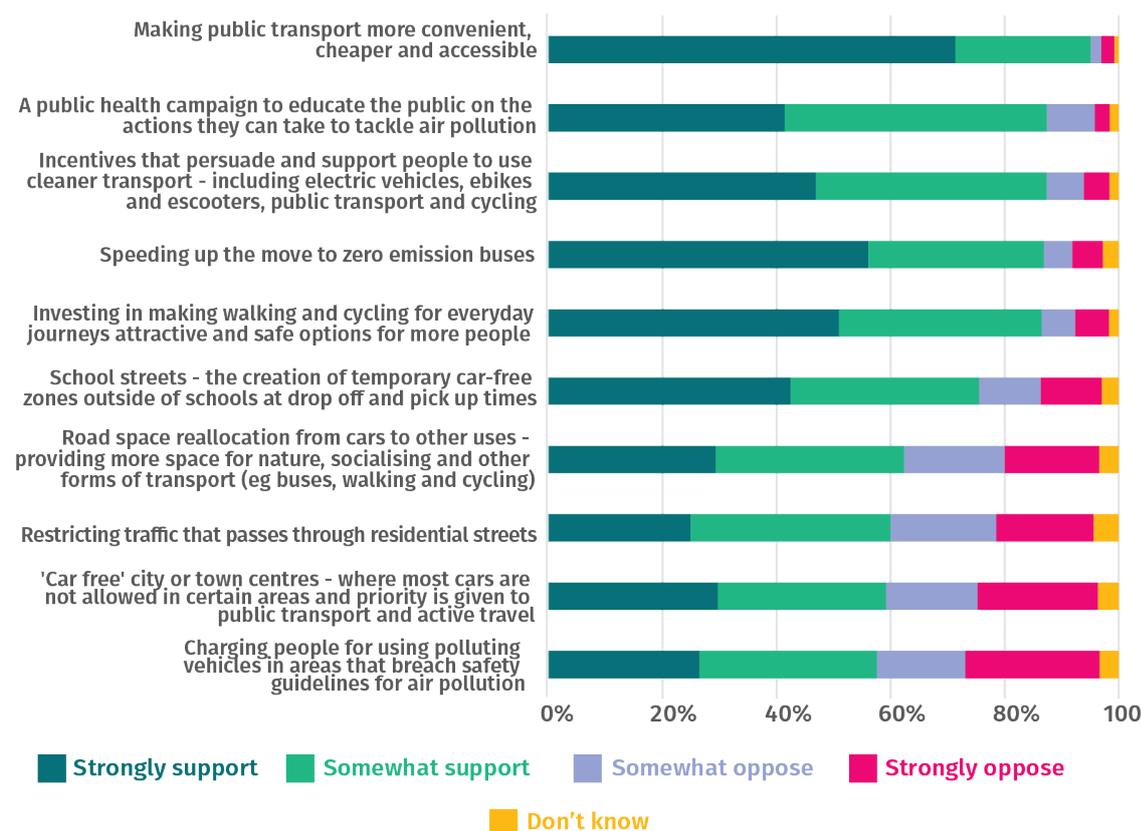
National government has already lost in court three times over its failure to meet air quality targets, leading to a Ministerial Direction for local authorities to improve air quality. It needs to set out a credible pathway for meeting more ambitious air quality targets to enable local authorities to act in their own areas.

## FINDINGS

The current political landscape threatens to derail steps that have been taken to address air pollution and current action is off-track, despite some studies suggesting that if the UK implements in full its policies related to net zero and air pollution, it is possible to reach the WHO interim targets for PM<sub>2.5</sub> by 2030 (CAF 2022).

**FIGURE 1: URBAN COUNCILLORS POLLED SUPPORT ALL PROPOSED INTERVENTIONS TO IMPROVE AIR QUALITY**

*Response to the question: “To what extent do you support or oppose the following measures to improve air quality”*



Source: Author’s analysis of polling commissioned for this project

**The vast majority (81 per cent) of local councillors we polled backed adopting WHO guidelines as targets locally and supported a wide range of interventions designed to improve air quality** (see figure 1). This includes measures that charge the most polluting vehicles or reallocate road space from cars to other use, which are generally the most effective interventions to improve air quality. Lack of support is felt to hold back acting on this ambition, with **70 per cent of councillors feeling that the government was not doing enough to support local authorities to improve air quality**. We found that local authorities have the necessary powers to implement most of the measures in figure 1, but a lack of funding and concerns about political pushback are a significant barrier to action.

Vocal opposition to action may be in part fuelled by a lack of awareness about air pollution; polling in August 2023 found that 55 per cent of the public do not think air pollution is a problem in their local area (YouGov 2023). Our engagement with the public helped highlight where some of the pushback might stem from, and to outline a route forward that will bring people along and rebuild some of the trust people feel has been lost in local and national government.

## PRINCIPLES FOR ACTION, DEVELOPED WITH THE PUBLIC

We held interviews, focus groups and ran a workshop with members of the public living on low-income in urban areas on clean air to help us develop a set of principles for local action on air quality.

**Act with urgency.** The public told us that they expect government to act quickly to protect those most impacted by poor air quality.

**Big changes require fair implementation.** There was an understanding that our lifestyles will need to change to address the challenge of clean air, but people need support to make changes in their lives. Participants were clear that during a cost of living crisis it would not be fair to ask people to pay more for something without providing support. There was also an understanding that changing behaviour is much easier for some than it is for others, and these differences should be considered when designing interventions, and that government must provide funding or incentives to help those on lower incomes. There was strong support for public transport to ensure that everyone could get around, and that the wealthiest shouldn't be able to avoid making changes because they can afford to pay their way out of them.

*“It would be fairer if you just closed the city centre to everyone sometimes – otherwise the rich can pay and everyone else can’t.”*

Young person focus group

**Taking responsibility.** People felt strongly that there is a need for everyone to take responsibility for improving air quality, but there was an understanding that some things are outside their control. It was important for everyone to be seen to be doing their bit, including businesses and farmers, who should be supported by government where necessary. Government should be highly visible in taking action, for example through a public health campaign, or provision of electric vehicle (EV) charging.

*“People should be supported to make changes in their lives.”*

Deliberative workshop

**Access to information and being heard.** The public told us they wanted more information made available about air pollution, including the impacts of air pollution and what they could do about it. The need for elected officials and the council to rebuild trust came across strongly – our participants did not feel heard. A public health campaign that outlines the risks of poor air quality and the need for urgent action would help make the case for action, and mean that the public were informed.

*“Air pollution is invisible – because you can’t see it, it’s out of sight and out of mind. People don’t know how bad it is”*

Deliberative workshop

## The limit of local authority powers

There are some emissions that local authorities have limited control over. This includes ammonia, of which 88 per cent is caused by agricultural practices (Defra 2018). Emissions have remained broadly stable since 2008 and are not currently under the remit of local authorities, therefore requiring national government to take a more proactive stance.

Improving indoor air quality is challenging for local authorities, since many of the interventions are related to behaviours, consumer choices, building regulations, or sit under the control of private landlords. Addressing emissions from wood burning falls under local authority powers on smoke control, but many lack capacity to adequately enforce smoke control areas. Government has a role to play in shifting purchasing choices and setting standards. There are also sources of air pollution that will require regulation from central government, including agricultural and industrial emissions.

## FISCAL LEVERS FOR REDUCING AIR POLLUTION FROM TRAFFIC

Low emission zones have been found to be the most effective measure to reduce NO<sub>2</sub> levels in the shortest possible time.<sup>1</sup> Other measures can be effective, but need to be delivered in combination with each other, often take a long time to have an effect, and the impact of those interventions can be hard to measure (AQEG 2020).

However, fiscal levers are highly politically charged. London’s Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) and Nottingham’s workplace parking levy, both of which have delivered cleaner air, faced political and public opposition which has potentially put off other cities or elected officials considering similar initiatives. The ministerial direction required cities that might otherwise have been concerned about political backlash to act on air pollution, and provided significant funding for the cities to implement clean air zones, both for scrappage schemes and the initial installation of Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) cameras.

The financial arrangement, where government recoups a portion of the fines to cover the cost of the programme, with the rest returning to the council to be spent on transport

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<sup>1</sup> Both Birmingham and Bath have reported a reduction in NO<sub>2</sub> emissions since the introduction of their clean air zones in 2021 and 2022 (Barltrop 2023, Birmingham CC 2022).

projects or support the scrappage scheme is welcome. However, many councils lacked the upfront funding to support those on low incomes who were impacted by the change and required support from central government. **It is essential that government continues to financially support action on air quality to ensure that the burden does not fall on those with the least capacity to change their behaviours**, both individuals and smaller businesses.

Where local authorities have taken a more proactive approach, central government should support this through funding if required. In London, Camden and Hackney have adopted WHO air quality targets, and Oxfordshire is in the process of implementing a zero emission zone without the need for a ministerial direction.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Some local authorities have adopted the WHO guidelines as their targets, but in general there is a lack of ambition and urgency around air quality among many local authority officers and councillors. Research suggests that if 'current and proposed' policy proposals are implemented the UK will meet WHO safety targets<sup>2</sup> (CAF 2022), but that current action is not on track.

**Recommendation:** Government should adopt WHO guidelines for air pollution and should outline a credible plan to achieve their targets. The ministerial directive for cities to meet air quality targets should be extended as air pollution targets become more ambitious.

A credible plan to improve air quality will include; improving information and data availability, enabling local authority action, and taking a pro-active and forward-looking approach to emerging sources of pollution. The Environment Act 2021 goes some way to strengthening the accountability of local authorities, but they will need political and financial support from central government to deliver.

### Information and data

In our deliberative work, it was clear that government needs to rebuild trust with the public. Participants in our workshop said they felt they had a limited understanding of the risks of air pollution. When asked about interventions, there was strong support for a public health and education campaign.

**Recommendation:** The Office for Health Improvement and Disparities should roll out a public health and education campaign, outlining the risks of air pollution and actions individuals can take to reduce air pollution.<sup>3</sup> Government should consider encouraging the

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<sup>2</sup> The WHO safety targets are an interim target, distinct from the WHO guidelines referenced previously.

<sup>3</sup> This might include information about smoke control areas or the impact of gas boilers and supporting heat pump uptake. It might also be transport-related; encouraging active travel, public transport use, EV car uptake, walking kids to school, buying smaller cars and anti-idling campaigns.

inclusion of pollution levels on weather forecasts, particularly on days of high air pollution alerts.

**Recommendation:** Government should be transparent with the public and show they are serious about addressing this risk. This should start by including clean air in the priorities of the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP), and ensuring the OEP is sufficiently independent in holding government to account.

**Recommendation:** Evaluation of initiatives is challenging since impacts are often due to a combination of factors. Government should provide more monitoring and funding for evaluations, and should ensure this data is accessible to the public.

## Enabling local authority action

Despite local authorities having many of the powers they need to act on air pollution, they are limited by a lack of funds. Competitive funding rounds mean councils that are better resourced are more able to win funding than others. Given the negative outcomes from not acting on air pollution, government should provide core funding for local authorities to improve air quality.

**Recommendation:** Government should provide long-term financial support for action on clean air. Funding should be linked to local authorities developing a credible plan to reduce emissions in a reasonable timeline, and can be used to cover implementation, monitoring and staffing. Fiscal devolution will support greater local leadership on improving air quality, and England's local authorities should have the powers seen elsewhere in the world to raise and spend more money locally (Johns 2023).

**Recommendation:** Government should offer additional support to local authorities taking urgent action. There should be a commitment to ensure interventions are equitable and funding to support this, for example there should have been more support for the ULEZ scrappage scheme (from central government) for SMEs in London, people on low incomes or with disabilities, or who travel to London for work. As previously called for by IPPR's Environmental Justice Commission (2021), government should introduce an easy to access, national scheme to support people to shift to cleaner transport modes, for example making grants available for EVs, ebikes, car clubs or public transport.

Local authorities have reported that the cost of enforcing environmental permitting or parking fines is greater than the value raised through the fees and fines themselves. Local authorities have limited abilities to raise funds which means they have less to spend on mitigation measures, such as better public transport or scrappage schemes.

**Recommendation:** Government should reform traffic fines and environmental permitting fees, along with funding for local authority enforcement, to ensure local authorities have sufficient capacity to enforce air quality measures.

## Setting standards and being forward-looking

There are several areas where local authorities do not have the powers to address air pollution. Some of these fall under Best Available Technology (BAT) regulations, which are used to apply pollution controls to industries. The proposal to expand environmental

permitting to cover dairy and intensive beef is welcome, since ammonia from agriculture is a major contributor to transboundary PM<sub>2.5</sub> pollution.

**Recommendation:** Tighten the regulatory landscape to ensure products and practices are in line to meet WHO targets. Implement the proposal to expand Best Available Technology (BAT) regulations to cover agricultural emissions, and consider extending to other pollutant sources such as industrial food preparation and diesel generators.

There is an opportunity to reduce air pollution from construction sites as well as throughout the life of the building (Pearce 2022). Following the Clean Air Strategy 2019, ventilation standards for indoor air quality were improved in 2021, which is welcome. However, there is scope for further improvements, since although air quality can be controlled through planning, this is not the default.

**Recommendation:** Introduce more stringent building regulations to limit emissions during construction and operation of new builds and retrofit strategies and ensure local authorities have capacity to enforce these. We strongly support the phase-out of gas boilers and electrification of heat, reducing use of biomass in district heating schemes and would recommend banning woodburning stoves.

With the continued introduction of EVs, which do not currently pay vehicle excise duty<sup>4</sup> or fuel duty, there are calls for an alternative tax to replace the lost revenue for government (Transport Committee 2022, Adam and Stroud 2019). National road pricing would address this gap, and would offer a way to simplify the currently complicated landscape, removing the need for different cities to have different CAZ requirements. It also offers an opportunity to design a programme that is equitable, whilst also offering a shift away from car dependency.

**Recommendation:** Government should consider how road user charging could be rolled out nationally and what mitigations would need to be in place beforehand to ensure it did not disproportionately impact those on the lowest incomes. These mitigations should be drawn up, in part, through a deliberative process.

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<sup>4</sup> Electric vehicles will have to pay vehicle excise duty from April 2025.

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