

Toxic emissions down, but people still dying from air pollution – it's time for something radical

February 19 2018, by Gary Haq



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The UK has made much progress in its efforts to clean the air of toxic pollutants, but while the thick, dirty haze of the 1952 [great London smog](#) no longer fills the city streets, air pollution remains a silent killer. In the UK, poor air quality is responsible for some [40,000 deaths](#) each year. It

has been linked to diseases such as cancer, asthma, stroke and heart disease, diabetes, obesity and dementia. The health problems from exposure to air pollution are costing the nation more than £20 billion every year.

Dirty air also causes [acid rain](#), which affects historical monuments, land and aquatic systems, and the excessive release of [soil nutrients](#), which stimulates algae growth in lakes and water courses. It can even form a ground-level ozone gas that [damages plants](#), crops and forests.

Getting clean

The latest update to the [UK national air pollution statistics](#) shows that there has been a long-term decrease in emissions from power stations, transport, household heating, agriculture and industrial processes.

Over the past four decades, emissions of key pollutants such as sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, non-methane organic compounds and particulate matter have fallen by between 66% and 92%. But emissions of ammonia from the agriculture sector rose by 3% between 2015 and 2016. This has been blamed on [manure](#) from larger dairy herds and using fertilisers.

Despite the decline in air pollutants, the UK remains in breach of [European limits](#) on nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) in 16 cities, mainly due to [diesel](#) fumes from road transport. In 2018, London reached its [legal air pollution](#) limit for the whole year within one month: on Brixton Road, South London, NO₂ levels exceed average hourly limits 18 times – the maximum allowed under European air quality rules.

A decision on potential legal proceedings against the UK is expected from the European Commission in [mid-March](#).

Trips for free

If air quality is to improve, people must change the way they move around their cities. The UK government intends to ban the sale of all [petrol and diesel cars and vans from 2040](#). The [rigging of emission tests](#) by car manufacturers has already resulted in consumers ditching diesel – sale of [diesel cars](#) fell by 25% in January 2018 compared with the previous year.

In contrast, sales of electric vehicles are growing – though this trend will need to accelerate if 60% of all new cars and vans are to be electric by 2030, as the [UK Committee on Climate Change](#) hopes. While electric vehicles will improve [air quality](#) by reducing NO₂ emissions, they still produce [half of all transport-related particulate matter emissions](#) because of the fine particles released from their brakes, clutches and tyres, as well as the dust thrown up from the roads.

Having [fewer cars](#) on the roads would be even better than having cleaner cars. Attitudes may be changing, alongside the rise of the [sharing economy](#). Younger people are using apps to take part in car club schemes, ride-sharing and car-sharing as a way of opting out of the expense and hassle of owning a car. But there's also a clear need to provide infrastructure that encourages more walking, cycling and public transport.

If the British people want a more radical solution, then they could consider making public transport in cities free. This is already happening in [Seoul](#) on days with severe pollution. [Germany](#) is reported to be mulling over plans to make public transport free to address air pollution and reduce the number of private cars.

But this doesn't always work as planned: one [analysis](#) of a fare-free [public transport](#) scheme in Tallin found that the increase in use was

largely from people who normally walk, rather than drive a car.

While the overall drop in [air pollutants](#) is welcome, the UK needs to make further progress to ensure that everyone can [breathe clean air](#).

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