

London vehicle pollution toll zone expands despite controversy

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London's ULEZ mirrors similar low-emission zones to improve air quality in more than 200 cities in 10 countries across Europe.

London's Ultra-Low Emission Zone expanded on Tuesday to become the largest pollution charging scheme in the world but prompting protests

from those angry at the extra financial burden during a cost-of-living crisis.

The city's mayor Sadiq Khan is pressing ahead with the politically charged extension across Greater London, arguing it will help clean up the British capital's air.

However, he has faced a fierce backlash from many living in and around the newly encompassed areas since unveiling the plans last year, with critics arguing the scheme is more concerned with raising revenue.

The contentious move also has national political implications, after it was blamed for costing Khan's main opposition Labour party victory in a by-election last month in former prime minister Boris Johnson's old parliamentary seat.

Khan had reportedly come under pressure from Labour leader Keir Starmer to stall or U-turn on the plans but refused.

A High Court challenge brought by several outer London local authorities also failed to stop its expansion.

"The policy to clean the air in London is not anti-car or anti-motorist," the mayor said Tuesday, as he faced fresh protests.

"We now have a really effective policy to reduce air pollution," he told the BBC.

'Killing London'

London's Ultra-Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) mirrors similar low-emission zones to improve air quality in more than 200 cities in 10 countries across Europe.

First introduced in inner London in 2019 and separate from the two-decades-old congestion charge, it requires drivers of the most polluting vehicles to pay £12.50 (\$16) on days they are on the road.

They face fines of up to £180 for each day they fail to pay.

That has infuriated opponents, who argue outer London is not well served enough by public transport and that it is the wrong time to put extra costs on drivers.

Britain is grappling with decades-high inflation, spiraling bills and anemic economic growth, which have left many people struggling to pay for their daily essentials.

"I can't afford to buy a new car," part-time bakery worker Robin Dewey, 64, of southeast London, told AFP at an anti-ULEZ protest in central London.

Attendees rallied in Westminster, waving placards accusing Khan of "killing London".

Retiree John Davis was among those claiming the scheme is intended to make up transport budget shortfalls.

"They cannot manage their finances so they want us to pay," he said.

Scrappage scheme

The mayor is adamant the ULEZ expansion will help improve London's "toxic" air pollution in outlying areas, which he notes causes thousands of deaths and life-changing illnesses per year.

He developed adult-onset asthma a decade ago and blames it on decades

of breathing the capital's poor air.

In a legal first in 2021, a coroner ruled that poor air quality from vehicle emissions made a "material contribution" to the death of a nine-year-old London girl who suffered a severe asthma attack.

Petrol cars registered pre-2006 and diesel vehicles first registered before September 2015 are unlikely to meet the minimum emissions standards required.

Transport for London (TfL)—a local government body—estimates that fewer than 200,000 such vehicles currently enter the new zone, based on existing ULEZ camera analysis.

But the RAC motoring group used a freedom of information request to discover that more than 850,000 ineligible vehicles are registered within London alone.

Khan argues that many of those are not actually driven in the capital.

Earlier this month he increased financial support for vehicle owners, making available to every Londoner various grants worth thousands of pounds to scrap non-compliant cars and trucks.

He has expressed frustration at the lack of government support for the scheme and the accompanying scrappage reimbursement, unlike for those in other cities in England.

But Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's government has claimed the extension will have little public health benefit.

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