

Cleaning up the Air We Breathe – a Liberal Democrat Action Plan

A hidden public health emergency

Around a decade ago, the Labour Government, worried about global warming, encouraged the switch from petrol to diesel. We now know that this led to a dangerous rise in the emission of nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), particulates, and ozone (O₃). In the UK, these three together cause 40,000 early deaths each year. Since 2010, the UK has broken the legal limits for NO₂ every year. Road transport is responsible for 80% of roadside NO₂.

These emissions harm our environment and threaten biodiversity. But public awareness of emissions and their origins remains dangerously low.

The Government response

The Government has been weak, patchy, slow and unambitious. The Government cannot even do the minimum to comply with EU legal limits. It has been taken to court three times and lost on each occasion, but still fails to produce a comprehensive response.

The Government has set itself a deadline of 2040 to end the production of diesel and petrol cars, but this target is woefully inadequate, lagging behind developments in the market. Instead of setting an ambitious target for industry, the Government is following behind in the slipstream with a target that is too distant to be relevant.

The Government have now released its own plan "Road to Zero," but these proposals simply do not go far enough.

The cost

An urgent response is required because of the widespread health problems caused by emissions. From the womb to old age, these impacts go well beyond lung conditions such as asthma and lung cancer. Emissions also contribute to diabetes, dementia, heart disease, low birth weight, premature births and the impaired lung development of children. Children and the elderly are particularly vulnerable. Emissions widen inequality because the poorest people are more likely to live and study near highly polluted inner-city roads.

These effects have a huge financial impact on the NHS and hence on the taxpayer. The cost to the NHS is estimated at £20 billion a year. It is not a case of if we can afford to tackle this problem – we cannot afford NOT to tackle it.

After Brexit

Most of our current air quality regulations owe their origins to the EU. Given the UK's poor record in observing existing standards, we are sceptical about the Government's commitment to further improvement.

If Brexit happens, Liberal Democrats commit to, at the least, mirroring or improving on EU environmental standards. We will establish a statutory, independent Air Quality Agency to enforce the highest standards.

Our commitment: A 15-point action plan to clean up the air we breathe

Liberal Democrats commit to a comprehensive, ambitious and realistic Action Plan to tackle emissions from road transport.

If our proposals are to attract public support, we must demonstrate the dangers of air pollution and improve the **public health** of citizens. By giving people a legal right to live in unpolluted areas, we empower residents to fight for improved air quality where they live. Liberal Democrats propose the following:

- 1 The Government must pass a Clean Air Act urgently, based on World Health Organisation guidelines, enforced by a new Air Quality Agency. The Act will enshrine the legal right to unpolluted air wherever you live.
- 2 There is an urgent need for a widespread public health campaign to raise awareness of the risks associated with emissions and to encourage preventive behaviour. Information should be targeted at schools, GP surgeries and hospitals, as well as the general population.
- 3 Air pollution testing must be undertaken much more widely and frequently, with warning signs displayed in pollution hotspots and in sensitive areas such as near schools.

Rapid developments in alternative fuels mean that **petrol and diesel** vehicles should be phased out far earlier. But we must also take steps now to improve air quality. Liberal Democrats would:

- 4 Ban the sale of new diesel cars and small vans by 2025 and of petrol cars and small vans by 2030. Central Government should lead the way by replacing the current vehicle fleet with electric, hybrid or other ultra-low emission vehicles by 2022.
- 5 Introduce a diesel scrappage scheme, carefully targeted at the most polluting vehicles and taking account of the needs of poorer car owners and of small and medium-sized businesses. This should include the option of a system of mobility credits, which can be put towards shared transport schemes such as shared cars and car clubs or public transport.
- 6 Reform Vehicle Excise Duty so that it is graduated to reflect levels of both NO₂ and CO₂ emissions in every year. Manufacturers should be required to include air quality emissions information as part of vehicle labelling.
- 7 Create Ultra Low Emission Zones and Clean Air Zones in at least 10 more towns and cities. As part of this diesel lorries should be banned from entering 'high pollution' areas between 7am and 7pm.
- 8 Introduce a ban on idling in vehicles, near schools, hospitals, parks and care homes, with fines for those who ignore the ban.

Sales of **electric and other low-emission vehicles** are increasing, but problems remain that are preventing their mass take-up as true alternatives to petrol and diesel. Liberal Democrats propose that:

- 9 All electric and hybrid vehicles manufactured and sold in the EU must use a universal plug for charging. The Government must quickly use the new powers it has to standardise plug sockets for electric vehicles.
- 10 The Government needs to lead and invest significantly in schemes to speed up the strategic roll-out of rapid charging points. This should include motorways, petrol stations and popular in-town locations such as public car parks and supermarkets. A step change in investment is needed for residential on-street charging, which should use the existing lamppost infrastructure wherever possible so as not to clutter the

pavement. New planning legislation must ensure all new developments and large-scale regeneration schemes include adequate electric charging facilities.

- 11 Legislation should ensure that prices for electric charging are always kept below those for equivalent refuelling with diesel or petrol. This will mean that consumers choosing an electric vehicle will never be left out of pocket for making a greener choice.
- 12 The Government must lead by investing in research into alternative technologies, such as hydrogen fuel cells, as well as into battery technology. Government funding for all these initiatives should be supplemented by a Clean Air Fund from industry, akin to the one established in Germany.

Public transport and taxis contribute a huge amount to poor air quality in urban areas, with the growth of private hire companies like Uber, as well as diesel buses. Liberal Democrats propose that:

- 13 All diesel buses operating in urban areas should be phased out within five years, either retrofitted or replaced with vehicles operating on ultra-low or zero emission fuels. Government funding must be targeted to support bus operators to renew their fleets.
- 14 All private hire vehicles licensed to operate in urban areas should be electric, hybrid, or capable of running on other ultra-low emission technology, within five years.
- 15 The Government must provide greater and more ambitious support for all forms of public transport. "Active Travel" initiatives involving walking and cycling should be strongly promoted. These will reduce reliance on private vehicles, thereby helping to reduce congestion and emissions. Councils must be better supported both financially and with training to implement local initiatives.