

Cleaner air would help 150,000 breathe easier

Ben Webster, Environment Editor, The Times - Wednesday March 02 2022

The number of people with respiratory diseases would fall by 150,000 a year by 2030 if the government delivered on promises to improve air quality, a study has found.

The report strengthens the case for ministers to set a new target for fine particle pollution, in line with the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommended interim limit of ten micrograms per cubic metre of air.

The UK legal limit is double that, but the Environment Act 2021 requires the government to announce tougher targets for fine particle pollution by October.

The Clean Air for All campaign, launched by The Times in 2019, calls for air pollution limits to be set in line with WHO guidelines.

The study by Imperial College London calculated the health benefits that would result if the government implemented proposed policies by 2030, including phasing out London's diesel buses, tighter limits on burning coal and wood, reducing gas boiler emissions and stricter limits on emissions from industry. The policies include recommendations by the Climate Change Committee for accelerating the switch to zero emission vehicles.

Imperial found that there would be 149,000 fewer adults per year with chronic phlegm, 25,000 fewer asthmatic children with bronchitic symptoms, 9,000 fewer hospital admissions for respiratory and cardiovascular conditions and 20 fewer infant deaths.

The average life expectancy of a person born in 2018 would rise by nine to ten weeks, and the benefits would be worth £3.3 billion a year to the economy through reduced NHS costs and higher productivity.

Imperial also found that there had been a 30 per cent fall since 2014 in air pollution-related hospital admissions owing to improvements in London's air quality.

Jane Burston, executive director at the Clean Air Fund, which commissioned the study, said: "This research shows us that achieving healthier air is possible across the vast majority of the UK by 2030 based on policies the government already plans to implement."

"The new air quality target for the UK should align with WHO at a minimum, with a view to further reducing pollution beyond this in the future. It is necessary, beneficial and achievable, and will save lives and money."

Professor Frank Kelly, of the environmental research group at Imperial College London, said: "People in the UK have long suffered from poor air quality. There is no excuse for such a situation to continue."

"We understand the sources of air pollution that must be targeted and we have the technologies to reduce emissions to low levels or to eliminate them."

"By grasping this capability now, the government can improve our air quality and the health of people of all ages."