

Boris Johnson has backed the [*Times* clean air campaign](#) and committed himself to legally binding targets to reduce pollution as part of his first Queen's Speech on Monday.

The prime minister pledged that a new Environment Bill would succeed the 1956 Clean Air Act, introduced in response to London's Great Smog.

Praising this newspaper's Clean Air for All campaign, Mr Johnson said that ministers would "improve our environment and the quality of the air we all breathe".

The Times revealed in May that 2.6 million pupils attend schools in areas where the level of fine particles in the air exceeds the limit set by the World Health Organisation.

Every school in London is above the limit, as are 234 schools in Birmingham and more than 100 in large cities such as Nottingham and Leicester.

Mr Johnson said that he wanted his government to "leave our country in a better state than we found it", adding: "*The Times* has powerfully demanded a successor to the 1956 Clean Air Act . . . and I am proud to tell you that this Conservative government will be the one to deliver it. This landmark legislation will set a framework of far-reaching, legally binding targets to reduce plastics, restore biodiversity, improve the quality of our water and — inspired by the brilliant campaign of this newspaper — clean up our air."

There is expected to be a specific target for fine particles known as PM2.5, the most dangerous form of air pollution because their microscopic size allows them to penetrate deep into the lungs and enter the bloodstream.

The threshold and a target date for implementation will be set later, however, meaning that it is not yet possible to gauge the significance of Mr Johnson's commitment.

The Times is calling on ministers to adopt into law the WHO's limit of ten micrograms of fine particles per cubic metre of air. The demand is supported by the chairmen of four parliamentary select committees in a letter to this newspaper.

Almost two thirds of people want this limit to become legally binding, according to a YouGov poll commissioned by the environmental charity Client Earth. The poll also found that 67 per cent of the public wanted the most polluting vehicles to pay entry charges in cities, as they do in central London.

It is unclear whether the Environment Bill will contain the tough measures needed to tackle the pollution that cuts short 40,000 lives a year.

The new law will force companies to pay the full cost of the collection and recycling of packaging.

Local authorities will also be forced to collect a consistent set of materials for recycling, including plastic packaging, and companies will have to say whether or not plastic packaging can be recycled.

The new bill will include the powers to introduce a deposit return scheme for drinks bottles and legally binding targets to increase biodiversity and improve water quality with the creation of an independent Office for Environmental Protection.

Simon Gillespie, of the British Heart Foundation, said: "Taking tough action for cleaner air now will prevent thousands of heart attacks and strokes in the years to come."

Unicef UK, the children's charity, said the bill was "a crucial opportunity for the government to make a public commitment to reduce air pollution to acceptable levels".

Analysis: PM must now walk the walk

Boris Johnson has been full of praise for this newspaper's Clean Air for All campaign, describing it as "brilliant" and saying that it is inspiring him to introduce far-reaching legally binding targets to tackle air pollution (Ben Webster writes).

Our campaign advances a bold manifesto containing five specific measures that would save thousands of lives every year.

The prime minister's language sounds promising but it remains to be seen whether his environment bill really will, as he suggests, be a worthy successor to the 1956 Clean Air Act introduced in response to the Great London Smog. The UK already has legally binding targets for cleaner air under the EU but they are woefully inadequate. If Mr Johnson is serious about stopping the poisoning of our lungs, hearts and brains he must adopt in law the much tougher World Health Organisation pollution limits and set a date by when they will be met.

Meeting those limits will require tough measures to tackle all the main sources of pollution, including vehicle exhausts, tyres and brakes, gas boilers, wood-burning and the use of slurry and fertiliser on farms.