

Clean Air Act would give everyone the human right to an unpolluted atmosphere

Britain once led the world in improving air quality but is now a "laggard and a scofflaw", according to the UN special representative on human rights and the environment.

The Times is responding by launching an urgent campaign for a new Clean Air Act to give everyone in the UK a right to unpolluted air, in what would be the biggest change in air quality legislation since the 1956 Clean Air Act was implemented in response to the Great London Smog.

Air pollution cuts short 40,000 lives across the country each year and costs the economy £20 billion annually in healthcare and impact on businesses, according to the Royal College of Physicians. Public Health England's forecasts show that if left unchecked pollutants will cause 2.4 million new cases of disease in the next 16 years.

David Boyd, who was appointed to the UN role last year, condemned Britain's lack of action on the problem. He told The Times it was "frankly embarrassing" that courts had ruled three times since 2015 that the government was failing its citizens by producing air quality plans so weak that they breached its legal duty.

"The UK was the first country in the world to pass a Clean Air Act back in the 1950s after the terrible London smog catastrophe," he said. "It's time to reassume that mantle of leadership instead of being a laggard and a scofflaw [by] ignoring these court decisions."

Mr Boyd said Britain should treat the case of **Ella Kissi-Debrah** as "a learning moment" and opportunity to act to protect millions of other children. Nine-year-old Ella died in 2013 after repeated severe asthma attacks during spikes in air pollution. The High Court last week ordered a new inquest to investigate how traffic fumes near her home in south London may have contributed to her death.

The Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, the Royal College of Nursing and the British Medical Association are supporting the call for a new Clean Air Act to address what they described as a "major public health crisis caused largely by the use of road vehicles".

The medical bodies are all members of the UK Health Alliance on Climate Change, which says the act should reduce the concentration of pollutants in the air to "as close to zero as possible in the shortest amount of time".

Nicky Philpott, director of the alliance, which represents more than 650,000 doctors and nurses, said: "Air pollution is an invisible but serious threat to our health. Exposure to air pollution builds up over time and can cause asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, cancer, dementia, stroke and heart disease, obesity and diabetes. Children and vulnerable groups are most affected. It is a public health emergency and we must act now.

"The alliance wants the government to protect our health through a new Clean Air Act. We need legally enforced air quality standards that at least meet World Health Organisation recommended limits and a new independent statutory body to enforce this.

"Crucially, the actions needed to reduce air pollution are also those that improve our health anyway, including through helping more people cycle and walk instead of using cars."

Recent studies from Britain and Canada have suggested that air pollution contributes to a higher risk of dementia, adding to evidence that it harms the brain in old age. While not yet conclusive, links to depression and teenage psychosis have also been found. There is emerging research that pollution contributes to diabetes and even obesity through driving chronic tissue inflammation.

Public Health England has estimated that if pollution levels do not come down, they will cause 2.4 million new cases of disease by 2035. This includes almost 500,000 asthma cases and more than 800,000 cases of diabetes, about

350,000 people developing heart disease, more than 100,000 strokes and 86,000 cases each of lung cancer and dementia.

Road transport is the main cause of air pollution in cities, with diesel vehicles emitting nitrogen dioxide gas and the burning of both petrol and diesel producing particulate matter. All types of vehicle contribute more toxic particles from tyre and brake wear.

Baroness Jones of Moulsecoomb, the Green Party peer, produced a draft Clean Air Bill last year and plans to resubmit it to parliament next month.

She said: "It's wonderful that The Times is campaigning on this extremely important issue. Air pollution is responsible for early deaths and crippling long-term illnesses, mostly affecting the less well off. It not only impacts on adults and children now, but will damage their futures too, putting a huge burden on the NHS. The World Health Organisation has it in their top four global crises, ranking alongside ebola and antibiotic resistance."

Simon Birkett, founder of Clean Air in London, a campaign group, said enshrining the human right to clean air in a new Clean Air Act was the "single most effective and quickest way to address the UK's largest environmental health risk. Overnight, air pollution, including greenhouse gases, would have to be considered in every decision by every government body in the way that equalities are now considered."