

The Times view on fighting air pollution: Dirty Politics

The government is not taking the challenge of combating air pollution sufficiently seriously. Decisive action is needed if disease and deaths are to be avoided.

The government is fully aware of the long-term dangers to public health from air pollution. The Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' own clean air strategy published at the end of last year states that "poor air quality poses a serious risk to human health, and has a major impact both on the natural world and the state of the economy".

Public Health England estimates that pollution will create 2.4 million cases of disease between now and 2035, including 500,000 asthma cases and about 350,000 people developing heart disease. Ministers ought to be taking this issue far more seriously. The government's efforts so far look half-hearted and fall far short of what is needed to tackle the crisis.

As things stand, the government will only say that it is committed to cutting by half the number of people living in areas above the limit recommended by the World Health Organisation (WHO) of 10 micrograms of fine particle pollution per cubic metre by 2025. Yet Michael Gove, the environment secretary, is unable to say what the baseline for this target will be or how the target will be achieved or even whether it will be made legally binding.

Meanwhile Matt Hancock, the health secretary, is unable to say how big a reduction in incidents of disease the government hopes to achieve by this target. Nor has the government any plans to bring forward the date for ending sales of new petrol and diesel cars from 2040, which means Britain will lag behind many other countries including China, India, Ireland and the Netherlands.

This is not good enough. The government's own projections show many parts of the country will experience little or no improvement in air quality over the next decade. Analysis of the agriculture department's data for 9,000 roads suggests that 1,000 of them will still have the same concentration of fine particles in 2030 as they have now. And 4,500 roads will see declines of less than 10 per cent. Britain's most polluted road, the A12 in northeast London, is projected to still have concentrations of fine particles 60 per cent above the WHO's limit of 10 micrograms by 2030.

The government says that the details of its clean air strategy will be included in a new environment bill. This was expected at the start of this year but there has been no sign of it. The Times launched its own Clean Air For All campaign this week with a five-point manifesto to improve air quality. This included a ban on sales of new diesel and petrol cars from 2030 and temporary traffic bans outside schools. The campaign has already garnered widespread support from environmental, health and parent groups. Yet any meaningful improvements in air quality will depend on decisive government action.

That requires legally binding targets overseen by an independent regulator with powers of enforcement. Until now that task has been performed by the European Commission, whose clean air targets have succeeded in delivering significant reductions in pollutants. British emissions of sulphur dioxide, for example, are almost 95 per cent lower than in 1990, while nitrogen dioxide emissions fell by almost 27 per cent between 2010 and 2016. They are at their lowest level since records began.

Yet the government's plans for a new office of environmental protection fall "woefully short" of what is needed, according to the Commons environmental audit committee. The proposed office has been criticised as insufficiently independent, its remit too narrow and lacking in enforcement powers.

There is no doubt that cleaning up Britain's air will come with political costs. But far-sighted politicians should recognise that tackling this crisis will bring opportunities too. Besides, as with the campaign against smoking, the science is overwhelming. There is no excuse to delay.