

Pollutionwatch: why efforts to tackle air pollution can backfire

New laws can have unforeseen consequences so it is vital to regularly track progress

Gary Fuller reporting in The Guardian on 29 Aug 2019

Cleaning up London's buses halved nitrogen dioxide in places, but it got worse in other areas. Photograph: Peter Macdiarmid/Getty Images

In his [final speech](#) as UK environment secretary, Michael Gove promised to incorporate World Health Organization guidelines for air pollution into the environment bill. This would tighten laws for particle pollution that are currently far weaker than the WHO recommends.

But working to meet limits can [focus efforts \(pdf\)](#) where the law is being breached and favour the construction of new pollution sources, such as factories and developments with large car parks, in places that already meet the law.

Studies, including one on more than [61 million](#) people in the US, show health effects wherever there is polluted air. It would be better to tackle the problem wherever people live.

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Across Europe, [each country](#) has targets to reduce the average particle pollution across its territory, but this does not mean improvement for everyone.

For example, cleaning up London's buses roughly halved nitrogen dioxide alongside many busy roads, including Oxford Street, but in some places, it [got worse](#).

In the first decade of this century, the gap between air pollution in the richest and [poorest parts](#) of the UK widened.

Canada has a [different approach \(pdf\)](#) requiring continuous improvements, even in places that meet limits. Setting targets to reduce air pollution year on year, and [tracking progress](#), would provide a clear link between controls and their health improvements.