



11 May 2023

Dear Secretary of State for Health and Social Care,

We write to you as an alliance of health organisations deeply concerned about the impact of air pollution on human health.

Last year the Government Office for Health Improvement and Disparities reported that “in the UK, air pollution is the largest environmental risk to public health”, stating figures that estimate the annual mortality of human-made air pollution in the UK as roughly equivalent to between 28,000 and 36,000 deaths every year.<sup>1</sup> It was also estimated that between 2017 and 2025 the total cost to the NHS and social care system of air pollutants (fine particulate matter and nitrogen dioxide), for which there is more robust evidence for an association, will be £1.6 billion.

As health professionals, we are already seeing first-hand the impacts of air pollution on health. If the issue is not urgently addressed, we face decades more of health conditions linked to breathing polluted air, with poorer outcomes for people and increasing strain on the health service.

Long-term exposure to air pollution can cause chronic conditions such as cardiovascular and respiratory diseases as well as lung cancer, leading to reduced life expectancy. Short-term increases in levels of air pollution can also cause a range of health impacts, including effects on lung function, exacerbation of asthma, increases in respiratory and cardiovascular hospital admissions and mortality. Research has shown a direct link between increasing levels of pollution in the air and GP appointments for respiratory symptoms and asthma, and that exposure to traffic related pollution increases the likelihood of having multiple long term physical and mental health conditions.<sup>2</sup> The effects of air pollution are so serious that the Chief Medical Officer, Sir Chris Whitty, chose it as the subject of his annual report highlighting its link to low birth weight, developmental problems in children, diabetes, and dementia.

The tragic death of nine-year old Ella Adoo Kissi-Debrah in 2013 was caused by the polluted air that she breathed near her home on London’s South Circular Road. That polluted air continues to impact the health of tens of thousands of people across the UK every year.

We need bold action from the government to enable the transformation needed to get air pollution down to safer levels, and make sure every person has clean air to breathe.

Transport is one of the main sources of air pollution and greenhouse gases in the UK. Governments have recognised this and promoted the introduction of Clean Air Zones in cities from Aberdeen and Bristol to Newcastle and Gateshead. We very much support this.

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<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/air-pollution-applying-all-our-health/air-pollution-applying-all-our-health#:~:text=The%20annual%20mortality%20of%20human,and%2036%2C000%20deaths%20every%20year.>

<sup>2</sup> <https://ukhealthalliance.org/resource/lancet-countdown-uk-policy-brief/>



The most robust of the clean air zones is the Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) in London. Since the introduction of the ULEZ in 2019 emissions of fine particulate matter (PM2.5) are estimated to have reduced by 7% across London compared to without the ULEZ and by 19% within the ULEZ. Carbon emissions have reduced by 3% across London and by 4% within the ULEZ. As a result of the fall in emissions London's air is cleaner: nitrogen dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>) concentrations are 21% lower in inner London than they would be without the ULEZ and 46% lower in central London.

We believe that these falls will have produced benefits to health, and the ULEZ will have contributed to a 30% reduction in children being admitted to hospital with asthma in inner London. Of the 500,000 Londoners with asthma more than half live in outer London.

The expansion of the ULEZ to outer Londoner later this year will bring cleaner air to five million people. The evidence is clear that the ULEZ has led to cleaner air in inner London and it is right that those living in outer London should experience the same benefits.

We are therefore disappointed about statements from Ministers in regards to the ULEZ expansion, given the Government is clear on the serious effect air pollution has on our citizens' health. The Minister for London, the Secretary of State for Transport and even the Prime Minister have all made statements in opposition to the ULEZ.

We write to you as Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to ask that you not only support the ULEZ expansion as an important intervention to improve the health of Londoners and all who breathe our capital city's air, but that you also ensure your Ministerial colleagues are fully aware of the serious impacts of air pollution on health. This [page on the Gov.uk website](#) is an excellent explainer, should they need a short crib sheet.

The coroner who ruled on Ella Adoo Kissi-Debrah's death produced a prevention of future deaths report which called on further action from national Government to tackle air pollution and to communicate the health impacts to patients.<sup>3</sup> We hope you will uphold this direction and that Government more widely will uphold its responsibilities in this area.

We welcome the opportunity to work with you and your ministerial colleagues, as well as the wider public, to make the case for action.

Sincerely,

Dr Richard Smith CBE FMedSci, Chair of UK Health Alliance on Climate Change

Dr Elaine Mulcahy, Director UK Health Alliance on Climate Change

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Ella-Kissi-Debrah-2021-0113-1.pdf>