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The worst public health crisis since the Great Smog of 1952

Air pollution is rocketing up the public, media and political agenda in London and more widely. By Easter this year, London had already breached the number of 'Bad Air Days' for dangerous airborne particles allowed for a whole year. The standard has been in legislation since 1999 and required to be met since January 2005.

The Mayor is correct to say – when comparing the public health risk with alcoholism, obesity and smoking – there were 4,267 deaths in London in 2008 attributable to long term exposure to fine particles at an average additional loss of life of 11.5 years. However, Clean Air in London (CAL) has found that this is a pure number, calculated after eliminating up to 40 other possible causes of death. It is more likely, in practice, air pollution may have contributed to all 15,800 deaths due to cardiovascular causes (i.e. one in three of all deaths) in London [in 2009] at an average additional loss of life of around three years for these people. Either way, this is as many early deaths as we thought occurred due to short-term exposure during the Great Smog of 1952 (when the impacts of long-term exposure were unknown).

It is not just older people though who are at risk. Earlier this year, CAL published a list – obtained under the Freedom of Information Act – of 1,148 schools and other educational places within 150 metres of roads carrying over 10,000 vehicles a day after discovering new scientific research that traffic-related air pollution from such roads could be responsible for up to 30% of all new cases of asthma in children. This is a public health crisis and far too little is being done to tackle it.

A recent survey by a group of green non-governmental organisations on actions to improve air quality in 17 European cities ranked London 'Below Average' and gave it an 'F' largely because of the Mayor's backward steps on key air quality measures over more than three years. These have included: the scrapping of six monthly checks on taxi emissions (which are being reinstated next year); the removal of the western extension of the congestion charging zone; and the delay from October 2010 to January 2012 of Phase 3 of the low emission zone which was due to protect some 15% of those worst affected by air pollution. Amongst other things, the Mayor has been severely criticised for his use of 'dust suppressants' which mask air pollution in front of monitoring stations to avoid legal fines.

The planned Olympic and Paralympic Route Networks (ORN and PRN) pose serious congestion and air quality problems of their own. They seem designed to trap people in local streets or force everyone down one lane, or two if you are lucky, alongside the ORN or PRN with all the buses and taxis. The organisers need to reduce background or 'non-Games' traffic by some 30% to make this system work. The traditional solution involves the 'Big Scare' tactic which would play mind-games with Londoners to discourage them from driving or working in London even if there is no traffic problem. Beijing chose instead a last minute 'odd and even' number plate ban. Seeking something better, CAL has proposed a Berlin-style zone which would ban the oldest diesel vehicles from the most polluted parts of London for the required 100 days in 2012 with a smaller zone to remain as a legacy. CAL has told Transport for London it considers the current plans to be unlawful.

Not surprisingly, the legal pressures are building on the Government and the Mayor. After two failed attempts, the Government obtained finally from the European Commission in June a time extension until 2011 to comply with legal standards for dangerous airborne particles. No further time extension is allowed so the UK faces fines of up to £300 million per annum if the problems of this year are repeated in 2012 or thereafter.

The Government can apply similarly for a time extension from January 2010 to January 2015 to comply with legal standards for nitrogen dioxide (so called NO₂). London has the highest annual mean concentrations of NO₂ of all 27 European capital cities with pollution over twice the legal limit and World Health Organisation guideline near our busiest streets. Incredibly, the so-called 'greenest Government ever' is saying it can't (or more likely won't) comply with this legal standard in London until 2025. This raises the prospect of infraction action from the European Commission in the months leading up to the London 2012 Olympics and unlimited lump sum and daily fines in due course.

This Autumn will also see two ground-breaking legal cases on air quality reach the Courts. ClientEarth has won the right to seek a judicial review of the Government's failure to produce proper action plans to comply with legal standards. In late November, CAL and Defra are due in the Court of Appeal in a Freedom of Information case. Separately, in a campaigning win for CAL, the new London Plan which sets the legal framework for development in London says "Development should...be at least 'air quality neutral' and not lead to further deterioration of existing poor air quality". Together with other strict requirements, the new London Plan should restrict major developments unless harmful traffic emissions are reduced.

Parliament's Environmental Audit Committee is also concerned about the lack of action to tackle air pollution in the UK. It launched a second inquiry this year into air quality after finding that the new Government had made no significant progress in response to its hard-hitting report published in March 2010. With political pressure building in City Hall, Westminster and Brussels, poor air quality looks set to be a Top 5 issue for the Mayoral elections in 2012. Among other things, CAL's manifesto for Mayoral candidates will include a call for a major campaign to build public understanding of the dangers of air pollution with advice for people on protecting themselves and reducing pollution for themselves and others.

Finally, in an exciting new development, Camfil Farr – a world leader in air filters for buildings – has become CAL's first Gold Sponsor and backed a campaign, initially in London, to build public understanding of the dangers of poor indoor air quality which can be worse than outdoor or so-called ambient air pollution.

Let's encourage the Mayor and the Government to act urgently and boldly. If they do, the Olympic city could show the world next year how air pollution and wider sustainability issues can be tackled successfully through a mixture of political will, technology and behavioural change.

For more information please follow www.twitter.com/CleanAirLondon or see 'Take 10 steps for Clean Air in London' on www.cleanairinlondon.org.

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