

Statement by ‘Clean Air in London’ – Toxic Town

In a landmark case in 2009 the High Court ruled that toxic air, unwittingly inhaled by the residents of Corby during the years spent reclaiming the land polluted by the closed steel works, had caused birth defects. (Corby Group Litigation v. Corby District Council [2009] EWHC 1944 (TCC)¹.)

Toxic Town tells the moving story of the affected mothers’ fight to uncover the truth and gain justice for their children.

Their case was the first to recognise the link between polluted air and birth defects. The pollution contained in the local air was from dust generated by the careless and frequent transport by road of toxic waste from the contaminated sites to be developed.

At the same time, the campaign group ‘Clean Air in London’ (“CAL”) was writing to the government to point out that air pollution was causing around 2,900 premature deaths per annum in London alone² (April 2009) and around 35,000 across the UK³ and ⁴ (December 2009). Despite that the government applied to the EU for extra time to comply with minimum legal standards of air pollution – also 2009⁵. The European Commission rejected the UK’s application for a time extension in December 2009⁶.

Air pollution is now recognised to be the largest environmental risk to human health in the UK⁷ and ⁸. It is caused by various sources including vehicle exhaust and tyre and brake wear, building emissions, factories, agriculture, construction, wood burning stoves, dust, pollen and mould spores.

Yet 16 years on from the Corby case, air pollution in the UK (for which the government is ultimately responsible) is: still at illegally high levels; well above the guidelines recommended by the WHO; and below new standards which entered into force across the EU on 10 December 2024⁹.

Despite that, the government, by signaling support for huge and polluting infrastructure projects such as the third runway at Heathrow and planning reduced environmental assessments for developments, looks set to weaken regulations essential for the protection of human life and health.

In telling the story of what happened in the rush, through political and profit making motives, to regenerate Corby, *Toxic Town* provides a timely warning. It is a reminder that environmental regulation is not unnecessary ‘red tape’, nor just a protector of rare bats and other species. High environmental standards and their conscientious enforcement are essential for the protection of human life, the health of citizens and future generations. Sustainable development offers benefits for all.

¹ https://assets.caselaw.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ewhc/tcc/2009/1944/ewhc_tcc_2009_1944.pdf

² <https://cleanair.london/health/what-is-the-real-health-impact-of-poor-air-quality-in-greater-london/>

³ <https://cleanair.london/health/one-of-the-worst-public-health-failings-or-cover-ups-in-modern-history/>

⁴ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmenvaud/229/22902.htm>

⁵ <https://cleanair.london/legal/defras-consultation-on-the-draft-uk-notification-to-the-european-commission-to-secure-additional-time-to-meet-the-limit-values-for-pm10/>

⁶ <https://cleanair.london/legal/european-commission-rejects-uk-application-for-a-time-extension-to-comply-with-pm10-daily-limit-value/>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/understanding-and-addressing-inequalities-in-air-quality/understanding-and-addressing-inequalities-in-air-quality-summary>

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-matters-air-pollution/health-matters-air-pollution>

⁹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/2881/oj>



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