

17 November 2014

City of London Health and Wellbeing Board Dinner

Chairman, Master, Ladies and Gentlemen. Good evening.

May I start by thanking the Chairman for his excellent speech.

In 1999, the Journal of the American Medical Association said that 25 years of the 30 year gain in life expectancy in the US in the 20th Century were attributable to advances in public health, such as clean water and improved sanitation, rather than medical science. I am very pleased therefore that the City of London's Health and Wellbeing Board included air pollution in its Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and has prioritised it in its Action Plan.

Keeping my speech as short as I can, I'm going to give you three reasons why we should ban diesel exhaust from the most-polluted places by 2020 with an intermediate step by 2018.

First, air pollution is much worse than most of us have realised and it is a serious public health issue.

- We're talking about particles (PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀), which are regulated as a lump, and gases. In practice, nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), is the only outdoor gas regulated for health and legal purposes.
- In Farringdon Road, concentrations of fine particles are more than two and a half times the World Health Organisation (WHO) guideline. Public Health England estimates that 8.3% of all deaths in the City of London and 6.6% across London were attributable to long-term exposure to human-made fine particles (PM_{2.5}) in 2012. That represents more than 20 times the number of people dying from road traffic accidents.
- Nitrogen dioxide concentrations in Upper Thames Street last year were three times the WHO guideline AND legal limit, which I'll come back to later. That's not much less than Oxford Street which has been in the news again recently. The latest scientific evidence suggests that NO₂ mortality impacts are on same scale as those from PM_{2.5} and largely independent of them.
- Since the Great Smog in 1956 the known health impacts of air pollution have risen much faster than air pollution has changed from visible coal smoke to invisible traffic fumes.

Second, very bold intervention is needed because technology is not sorting this problem.

- The City of London has done much already. I would highlight its CityAir best practice guidance for businesses and its great work with Mapping for Change to build public understanding of air pollution among residents. Also for example the City's success in largely eliminating biomass burning in new developments.
- In policy terms, the three key actions needed include: building public understanding of the dangers of air pollution (with advice on mitigation and adaptation); reducing transport and building emissions; and taking a lead from the City of London, the London Health Commission and many others in this room in putting prevention and protection at the heart of the public health agenda.
- But even with all this effort, air pollution levels are not going to fall two-thirds tomorrow so we need to help people now to reduce their exposure to it. That includes EN13779 for air filters.

Third, as the top priority, I urge the City of London to take the lead in banning diesel from the most polluted places as it was the first to ban coal burning exactly 60 years ago.

- Let me tell you why. To start with, diesel vehicles produce about 10 times more of the most harmful exhaust emissions than petrol and the WHO classified diesel exhaust as carcinogenic for humans in June 2012.
- Successive Governments got us into this mess by myopically focusing on carbon dioxide (CO₂) rather than air pollution as a whole. Worse, they set much laxer engine emission standards for diesel vehicles than petrol i.e. the opposite of ‘technology neutral’!
- Even the latest engine emission standard for diesel vehicles is not working, with real world exhaust emissions many times higher than the official requirement. This tells us that the Mayor’s ultra-low emission zone planned for 2020 is too small, too weak and too late. **AND**
- Last, but not least, we are getting banks of ‘standby diesel generators’ installed in London buildings to put power back into the grid. Frankly, that’s madness.

The good news is that banning diesel exhaust would not bring London to a standstill any more than banning coal did 60 years ago.

- The City of London’s draft Air Quality Strategy, to be discussed in Committee tomorrow, already proposes moving away from using diesel in its own fleet wherever practical.
- The Freight Transport Association is already looking at ‘gas’ as an alternative fuel to diesel.
- Petrol and petrol-hybrid cars are widely available and probably cheaper to run than diesel.
- Cleaner, cheaper taxis would be available almost immediately if the 25 foot turning circle requirement was removed. **AND**
- All buses could be fitted with exhaust filters in the short-term and fuelled by compressed natural gas or electricity in the medium or longer-term as is already happening in other cities.

Don’t be put off by siren voices. Before coal was banned, the Government said it didn’t have the money to help and people said the poor would freeze. In fact, the vulnerable benefited most as they would again.

I am very optimistic because more and more people understand what needs to be done.

- For example, two weeks ago, at an event hosted by the City of London, key measures proposed by London borough councils included an expanded ultra-low emission zone and an emphasis on cycling and cleaner petrol fuels.
- Around lunch time this Wednesday, we expect the European Court of Justice to hand down its judgement in ClientEarth’s case against Defra about the UK’s failure to comply with nitrogen dioxide limit values. This judgement will bind all 28 Member States and could lead to a much more rapid diesel ban than I have proposed above. **AND**
- Parliament’s Environmental Audit Committee is expected to publish the results of its six month Inquiry into Air Quality in the next few weeks.

If we succeed in banning diesel from the most polluted places by mobilising political will, technology and behavioural change, London will lead the world again in public health and much more as we did after the Clean Air Act of 1956.