Government is not taking responsibility for improving air quality, MPs say

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The government is putting the health of people living in UK cities at risk by trying to water down European Union rules on air quality rather than implementing them as a priority, says parliament’s environmental watchdog.

A report by the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee published on 14 November says that, despite a commitment by the coalition government to work towards full compliance with EU air quality standards, ministers seem to be actively trying to dilute safety standards to avoid EU fines.

Dangerous levels of particulate matter and pollutants such as nitrogen dioxide are shortening the lives of up to 200 000 people in the United Kingdom by up to two years, the report says. In 2008 around 30 000 deaths in the UK were linked specifically to air pollution, including 4000 in London alone.

The committee’s inquiry found that business plans produced by the Department for Transport and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) did not even mention air quality. In addition, Defra’s plans to meet European targets on nitrogen dioxide levels, which came into force in January 2010, consist of an application to the European Commission to extend the deadline for complying with the targets to 2015. In 2010, 40 of the 43 UK air quality monitoring zones breached the annual safety limit on nitrogen dioxide.

Under EU air quality laws the daily pollution levels of particles of 10 microns in diameter or less (PM<sub>10</sub>) must not exceed the legal limit on more than 35 days in a year, but by 21 April this year London had already exceeded this target.

Joan Walley, the chairman of the Environmental Audit Committee, said, “Despite a coalition pledge to meet European safety standards on air pollution, the government appears to be lobbying behind the scenes to water these rules down.

“It is a national scandal that thousands of people are still dying from air pollution in the UK in 2011—and the government is taking no responsibility for this.

“If you have heart disease, asthma, or other respiratory illnesses then living near a congested road like this can literally take years off your life.”

The committee says that central government needs to make air quality a priority by incorporating it into Defra’s business plan and setting up a ministerial group within the Cabinet Office to oversee delivery of a cross government strategy on air quality.

The government will be able to pass on EU fines for breaches of standards on air pollution to local authorities, subject to new procedures in the Localism Bill, currently in its final stages in parliament, but the committee points out that the causes of poor air quality are often beyond an individual local authority’s control.

The report says that the government needs to establish a national system of low emission zones to help local authorities reduce pollution from traffic; ensure that improving air quality is a focus of the reforms that will transfer public health functions to local authorities; and engage with local authority leaders so that they understand the risks of failing to act to improve air quality and that they contribute to tackling air pollution.

At the same time a public awareness campaign is needed to drive air quality up the political agenda and to inform people about how they can contribute to reduction of emissions and lower their exposure to them.


bmj.com Research: The effects of hourly differences in air pollution on the risk of myocardial infarction: case crossover analysis of the MINAP database (BMJ 2011;343:d5531, doi:10.1136/bmj.d5531)

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