

Cleaning up the Air We Breathe

The Clean Air Alliance calls for a high level Commission to co-ordinate action and accelerate progress towards cleaner air

Air pollution is a major public health problem in the UK. Many studies and reports have underlined the gravity of the situation. The most recent report of the Royal Colleges of Physicians and of Paediatrics and Child Health finds that air pollution is responsible for causing over 40,000 premature deaths each year and exacerbating a variety of chronic conditions according to It spoils the quality of life in our towns and cities for many more. The economic cost from the impacts of air pollution in the UK is estimated at £9-19 billion every year.

These facts are rapidly gaining more public recognition and are fuelling a widespread demand for more vigorous action to improve air quality in the UK. In 2015 Environmental Protection UK (EPUK, formerly the National Society for Clean Air) invited a number of bodies concerned with this situation to join a new Clean Air Alliance to explore and advocate ways of making faster progress. The Clean Air Alliance has itself attracted growing support and is helping to focus attention on the need for a better integrated programme of action involving all the parties concerned to improve the situation.

The single largest cause of poor air quality in the UK today lies in emissions from vehicles, and one main solution must lie in accelerating the transition towards cleaner vehicles, coupled with planning and traffic management measures to restrict access to the worst affected areas by the most polluting vehicles.

More co-ordinated action is also needed on other causes of air pollution from industrial and construction activities and from domestic heating.

A great deal of policy attention and action is rightly focused on the need to mitigate the threat of climate change by reducing emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. It is important that future climate change mitigation policies be shaped in such a way as to help also with air quality, or at the least not to exacerbate air quality problems.

A few years ago fiscal incentives were introduced to encourage the take-up of diesel-powered cars in the belief that this would assist in limiting greenhouse gas emissions. It is now clear however that any small carbon benefits of the rapid expansion of the share of diesel is heavily outweighed by the damage this shift has done to air quality and the ill health and earlier deaths that this leads to. Fiscal incentives need to be rebalanced away from favouring diesel and towards the cleaner vehicles of the future.

Although the Government and some local authorities have introduced a number of measures intended to improve air quality over time the problem remains intractable and the levels of pollutants in the UK atmosphere during pollution incidents have remained obstinately high, particularly in relation to nitrogen oxides and fine particles. On present trends and policies it will take many years to make significant improvement in reducing poor air quality and the ill health and premature deaths it causes. There needs to be a more determined and co-ordinated effort to accelerate progress.

On the transport side the technical means of improving the situation through cleaner vehicles of all kinds are becoming available and are likely to become more affordable quite quickly once the transition is driven forward more quickly and consistently. Such an acceleration could provide significant commercial opportunities for relevant UK businesses in both domestic and export markets which may be lost if other countries take an early lead.

There is also a growing public appetite for accelerating the change towards cleaner vehicles. But the switch needs to be supported by adequate infrastructure support, (e.g. a comprehensive network of charging points for electric vehicles), adequate fiscal or other incentives until the cleaner vehicles become fully competitive in the market place, and a major educational and promotional effort to make clear to all the public health and environmental benefits of the changeover. Many of the changes needed will also reduce carbon emissions from vehicles and thus assist in the battle against climate change.

Many of the other causes of air pollution from industrial and construction processes from and from domestic heating are also ripe for improvement through the adoption of cleaner technologies. Again these changes need to be driven forward in a more consistent and co-ordinated way.

Some of the worst pollution is in urban areas where housing and traffic densities are high, construction activity is intense and other concentrations of industrial activity may be present. Many local authorities in these areas are already grappling with these problems – the new Mayor of London is already showing the way with his proposals for new restrictions on polluting vehicles in London - but they need stronger powers, more resources and a better national framework to enable them to make faster progress in the most critical areas.

The case for a high level Commission to drive the transition forward

Many different bodies will need to be involved in creating such an acceleration, including several central government departments, local authorities and health bodies, vehicle and engine manufacturers and suppliers, the fuel industry, fleet owners (public service and commercial), individual car owners and bodies representing them, the construction industry, domestic heating suppliers etc. Achieving the acceleration will require the creation of an active and dynamic partnership for change amongst all these groups.

It is not easy to create or drive such a vigorous partnership for change from within a single Government Department which only itself has direct responsibility for part of the solution, and may have difficulty in sustaining the momentum and commitment of all parties involved over the years of the transition. In order to overcome this problem the Clean Air Alliance is proposing the establishment of a high level Commission to chart the way forward and build a stronger partnership for ongoing action between all the principal bodies involved.

The new Commission would take account of the action already in hand at all relevant levels, including the EU level of standard setting, the national level and the local level. It would review the main technical possibilities for improvement, and consider the nature of the changes needed, and the possibilities for encouraging progress. It would explore the possibilities for encouraging British businesses, particularly in the vehicles sector, to build successful business strategies around the shift to cleaner processes and products, particularly in the vehicles sector.

It would look at the scope for local action to improve matters locally and the possibilities for focusing action initially in the most polluted areas. It would seek to identify opportunities for reinforcing partnerships for change at all levels, and building public support for them. It would look at possibilities for using fiscal and regulatory measures to incentivise appropriate changes. It would look at procurement policies in the public and private sectors for vehicles and for construction. It would seek to build creative partnerships for faster action.

The details of its work would be a matter for the Commission but it might, amongst other things, consider a number of key questions:

- How can our current understandings of air pollution and its impacts be made into effective messages for all stakeholders, public, policy makers and business?
- What is the best balance between action at international, European and national level and by central government, local authorities, health bodies business and civil society, and how can all the different bodies involved in both the public and private sectors create an effective partnership for action?
- What packages of measures have the potential to deliver the scale of improvement health experts believe is necessary?
- What are the real costs and benefits of the different packages of measures and how can the necessary investments be mobilised?
- What mixture of measures and policies would be best suited to achieving carbon reductions (and hence climate change benefits) at the same time as improving air quality?
- Are the current powers of the bodies that have to implement such measures adequate?
- What part can members of the public and local communities play in helping to reduce pollution and improving the quality of the air we all breathe?

New legislation may well be needed to help to drive progress forward and co-ordinate action. It should be part of the task of the proposed Commission to help fill in the details of the legislative, regulatory and fiscal framework that will be needed to accelerate the pace of change.

The Commission should also be charged with identifying how to make progress on air quality in the UK in a post-BREXIT world. Air quality standards in the EU and air emission standards for vehicles have in recent years been established and progressively tightened as a joint European project. The Clean Air Alliance believe that the UK should set itself the objective of being at least as proactive on air quality improvement as the EU, and should actively seek opportunities to go further and to make the quality of the air we breathe in Britain amongst the best in the world.

Structure of the Commission

In order to be able to win all party support and build effective and consistent long term partnerships for action such a Commission should be formally independent from Government. At the same time in order to have the necessary level of support and engagement from all the Government Departments involved it would be desirable that the Commission (or at least its chair) should be appointed by or with the support of Government.

The precise structure will need to be considered further. There is a useful precedent in the air quality field. After the notorious great smog of 1952 which killed upwards of 4000 people the

Conservative Government of the day established the Beaver Committee as a high level Commission to develop new solutions to the air quality problems of those days. That body developed a practical programme of action to be taken forward in partnership by all the interests involved. This quickly won widespread public support and formed the basis for the Clean Air Act of 1956; and this in turn led within comparatively few years to the almost universal adoption of smokeless fuels, transforming the air quality of our towns and cities and bringing about immense public health, environmental and economic benefits.

A new Beaver Commission for today's air quality challenges could inspire and shape the new alliance for action that is needed today.