



Parliamentarians demand clean air exit from lockdown

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Lower air pollution during the Covid-19 outbreak has created an appetite for action on air quality among the public, according to a letter signed by 90 MPs and peers.

The message to prime minister Boris Johnson, sent last week by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Air Pollution (APPGAP), also highlights how exposure to fine particulate matter (PM2.5) affects the risk of dying from the virus. For each increase of only one microgram per cubic metre, there is a “significant increase in infection rates and an 8% increase in Covid deaths,” it states, quoting research from Harvard, Queen Mary and York Universities.

“Air pollution was already causing 64,000 early deaths before the pandemic,” says the letter, using figures from a study published in the *European Heart Journal* last year that are double previous estimates. Thousands of lives are likely to have been extended by the lower pollution encountered during lockdown.

“Therefore, we need an holistic strategy to reduce air pollution as we emerge from lockdown. This should include, but not be limited to, encouraging cycling as you have highlighted, alongside working practices that allow

technology to reduce travel, more frequent public transport, cleaner private transport, more pedestrian space, a clamp-down on wood and coal burning, improvements in indoor air quality, less polluting machinery, a reduction in ammonia fertilisers and the adoption of World Health Organization air quality targets,” the letter adds.

Many of these measures are mentioned in the Clean Air Strategy. Though published a year and a half ago, little has been done to implement it.

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The letter’s demands are detailed in an accompanying report, seeking “to avoid, or minimise, a second peak in infection as we emerge from lockdown and set a clear pathway for a healthier, greener recovery. They will support investment which provides a new exports platform to help build a stronger, more resilient and sustainable economy”.

The letter echoes earlier comments from Frank Kelly, professor of environment and health at Imperial College and director of its Environmental Research Group, that, “We can’t move back to the bad old practices where we’re breaching air quality standards.”

APPGAP chair Geraint Davies said that heart and lung damage accounts for the higher death rate from coronavirus in polluted neighbourhoods, which are also more likely to have a higher proportion of black and minority ethnic communities, themselves significantly more at risk from the virus. Particulate pollution may also help transport the virus.

“Therefore, it is vitally important that the prime minister acts immediately on the emerging science and our wide-ranging proposals backed by scientists, businesses, local authorities and 90 Parliamentarians. Air pollution already costs the economy £20 billion and these proposals are capable of generating export income, tax revenue and substantial NHS savings,” he added.

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