

Cycling and Health - Road pollution

Note – This is a fuller version of an article in the Cycling and Health supplement of Spokes Bulletin 125, which is at spokes.org.uk – see the Bulletin tab or click [here](#).

Air Pollution: Invisible yet Harmful to Health

Over 2500 deaths in Scotland each year are caused by outdoor air pollution.¹ Air pollution plays a part in cancer, asthma, strokes, heart disease, and even diabetes, obesity, and dementia.

Children, the elderly and people living in poverty are hit harder by the effects of air pollution. Air pollution can therefore threaten the rights of some of the most marginalized people in our society. However, everyone is affected to a greater or lesser degree, and air pollution shaves an average of 7-8 months off of everyone's life in the UK.

Yet the Scottish Government continues to break binding European legal limits for air pollution 6 years after a deadline.

Air quality safety standards are being broken in 32 Pollution Zones across Scotland. Glasgow, Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, and smaller towns like Crieff and Linlithgow all have Pollution Zones.

Road traffic is the main source of Scotland's air pollution, responsible for around 80% of our urban Nitrogen Dioxide pollution.²

Road traffic also causes a large chunk of Scotland's climate emissions. In fact, the road transport sector accounts for a *growing* portion of Scotland's carbon emissions. Whilst other sectors have reduced their carbon emissions year on year, the transport sector continues to pour out almost as much carbon as it did in 1990.

So the changes that would clean our air would also help stop our planet from overheating.

Can pedalling save lives by cleaning the air?

In short, YES. Studies are beginning to show that increased uptake in cycling is consistent with improvements in air quality. It's a no brainer – jumping on a bike means eliminating car travel which in turn means cleaner air.

Sevilla has seen a rapid and inspirational transformation in cycling in the last decade, with an impressive cycling modal share increase from 0.5% to 7% between 2006 and 2013! The city now meets European air quality limits for Nitrogen Dioxide. Overall concentration levels for Nitrogen Dioxide in Sevilla decreased from 52 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ in 2000 to 25 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ in 2012 (the European legal limit is 40).³ This dramatic improvement has been down to a combination of concerted investment in cycling as well as other measures to reduce motorised traffic.

1 Friends of the Earth Scotland estimate derived from Royal College of Physicians Report, "Every breath we take: the lifelong impact of air pollution" (February 2016) which concluded that 40,000-50,000 deaths across the UK are attributable to outdoor air pollution each year.

2 *Clientearth v Defra* [2015] UKSC 28, paragraph 23

3 European Cyclists Federation, "Cycling and Air Quality" (Nov 2014)

What Must the Scottish Government do?

Whilst there is growing enthusiasm for cycling in Scotland, less than 2% of all trips are by bike. This is because our roads are skewed in favour of cars. Some people feel it is not safe or convenient enough to cycle. The Scottish Government currently invests under 2% of its transport budget on walking and cycling.

The Scottish Government has promised us, through a new Strategy called "Cleaner Air for Scotland", that we will meet European air quality standards by 2020. Friends of the Earth Scotland is campaigning to ensure that the Government now delivers on its promise.

We are calling for the Scottish Government to:

- 1.** Shift our car is king culture to more sustainable transport modes, by making 20mph zones the national norm, introducing workplace parking levies for large employers, and looking at ways to introduce congestion charges in Scottish urban areas.
- 2.** Roll out a network of Low Emission Zones in towns and cities by 2018, where the most polluting vehicles would be banned or have to pay hefty fines
- 3.** Spend 10% of its transport budget on walking and cycling.

We are tackling air pollution as part of our overarching Fossil Free Scotland campaign, which aims for a just transition to a 100% renewable, nuclear-free, zero fossil fuel Scotland.

What can you do?

1. By getting on your bike, you are part of the solution.

Choosing a bike and ditching the car means you are cutting down on air pollution, congestion, and climate emissions, and getting fit and healthy in the process.

2. Write to your new MSPs about cycling and air pollution

The new Parliament means renewed opportunity to push for action on transport. You can find out who they are and how to contact them at <https://www.writetothem.com>. You may wish to say if you live or work in a Pollution Zone, and if you feel personally affected.

3. Find out if you live in a Pollution Zone – visit www.scottishairquality.co.uk/laqm/aqma

4. Check out the Scottish Government's Air Quality Website. If you feel particularly susceptible to air pollution on a day to day basis, you can look at live pollution readings and subscribe to the Government's "Know and Respond" service to receive alerts when air pollution is high – visit www.scottishairquality.co.uk for more details

5. Join Friends of the Earth Scotland as a member and help us fight for clean air every day. You can join us today at www.foe-scotland.org.uk/join

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