

Environmental Audit Committee

Oral evidence: Environment in Focus, HC 1310

Wednesday 17 December 2025

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Mr Toby Perkins (Chair); Julia Buckley; Jonathan Davies; Carla Denyer; Barry Gardiner; Sarah Gibson; Alison Griffiths; Manuela Perteghella; Martin Rhodes; Dr Roz Savage.

Questions 19 - 25

Witnesses

[III](#): Jemima Hartshorn, Founder and Director, Mums for Lungs; Dr Nat Easton, Air Quality Researcher and Specialist Policy Officer, University of Southampton.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Written submission from Mums for Lungs CIC \(EIF0198\)](#)
- [Written submission from University of Southampton \(EIF0028\)](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Jemima Hartshorn and Dr Nat Easton.

Q19 **Chair:** We now come to the third pitch. This is on the subject of air pollution. A number of people and organisations suggested this, and I am very pleased that they have invited Jemima Hartshorn, the founder and director of Mums for Lungs, and Dr Nat Easton, the air quality researcher and specialist policy officer from the University of Southampton, to represent the broader group who had recommended this area. We now go over to you for your 10-minute pitch. Thank you very much indeed.

Jemima Hartshorn: Thank you for having us today. We are glad and excited to be presenting on why air pollution is the topic that the Environmental Audit Committee should choose for your next inquiry. As you said, I am Jemima Hartshorn, founder and director of Mums for Lungs. Mums for Lungs is an organisation supported by hundreds of impacted people across the country. With me is Dr Nat Easton, an air pollution scientist from the University of Southampton, who researches how the composition of air pollution impacts our health. We represent a coalition that expands across academia, professional bodies, NGOs and local authorities, all concerned that the Government's current approach is not delivering on their ambitions of protecting public health, the environment, and climate from air pollution.

The original landmark Clean Air Act is turning 70, but it is not protecting the public health from the biggest environmental risk, which is air pollution. A scrutinising inquiry is therefore timely and urgent. Previous iterations of this Committee have done inquiries on this issue, most recently in 2023, but that inquiry was not completed or published. We are asking you not to reinvent the wheel, but to scrutinise where we stand today and to ensure that Government across their Departments deliver for public health and environment. This Government called for a Clean Air Act while in opposition, and this inquiry could be the catalyst for them to deliver.

Dr Easton: 2026 marks 70 years since that first Clean Air Act, which established the UK as a world leader in tackling against harmful air pollution. It received Royal Assent less than four years after the great smog of London killed over 4,000 people in just five days. We have come a long way from there and we now know a lot more about just how harmful air pollution is. While the Clean Air Act largely succeeded in its mission to give UK cities blue skies, we now know that it is not just about bluer skies. In the UK today it is estimated that long-term exposure to air pollution is causing 30,000 early deaths a year, and not just that, but up to £150 billion-worth of cost to healthcare, productivity losses and reduced quality of life. We are all breathing this air, which has the potential to affect almost every organ in every body at every stage of life.



Jemima Hartshorn: The young, the old, the deprived and ethnic minority groups are often the most affected. Many of us will know of two children who lost their lives due to air pollution. Nine-year-old Ella Adoo-Kissi-Debrah died from the effects of outdoor air pollution, and two-year-old Awab Ishaq died from indoor air pollution. This should never have happened and this must never happen again. But many more children are sick from air pollution. I know a mother who was told to avoid trafficky roads, to protect her asthmatic son. My daughter, too, has been hospitalised during a high-pollution episode. Families are leaving their homes to live in less polluted places. In one of the most prosperous countries in the world, children are getting sick in their homes and at school and they are breathing toxic air on playgrounds.

Air pollution, at the level we breathe in this country, impacts our health from conception until we die. Babies are more likely to be born with a low birth rate. Wheezing, asthma, lung and heart issues, diabetes and cancer are linked to air pollution. In fact, over 700 illnesses are now linked to air pollution. The UK has the highest prevalence of childhood asthma, hospital admissions and deaths in all of Europe. In London in 2024 alone, 120,000 children were admitted to hospital with breathing issues. The struggles of each of them will have been exacerbated by air pollution. These children missed out on school and on playing, and their parents missed work as they had to care for their kids in hospital. Across the country many more children are going to hospital every year. Of course, London is not even among the top five polluted places in this country any more. This is a national issue. Our Clean Air Act turns 70 next year, but it is failing to protect us from horrendously high levels of ill health and death.

Dr Easton: Air pollution remains the single greatest environmental risk factor, both globally and in the UK. The 10-year NHS plan explicitly defined air quality as a priority area in the shift to a preventative-focused healthcare system. Yet a recent survey from YouGov commissioned by the Royal College of Surgeons shows us that the majority of the British public are unaware of the links between air quality, dementia and heart disease as well as adverse pregnancy outcomes.

Air pollution is not just a public health hazard. Air pollution in our atmosphere is a complex mixture of pollutants. We are commonly focusing on gases like nitrogen dioxide and ozone, as well as microscopic particles called particulate matter. Many sources of air pollution contribute directly to climate change themselves. The new Environmental Improvement Plan directly recognises that air pollution contributes to climate change, biodiversity loss, and reduced crop yields. We should not be treating air pollution and climate change separately. There are co-benefits and there are co-risks and we need co-ordinated action on this. Tackling air pollution, along with the other wider determinants of health, has the potential to deliver across all five of the Government's missions, with particularly strong alignment to the health and net zero emissions. While we see the message from Government that the need to tackle



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clean air is strong, we do not see that reflected in the approaches to delivery.

Jemima Hartshorn: The side of delivery is very different. The new Environmental Improvement Plan that was published two weeks ago has high ambitions and declares that we will achieve clean air, but it does not provide answers to the challenges on the ground that we hear all the time. Local authorities remain under-resourced to address air pollution sufficiently. The short-term DEFRA air quality grant was cancelled in April 2024 and has not been reinstated. Funding for local authorities specifically to address air pollution dropped to a low of £1.5 million in the first year of the current Government. There is no long-term strategy in place.

Local authorities have the legal responsibilities to improve local air quality, but they often do not have the power to do so. The regulatory framework remains ineffective. A strong example is wood burning. Across the country, there were over 15,000 complaints in 12 months, but there have only been 24 fines issued, because the current system of smoke control zones is unenforceable. Unsurprisingly, non-essential wood burning is increasing in popularity. Earlier this year, the Future Homes Standard was established by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. This model for sustainable housing allows for even new houses to be built with wood burners as a secondary heating source, while DEFRA is trying to reduce wood burning. Enhanced cross-departmental work could have avoided such tension.

There are many more examples that highlight that the powers to improve air quality, as well as the necessary funding to address it, remain fragmented, inconsistent, under-resourced and unaligned across Government Departments. We believe that the Environmental Audit Committee could use this opportunity to address such widespread inconsistencies. If we look at air pollution targets, the picture is similarly incoherent. As things stand, by 2030 nitrogen dioxide limits in the EU will be twice as stringent as in the UK. But in five regions across England and in many more local hotspots, even these very high levels are still exceeded now, 15 years since these levels came in force.

On the good side, the Environmental Improvement Plan has, however, brought forward a target for fine particle pollution, the most harmful pollutant. The target of 10 micrograms per cubic metre must now be achieved by 2030 instead of 2040. However, this target was already achieved in 99% of the country in 2024. This new target does not represent a safe level of pollution and it will fail to drive meaningful improvement, because those huge damages to public health, the environment, the climate and the economy that we spoke about earlier took place while this new target was already achieved. So even with this change in targets, air pollution protections in the UK fall well short of the WHO and the EU.

Dr Easton: Crucially, the EIP also ignores indoor air pollution entirely, despite clear evidence of the harm from damp, mould, poor ventilation



and indoor combustion. It also ignores key emerging pollutants like ultrafine particulate matter, which are those particles that are small enough to pass from the lungs into the blood and be transported all over the body, with emerging mounting scientific evidence that these have a significant potential to affect our health. The Environmental Audit Committee has a unique opportunity with its cross-Government scrutiny role to investigate and champion updated, binding, evidence-based targets for outdoor and indoor air pollution, with a route for continuous improvement, to respond with agility to emerging sources, to ensure that public health is protected, and to question whether enforcement, long-term funding and statutory powers are adequate to achieve clean air. This is especially important for local and devolved authorities to ensure that cross-Government working is not working at odds with each other, especially at the interface of net zero and air pollution, to ultimately deliver this modern vision for clean air, building on the legacy of that first Clean Air Act.

I will finish by saying that the 2018 cross-Committee inquiry, improving air quality, concluded key recommendations that the protection of public health and the environment should be placed before technical compliance and political convenience, that we introduce a new Clean Air Act, initiate a national health campaign and align with climate change schemes, preventing government policy working at cross-purposes. We are nearly eight years on from these recommendations and no closer to delivering them, and we think that the Government need to be held to account.

Chair: Excellent. Thank you very much indeed, Ms Hartshorn and Dr Easton. We will go over now to questions, and we will come to Barry Gardner and then Carla Denyer.

Q20 Barry Gardiner: Thank you for that presentation, and I want to particularly acknowledge the presence of Ella Adoo-Kissi-Debrah's mother in the audience, and thank her for the campaign that she has mounted on this in memory of her daughter.

You spoke about the impacts on children, and you spoke about the impacts on communities, but often those impacts are on lower-income groups, lower economic groups in society, and it can be argued that addressing them can also be unequal. Addressing the impacts can be unequal. It is easier for people who are wealthier to have electric vehicles or whatever. Is part of the role that you see for this Committee advising Government on how to manage those trade-offs?

Jemima Hartshorn: Thank you for that question. When it comes to air pollution, the whole picture is unfair. It is usually people who are the most exposed to air pollution who are contributing the least in air pollution. The poorest in our society drive the least and often live on the most polluted roads. The people who are in the highest levels of fuel poverty might in some parts of the country be dependent on using a wood burner. They are living with poverty and having to use a wood burner, which is a very polluting source of fuel. What is important, genuinely, is that these cross-factors that come together are considered



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carefully. It is crucial that in schemes that are delivered to address air pollution, whether that is the ULEZ or other schemes, the needs of those people who are the most impacted by air pollution are considered and that they are given the support needed to benefit the most, without having to pay twice, once with their lungs and once with the impacts of a scheme that is meant to help them.

- Q21 **Carla Denyer:** This is obviously an important issue. I am sure I speak for the whole of the Committee on that. The trouble is that so are all of the other topics we are considering, of course. One of the criteria we are considering in deciding which topics to take forward for a full inquiry is, why us? Is there something specific that the Environmental Audit Committee can bring to this that other audit or Select Committees or other bodies could not also do just as well on or further to what the Environmental Audit Committee has already done?

On the plus side for the air pollution topic, you have the point that you made about the lack of cross-Department working. The Environmental Audit Committee being cross-Department clearly has something to add there. On the other hand, the Environmental Audit Committee has looked at air pollution a few times before, whereas some of the other topics being proposed today have not been looked at by any audit or Select Committees in Parliament yet. To my mind that is the tension between those factors, so what is your specific pitch to us for why the Environmental Audit Committee rather than any other body?

Dr Easton: There are a few factors at play here. As you mentioned, it is obviously the cross-Government Department roles that are affected by air quality, because air quality is environment, public health, transport, and so on. We have the factor that, yes, it has been investigated several times, but that has not actually led to any change or any action in government. The fact that air pollution is the greatest environmental risk factor, which affects every single person in this country at every single stage in their life, means that this is a very important topic. At the moment, we are not seeing those actions that actually lead to tangible change to protect people and the environment.

- Q22 **Chair:** It is also worth saying that three years ago, the original Office for Environmental Protection analysis found that air pollution was one of the few areas where the Government was on target and that, in the subsequent couple of years, there has been a regression in that performance and the Governments started falling behind having initially made quite positive steps. What is your sense as to why the Government, having initially apparently made good progress, have stepped backwards over the last three years or so? Is there anything that can inform our study into that kind of analysis?

Jemima Hartshorn: Since I have been campaigning, which has been eight years, I have spoken to people who have children who are impacted by air pollution all the time. I talk to people who say, "I don't know what you are talking about, Jemima. It is all fine. Please leave us alone". What is apparent is that the vast majority of the public are not aware of how



impactful pollution is and that it is impacting our lives on a daily basis. People don't make the connection between driving and their children's asthma. They are not making the connection between their grandparents' dementia and using a wood burner on a regular basis. What has been an absolute missed opportunity over many years has been a real public health campaign and standing up and explaining what is actually going on, what the air we are breathing is doing to our health and how our own behaviour is a contributor to that.

I cannot express how regrettable it is that the issues around clean air zones and wood burning have been drawn into some kind of culture wars when, actually, the one thing we all should want is healthy children, healthy adults, and a much less stressed NHS. What is crucial is that people from government speak up and do clear public health campaigns, as has been recommended by so many bodies over such a long time.

Dr Easton: The Royal College of Physicians reported on just how low the public awareness is of the harms of air quality and how many different systems of the body are affected, down to babies in utero being affected, and the British public are not aware.

Q23 **John Whitby:** Agriculture is a major source of secondary particulate matter. How can we improve air quality in that sector?

Dr Easton: There are two main approaches. You would want to reduce the emissions to start with and then you would also want to look at trying to protect the public and reduce exposure to those emissions. There are different ways you can take this. One of the ways, if you are trying to reduce the emissions to start with, is that you can move to feedstocks, where the nitrogen is already fixed, so you can go to things like ammonium nitrate rather than urea rich. You can also cap your slurry tanks and things like that.

There are then some more solutions to try to stop those emissions reaching the public. Some of those will be using things like trees, which can be nitrogen-fixing. Obviously, there is then a bit more of a trade-off because some trees are then producing organic compounds, which are precursors to ozone, and you do not want to reduce biodiversity by exclusively planting plants that are ammonia trapping. There are lots of ways that we can look into this. Jemima and I were both at a research conference on Monday, where the entire morning was dedicated to ammonia emissions in the UK.

Q24 **Dr Roz Savage:** Thank you very much for coming in today. Of course, it is one thing to set targets, it is another thing to actually achieve them. I am trying to get a sense of this: if we were looking at which sectors should be targeted, is there, like, a dirty dozen? Is there some low-hanging fruit in terms of which polluters to tackle first? Is it agriculture? Is it industry? Is it domestic car drivers or wood burners? Can you give me some sense of that?

Dr Easton: It depends on which pollutant you are looking at. The two that are most important for health are fine particulate matter and



nitrogen dioxide. With nitrogen dioxide, it is road vehicles. We still have plenty of diesel cars in our fleet on our roads, despite the fact that we know that there are cleaner options out there that are available.

With some of the fine particulate matter, we are at a point where domestic combustion is becoming increasingly the dominant source of fine particulate matter in the UK. That is continuing to grow. At the moment, there isn't a clear pathway to move us away from domestic combustion. It is still increasing, and the powers that local government has to actually act on this are not adequate.

Q25 Barry Gardiner: You mentioned nitrogen dioxide there. Am I right in thinking that nitrogen dioxide is not included in the environmental improvement plan? You rightly alluded to the fact that they brought forward the target for reduced PM2.5 to 2030—and we are already meeting that in 99% of the areas in the UK—but there would be no requirement on the Office for Environmental Protection to be reporting on nitrogen dioxide. Is that correct?

Dr Easton: Yes. As you have heard already, one of the big issues that many people in our coalition took with the Environmental Improvement Plan is the fact that it does nothing to tackle these stubborn NO₂ levels. As Jemima said in her pitch, we are getting to a point where the limits for NO₂ are going to be twice as stringent in the EU as they are in the UK.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. We have come to the end of our time. Jemima Hartshorn and Dr Easton, thank you very much.