

## **Written evidence submitted by Professor Sheena Cruickshank (PHS0208)**

### **What is the issue the Committee should explore?**

The Committee should explore the issue of air pollution, particularly in low-income communities which experience higher exposure to air pollutants than more affluent areas. The Committee should examine the sources of poor air quality in these communities, how it overlaps with other socioeconomic and environmental factors, and how air pollution can cause or worsen health conditions.

The Committee may also find it germane to investigate solutions to poor air quality, such as smarter planning of green spaces, reducing traffic flow, and improving active travel infrastructure.

### **Why does it deserve attention from the Committee now?**

Air pollution is the largest environmental threat in the UK, linked to between 28,000 and 30,000 deaths every year. It can worsen the symptoms of respiratory conditions such as allergies and increases the risk of severe complications from respiratory infections such as COVID-19, causing increased hospitalisations. Research from The University of Manchester found that exposure to poor air quality is linked to worsened allergy and asthma symptoms and slower cognitive development in school children.

Approximately 30% of particulate matter – microscopic particles which worsen air quality – comes from road transport, primarily from exhaust emissions and tyre and break wear. Another important and growing source is from burning- woods, coal and refuse.

Smart planning of green infrastructure is one key to reducing air pollution. In England alone, 10 million people live in areas with very limited access to green space, while the coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the importance of green space – particularly in urban areas – for the mental and physical wellbeing of citizens.

Many residents in low income areas are without the means to access active transport nor is the infrastructure in place to ensure they can readily walk or cycle. Transport should be affordable and accessible to ensure there are not areas that are not in ready access of shops, schools and businesses.

### **How could Government policy in this area be developed or improved?**

What we build today will last for at least thirty years, locking in health outcomes past 2050. To make the right decisions, there is an urgent need for more coordination between Government departments. DLUCH should establish cross-department working groups with DHSC and BEIS when setting guidance around planning legislation, to ensure health and sustainability are at the centre. Air quality and respiratory health do not exist in silos; neither should the work of Government as it relates to these issues.

Longitudinal data should be better integrated into Government policy. For instance, a better urban evidence base could have highlighted the negative impact of promoting diesel engines on air quality in the 1990s, while more recently, the adverse impact of planting male trees on hay fever may have been more apparent had urban planners consulted available evidence. Planting should accommodate the spaces to ensure pollution is not trapped by planting trees in highly built up spaces worsening its impacts.

The establishment of working groups dedicated specifically to the health and wellbeing of an area, including members of local communities, would help public health officials to make more informed decisions to tackle urban air pollution and inequality. The involvement of citizens is vital; they are the ones with on-the-ground knowledge of the sources of poor air quality, and of the needs of the local population. For example, an area with a higher proportion of elderly residents may need more benches for them to rest while walking.

Access to safe active transport, additional infrastructure such as bike storage, free bikes, crossings to enhance safety should also be considered as should ring fencing funds for school buses to reduce the impacts of the school run.

Finally, more careful planning of green spaces, including a mix of male and female plants, and a greater use of hedges and many small green spaces would help to improve air quality. The Government can provide more detailed planning guidance to local authorities in this area.

*This submission is supported by [Policy@Manchester](mailto:Policy@Manchester), The University of Manchester's policy outreach and engagement team.*

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