

# Tighter air pollution guidelines leave British rules in the dust

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CLEAN AIR  
FOR ALL



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The World Health Organisation has tightened its air pollution guidelines after evidence that toxic particles and gases harm human health at much lower levels than previously thought.

The changes mean the UK's legal limits for the most harmful pollutants are four times as high as the maximum levels recommended by the UN agency.

Most people in the UK live in areas in breach of the new WHO guidelines on fine particles, known as PM2.5, and nitrogen dioxide, which is produced by diesel engines and other forms of combustion.

Analysis of official data by the cam-

paign group ClientEarth found that 96 per cent of roads assessed by the government exceeded the WHO's new PM2.5 guideline and 99 per cent the NO<sub>2</sub> guideline. The changes to the WHO guidelines will put pressure on the government to set more ambitious targets to cut air pollution.

The Times's Clean Air for All campaign, launched in 2019, calls on the government to introduce a new Clean Air Act adopting tighter limits based on WHO recommendations.

Under its new guidelines, the WHO recommends that concentrations of PM2.5 and NO<sub>2</sub> should not exceed an annual mean concentration of 5 micrograms per cubic metre (mcg/m<sup>3</sup>) and 10 mcg/m<sup>3</sup> respectively. Previous WHO guidelines were set at 10 mcg/m<sup>3</sup> for PM2.5 and 40 mcg/m<sup>3</sup> for NO<sub>2</sub>. The UK's present legal limits are 20 mcg/m<sup>3</sup> for PM2.5 and 40 mcg/m<sup>3</sup> for NO<sub>2</sub>.

Asthma UK said 99.8 per cent of

schools in England were in areas where air pollution exceeded the WHO's new PM2.5 guideline, compared with 31 per cent under the previous guideline.

Rosamund Adoo-Kissi-Debrah, whose nine-year-old daughter, Ella, was the first person in the UK to have pollution listed as a cause of death last year, said: "There is no safe level of air pollution to breathe, but following the WHO's new air quality guidelines will improve children's health and set us on the path to achieving clean air for all."

Professor Frank Kelly, of Imperial College London, who is advising the government on new air quality targets, said: "Meeting these updated WHO air quality guidelines will be a challenge ... but not doing so will mean our children and generations to follow will suffer from our inaction."

He added that international co-operation would be needed to reduce pollution that travels across continents.

Alastair Lewis, professor of atmospheric chemistry at the University of York and chairman of the government's air quality expert group, said it was feasible to meet the WHO's new NO<sub>2</sub> guideline within a decade as electric vehicles replaced those running on diesel or petrol, but the new guideline on PM2.5 was "close to impossible" to achieve in some urban areas. This was because particles came from industry, agriculture, wood burning and household products as well as transport. The WHO said millions of lives could be saved by following the new guidelines.

The Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs said: "We will consider the updated WHO guidelines on PM2.5 to inform the development of air quality targets but we must not underestimate the challenges." Defra added that emissions of fine particles had fallen by 11 per cent and nitrogen oxides by 32 per cent since 2010.