

MAYOR OF LONDON

Mr Neil Parish MP

Chair
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

Date: 7 August 2020

Dear Neil

Thank you for the opportunity to provide evidence to the committee's inquiry into air quality.

Since 2016, when I took office, roadside concentrations of nitrogen dioxide in central London have reduced by five times the national average. Exceedances of the hourly limit value for nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) reduced by 97 per cent London wide.

These rapid changes are due to the bold steps we have taken, such as introducing the central London Ultra Low Emission Zone. Alongside future projects such as the expansion of the Ultra Low Emission Zone to the North and South circular in October 2021 these changes will improve the lives and health of Londoners for years to come. My plans to improve air quality could avoid 295,000 new cases of disease and 1.1 million hospital visits by 2050. This would lead to an estimated £5bn in saving in avoided costs to the NHS.

Nevertheless, there is much still to do. I have set a target for London to meet current World Health Organization (WHO) targets for PM_{2.5} no later than 2030 and there is strong support across other regional and local authorities, environmental NGOs and within Parliament for the Government to follow suit.

We have shown that meeting WHO targets in London by 2030 is possible but that is only because I have gone above and beyond using the limited powers I have. To actually achieve these targets, and indeed to go further – which I believe we must – then I need Government's help and new powers in the Environment Bill to tackle non-transport sources of pollution.

Emerging evidence points to significant links between exposure to air pollution and worse outcomes from COVID-19 infections and many of the well-known health effects of long-term exposure, such as increased levels of diabetes and poor lung function, are also directly linked to increased chances of death of severe illness during the pandemic. We have long known that exposure to pollution is often worse for the poorest and most deprived in our society, as well as those from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities. The shocking inequalities in the effects of COVID-19 have thrown into sharp relief exactly what this means for the individuals affected.

Addressing the inequalities in exposure to pollution and inequalities in health outcomes has been a central theme of my plans to tackle London's air pollution. As a result, the difference in concentrations of NO₂ between the most and least deprived areas of London is expected to reduce by 70 per cent by 2030.

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Economically there is a clear case for levelling up in the towns and cities across England who have for too long been left behind, but when it comes to air quality it is often the poorest areas of the capital that need the most support. For example, London has 82 per cent of the most polluted roads in the UK, but the GLA are specifically excluded from applying for national air quality grants and, despite the fact that Londoners pay in £500 million in Vehicle Excise Duty, London is excluded from the UK strategic road funding.

Following successive defeats in the courts for their lack of urgent action the Government finally started to talk the language of ambition during the preparation of the Clean Air Strategy. Sadly, the final document failed to live up to the hype and since then any sense of urgency seems to have drained away and little, if any, of the Clean Air Strategy has borne visible fruit.

Crucially the Environment Bill misses the opportunity to delegate power and responsibility to those most able to act effectively. I have shown what can be done at the regional level in London, but we have limited powers to act outside of the transport sector even though those areas are significant causes of air pollution. I know other Mayors, Combined Authorities and Local Authorities are willing to act, but are similarly hamstrung by poorly designed or inadequate powers.

Action to improve air quality can also deliver wider benefits, for instance my bold policy to introduce Zero Emission Capable taxis for London has incentivised foreign direct investment of over £300m and the creation of over a thousand new jobs in Coventry, at the same time as helping reduce carbon emissions from London's Taxi fleet by 26 per cent. By the same token, my plans to transform London's bus fleet to zero emissions will help secure 3,000 green jobs in the North, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Polling consistently shows that, like people elsewhere in the country, most Londoners agree that the perceived improvement in air quality is a positive outcome of lockdown. More broadly we know there is an appetite across the country for a genuinely green recovery.

Now is the time to challenge Government to act, or to give assistance to those willing to act. A recovery based on short termism and a rapid return to the polluting ways we are striving to abandon will have significant long-term consequences, not just for air quality but for climate change and public health.

I hope you will find the enclosed response to your inquiry helpful in demonstrating what London has achieved, and how this has informed our understanding of what remains to be done. If it would assist the committee, I would be happy to provide further evidence in writing or in person.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Sadiq Khan', with a small number '2' written below the name.

Sadiq Khan
Mayor of London