

The air isn't as clear as you'd think

By [Filip Preoteasa](#), Science Editor (2014/15)

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Blessed though we are to be in York, where the most poignant form of air pollution comes from the nearby chocolate factory, the UK is at the back of the European class when it comes to maintaining low levels of pollutants. It is easy to be oblivious of the invisible problem – until you realize that almost 9,500 people a year in London die because of it.

This figure is from a July 2015 study by King's College London which estimated that approximately 3,500 deaths are caused by pollutant particles up to 2.5 micrometers in size (known as PM2.5) and around six thousand deaths are caused by NO₂ (Nitrogen dioxide). These figures are compiled from measuring the number of human life years taken off by exposure to pollutants. The report also estimates financial costs incurred through hospital admission and treatment to be somewhere between £1.4 and £3.7 million (per annum?).



The Great Smog of 1952 Image credit
RV1864

The UK's track record on resolving air pollution leaves much to be desired. In February last year the EU Commission began taking legal action against the government for breaching pollution targets. The city is on track for reaching adequate levels after 2030. Much of the damage is attributed to the ubiquity of London's diesel buses, something Mayor Boris Johnson has promised to fight. Last year Johnson proposed a scheme to remove diesel cars from the city by incentivising motorists to trade their diesel-utilizing vehicles for more environmentally friendly ones. The government rejected the plan due to cost. However, the Mayor is on track to introduce an "Ultra Low Emissions Zone" for London in 2020, which would charge the most severely polluting vehicles for transit in central London, as well as modernising the bus fleet to a hybrid and zero-emission standard.

Taxing as that may seem, there have been other, more entrepreneurial solutions devised. Lord Paul

Drayson, millionaire and former Science Minister, will be launching "CleanSpace". The service offers a hand-held pollution sensor that communicates via Bluetooth to the client's smartphone application. The app provides rewards in the form of "CleanMiles" for cycling and walking which can be used to purchase rewards from Drayson Technologies' partner companies. Furthermore, as more people acquire the application, the more effective it becomes: shared data from the network of sensors can be used to warn clients of areas of high pollution. Maybe this techy mindfulness of one's local atmosphere will start to be trendy and pick up as the next cool thing.

Nevertheless, the country's air has been generally improving for decades now and we're a long way off anything like the Great Smog of 1952. Moreover, York has surpassed other cities in its efforts to improve quality of air, being the first UK city, in 2014, to offer grants to taxi companies to shift to low-emission cars. The city is also adding five new electric vehicles to the bus tour fleet and there'll be six new electric buses for the Park and Ride service. Not only that, but the city installed diffusion tubes in 2011 to monitor the air content at hundreds of locations in the city. You could almost choke with civic pride.



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