

Toxic air fact-file: West Midlands

Every local authority in the West Midlands has illegal and harmful levels of toxic air.

Over 2.5 million people live in the seven local authorities that make up the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA). Each of these local authorities has an area with illegal (over the EU's legal limit of 40 µg/m³ for nitrogen dioxide) and harmful (over the World Health Organization's recommended limit of 10 µg/m³ for fine particulate matter) levels of pollution.¹

| Local authority | Highest level of average annual NO ₂ roadside concentration (2018) µg/m ³ | Highest level of average annual roadside PM _{2.5} (2018) µg/m ³ |
|-----------------|---|---|
| Birmingham | 58 | 13 |
| Coventry | 48 | 13 |
| Dudley | 42 | 12 |
| Sandwell | 47 | 14 |
| Solihull | 54 | 12 |
| Walsall | 49 | 13 |
| Wolverhampton | 47 | 13 |

Up to 1,460 early deaths every year linked to toxic particles

In 2014 Public Health England estimate that 1,460 early deaths each year can be linked with exposure to fine particulate matter across the WMCA.²

Higher levels of lung disease than national average

People in parts of the West Midlands are more likely to suffer from a lung condition compared with the UK average. For example, people in Birmingham are 213% more likely than average to be admitted to hospital for asthma and 18% more likely to die from COPD.³ In 2018 there were around 180,000 people living with asthma and 50,000 people living with COPD across the West Midlands.⁴

Air pollution can stunt the growth of children's lungs in Birmingham by 8%

In Birmingham, an extra 15 children are hospitalised with asthma each year on days when air pollution is high compared to days when air pollution is low and roadside air pollution can stunt lung growth in children by 7.7%.⁵

Up to 80% of pollution from vehicles

It is estimated that up to 80% of the pollution in Birmingham comes from motor vehicles, and diesel engines are the worst culprits.⁶

Two major hospitals and 41% of GP surgeries in Birmingham are in areas of toxic air

Birmingham Children's Hospital and City Hospital and 41% of the GP surgeries in Birmingham are located in areas with harmful levels of fine particulate matter.⁷



What progress has been made?

In 2017 the government ordered every West Midlands local authority to develop clean air plans and identify how they would bring pollution down to legal levels.⁸

Progress with these plans has been slow and varies across the area. In Birmingham, there has been good progress and plans were announced in 2018 to introduce a charging Clean Air Zone, where the most polluting vehicles will have to pay to enter the city centre (including private cars).⁹ Disappointingly, this zone has now been delayed due to lack of support from central government.

Other WMCA councils (e.g. Coventry) are resisting this type of measure, even though research shows it's the most effective. We've also seen differing approaches to improvements for cycling, walking and public transport.

What more needs to happen?

Far more ambition is needed to protect public health. Policy-makers should:

- 1) **Establish effective Clean Air Zones across urban areas.** These zones should include hospitals, schools and care homes, and should charge the most polluting vehicles, including private vehicles.
- 2) **Roll out a Clean Air for Children programme.** Children are the most vulnerable to toxic air, so we need a regional-wide programme to protect them. This should include audits of polluted schools and nurseries to identify which tailored solutions best solve local challenges.
- 3) **Set out a West Midlands Healthy Air Strategy** across health, environment, education, planning and transport teams. It should include financial incentives for vulnerable people to scrap older and diesel vehicles, improved air pollution alerts and run a regional public health campaign on toxic air.

Get in touch

To find out more about statistics and campaigns in your local area, drop us an email at campaigns@blf.org

¹ DEFRA (2018) Max annual average fine particulate matter (PM2.5) and NO2 roadside concentrations for all modelled UK road links for 2018, <https://uk-air.defra.gov.uk/data/gis-mapping>. Accessed October 2019

² Estimating local mortality burdens associated with particulate air pollution, Public Health England, (2014) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/332854/PHE_CRCE_010.pdf

³ Battle for Breath, British Lung Foundation (2016), <https://www.blf.org.uk/policy/the-battle-for-breath-2016>

⁴ INHS Digital (2018) Quality and Outcomes Framework, Achievement, prevalence and exceptions data - 2017-18 [PAS] - based on CCG level data whose boundaries may differ to that of the local authority and taken from <https://files.digital.nhs.uk/C7/9815B0/qof-1718-prev-ach-exc-ccg.xlsx>

⁵ Evangelopoulos et. Al (2019) Personalising the health impacts of air pollution: interim statistics summary for a selection of statements, Environmental Research Group, Kings College London, <http://www.erg.kcl.ac.uk/Research/docs/personalised-health-impacts.pdf>

⁶ A Clean Air Zone for Birmingham Consultation, Birmingham City Council, 2018, https://www.birminghambeheard.org.uk/economy/caz_individual/

⁷ Toxic air at the door of the NHS, British Lung Foundation, 2018, <https://www.blf.org.uk/take-action/campaign/nhs-toxic-air-report>

⁸ DEFRA (2017) Air quality plan for nitrogen dioxide (NO2) in UK (2017), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/air-quality-plan-for-nitrogen-dioxide-no2-in-uk-2017>

⁹ A Clean Air Zone for Birmingham Consultation, Birmingham City Council, 2018, https://www.birminghambeheard.org.uk/economy/caz_individual/