

Bright Blue with UK 100: Cleaning up the air we breathe

Speakers: Jess Shankleman, Business Journalist, Bloomberg (Chair); Andrew Selous MP, Member, Health Select Committee ; Cllr Sean Anstree, Leader, Trafford Council ; Sam Hall, Senior Researcher, Bright Blue; Alison Cook, Policy & Communications Director, British Lung Foundation ; Simon Alcock, Head of UK Public Affairs, Client Earth;

Shankleman introduces the event and the panel. Sam Hall begins, discussing the responsibility that Government has to safeguard public health, especially as Conservatives. He then explains the many health risks posed by poor air quality, and says it should be seen as a social justice issue. The solution to the problem is to remove old diesel cars from roads, crucially this needs to be done beyond London, as 40% of local authorities in the UK exceeded levels in 2015. Hall then turns to the Air Quality Strategy from the Government: he is critical about its failure to bring in regulations which charge polluting vehicles from entering cities. The Government had said this was the most effective measure to reduce pollution yet it still classes it as a last resort. Hall goes on to talk about the funding announced by the Government, which he welcomes. He says the challenge now is that this is allocated quickly and that innovation is encouraged. In terms of Brexit , he says that 92% of Conservative voters that Bright Blue polled said they support maintaining and strengthening air pollution targets from the EU after Brexit, and he sees it as an opportunity to bring our standards up to scratch with other countries. There is also a big opportunity to nudge consumers into opting for electric vehicles, which will help the environment, the economy and British manufacturing.

Andrew Sealous opens his remarks by explaining the health impacts of air pollution such as dementia, cardiac problems and cancer. He talks about the cross-select committee work that has been done on air quality and also agrees it is a social justice issue: poorer families are disproportionately affected by it. Sealous says they should aim high in their attempts to tackle the issue, and thinks this will work in favour in terms of economy, jobs and tax revenues as well. He agrees that the electric vehicle industry will be one of the best ways to combat the current air quality problems, and says that the recent announcement that some short haul flights will be going electric will improve the situation around airports as well. He says there should be schemes to help poorer people move from old polluting vehicles to new cleaner ones, and that he believes the car industry has got the message in terms of the direction the public wants the market to move in.

Alison Cook begins her remarks by saying that the evidence for air pollution is incredibly strong: we don't need to debate the need to take action anymore, but still the majority of people don't have the information to act properly. She says that clean air zones have been shown to be the most effective way to reduce air quality problems, but this means that strong leadership and sometimes tough decisions are needed to remove cars from towns and cities. She explains how lung disease rates have stayed constant whilst lung cancer rates have decreased, and says this shows that something needs to be done to tackle the problem. Children's health is at centre of this problem – growing up in a polluted area means they are likely to have smaller lungs which leave them vulnerable to lung disease in future years. She explains that British Lung Foundation now needs a public health campaign from the government to support them. Clean air zones, diesel scrappage schemes and changes to taxation on diesel cars are all necessary to carry on progress from the first Clean Air Act.

Sean Anstree is asked whether, as a Council Leader, a clean air zone is something he is looking at:

He says they are. He also says that what's now lacking is an agreement about how to tackle the issue, not what the issue is. There are competing interests in cities between economic growth and quality of life, but he says it shouldn't be impossible to have both. He says we need to look at what local authorities can do alongside government, and the different levels both actors will work at. He goes on to explain the work that Transport for Greater Manchester is doing on the issue, for instance incorporating air quality matters into bus policy. Says he wants to see politicians making a decision on this issue, as actions will speak far louder than words. Air quality in Greater Manchester will become worse unless bold political decisions, which at the time might not seem like the most politically popular thing to do, are made. As time goes on it will be these decisions which make it a positive impact on people's health.

Simon Alcock explains the work Client Earth has done to sue governments in order to try and ensure they reach pollution targets. Again, he talks about the political difficulties of the solutions to air pollution, but that we need to do what the evidence tells us – clean air zones are the most effective way of tackling the problem, yet the government is still arguing they should be a last resort. He also says we shouldn't pass the buck to local authorities – they should have a say, but also have a lack of funding and expertise to carry out the feasibility studies which are needed for action. Alcock also argues that we should not penalise diesel drivers, instead we need a series of measures to help people switch to cleaner transport. He outlines some of these, such as a targeted scrappage scheme, mandatory system of recall and compensation for people who have high-polluting bought cars in good faith, consumer labelling and incentivising low emission vehicles. He says what puts people off is the cost of buying low emission vehicles, so we should make it cheaper to buy those, and more expensive to buy diesel. The UK also has the opportunity to become a world leader in these technologies.