

# RCPCH's Updated Position Statement on Air Pollution in the UK

Quick read:

## Position statement on air pollution in the UK

Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health 2024

### 1. The issue

Exposure to air pollution is the second leading risk factor for death in children under 5, both globally and in the UK.<sup>1</sup>



Fine particulate matter (PM<sub>2.5</sub>) and nitrogen dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>) are responsible for a significant proportion of air pollution's health impacts.<sup>2,3</sup> The UK government and devolved nations have not yet committed to meeting the 2021 WHO Air Quality Guidelines, which outline air pollution limits designed to protect public health.

UK sources of PM <sub>2.5</sub> emissions in 2022		UK sources of NO <sub>x</sub> emissions in 2022	
Source	%	Source	%
Domestic woodburning	22%	Road transport (tailpipe)	30%
Road transport	18%	Combustion	19%

#### Case study: Awaab

Awaab Ishak, a two year-old living in Rochdale, tragically died in December 2020 due to severe respiratory problems caused by exposure to black mould in his home, despite his father repeatedly raising the issue with his housing provider. His death has prompted legal reforms known as "Awaab's Law," requiring timely repairs for damp and mould in social housing.

#### Child health impacts of air pollution

Stage	Short term	Longer term
Gestation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Foetal growth and development</li><li>• Low birth weight</li><li>• Preterm birth</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Early life mortality</li><li>• Chronic disease in later life</li></ul>
Infancy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Respiratory infections</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Infant mortality</li></ul>



# Overview of Air Pollution in the UK



UK sources of PM <sub>2.5</sub> emissions in 2022		UK sources of NO <sub>x</sub> emissions in 2022	
Source	%	Source	%
Domestic woodburning	22%	Road transport (tailpipe)	30%
Road transport (road/tyre/brake wear)	18%	Combustion in energy industries	19%
Industrial processes and product use	17%	Non-road transport (air/rail/shipping)	15%

# Why Clean Air Matters for Children's Health

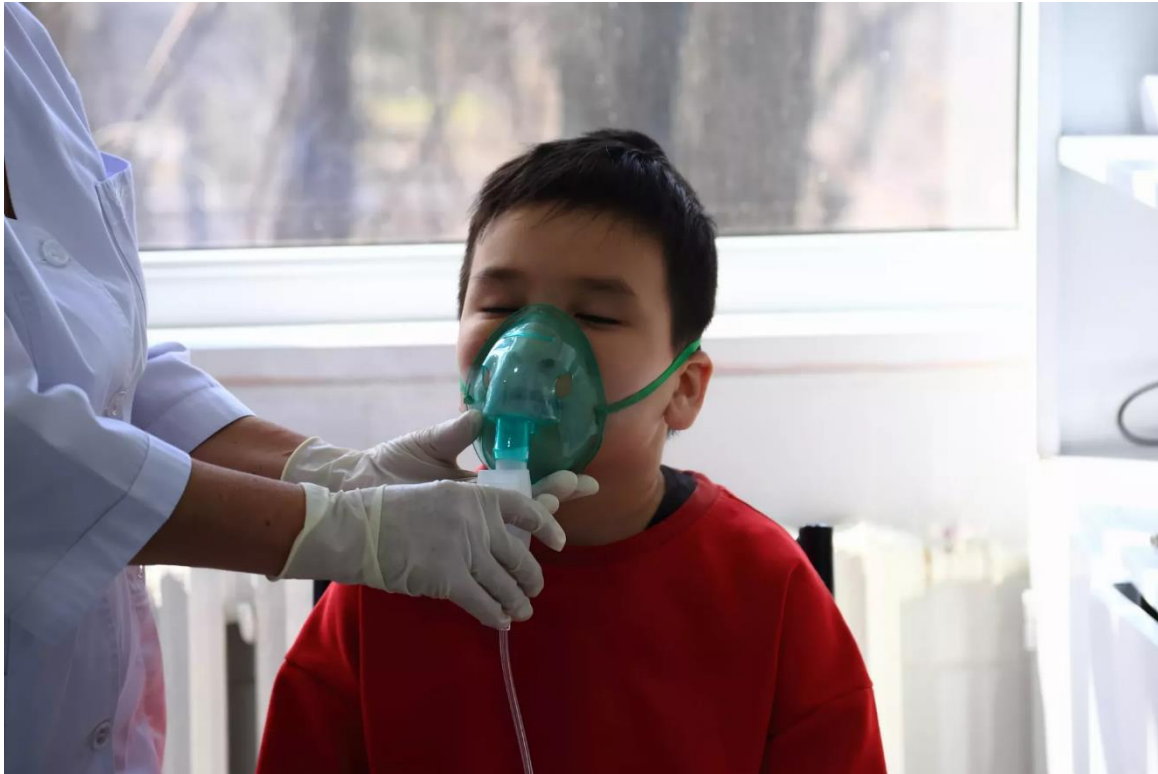
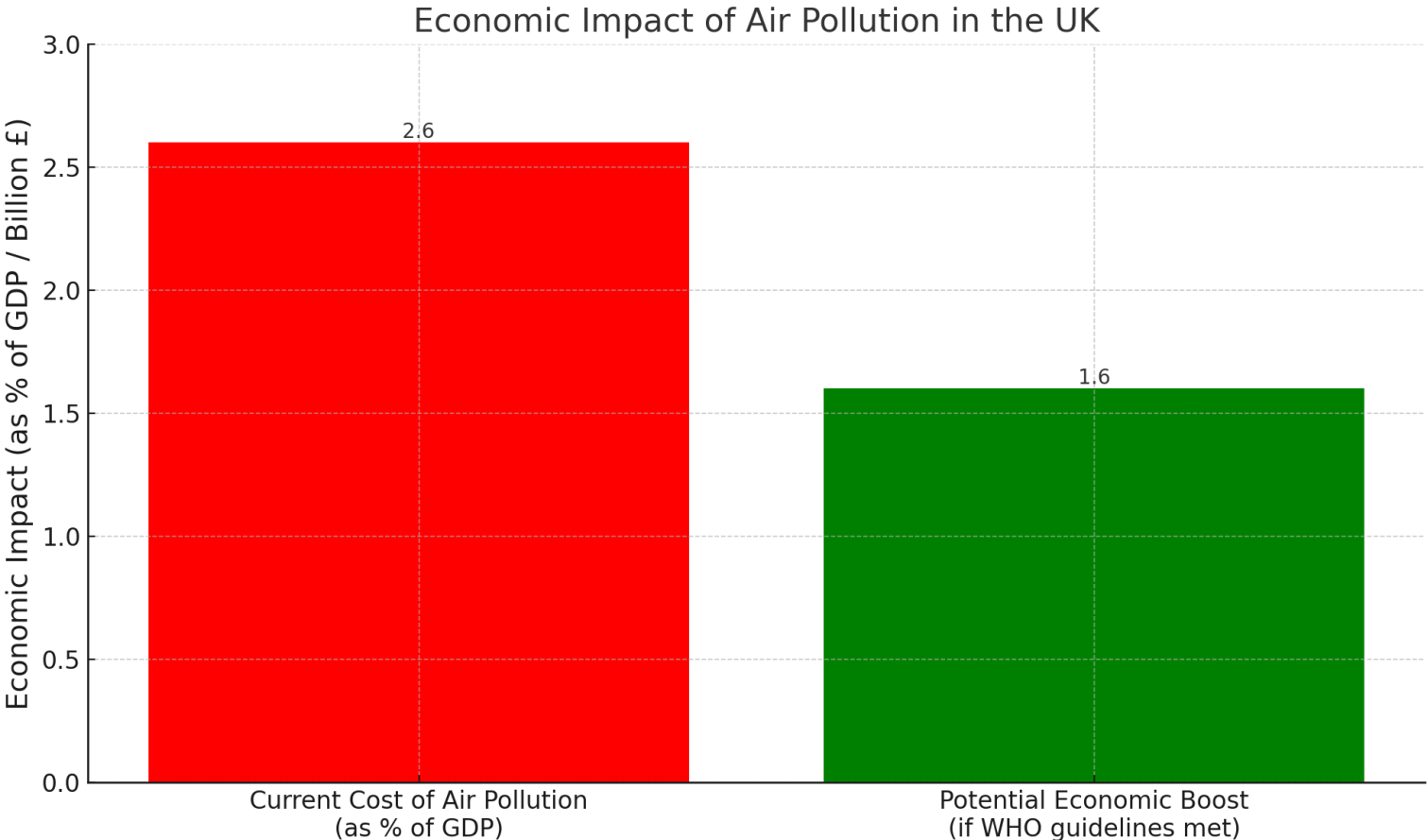


Image from UNICEF, 2025, Breathless beginnings  
*Policies to protect children from air pollution in Europe and Central Asia*

Child health impacts of air pollution		
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<b>Infancy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Respiratory infections</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Infant mortality</li></ul>
<b>Childhood</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Asthma</li><li>• Reduced cognitive function</li><li>• Skin and eye irritation</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lung growth and function</li><li>• Brain development and maturation</li></ul>
<b>Adolescence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Narrowing of arteries</li><li>• Psychotic experiences</li><li>• Metabolic disturbance</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Cardiovascular disease</li><li>• Obesity</li><li>• Type 2 diabetes</li></ul>

# The Economic Cost of Air Pollution



# Our Recommendations

**Air pollution is now the leading cause of global disease, overtaking high blood pressure and smoking** The Lancet, 2024

Air pollution increases hospital admissions for respiratory illnesses

**Children are especially vulnerable to air pollution**

Air pollution affects children before birth and throughout their lives

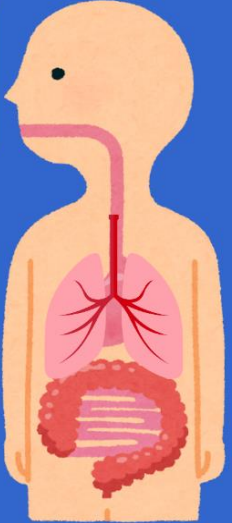
Air pollution affects all organ systems, not just the lungs

There are simple steps everyone can take to reduce air pollution exposure

**Let's start talking about it**

**RCPCH**  
Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health

CLEAN AIR FUND



<b>1</b>	<b>Right to clean air</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Enact a Clean Air Act to establish a legal right to clean air in all four nations of the UK.</li> <li>ii. Meet the 2005 WHO Air Quality Guidelines for PM2.5 by 2030, and develop a clear strategy to meet the 2021 WHO Air Quality Guidelines.</li> </ul>	UK government and devolved administrations; Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
<b>2</b>	<b>NHS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>iii. The NHS should lead by example by mandating the implementation of the Clean Air Hospital Framework across all NHS organisations.</li> </ul>	NHS England, Scotland and Wales; HSC Northern Ireland
<b>3</b>	<b>Schools</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>iv. Ensure children's health in schools is protected by monitoring outdoor PM2.5 and NO2 levels in all UK schools. Grant local authorities the power to close or divert roads when air pollution near schools exceeds limits.</li> <li>v. Implement a national rollout of the school streets initiative, ensuring adequate access for disabled students and those needing to travel by taxi. Improve infrastructure to facilitate active travel to school where school streets are not feasible.</li> </ul>	Department for Education (and equivalent departments in the nations); local authorities
<b>4</b>	<b>Transport</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>vi. Invest to ensure half of urban journeys in the UK can be walked or cycled by 2030.</li> <li>vii. Ensure all UK residents have access to regular, affordable and accessible public transport systems.</li> <li>viii. Implement clean air zones with careful consideration to economically disadvantaged groups and disabled people, and alongside simultaneous improvements in public transport and active travel infrastructure.</li> </ul>	Department of Transport (and equivalent departments in the nations); Metro Mayors; local authorities
<b>5</b>	<b>Housing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ix. In England, expand Awaab's Law to include protection for private rented households. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, introduce and expand Awaab's Law to include protection for private rented households.</li> <li>x. Ensure that retrofitting schemes focused on improving insulation include clear minimum ventilation requirements and enforce these.</li> </ul>	Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (and equivalent administrations in the nations)
<b>6</b>	<b>Wood-burning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>xi. Phase out domestic woodburning in urban areas, assist rural residents to transition away from wood as a primary heating source, and support those in fuel poverty with fuel cost assistance.</li> <li>xii. Increase public awareness on the health harms of woodburning.</li> </ul>	Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (and equivalent departments/administrations in the nations); Metro Mayors; local authorities;