

Tackle UK's killer toxic air before waging war on ocean plastic

If only environment secretary Michael Gove's enthusiasm to curb plastic pollution extended to more pressing environmental issues, says **Olive Heffernan**

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By **Olive Heffernan**



Levels of air pollution are dangerously high in many UK cities
Guy Bell/Alamy Stock Photo

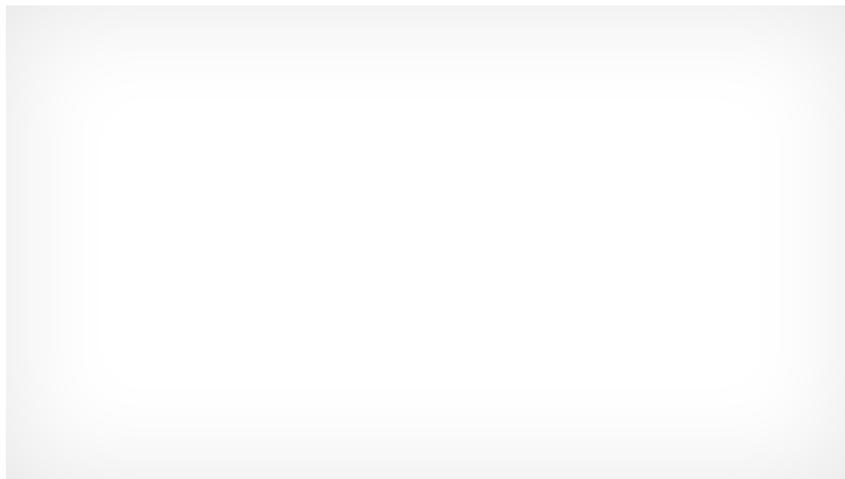
Two things are almost certain to happen soon. UK environment secretary Michael Gove, moved to urgent action, will publish a plan to tackle plastic pollution. At about the same time, the annual limits on toxic air will be passed in at least one part of London – even though it's only January – and be largely ignored by government.

In the first case, a staggering 8 million tonnes of plastic waste enters the oceans every year, ensnaring and drowning marine animals as well as [contaminating the seafood](#) that eventually ends up on our plates.

This pollution, which may see the oceans hold [more plastic than fish by 2050](#), was forced into the public consciousness by the BBC's recent *Blue Planet II* series. Like millions of other viewers, Gove was left "haunted" by images of an ocean awash with bottles, bags, straws and coffee cups.

In response, he is about to launch a war on plastic waste – a series of proposed measures that includes refundable deposits on plastic drinks bottles, incentives for retailers to use fewer types of plastic, and efforts to increase recycling.

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That's laudable when viewed in isolation. But Gove's rush to address the plastics problem is in stark contrast to inaction on toxic air. One could hardly be blamed for suspecting that a focus on plastics is a convenient diversion from the government's failure to address the nation's largest, and far deadlier, environmental concern.

Dangerous city air

The grave reality is that millions of people in dozens of UK cities are inhaling air [considered too dangerous to breathe](#). A chief contributor to the toxic mix is nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), mostly from diesel vehicles. Levels of this noxious gas have overshot legal limits in much of urban Britain since 2000.

In London, the annual limit is routinely breached as soon as January. In 2017, Brixton Road broke it within days, and in 2016, Putney High Street did likewise.

In all likelihood, at least one London borough will have illegally high NO₂ levels within the [coming weeks, or even days](#). For residents, this is potentially fatal. Together with other air pollutants, NO₂ contributes to [some 40,000 early deaths](#) each year in the UK, mainly from respiratory illness and heart disease. These deaths are avoidable, yet [the government has refused to prevent them](#), instead cosyng up with the auto industry and its powerful lobbyists.

It may yet be forced to act. Environmental law firm ClientEarth is [now suing the UK government for a third time](#) to get it to solve the problem, and quickly – as required under EU law.

Wasting money and lives

Gove knows full well what the solution is. According to the government's own analyses, published last May, clean air zones (CAZs) – which clamp down on some diesel vehicles in cities – are by far the best option for slashing NO₂ from transport. They are [60 times more effective than schemes to encourage the scrapping of dirtier vehicles](#).

But the latest UK air pollution control plan, the result of legal action, calls for no mandatory CAZs, instead making them optional in the most polluted cities, such as Birmingham. What's worse, no action at all is required in 45 districts with illegally toxic air, including Leicester, Oxford and Liverpool.

In fighting ClientEarth in court, the government has already wasted £370,000, not to mention countless lives. Important as it is to reduce plastic waste, Gove would do well to remember that a government's duty first and foremost is to protect the lives of its citizens, not its fish.

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