

To reduce the risk of COVID-19, it is essential that air quality is improved. There is increasing evidence of COVID-19 travelling via particulate matter. Furthermore, exposure to high concentrations of air pollution increases the risk respiratory and cardiovascular diseases making the public more vulnerable to the virus.

COVID-19 has resulted in vast changes to our everyday lives. However, through this turmoil, there is the opportunity for new policies and strategies to be put in place to improve our environment. For example, during the initial month of lockdown, the public were able to see the benefits of reduced traffic, cleaner waterways and an increase in biodiversity.

Pedestrianizing the high streets will enhance the area by reducing congestion whilst increasing foot-traffic past commercial units, thereby improving trade. Exceptions could be made for disabled drivers and emergency vehicles. Deliveries could take place outside of peak hours.

Currently, those who can work from home are doing so. This has reduced the number of vehicles on the road. As we return to pre-COVID-19 activity, it is important that working from home is still encouraged to avoid the return of congested peak hours. For those in essential services, unable to work from home, COVID-19 has resulted in a decreased willingness to commute via public transport due to safety concerns.

As those living in poverty in the UK have the lowest levels of car ownership, it is imperative that public transport is upgraded so commuters feel safe using it and those who rely on it are not put at greater risk. COVID-19 has also been shown to be of greater risk to those living in more deprived areas. Additionally, there is a well documented link that those living in deprived areas are exposed to higher concentrations of air pollution compared to more affluent areas.

Increasing public transport use is critical for England to meet its air quality targets through the reduction of individual vehicles on the road; this could be further improved by reducing the emissions associated with public transport by funding electric bus fleets and retrofitting older engines. To increase the use of public transport in wake of COVID-19, buses and trams could have greater spacing between seats and hand sanitising facilities.

Another way to improve air quality would be to increase the number of cycle paths and improve existing cycle paths to be safer. The 2020 National Travel Attitudes Survey found that 66% of adults stated "it is too dangerous for me to cycle on the roads" as a barrier for cycling. Targeting deprived areas would be beneficial in improving accessibility and connectivity within those areas in addition to reducing vehicle numbers.

The average person spends 90% of their time indoors. Therefore, ensuring good indoor air quality is vital for human health. Improving outdoor air quality through the strategies stated will reduce indoor air pollution which enters from outside. However, there are also sources of air pollution generated inside buildings. Research commissioned by Global Action Plan found that 71% of those surveyed felt their health is impacted by indoor air pollution, yet the survey showed that knowledge on what causes poor indoor air quality was low. Awareness campaigns are vital so that the public can make informed decisions to reduce indoor air pollution. The survey previously mentioned showed that the public are unaware of everyday products which release volatile organic compounds such as certain cleaning products, air fresheners and personal care products. Encouraging ventilating rooms whilst painting, varnishing and using glues would also improve indoor air quality. Sufficient ventilation is important to reduce indoor air pollution, especially during winter when the public is less likely to open their windows and may have lit fireplaces.

In summary, the combined approach to reducing traffic through pedestrianization, improving public transport and cycling infrastructure, in addition to an indoor air quality awareness campaign will bring about the sustained change we require to improve air quality across the UK.