



A Mind is a Terrible Thing to Waste

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Road charging 'vital to reduce pollution'

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Wednesday April 5, 2006

[The Guardian](#)

The government will today say a national road charging programme will be a vital tool in cutting pollution levels that reduce life expectancy by eight months and threaten the environment.

The introduction of tolls, congestion charging or other ways of making motorists pay for the distances they drive is one of the few significant measures Britain can take independently of the European Union or other international agreements, a consultation paper will make clear. New rules on energy use in offices and homes are also on the cards since they too can be introduced unilaterally and bring significant social and environmental benefits.

Other measures that could prove cost effective - new emissions limits on vehicles and measures forcing ships to have less polluting engines - are desirable but impossible to implement independently. That limits other options on which the government sounds keen, including tax breaks or other financial incentives to persuade motorists and companies to buy greener cars, a report from the environment department, Defra, warns. Ministers will soon however have the power to direct airport operators to charge airlines according to their aircraft's pollution footprint.

Life expectancy in Britain varies from 69.3 years for men in Glasgow to 85.8 for women in the affluent London borough of Kensington and Chelsea and pollution cuts people's lives by an average eight months, the paper says. Measures introduced over the last 15 years might reduce that to 5.5 months by 2020, while a new package would shave just an extra couple of weeks



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The paper outlining possible ways of improving air quality throws cold water on some apparently attractive options such as encouraging owners of cars made before the mid-1990s to get them scrapped or force power stations, refineries or industrial plants to introduce new technologies before new EU-wide controls in 2016. Not enough people own old cars to make scrapping them worthwhile, while power stations are in rural areas not the urban areas most affected by pollution.

Britain is failing to achieve planned reductions in levels of nitrogen dioxide, minute particulates, mainly caused by diesel engines, and ozone. These pollutants can cause severe health problems including respiratory infections and lung and heart disease. The problem areas are mostly in major towns and cities and alongside busy roads. But even the most significant measures among the new options will only marginally improve health prospects by 2020, according to the Defra document.

Ben Bradshaw, the minister responsible for air quality, will today say: "We need to take further action ... Air quality is still affecting people's health and the wider environment, particularly those pollutants for which there is no safe level. These measures would, if implemented, be a significant step forward in improving public health and the environment."

Up to now ministers have considered road pricing mainly as a way of reducing congestion and encouraging economic expansion, not as a key measure to improve air quality. Previous studies for the government have suggested national schemes may take 10-15 years to introduce.

Air quality options

Benefits society and cost effective

- New EU vehicle emission standards
- Financial incentives to buy greener vehicles before legally required
- International cuts in emissions from shipping
- Cut in office and home pollutants
- National road pricing
- Early adoption of EU pollution controls on coal-fired power stations

No benefit and some costs

- Scrapping old polluting cars
- National backing for low-emission zones, with charges imposed on polluting lorries, coaches and buses
- Incentives to fit new particulate filters to lorries, coaches and buses

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• New technologies required to reduce nitrous oxide emissions on gas-fired power stations and refineries

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