



Britain to ban sale of all diesel and petrol cars and vans from 2040

Plans follow French commitment to take polluting vehicles off the road owing to effect of poor air quality on people's health

Anushka Asthana Political editor and **Matthew Taylor**

Tuesday 25 July 2017 22.38 BST

Britain is to ban all new petrol and diesel cars and vans from 2040 amid fears that rising levels of nitrogen oxide pose a major risk to public health.

The commitment, which follows a similar pledge in France, is part of the government's much-anticipated clean air plan, which has been at the heart of a protracted high court legal battle.

The government warned that the move, which will also take in hybrid vehicles, was needed because of the unnecessary and avoidable impact that poor air quality was having on people's health. Ministers believe it poses the largest environmental risk to public health in the UK, costing up to £2.7bn in lost productivity in one recent year.

Ministers have been urged to introduce charges for vehicles to enter a series of “clean air zones” (CAZ). However, the government only wants taxes to be considered as a last resort, fearing a backlash against any move that punishes motorists.

“Poor air quality is the biggest environmental risk to public health in the UK and this government is determined to take strong action in the shortest time possible,” a government spokesman said.

“That is why we are providing councils with new funding to accelerate development of local plans, as part of an ambitious £3bn programme to clean up dirty air around our roads.”

The final plan, which was due by the end of July, comes after a draft report that environmental lawyers described as “much weaker than hoped for”.

The environment secretary, Michael Gove, will be hoping for a better reception when he publishes the final document on Wednesday following months of legal wrangling.

A briefing on parts of the plan, seen by the Guardian, repeats the heavy focus on the steps that can be taken to help councils improve air quality in specific areas where emissions have breached EU thresholds.

Measures to be urgently brought in by local authorities that have repeatedly breached EU rules include retrofitting buses and other public transport, changing road layouts and altering features such as roundabouts and speed humps.

Reprogramming traffic lights will also be included in local plans, with councils being given £255m to accelerate their efforts. Local emissions hotspots will be required to layout their plans by March 2018 and finalise them by the end of the year. A targeted scrappage scheme is also expected to be included.

Some want the countrywide initiative to follow in the footsteps of London, which is introducing a £10 toxic “T-charge” that will be levied on up to 10,000 of the oldest, most polluting vehicles every weekday.



There have been calls for vehicles to be charged for entering 'clean air zones'. Photograph: Alicia Canter for the Guardian

Sources insisted that while the idea of charges were on the table, there was no plan to force councils to introduce them, and that other measures would be exhausted first.

They hope the centrepiece of Wednesday’s strategy will be the plan to ban diesel and petrol sales completely by 2040, in line with Emmanuel Macron’s efforts across the Channel.

The French president took the steps to help his country meet its targets under the Paris climate accord, in an announcement that came a day after Volvo said it would only make fully electric or hybrid cars from 2019 onwards.

That decision was hailed as the beginning of the end for the internal combustion engine's dominance of motor transport after more than a century.

Prof David Bailey, an automotive industry expert at Aston University, said: "The timescale involved here is sufficiently long-term to be taken seriously. If enacted it would send a very clear signal to manufacturers and consumers of the direction of travel and may accelerate a transition to electric cars."

Britain's air quality package also includes £1bn in ultra-low emissions vehicles including investing nearly £100m in the UK's charging infrastructure and funding the "plug-in car" and "plug-in grant" schemes.

There will also be £290m for the national productivity investment fund, which will go towards the retrofitting, and money towards low-emission taxis.

The report will also include an air quality grant for councils, a green bus fund for low carbon vehicles, £1.2bn for cycling and walking and £100m to help air quality on the roads.

The strategy comes amid warnings that the UK's high level of air pollution could be responsible for 40,000 premature deaths a year.

A judge had said the government's original plans on tackling the issue, which included five clean air zones, were so poor as to be unlawful. The government was asked to present a new draft policy to tackle air pollution from diesel traffic before the election.

It was then called to court to explain why it had made a last-minute application to delay publication of its draft policy until after the election.

James Eadie QC, representing the government, said the policy was ready to be published but it would be controversial and should therefore be withheld until after the election.

"If you publish a draft plan, it drops all the issues of controversy into the election ... like dropping a controversial bomb," he said, adding that it could risk breaching rules about civil service neutrality and lead to the policy being labelled a Tory plan.

However, judges said the government did have to publish a draft plan with the final version needed by the end of July.



Michael Gove will publish the document on Wednesday.
Photograph: Stefan Rousseau/PA

May's draft contained few concrete proposals and did not specify the cities and towns where polluting vehicles might face charges, the level of any charges or the scope or value of any scrappage scheme.

Instead, the plan put the onus for action on local authorities: “Local authorities are already responsible for improving air quality in their area, but will now be expected to develop new and creative solutions to reduce emissions as quickly as possible, while avoiding undue impact on the motorist.”

Analysis in the documents showed increasing the number of CAZs from the current six planned to 27 would make by far the greatest impact in cutting pollution and provide cost benefits of over £1bn. The CAZ policy would cut more than 1,000 times more NO₂ than a scrappage scheme, even if that scheme required old diesels to be replaced by electric cars.

But it required local authorities to exhaust all other options before introducing CAZ charging for diesel vehicles, such as removing speed bumps and retrofitting buses.

The coalition government had already set out a vision for almost every car and van to be ultra-low emission by 2050 – a move which the government acknowledged would require “almost all new cars and vans sold to be near-zero emission at the tailpipe by 2040”. So it is unclear to what extent the new pledge will further boost Britain’s ability to achieve air quality requirements.

ClientEarth, the campaign group that has successfully pursued the government through the courts over the UK’s air pollution crisis, gave a cautious welcome to the announcement but said ministers must take immediate action to tackle the UK’s air pollution crisis.

“The government has trumpeted some promising measures with its air quality plans, but we need to see the detail,” said CEO James Thornton. “A clear policy to move people towards cleaner vehicles by banning the sale of petrol and diesel cars and vans after 2040 is welcome, as is more funding for local authorities.

“However, the law says ministers must bring down illegal levels of air pollution as soon as possible, so any measures announced in this plan must be focused on doing that.”

The mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, has been calling for tougher measures to tackle air pollution, which kills 9,000 people a year in the capital.

A City Hall source was sceptical about the government’s announcement. “We need to look at the full details but what Londoners suffering from the terrible health impacts of air pollution desperately need is a fully-funded diesel scrappage fund – and they need it right now.”

Areeba Hamid, clean air campaigner at Greenpeace, said: “The high court was clear that the government must bring down toxic air pollution in the UK in the shortest possible time. This plan is still miles away from that.

“The government cannot shy away any longer from the issue of diesel cars clogging up and polluting our cities, and must now provide real solutions, not just gimmicks. That means proper clean air zones and funding to support local authorities to tackle illegal and unsafe pollution.”

Topics

- Transport policy
- Pollution
- Transport
- Health
- Automotive industry