UK Health Alliance on Climate Change

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The UK Health Alliance on Climate Change was founded in April 2016, bringing together leading health bodies to advocate for responses to climate change that protect and promote health. Our vision is that the threats to planetary health from climate change are minimised and in a way that health benefits are maximised. Our membership comprises many Medical Royal Colleges, the Royal College of Nursing, Faculties, the British Medical Association, the British Medical Journal, and The Lancet. In total, we represent over 650,000 healthcare practitioners’ response to climate change.

While climate change poses the greatest health threat of the 21st century, the actions needed to halt climate change can unlock large health co-benefits. The Alliance was formed in reaction to these profound threats and opportunities and seeks to drive an accelerated policy response.

What are we calling for?

Over the last 40 years, the EU has been a leader in environmental legislation, with the UK playing an important part. As a result we now have a framework of law and regulation that has helped to dramatically improve the protection of our environment – including action to mitigate climate change – and as a result, the health of the UK population. Currently, up to 80% of our environmental protections derive from EU law, and are at risk of being lost without robust legislation to maintain and extend them. Of course, law is only as effective as its enforcement and institutions such as the European Commission and the European Court of Justice currently play an important role in ensuring positive environmental outcomes in the UK.

Environmental Protections and Governance

The Environment Bill is an important opportunity to ensure that current protections are maintained and enhanced following our departure from the EU. For the Government to deliver a ‘Green Brexit’, it is imperative that the environmental protections currently secured by EU legislation are maintained after the UK’s exit from the EU.

1. In addition, the Alliance believes it is essential to create an independent ‘green watchdog’ to replace the current functions of the European Commission and the European Court of Justice. We welcome the proposed ability of the body to ensure important environmental principles, such as the precautionary principle, are at the heart of UK policy in the future.

The Alliance is encouraged that the Bill contains some assurances that the new environmental watchdog will be independent and accountable to Parliament. However, we would like to see the independence of the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) strengthened through a commitment to multi-annual budgets and a greater role for parliament in approving funding and appointments. The Bill should enhance the OEP’s legal status to provide greater independence than a standard non-departmental public body model allows.
2. By committing to introduce the watchdog through primary legislation, it would appear that the Government recognises the importance of enforcement of the UK’s environmental standards after our departure from the EU. However, the Alliance believes that for any proposed post-EU watchdog to be able to adequately oversee and enforce environmental policy in the UK, it must be given the power to initiate legal action where appropriate. Without the power to initiate court action against public authorities or the government, or to engage in other enforcement measures, the watchdog will provide less effective oversight and enforcement functions than are currently provided by the EU institutions. The Alliance and its members cannot support the watchdog in its proposed form.

Earlier this year, the Prime Minister promised that a “world-class” watchdog would be created, not just to protect current standards but to improve on them. We support this ambition, and believe that to achieve it any new watchdog must have at least the existing oversight and enforcement capability of EU institutions. It is also disappointing that Government proposals do not commit to enshrining vital environmental principles, such as the precautionary principle and the ‘polluter pays’ principle, in law. Instead, it is proposed that there be a “requirement for government to have regard to [a] statutory policy statement on environmental principles in developing and implementing their policies”.

Without stronger oversight and enforcement capability, the Alliance is concerned that legislation will no longer maintain key environmental principles in practice, which could have a major negative impact on public health through increases in environmental degradation. For example, the Alliance is concerned that the absence of the ‘polluter pays’ principle could lead to a rise in pollution with attendant negative impacts on public health.

**Air Quality & Active Travel**

Air pollution continues to have a large negative health impact on the UK population. The negative health effects of exposure to air pollution build up over time, and can include asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), cancer, dementia, stroke and heart disease, obesity and diabetes. Estimates of the mortality burden of air pollution are as high as 40,000 deaths a year. By 2035, the health and social care costs of air pollution have been estimated to reach up to £18.6 billion.

In 2016, emissions from road transport accounted for 12% of particulate air pollution in the UK – the third largest source. Road transport also accounted for 34% of UK nitrogen dioxide emissions in the same year, with the rate of reduction from this sector slowing down due to the increased contribution from diesel vehicles.

1. We support the inclusion of new targets for fine particulate matter (PM2.5) in the Bill, in line with the limit recommended by the World Health Organisation (WHO). The Bill will be a once-in-a-generation opportunity to adopt the best standards to protect public health. The current legal limit for PM2.5 is twice as high as what the WHO recommends – 25µg/m³ and 10µg/m³ respectively.

Enshrining WHO’s limit for fine particulate matter (PM2.5) into UK law would guarantee that we have a legislative framework based on the highest health standards in place and clear legally binding targets to consistently and effectively reduce air pollution levels across the country.
2. Most of the UK is still experiencing illegal levels of nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), and it is of the utmost importance that the Environment Bill commits to maintaining existing NO₂ standards after we leave the EU. Furthermore, to ensure we bring these illegal levels down, we need to make sure enforcement powers are given to an appropriate body.

3. A key plank of reducing outdoor air pollution is increasing the uptake of non-motorised transport (i.e. active travel, including walking and cycling). At present, over half the population do not reach a healthy level of activity, and 70% of the NHS budget is spent on long-term conditions with a large preventable element. Intervention studies show that targeted increased physical activity reduces the need for social care (which currently costs around £100bn in the UK).

We know that the ability to exercise outdoors improves physical and mental health. A strategy that tackles pollution and inactivity together has the potential to reduce the UK’s increasing burden of ill-health and the costs of the NHS and social care, as well as contributing to the mitigation of climate change. Therefore, we call on the government to increase investment in active transport to £10 per capita, and to enshrine this in law in the Environment Bill.

For more information please contact laurencebourton@ukhealthalliance.org, Communications Manager, UK Health Alliance on Climate Change. Twitter: @UKHealthClimate