

# Case Study: Improving London's Air Quality

How interventionism led to improvements in London's air quality and associated wellbeing of its people | Joe Inniss

## Introduction

Cities are a built environment. Specifically, an environment built for people. It stands to reason that these built environments should benefit us all. But that isn't always the case, especially in large cities.

The things that make a city economically successful sometimes complement the things that make it liveable. Too often, they work against the comfort, happiness, and well-being of the city's residents.

Unconstrained, the same free markets that have made our cities such economic dynamos can also make them nearly unbearable when the quality of our shared resources suffers. Take the air we breathe. In cities from Delhi to Los Angeles to Beijing, critically contaminated air regularly keeps people indoors and threatens the health of vulnerable populations.

London was on that list until recently. Through a combination of clear objectives, targeted regulations, and ample support for alternatives to highly polluting activities, it managed to improve its air quality to a stunning degree in just five years.

We believe that London's approach to air pollution reflects a model that can and should be applied elsewhere. Left to its own devices, the free market will pursue profit in such a headstrong, even naïve, way, that prudent government intervention is necessary. More than our quality of life is at stake: the very fact of our existence may be on the line, and with it the continued viability of private enterprise itself.

## Interventions can work

In 2015, more than 2 million Londoners—a quarter of the city's population—endured polluted air each day. More than 9,000 of them died each year as a direct result of breathing dangerous levels of nitrogen dioxide. Today, only 119,000 Londoners are still living with polluted air.

So, how did London manage this dramatic improvement?

Firstly, by identifying the cause. While any number of sources contribute to air pollution, vehicle traffic was the prime cause of London's poor air.

Officials then set clear objectives that described their desired outcome, and created regulations designed to achieve those goals. Most famously, they put an economic premium on air pollution caused by vehicles on London's roads by imposing fees for driving in heavily polluted areas of central London.

These fees gave drivers an unmistakable sense of the problem to which each of them was contributing. But the scheme went far beyond financial disincentives. London also invested in cleaner buses, replacing older models in its most polluted areas, and encouraged the use of more efficient taxis.

These changes were not the brainchild of one person alone. Successive mayors embraced and developed the idea, and as the idea caught on, pollution-control zones cascaded throughout London's boroughs.

While some hard-bitten types never stopped complaining about the restrictions London had placed on freedom of movement, most Londoners themselves understood the bigger picture. The freedom to drive had come up against Londoners' freedom to breathe. Freedom to breathe won out, naturally, and without anything as draconian as an outright ban on motor vehicles.

As London's air quality improved, its residents had a tangible demonstration of the new regulations' impact and success.

Better yet, the regulations had been developed, implemented, and enforced expressly to improve air quality where it was worst. Some businesses and private drivers were inconvenienced, but without prejudice toward anything but dangerously polluted air. The same rules applied across the board, which left no business at a relative competitive disadvantage.

## Interventions can work

While London's efforts have been remarkably successful, much work remains to be done. The success of the last five years has been driven by a carrot-and-stick approach. The imposition of low-emission zones and the assessment of penalties for driving in them was a stick that struck some like an entire tree branch. But the programme's early and sustained success proved to everyone involved that the scheme had a real and meaningful impact. Most people did the maths and realised that they'd come out ahead.

The next phase of air-quality assurance in London is shaping up a bit differently. Having curtailed damaging behaviour by London's drivers, officials are now looking to make it easier to drive sustainably. Less stick, in other words, and far juicier carrots.

Public transport, for example, is an inherently eco-friendly way to get from here to there. London's buses alone provide more than 2 billion rides each year, many of which represent a private vehicle left in the driveway.

London has doubled down by pledging that all new buses added to its fleet will produce zero emissions. Thousands of hybrid buses have been serving London for years, and those will slowly be replaced by a growing number of all-electric vehicles. In November 2021, London added 20 hydrogen-powered buses to its fleet.

Owners of private vehicles are receiving targeted investments of their own. London currently features roughly 7,000 charging points for electric vehicles. The Mayor's most recent EV infrastructure strategy calls for increasing that number eightfold by 2030.

Of course, not every trip demands a motorised vehicle. As investments in public transport make private cars less necessary throughout London and fees in emission-control zones make them more onerous to drive, road traffic may well decrease permanently. This introduces an opportunity to carve out just a bit of London's existing roadways for other uses.

Few cities are truly friendly to bicyclists, but some of London's closest neighbours come close. Amsterdam, Copenhagen, and

even hilly Oslo have made it remarkably easy to get around by bike. Over in Seattle, a city with enough steeply pitched streets to make your hamstrings weep, public bicycles are available to ride—and leave—wherever people choose.

London cannot achieve overnight what those cities have built over the years. For one thing, London twice as populous as Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Oslo, and Seattle combined. But as the city's traffic infrastructure changes, officials must be prepared to support new, greener modes of transportation. Even those that use cheese and onion crisps as fuel.

## Interventions can work

London's remarkable success in improving the quality of its air has not been an accident. Nor has it been the result of an unfettered free market or of heavy-handed central planning. Its success is down to the simple yet surprisingly tricky art of establishing clear objectives and fitting regulations that met them directly and precisely.

Those objectives have held fast through dramatic changes in the mayoralty and throughout a time of significant change in London's economic and social makeup. That so many officials, of such disparate inclinations, have not only agreed with the need for pollution-cutting measures but on the right way to pursue them, is a remarkable demonstration of political faith. And a testament to the power of reasonable, purposeful regulation to achieve critical common goals.

The same dynamic can and should inform public policy throughout the UK. The virtues of private industry need no elaboration or defence.

But those virtues—among them the pursuit of innovation, productivity, and efficiency—can reveal a grimmer side when they are pursued to their illogical, sometimes inhumane, limits.

The public has an interest, after all, in public spaces and in caring for the resources we share with the instruments of commerce. Sensible governmental regulation represents the public interest. When it is conceived and implemented properly, intervention and regulation affects all private businesses equally, allowing each to support a healthier and more sustainable human environment without having to worry about losing its edge on the competition.

These are no longer optional considerations, or ways to make things a bit nicer. In the midst of a climate emergency largely fuelled by industrial production and related commercial activity, they are existentially important.

### TL;DR

1. Air pollution in cities is bad.
2. Government interventions can help.
3. London provides an example of a successful approach.