

Fewer cars not cleaner ones key to tackling air quality

Written by Joan Russow

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Image captionElectric vehicles produPlans to promote electric vehicles in the UK do not go far enough to tackle air pollution, according to a leading government adviser.

Writing in the Guardian, Prof Frank Kelly said fewer cars, not just cleaner ones, were the key to cleaner air.

Electric cars produce particulates from their tyres and brakes which are linked to serious health problems.

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Prof Kelly said that London should lead the way in promoting non-polluting transport policies.

Just last week the government [unveiled its strategy for tackling illegal levels of nitrogen dioxide in the air](#)

The key element was a promise to end the sale of all new diesel and petrol cars from 2040.

The government said there would be significant investments in ultra-low emission vehicles, with some £600m going into the development and manufacture of such vehicles by 2020.

But according to Frank Kelly, who is professor of environmental health at Kings College London, and chair of the government advisory committee on the medical effects of air pollutants, these steps would not go far enough.

"Our cities need fewer cars, not just cleaner cars," Prof Kelly writes.

"One issue is that electric vehicles will not sufficiently reduce particulate matter (PM), the other toxic pollutant emitted by road transport.

"This is because PM components include not only engine emissions, but also a contribution from brake and tyre wear and road surface abrasion," he added.

The government has focussed on dealing with nitrogen dioxide because of consistent breaches of legal limits in many areas of the country.

However levels of PM are not above the law, although they do breach World Health

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Organisation recommended safety guidelines.



Image copyrightGETTY IMAGES

Image captionThe government has said that it will end the sale of new diesel and petrol cars from 2040 According to the Royal College of Physicians the early deaths of around 29,000 people in the UK each year are linked to particle pollution, which is more than

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the 23,500 premature deaths attributed to nitrogen dioxide.

The combined total is estimated to be around 40,000 as some people are harmed by both pollutants.

Particulate matter has also been found in human brains and there are concerns that exposure to PM may have a role to play in developing debilitating conditions such as Alzheimer's disease.

Prof Kelly's views have been supported by environmental lawyers, ClientEarth, who used the courts to force the government to come forward with their air quality strategy.

"Electric vehicles have a role to play in tackling air pollution but they are not the only solution," said lawyer Anna Heslop.

"What we need, and what the government has so far failed to deliver, is a comprehensive plan to bring down air pollution in the UK."

In his article Prof Kelly puts significant emphasis on the role of London in showing the way forward for other big cities in tackling these sources of pollution.

He says that as London's population is growing quickly, there needs to be more and better public transport, instead of letting people rely on owning cars and using them for short journeys.

There should be "as much active transport in the form of walking and cycling as is feasibly possible," he says.

Prof Kelly believes that attitudes towards cars are changing rapidly, with younger Londoners in particular opting for car club membership and ride-sharing apps instead of buying a car.

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The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, has already committed the city to a future of fewer car journeys, aiming to cut the number by three million per day from 2041.

In his draft strategy, unveiled in June this year, he proposed making the entire transport system in London free of emissions by 2050.

"Leaving the car at home must be the affordable, safest and most convenient option for Londoners going about their daily lives," Mr Khan said.

"This is not only essential for dealing with congestion as London grows, but crucial for reducing our toxic air pollution, and improving the health of all Londoners."