



BRIEFING PAPER

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Brexit and air quality

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Summary

Poor air quality is considered by the Government to be “the largest environmental risk to public health in the UK”. As well as human health, air pollution also has implications for the natural environment and for the economy. Due to the transboundary nature of air pollution, action to manage and improve air quality in the UK has been driven by both international agreements and EU legislation, as well as national and devolved legislation.

This paper gives an overview of the current air quality legal framework and sets out the speculation and what is known so far about what could change following Brexit.

Current law and policy

At international level, the Gothenburg Protocol and amendments to it set emissions ceilings levels for various pollutants. Its aim is to control long-range transboundary pollution. It is implemented at EU level through several directives, including the National Emission Ceilings Directives of 2001 and 2016. The 2001 Directive is implemented in the UK through the by the *National Emission Ceilings Regulations 2002*. The 2016 Directive sets emission ceilings which apply from 2020. It is expected to be transposed in the UK by June 2018 and implemented by December 2018.

There is also legislation relating to ambient air quality (the air that more immediately surrounds us) at EU level through [Directive 2008/50/EC](#) (the “Air Quality Directive”). Instead of setting a ceiling for pollutants, it sets “limit values” (parameters that must not be exceeded) for concentrations of different pollutants. In the UK, responsibility for meeting ambient air quality limit values is devolved to the national administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has responsibility for meeting the limit values in England and Defra co-ordinates assessment and air quality plans for the UK as a whole.

The Air Quality Directive is implemented in the UK through:

- [Air Quality Standards Regulations 2010](#) (as amended);
- [Air Quality Standards \(Wales\) Regulations 2010](#) (as amended);
- [Air Quality Standards \(Scotland\) Regulations 2010](#) (as amended); and
- [Air Quality Standards Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2010](#) (as amended)

EU infringement proceedings

Enforcement mechanisms for failure to meet air quality limit values are contained in EU law and not in UK legislation. In February 2014 the EU Commission began [infringement proceedings](#) against the UK for its failure to meet air quality targets for nitrogen dioxide set by The Air Quality Directive in certain parts of the UK. These proceedings have not yet been concluded.

Judicial review and air quality plan compatibility with EU legislation

Separate to the EU Commission proceedings, but arising from the same EU Air Quality Directive, private judicial reviews have also been brought against the UK Government stemming from the admitted and continuing failure of the United Kingdom, since 2010, to comply (in certain zones), with the limits for nitrogen dioxide levels. These proceedings have resulted in the Government producing a number of different air quality plans aimed at reducing nitrogen dioxide levels.

Brexit: statements, concerns and uncertainties

The [*European Union \(Withdrawal\) Bill*](#) 2017-19 is designed to provide legal continuity by copying over the entire body of EU law onto the UK's post-exit statute book. In broad terms, this means that all EU air quality law will be converted into domestic law from exit day.

The Government has sought to allay concerns about changes to air quality standards following Brexit by stating that there are [no plans to change air quality limit values and targets](#).

It is not clear if the Government would follow any changes to EU air quality standards made following Brexit. It remains a possibility that equivalence between UK and EU standards could still be required under future trade arrangements. Some commentators have said that a change to air quality limit values post Brexit could be desirable on the basis that they could be more refined for the UK's specific circumstances. One of the areas that the [Government has indicated that it might change post-Brexit](#) is how air quality is monitored and assessed in order to provide requirements that are more targeted and focussed to UK needs.

While air quality standards from the Air Quality Directive are enshrined in UK legislation, they are currently monitored and enforced by the European Commission and overseen by the Court of Justice of the European Union. In response to concern about enforcement of environmental standards following Brexit, the [Government has announced](#) plans to consult, in 2018, on a new independent statutory body that would hold Government to account for upholding environmental standards in England. The new body is not expected to cover the devolved nations.

In relation to the devolved nations, there has been concern about the *European Union (Withdrawal) Bill* 2017-19 and how it would intersect with a number of devolved environmental policy areas, including air quality. The Secretary of State has [said](#) there is potential for a discussion about whether air quality should maintain common UK-wide rules.

For further information on related issues see Library briefing papers, [Air Pollution: Meeting Nitrogen Dioxide Targets](#) and [Brexit and the environment](#).

1. Sources of air pollution

Air pollution can come from a variety of different pollutants and stem from a variety of different sources.

Some of the principal pollutants that are relevant to this paper include:

- **Sulphur dioxide (SO₂):** An acid gas formed when fuels containing sulphur impurities are burned. The main man-made sources include fossil fuel combustion and incineration of waste.¹
- **Nitrogen oxides:** Compounds formed when nitrogen and oxygen combine. NO_x, which comprises nitric oxide (NO) and nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), is emitted from combustion processes. NO is subsequently oxidised to form NO₂, although some NO₂ is emitted directly. Main sources include power generation, industrial combustion and road transport.²
- **Particulate matter (PM):** Small breathable particles classified according to size. PM is not a single compound. It is made up of a mixture of solid and liquid particles of organic and inorganic chemicals; and includes some naturally occurring ones, such as salt and dust.³ Within this category, PM is split further into PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5}, which reflects the size of the particles. The smaller the particle, the further it can penetrate into the lungs through inhalation.⁴ Sources of PM are classified as either primary, such as particles from engine combustion or break and tyre wear; or secondary, when other chemicals react to form PM in the atmosphere.
- **Ozone (O₃):** A pollutant gas which is not emitted directly from any source in significant quantities, but is produced by reactions between other pollutants (such as NO_x and **Volatile Organic Compounds** (VOCs)), in the presence of sunlight.⁵ Ozone is not reported as part of transboundary pollution obligations as it is not a primary pollutant. Ozone acts as an irritant to the eyes, nose and lungs. It can also affect vegetation, impacting crop yields and ecosystems.⁶
- **Lead and heavy metals,** for example, arsenic, cadmium, mercury and nickel. Anthropogenic emissions of toxic metals originate mainly from fossil fuel combustion, industrial processes and waste incineration.⁷
- **Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons (PAH).** PAHs are a large group of chemical compounds that are toxic and carcinogenic. This group includes Benzo[a]pyrene (BaP). The main sources of

¹ European Environment Agency, [Air quality in Europe 2017](#), October 2017, p16

² HM Government publication, Defra, [Air Pollution in the UK 2016](#), September 2017, glossary

³ WHO Fact Sheet, [Ambient \(outdoor\) air quality and health](#), September 2016

⁴ Defra, [Air Pollution in the UK 2016](#), September 2017, pvii

⁵ HM Government publication, Defra, [Air Pollution in the UK 2016](#), September 2017, glossary

⁶ Air Quality Expert Group, [Ozone in the United Kingdom](#), 2009

⁷ European Environment Agency, [Air quality in Europe 2017](#), October 2017, p17

BaP are domestic heating (in particular wood and coal burning), waste burning, coke production and steel production.⁸

These pollutants have been chosen for this paper because the regulation of them highlights the interaction between EU and UK legislative and policy regimes, as well as the monitoring, reporting and enforcement mechanisms in relation to them.

As seen from this list, the sources creating these pollutants are wide-ranging and cover a range of natural and anthropogenic sources, including the combustion of fossil fuels for industrial and domestic processes, incineration of waste, emissions from traffic, chemical and photo-chemical reactions. For further information see the Defra publication [What are the causes of Air Pollution](#).

1.1 Reasons for concern

Air pollution is cause of concern for human health, the natural environmental and on the economy.

It is widely acknowledged that air pollution has a significant public health impact.⁹ The World Health Organisation (WHO) has published its own [Air quality guidelines](#), 2005, which offer global guidance on thresholds and limits for key air pollutants that pose health risks.

The WHO has also published a [WHO Global Urban Ambient Air Pollution Database](#) (update 2016). The summary to it states that globally, over 80% of people living in urban areas where levels are monitored are exposed to air quality levels that exceed WHO limits and that people living in low income cities were the most likely to be affected.¹⁰

An April 2017 briefing from the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) on [Brexit: What does it mean for air quality?](#), gave a summary of some of the health implications of poor air quality:

- Outdoor air pollution causes an estimated 40,000 deaths in the UK every year.
- Exposure to outdoor air pollution is estimated to lead to a loss of 15 minutes of life expectancy each day.
- In addition to the health implications, air pollution has a significant impact on business and our health services. In the UK, these costs add up to more than £20 billion every year.
- Exposure to outdoor air pollution is associated with lifelong health implications, including: effects on foetal development (particularly in relation to lung and kidney development), and increases in heart attacks and strokes for those in later life. Air pollution is also linked to asthma, diabetes, dementia, obesity and cancer.¹¹

⁸ European Environment Agency, [Air quality in Europe 2017](#), October 2017, p16

⁹ WHO, [Ambient \(outdoor\) air quality and health](#), September 2016

¹⁰ WHO, [WHO Global Urban Ambient Air Pollution Database](#) (update 2016)

¹¹ Royal College of Physicians, [Brexit: What does it mean for air quality?](#) April 2017

The Government's July 2017 [UK plan for tackling roadside nitrogen dioxide concentrations](#) provides a summary of some of the implications of poor air quality on public health, the natural environment and the economy:

11. Poor air quality is the largest environmental risk to public health in the UK. It is known to have more severe effects on vulnerable groups, for example the elderly, children and people already suffering from pre-existing health conditions such as respiratory and cardiovascular conditions. Studies have suggested that the most deprived areas of Britain bear a disproportionate share of poor air quality.

12. Air pollution also results in damage to the natural environment. NO₂ contributes to acidification and eutrophication of soil and watercourses, which impacts on animal and plant life and biodiversity. It also contributes to local ozone production which has public health impacts and damages agricultural crops, forests and plants.

13. Air pollution has social costs and risks the potential for economic growth. It also impacts upon people of working age which can have economic effects, for instance if they have to take days off work due to air pollution-related health problems. Poor air quality is estimated to have had a total cost of up to £2.7 billion through its impact on productivity in 2012.¹²

For a selection of further views and studies about the impacts of air pollution see:

- written evidence submitted to the joint select committee inquiry into [Improving Air Quality](#);
- [Chief Medical Officer annual report 2017: health impacts of all pollution – what do we know?](#) 2 March 2018; and
- section 1.3 of the European Environment Agency report, [Air quality in Europe 2017](#), October 2017.

¹² HM Government, [UK plan for tackling roadside nitrogen dioxide concentrations](#), July 2017, p3

2. The integration of EU air quality law

Due to the transboundary nature of air pollution, action to manage and improve air quality in the UK has been driven by both international agreements and EU legislation, as well as domestic legislation.

Box 1: Competence on air quality: an example of ambient air control

EU law

The EU [Directive 2008/50/EC](#), (the Air Quality Directive), sets legally binding standards for ambient air quality (the air that surrounds us). It sets limit values for concentrations of various pollutants and dates by which targets must be achieved. For example, in respect of nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) it sets a maximum annual mean concentration of no more than 40µg (microgram)/m³; and an hourly mean concentration of 200µg/m³ not to be exceeded more than 18 times in a year.

UK and devolved nations legislation

In the UK, responsibility for meeting air quality limit values is devolved to the national administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has responsibility for meeting the limit values in England and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) co-ordinates assessment and air quality plans for the UK as a whole. The Air Quality Directive is implemented in the UK through:

- [Air Quality Standards Regulations 2010](#) (as amended);
- [Air Quality Standards \(Wales\) Regulations 2010](#) (as amended);
- [Air Quality Standards \(Scotland\) Regulations 2010](#) (as amended); and
- [Air Quality Standards Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2010](#) (as amended)

Each devolved nation has discretion to go above and beyond the EU requirements. For example, Scotland has set a stricter limit value for PM_{2.5} than required by the Air Quality Directive and those limits adopted in the other UK countries.

Monitoring and enforcement

The UK is required to report air quality data on an annual basis to the European Commission under the Air Quality Directive.

EU law is monitored and enforced by the European Commission under Article 258 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, as the “Guardian of the Treaties”. It is overseen by the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU), which can levy fines on Member States that are found to be in breach of EU law. This enforcement mechanism does not stem from the Air Quality Directive itself.

The need for an air quality plan

Under article 24 of the Air Quality Directive, where there is a risk that the levels of pollutants will exceed one or more of the thresholds, Member States “shall draw up action plans indicating the measures to be taken in the short term in order to reduce the risk or duration of such an exceedance.” Following recognition that a number of UK zones had not met the Directive’s limits in respect of nitrogen dioxide, the Government has produced a number of successive plans to tackle roadside nitrogen dioxide levels. See box 3 for further information.

The legislation in the sections below was selected for this paper to highlight the interaction between international agreements, EU and domestic law, as well as interaction with legislation and policy in the devolved nations. Legislation has also been selected where it is likely to be of interest to MPs because of recent and/or forthcoming legislative change at EU level. There are other pieces of legislation which deal with other different air pollutants which are not covered further in this paper.

2.1 International agreement: the Gothenburg Protocol 1999

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Convention on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollution was extended in 1999 by the [Gothenburg Protocol to Abate Acidification, Eutrophication and Ground-level Ozone](#), with the aim of reducing emissions of transboundary air pollution. It set national emissions ceilings for sulphur, nitrogen oxides, volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and ammonia for 2010. The EU and the UK are both contracting parties to the Protocol.

In 2012, decisions amending the Protocol, known as the “2012 Amendment” set new emissions ceilings for sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, ammonium and VOCs to be achieved by 2020 and beyond.¹³ The emissions reductions targets were also extended to include PM_{2.5}. The acceptance of the 2012 Amendment on behalf of the European Union was published by the Commission in the Official Journal [Council Decision \(EU\) 2017/1757](#) of 17 July 2017.

The protocol is implemented at EU level through several EU directives. These include: Directive (EU) 2016/2284 on the reduction of national emissions of certain atmospheric pollutants; and Directive (EU) 2015/2193 on the limitation of emissions of certain pollutants into the air from medium combustion plants.

The enforcement provisions of the Gothenburg Protocol to the Convention on Long Range Transboundary Air Pollution are summarised in a paper by the UK Environmental Law Association (UKLEA) as follows:

Decision 1997/2 of the Executive Body of the Convention adopted a non-compliance procedure applicable to all the Protocols under the Convention. This creates an International Committee formed of eight Parties which periodically reviews compliance with the reporting requirements of the protocols to consider any submissions or referrals made to it concerning a Party's non-compliance with treaty obligations. The Committee is required to report and make recommendations annually to the Executive Body on cases of non-compliance. The decision does not expressly specify the range of measures that can be imposed on a Party in non-compliance.¹⁴

¹³ UNECE, [Parties to UNECE Air Pollution Convention approve new emission reduction commitments for main air pollutants by 2020](#), 4 May 2012

¹⁴ UK Environmental Law Association, [Brexit and Environmental Law: The UK and International Environmental Law after Brexit](#), September 2017, p90

The Defra [Air Pollution in the UK 2016](#) September 2017, report states that the UK meets all current emission ceilings as provided by the Gothenburg Protocol:

The UK continues to meet current international and EU ceilings for emissions of ammonia, nitrogen oxides, non-methane volatile organic compounds and sulphur dioxide.¹⁵

2.2 EU Legislation

National Emissions Ceilings Directives 2001 and 2016

The Gothenburg Protocol is implemented, among other Directives, in the EU through the [2001 National Emission Ceilings Directive](#) (the “NECD 2001”). The NECD 2001 sets national “ceilings” for air pollutants. The ceilings cover four pollutants: nitrogen oxides (NO_x); sulphur dioxide (SO₂); non-methane volatile organic chemicals (NMVOCs); and ammonia, to be met from 2010 and which will continue to apply until 2020.¹⁶

The NECD 2001 was transposed into UK legislation by the *National Emission Ceilings Regulations 2002*. Member States have to report their emission inventories annually to the European Environment Agency (EEA) and the European Commission in order to monitor progress and verify compliance. The Government-funded National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory website reports that the UK is meeting its targets:

Analysis of compliance is undertaken every year and presented in the EEA’s NECD status reports ([latest version 2015](#)). The UK has met its targets for all four pollutants for all years since 2010 inclusive.¹⁷

A revised NECD ([2016/2284/EU](#)) (the “2016 Directive”), was agreed in 2016. It sets new emission reduction commitments for each Member State for the NECD 2001 pollutants and additionally for fine particulates (PM_{2.5}) to be met by 2020 and 2030. The 2016 Directive will replace the NECD 2001 from 1 July 2018.¹⁸

Member states are required by Article 6 of the 2016 Directive to establish, by 1 April 2019 at the latest, an initial National Air Pollution Control Programme (NAPCP) which must be regularly updated, at least every four years. This is a governance mechanism designed to ensure that the reduction commitments for 2020 and 2030 are met.¹⁹

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey) has said that the revised 2016 Directive targets will be incorporated into UK legislation by the end of June 2018:

¹⁵ Defra, [Air Pollution in the UK 2016](#), September 2017, p11

¹⁶ National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory website, [National Emissions Ceilings Directive \(NECD\)](#) [on 2 October 2017]

¹⁷ National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory website, [National Emissions Ceilings Directive \(NECD\)](#) [on 2 October 2017]

¹⁸ National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory website, [National Emissions Ceilings Directive \(NECD\)](#) [on 2 October 2017]

¹⁹ EU Commission, [Draft Guidance on National Air Pollution Control Programmes](#), 10 March 2017

We are showing leadership in driving improved air-quality standards internationally through the Gothenburg protocol. As a result, in common with the rest of Europe, we now have legally binding targets to reduce UK air pollutant emissions by 2020, and to reduce them even further by 2030. The targets will be incorporated into our legislation by the end of June 2018. I will set out further actions in due course, including publishing the UK Government's air pollution action plan, which includes all pollutants, and we must do that by no later than March 2019.²⁰

The Government has also said it will publish a wider clean air strategy in 2018, (to cover 5 major pollutants: SO₂, NO_x, VOC, PM_{2.5}, NH₃). The strategy will set out how the UK will meet its international commitments to significantly reduce emissions of these pollutants by 2020, and 2030.²¹ This wider strategy follows on from the Government's July 2017 plan which was focused specifically on tackling roadside emissions of nitrogen dioxide.²² In relation to producing a wider strategy, the Government said that it:

...recognises that vehicles are not the only source of air pollution. Many everyday activities such as industrial activity, farming, heating homes and generating energy also have a detrimental effect on air quality. So, in addition to urgent action to tackle NO₂ hotspots around roads, we also need to reduce harmful emissions of other air pollutants.²³

The Air Quality Directive 2008

Whereas the Gothenburg Protocol and the National Emission Ceilings Directives are concerned with transboundary air pollution and control of pollutants that cross national borders, the EU [Directive 2008/50/EC](#) on ambient air quality and cleaner air for Europe sets legally binding standards for ambient air quality (the more immediate air that surrounds us). Instead of setting a ceiling for pollutants, it sets limit values for concentrations of them.

Limit values are legally binding and must not be exceeded. They are set at the same level for all countries for individual pollutants and comprise a concentration value, an averaging period for the concentration value, a number of exceedances allowed (per year) and a date by which it must be achieved. Some pollutants have more than one limit value, for example relating to short-term average concentrations (such as the hourly mean) and long-term average concentrations (such as the annual mean).²⁴

²⁰ HC Deb 16 Dec 2016 [c423WH](#)

²¹ HM Government, [UK plan for tackling roadside nitrogen dioxide concentrations: Detailed plan](#), July 2017, p59

²² HM Government, [UK plan for tackling roadside nitrogen dioxide concentrations: Detailed plan](#), July 2017

²³ HM Government, [UK plan for tackling roadside nitrogen dioxide concentrations: Detailed plan](#), July 2017, p59

²⁴ Defra, [Air Pollution in the UK 2016](#), September 2017

Box 2: Air Quality Directive emission limits and targets for NO_x, PM and Ozone for the protection of human health

- **By January 2005 for PM₁₀:** a maximum annual mean concentration of no more than 40µg/m³ ; and a 24 hour mean concentration of 50µg/m³ not to be exceeded more than 35 times a year.
- **By January 2010 for NO₂:** a maximum annual mean concentration of no more than 40µg/m³; and an hourly mean concentration of 200µg/m³ not to be exceeded more than 18 times in a year.
- **By January 2015 for PM_{2.5}:** a maximum annual mean concentration of 25µg/m³.
- **By January 2020 for PM_{2.5}:** a maximum annual mean concentration of 20µg/m³.
- **By January 2010 for ozone:** a target of a daily 8 hour ozone mean of 120 µg/m³ not to be exceeded more than 25 days year (averaged over 3 years). A long-term objective of a daily 8 hour ozone mean of 120 µg/m³, with no exceedances from January 2020.

µg = microgram

The Directive allows for Member States to apply to the European Commission to postpone the deadline for meeting the limit values for certain pollutants in a particular area. For example, this is by three years for PM₁₀ and up to five years for NO₂. The Commission must approve the extension to the deadline.

Under article 24 of the Directive, where there is a risk that the levels of pollutants will exceed one or more of the alert thresholds specified in the Directive, Member States “shall draw up action plans indicating the measures to be taken in the short term in order to reduce the risk or duration of such an exceedance.”²⁵ The UK has produced a number of these plans. See box 3 in this paper below for further information.

UK implementation

The Air Quality Directive is implemented in the UK through:

- [Air Quality Standards Regulations 2010 \(as amended\)](#);
- [Air Quality Standards \(Wales\) Regulations 2010 \(as amended\)](#);
- [Air Quality Standards Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2010 \(as amended\)](#); and
- [Air Quality Standards \(Scotland\) Regulations 2010 \(as amended\)](#). Scotland has set stricter levels for PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5} than the EU requirements. In April 2016, the Scottish Government became the first country in Europe to adopt the World Health Organisations recommended guideline value for PM_{2.5} of 10µg/m³ as an annual mean threshold.

Further information about compliance and enforcement of the EU Air Quality Directive is provided below in section 3 of this paper.

Fourth Daughter Directive (arsenic, cadmium, mercury, nickel and PAHs)

[Directive 2004/107/EC](#) of 15 December 2004, (referred to as “the Fourth Daughter Directive”), covers the four elements cadmium, arsenic, nickel and mercury, together with polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAH). As well as setting limit values for these elements (apart from

²⁵ Article 24, [Directive 2008/50/EC on ambient air quality and cleaner air for Europe](#)

mercury), the Directive sets monitoring and reporting requirements for member states.²⁶

It is implemented in the UK through the same regulations as made in relation to the Air Quality Directive ([Directive 2008/50/EC](#)), as set out above.

Medium Combustion Plant Directive

The [Medium Combustion Plant Directive](#) (MCPD) entered into force on 18 December 2015 and had to be transposed by Member States by 19 December 2017.²⁷ It regulates pollutant emissions from the combustion of fuels in plants with a rated thermal input equal to or greater than 1 megawatt (MWth) and less than 50 MWth.²⁸ Medium combustion plants those that are generally used to generate heat for large buildings (offices, hotels, hospitals, prisons) and industrial processes, as well as for power generation.²⁹ The MCPD was based on an EU Commission proposal, which was part of the [Clean Air Policy Package](#) adopted on 18 December 2013.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Welsh Government published a consultation, [Improving air quality: reducing emissions from Medium Combustion Plants and Generators](#), in November 2016 seeking views on draft plans to implement the MCPD and emission controls on generators in order to improve air quality. This consultation applied to England and Wales only. The consultation document made clear that until negotiations to exit the European Union have been completed the Government will continue to negotiate, implement and apply EU legislation.³⁰ The idea behind the MCPD is summarised the Government's consultation as follows:

The Medium Combustion Plant Directive (MCPD) will help to reduce air pollution by bringing in emission controls for combustion plants in the 1-50MWth range. The MCPD was supported by the UK as it will deliver a cost-effective improvement to air quality. The Directive requires all plant in scope to be registered or permitted and sets limits on the levels of pollutants that these plants can emit according to their type, size, age, fuel type and annual operating hours. It also requires operators to test emissions from their plants to demonstrate compliance with emission limits.³¹

The [Environmental Permitting \(England and Wales\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2018](#) now brings these changes into force. The explanatory

²⁶ Defra, [Air Pollution in the UK 2016](#), September 2017

²⁷ Directive (EU) 2015/2193 of the European Parliament and the Council of 25 November 2015 on the limitation of emissions of certain pollutants into the air from medium combustion plants

²⁸ European Commission website, [The Medium Combustion Plant \(MCP\) Directive](#) [downloaded on 5 December 2017]

²⁹ Defra and Welsh Government, [Consultation on reducing emissions from Medium Combustion Plants and Generators to improve air quality](#), November 2016, p1

³⁰ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Welsh Government, [Improving air quality: reducing emissions from Medium Combustion Plants and Generators](#), November 2016

³¹ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Welsh Government, [Improving air quality: reducing emissions from Medium Combustion Plants and Generators](#), November 2016, p1

memorandum to this SI sets out the long implementation period to meet the requirements of the directive:

In accordance with the Directive operators of new Medium Combustion Plants will require a permit to operate plants from 20 December 2018, at which point those plants will have to comply with the emission limit values for certain pollutants (which depends on the fuel used). Operators will also need to keep a record of operations to demonstrate compliance with their permit conditions for at least 6 years. A long implementation period is provided for existing Medium Combustion Plants, in order to provide operators with sufficient time to adapt technically to the requirements. This means operators of existing medium combustion plants only come within the permitting regime from 2024 or 2029, depending upon the plant's rated thermal input.³²

In December 2016 the Scottish Government published its consultation, [Consultation on Implementation of the Medium Combustion Plant Directive in Scotland](#). The [Pollution Prevention and Control \(Designation of Medium Combustion Plant Directive\) \(Scotland\) Order 2017](#) is now in force.

The Northern Ireland [Consultation on the transposition of the Medium Combustion Plant Directive \(1-50 megawatts\) including the regulation of thermal electricity generators](#), was published on 21 June 2017. Regulations have not yet been made.

Industrial Emissions Directive

The regulation of emissions from industrial installations and mobile plant is regulated primarily by the [Industrial Emissions Directive](#) 2010 (Directive 2010/75/EU) (the IED).

The IED aims to protect human health and the environment through the use of "Best Available Techniques" (BAT). BAT means the available techniques which are the best for preventing or minimising emissions and impacts on the environment. "Techniques" includes both the technology used and the way the installation is designed, built, maintained, operated and decommissioned. The European Commission produces [best available technique reference documents](#) which contain the BAT for installations. Around 50,000 installations undertaking the industrial activities listed in Annex I of the IED are required to operate in accordance with a permit (granted by the authorities in the Member States).³³

The Industrial Emissions Directive 2010 is implemented through the Environmental Permitting (EP) regime in England and Wales, the Pollution Prevention and Control (PPC) regime in Scotland and in Northern Ireland through the Pollution Prevention and Control Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013.

³² HM Government, [Explanatory memorandum to the Environmental Permitting \(England and Wales\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2018](#), p3

³³ European Commission website, [The Industrial Emissions Directive](#) [downloaded on 6 March 2018]

2.3 UK duties

National coordination and devolution

In the UK, responsibility for meeting air quality limit values is devolved to the national administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has responsibility for meeting the limit values in England and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) co-ordinates assessment and air quality plans for the UK as a whole.³⁴

At a national level, the UK Government and the devolved administrations (except Northern Ireland) are required under the Environment Act 1995 to produce a national air quality strategy. The requirement for Northern Ireland stems from the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002. The purpose is to have a document with common aims covering all parts of the UK. This was last reviewed and published in 2007, as the [UK Air Quality Strategy for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland](#).

While this strategy takes into account the European and wider international context in which the UK's domestic policies are set, the document is not a requirement stemming from EU legislation. The three main pollutants of focus in it were nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), ozone (O₃) and particle matter (PM).

Local authority obligations throughout the UK

The local air quality management regime in each of the four UK countries requires every district and unitary authority to regularly review and assess air quality in their areas.

The aim of the reviews is to identify whether national objectives have been, or will be, achieved at relevant locations, by an applicable date. Under [Part IV of the Environment Act 1995](#),³⁵ if [national objectives](#) are not met, or at risk of not being met, the local authority concerned must declare an [air quality management area](#) (AQMA) and prepare an air quality action plan. The air quality action plan should describe the pollution reduction measures which will be put in place and related timings. These plans contribute to the achievement of air quality limit values at local level.

This system is known as the local air quality management (LAQM) system. It does not place an absolute obligation on local authorities to achieve the Government's National Air Quality Strategy, but they are required to act "*in pursuit of the achievement*" of the standards. This is because air quality is generally seen as a transboundary issue and it is recognised that it is not always possible to control emissions originating from other areas.

Further information about the LAQM regimes in each of the UK countries is available as follows:

³⁴ Defra website, [UK and EU Air Quality Policy Context](#) [downloaded on 6 March 2018]

³⁵ The requirement for Northern Ireland stems from the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002

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- Defra, [Local Air Quality Management Policy Guidance](#) (PG16), April 2016 (applies to England, excluding London)
- Scottish Government, [Local Air Quality Management policy guidance](#), March 2016
- Welsh Government, [Local Air Quality Management](#) (LAQM), June 2017
- Northern Ireland Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs website, [Local Air Quality Management](#) [downloaded on 28 February 2018]

Under Part IV of the Environment Act 1995 supervision of the LAQM system in Greater London has been devolved to the Mayor of London, who has powers to intervene and give directions to London boroughs. For further information see the [London Local Air Quality Management Policy Guidance 2016](#).

For the purposes of air quality monitoring and assessment of compliance with the above Directives, the UK is divided into 43 air quality zones; many zones incorporate more than one local authority area.

3. EU Air Quality Directive: compliance and enforcement

The UK is required to report air quality data on an annual basis to the European Commission under the Directive on ambient air quality and cleaner air for Europe (2008/50/EC), the “Air Quality Directive”.

The Air Quality Directive contained certain flexibility with regard to the deadline for returning air pollution to safe levels. For example, although the original deadline for meeting the NO₂ limit values was 1 January 2010, extensions have been agreed by the Commission with some Member States who had notified it of a credible and workable plan for meeting the air quality standards within five years of the original deadline, i.e. to January 2015.³⁶ Notifications by Member States and Commission decisions on notification are available EU Commission webpage, [Air Quality - Time extensions](#).

The United Kingdom submitted a notification to the Commission in September 2011 of a postponement (under Article 22(1) of the Air Quality Directive) of the 2010 deadline for attaining the annual limit value and hourly limit value for NO₂ in a number of air quality zones. The Commission accepted the notification for some, but not all of the zones. This was on the grounds that the United Kingdom had not demonstrated that compliance with the limit value could be achieved by 1 January 2015 or earlier. For further information see “[Commission decision](#) of 25 June 2012 (C(2012) 4155 final).³⁷

3.1 Compliance with Air Quality Directive limits

An annual report summarises the UK’s submission on ambient air quality to the European Commission on behalf of Defra and the Devolved Administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The latest report, [Air Pollution in the UK 2016](#), published in September 2017 summarises the reported data as follows:

- The UK met the limit value for hourly mean nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) in all but two zones.
- Six zones were compliant with the limit value for annual mean NO₂. The remaining 37 exceeded this limit value.
- Four zones exceeded the target value for benzo[a]pyrene.
- Three zones exceeded the target value for nickel.
- All zones met both the target values for ozone; the target value based on the maximum daily eight-hour mean, and the target value based on the AOT40 statistic.

³⁶ European Commission, Press release Brussels, [Environment: Commission takes action against UK for persistent air pollution problems](#), 20 February 2014

³⁷ [Commission decision](#) of 25 June 2012 (C(2012) 4155 final) on the notification by the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland of a postponement of the deadline for attaining the limit values for NO₂ in 24 air quality zones.

- All zones except one exceeded the long-term objective for ozone, set for the protection of human health. This is based on the maximum daily eight-hour mean.
- Five zones exceeded the long-term objective for ozone, set for the protection of vegetation. This is based on the AOT40 statistic.
- All zones met the limit value for daily mean concentration of PM10 particulate matter, without the need for subtraction of the contribution from natural sources.
- All zones met the limit value for annual mean concentration of PM10 particulate matter, without the need for subtraction of the contribution from natural sources.
- All zones met the target value for annual mean concentration of PM2.5 particulate matter, the Stage 1 limit value, which came into force on 1st January 2015, and the Stage 2 limit value which must be met by 2020.
- All zones met the EU limit values for sulphur dioxide, carbon monoxide, lead and benzene.³⁸

A page on the Defra website, [Air Quality Plan for nitrogen dioxide \(NO₂\) in UK \(2017\): Zone Plans](#), lists the 37 zones that have been identified as having air quality exceedances of NO₂:

- [Zone 1: Greater London Urban Area Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 2: West Midlands Urban Area Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 3: Greater Manchester Urban Area Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 4: West Yorkshire Urban Area Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 5: Tyneside Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 6: Liverpool Urban Area Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 7: Sheffield Urban Area Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 8: Nottingham Urban Area Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 9: Bristol Urban Area Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 11: Leicester Urban Area Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 12: Portsmouth Urban Area Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 13: Teesside Urban Area Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 14: The Potteries Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 15: Bournemouth Urban Area Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 16: Reading/Wokingham Urban Area Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 17: Coventry/Bedworth Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 18: Kingston upon Hull Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 19: Southampton Urban Area Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 20: Birkenhead Urban Area Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 21: Southend Urban Area Zone Plan](#)

³⁸ Defra, [Air Pollution in the UK 2016](#), September 2017, piii - iv

- [Zone 24: Glasgow Urban Area Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 25: Edinburgh Urban Area Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 26: Cardiff Urban Area Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 27: Swansea Urban Area Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 28: Belfast Metropolitan Urban Area Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 29: Eastern Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 30: South West Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 31: South East Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 32: East Midlands Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 33: North West & Merseyside Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 34: Yorkshire & Humberside Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 35: West Midlands Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 36: North East Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 37: Central Scotland Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 38: North East Scotland Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 41: South Wales Zone Plan](#)
- [Zone 42: North Wales Zone Plan](#)³⁹

Previous compliance

Reports on the UK's air quality from previous years, dating back to 2003, are available from the Defra [Air Pollution in the UK report](#) website and the UK Air Quality websites at:

- <http://uk-air.defra.gov.uk/>;
- www.scottishairquality.co.uk;
- www.welshairquality.co.uk; and
- www.airqualityni.co.uk.

In May 2013 the UK Supreme Court declared that EU Air Quality Directive limits on nitrogen dioxide had been regularly exceeded in 16 zones across the UK.⁴⁰ The areas affected were: Greater London, the West Midlands, Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire, Teesside, the Potteries, Hull, Southampton, Glasgow, the East, the South East, the East Midlands, Merseyside, Yorkshire & Humberside, the West Midlands, and the North East.

The Court also noted that air quality improvement plans had estimated that in London compliance with the Directive's standards would only be achieved by 2025 and by 2020 for the other 15 zones.⁴¹ The original deadline in the Directive was for compliance by 2010.

³⁹ Defra website, [Air Quality Plan for nitrogen dioxide \(NO2\) in UK \(2017\): Zone Plans](#) [downloaded on 14 February 2018]

⁴⁰ R (on the application of ClientEarth) (Appellant) v The Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Respondent), [\[2013\] UKSC 25](#)

⁴¹ European Commission, Press release Brussels, [Environment: Commission takes action against UK for persistent air pollution problems](#), 20 February 2014

3.2 EU infraction proceedings against the UK

EU law is monitored and enforced by the European Commission under Article 258 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, as the “Guardian of the Treaties”. It is overseen by the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU), which can levy fines on Member States that are found to be in breach of EU law.

The Commission stated in 2013 that it would like to “to achieve full compliance with existing air quality standards by 2020 at the latest”.⁴² In February 2014 the EU Commission began (but has not yet exhausted) [infraction proceedings](#) against the UK for its failure to meet Air Quality Directive targets for NO₂ in 16 of its air quality zones (listed in the previous section of this paper).⁴³

This action was followed in February 2017 by [final warnings](#) to Germany, France, Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom for failing to address repeated breaches of NO₂ limits.⁴⁴ In its announcement the Commission reiterated that NO₂ pollution is a serious health risk and that most emissions result from road traffic. In its statement the Commission set out possible policy options for the UK and the next steps it may take [emphasis added]:

Possible measures to lower polluting emissions, at the same time accelerating the transition to a low-carbon economy, include reducing overall traffic volumes, the fuels used, switching to electric cars and/or adapting driving behaviour. In this context, reducing emissions from diesel-powered vehicles is an important step towards achieving compliance with EU air quality standards

While it is up to the Member State authorities to choose the appropriate measures to address exceeding NO₂ limits, much more effort is necessary at local, regional and national levels to meet the obligations of EU rules and safeguard public health. **If Member States fail to act within two months, the Commission may decide to take the matter to the Court of Justice of the EU.**⁴⁵

An article from AirQualityNews.com, dated 14 February 2018, reported that the European Commission is assessing the steps being taken by nine EU member states (including the UK) to address nitrogen dioxide pollution, before deciding whether to take forward further legal proceedings. A decision on potential legal proceedings against EU members is expected from the Commission in mid-March 2018.⁴⁶

⁴² Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, A Clean Air Programme for Europe /*, [COM/2013/0918 final */](#)

⁴³ European Commission, Press release, [Environment: Commission takes action against UK for persistent air pollution problems](#), Brussels, 20 February 2014

⁴⁴ European Commission - Press release, [Commission warns Germany, France, Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom of continued air pollution breaches](#), Brussels, 15 February 2017

⁴⁵ European Commission, [Commission warns Germany, France, Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom of continued air pollution breaches](#), 15 February 2017

⁴⁶ “EU air quality legal ruling expected in March” [AirQualityNews.com](#), 14 February 2018

A guide to [Infringement Procedure](#) on the European Commission website sets out the stages of infringement procedure. The next steps are as follows:

3. If the EU country still doesn't comply, the Commission may decide to refer the matter to the Court of Justice. Most cases are settled before being referred to the Court.
4. If an EU county fails to communicate measures that implement the provisions of a directive in time, the Commission may ask the Court to impose penalties.
5. If the Court finds that a country has breached EU law, the national authorities must take action to comply with the Court judgment.⁴⁷

These are not the only countries facing further stages of infraction proceedings for breaches of air quality legislation. According to the European Environment Bureau the following countries are facing Commission action on air quality breaches:

Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ European Commission website, [Infringement procedure](#) [downloaded on 14 February 2018]

⁴⁸ European Environment Bureau, [Air quality ruling is tip of the iceberg](#), 5 April 2017

4. Judicial review and air quality plan compatibility with EU legislation

Separate to European Commission infraction proceedings, EU legislation on air quality has also provided the legal framework for the Government's actions to be challenged by private organisations in the UK courts by judicial review.

Box 3: Government plans on NO₂ air quality

The judicial review proceedings outlined below refer to a number of different Government plans to reduce nitrogen dioxide (NO₂). The plans were formulated following recognition that a number of zones in the UK had not met EU limits on NO₂ (as set out in section 3 above). The air quality plans were initially submitted to the European Commission with a view to postponement of the 2010 compliance date for meeting the NO₂ limits to 2015. The plans are as follows:

- [Air Quality Plans for the achievement of EU air quality limit values for nitrogen dioxide \(NO₂\) in the UK](#): UK Overview Document, **September 2011**. This was subsequently replaced by:
- [Improving air quality in the UK, Tackling nitrogen dioxide in our towns and cities: UK overview document](#), **December 2015**. This in turn was replaced by:
- [UK plan for tackling roadside nitrogen dioxide concentrations: Detailed plan](#), **July 2017**. This is the Government's current approach to setting out how the UK will be reducing roadside nitrogen dioxide concentrations.

Following judicial review proceedings in relation to the July 2017 Plan, the High Court ruled, on 21 February 2018, that a supplement to the 2017 Plan should be produced by the Government by 5 October 2018.

4.1 Judicial review 2015

Proceedings brought by the environmental advocacy charity, ClientEarth, arose out of the admitted and continuing failure of the United Kingdom since 2010 to secure compliance in certain zones with the limits for nitrogen dioxide levels set by European Union law, under the Air Quality Directive (2008/50/EC).⁴⁹ Article 13 of this Directive sets limit values "for the protection of human health". In respect of NO₂, certain limits "may not be exceeded" from the relevant date, i.e. 1 January 2010.

ClientEarth argued that the UK was required to apply for postponement in respect of *all* zones where compliance with the air quality limits could not be met by the original deadline. The Secretary of State had not applied to postpone the deadline for some of the UK's non-compliant zones, but instead in 2011 had produced the 2011 [Air Quality Plans for the achievement of EU air quality limit values for nitrogen dioxide \(NO₂\) in the UK](#): UK Overview Document, which predicted that compliance may be achieved by 2015 in 24 zones, 15 zones were expected to

⁴⁹ R (on the application of ClientEarth) (Appellant) v The Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Respondent), [\[2013\] UKSC 25](#)

achieve compliance between 2015 and 2020 and that compliance in the London zone was expected to be achieved before 2025.⁵⁰

The Supreme Court referred several questions to the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) concerning interpretation of the Air Quality Directive. Having received a response to its questions from the CJEU, in its ruling on 29 April 2015 the Supreme Court unanimously ordered that the government must submit new air quality plans to the European Commission no later than 31 December 2015.⁵¹ A press summary of the judgement set out:

The Secretary of State's argument that there was no basis for an order quashing the 2011 plans, nor a mandatory order to replace them, was rejected. The critical breach is of article 13, not of articles 22 or 23. The CJEU judgment leaves no doubt as to the seriousness of the breach, which has been continuing for more than five years, nor as to the responsibility on the national court to secure compliance. Further, during those five years the prospects of early compliance have become worse (2014 projections predicting non-compliance in some zones after 2030). The Secretary of State accepted that a new plan has to be prepared. The new government should be left in no doubt as to the need for immediate action, which is achieved by an order that new plans must be delivered to the Commission not later than 31 December 2015. [19, 28-29, 33].⁵²

Following the court order, Defra consulted on new [Draft plans to improve air quality in the UK](#) in September 2015. The final version, [Improving air quality in the UK, Tackling nitrogen dioxide in our towns and cities: UK overview document](#), was published on 17 December 2015.⁵³ These updated and replaced the previous 2011 air quality plan.

In order to comply with NO₂ limits, the 2015 plan included a new commitment to legislate for Clean Air Zones (often referred to as Low Emission Zones or LEZs) for Birmingham, Leeds, Nottingham, Derby and Southampton to be introduced by 2020. The aim of these was to discourage older and more polluting buses, taxis, coaches and lorries, by charging them to access key parts of these cities. The proposal explicitly excluded cars.⁵⁴

4.2 Further Judicial Review 2016 and 2017

Following the publication of the 2015 air quality plan ClientEarth asked the high court for a judicial review of the plan. This was on the basis that the Government had breached its legal duty to produce new air

⁵⁰ HM Government, [Air Quality Plans for the achievement of EU air quality limit values for nitrogen dioxide \(NO₂\) in the UK: UK Overview Document](#), September 2011, p7

⁵¹ Supreme Court, [R \(on the application of ClientEarth\) \(Appellant\) v Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs \(Respondent\)](#), 29 April 2015

⁵² [Press summary](#), R (on the application of ClientEarth) (Appellant) v Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Respondent) [2015] UKSC 28, 29 April 2015, On appeal from [2012] EWCA Civ 897

⁵³ Defra, [Air quality in the UK: plan to reduce nitrogen dioxide emissions \(2015\)](#), December 2015

⁵⁴ Defra, [The Government announces plans to improve air quality in cities](#), 17 December 2015

quality plans to bring air pollution down to legal levels in the “shortest possible time”.⁵⁵

The Court [ruled](#) on 2 November 2016 and quashed the 2015 Air Quality Plan.⁵⁶ The judgement focused on the Directive’s requirement to keep exceedances “as short as possible”. The judgement rejected the argument that there could be regard to cost in setting a target date for compliance. In addition, it concluded that setting a compliance date for 2020, rather than determining when compliance could be achieved and working towards that, was incorrect. The judgement also concluded that relying on older emissions models, which were known to significantly underestimate real driving emissions, to model future emissions was incorrect:

It seems to me plain that by the time the plan was introduced the assumptions underlying the Secretary of State’s assessment of the extent of likely future noncompliance had already been shown to be markedly optimistic. In my judgement, the AQP did not identify measures which would ensure that the exceedance period would be kept as short as possible; instead it identified measures which, if very optimistic forecasts happened to be proved right and emerging data happened to be wrong, might achieve compliance. To adopt a plan based on such assumptions was to breach both the Directive and the Regulations.⁵⁷

The Court determined that the Government's 2015 Air Quality Plan for the reduction of NO₂ emissions had failed to comply with EU and domestic law.⁵⁸ The Court held that a draft modified Air Quality Plan should be produced by April 2017. The final plan should be published and sent to the European Commission by 31 July 2017.⁵⁹

Following the announcement of the June 2017 general election, the Government applied to the court to postpone the publication of the consultation. This application failed and the Government was ordered to consult on a third version by May 2017 and keep to the July 2017 publication date.⁶⁰

The Government’s then published its [Draft UK Air Quality Plan for tackling nitrogen dioxide](#) and associated [consultation document](#) in May 2017. The Government was criticised for a lack of detail in the plan and for delegating action to local authorities.⁶¹ ClientEarth again took the Government to court over concerns about the draft plan. The court

⁵⁵ “Judge decides UK government will face renewed legal action over air quality” [ClientEarth](#), 28 April 2016

⁵⁶ ClientEarth v Secretary of State of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, [2016] [EWHC](#) 2740 (Admin)

⁵⁷ High Court Ruling, [ClientEarth -v- Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs](#) [EWHC 2740 \(Admin\) Case No: CO/1508/20162](#) 2 November 2016

⁵⁸ R (on the application of CLIENTEARTH) v SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENVIRONMENT FOOD & RURAL AFFAIRS (2016) [2016] [EWHC](#) 3613 (Admin)

⁵⁹ R (on the application of CLIENTEARTH) v SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENVIRONMENT FOOD & RURAL AFFAIRS (2016) [2016] [EWHC](#) 3613 (Admin)

⁶⁰ R on the application of ClientEarth v Secretary of State for Environment Food and Rural Affairs [2017] [EWHC](#) B12 (Admin)

⁶¹ Business Green, [Draft Air Quality Plan: Green economy reacts](#), 5 May 2017

ruled that the plan was not unlawful as it was in draft form and was not the final version.⁶²

4.3 The 2017 Air Quality Plan and the 2018 court ruling

The Government kept to the High Court's deadline and published its latest [UK plan for tackling roadside NO₂ concentrations](#) on 26 July 2017. This focused exclusively on emissions from transport. Table 1 of this Plan lists those local authorities with roads with concentrations of NO₂ forecast above legal limits. The Plan makes clear that the Greater London Authority, Birmingham, Nottingham, Derby, Leeds and Southampton councils are expected to deliver Clean Air Zones by the end of 2019.

The Plan directs that 23 local authorities listed in Table 1, that it has projected as having NO₂ limit exceedances projecting beyond the next 3-4 years, to develop plans to achieve statutory NO₂ limit values within the shortest possible time. The Government has offered support, guidance and funding to these areas. Initial local authority plans must be made by 31 March 2018, with final plans produced by 31 December 2018 at the latest. The Government will test whether these plans secure compliance in the shortest possible time and will decide whether or not to approve them.⁶³

A further 45 local authorities listed in table 1 of the Plan were not required to take specific action to improve air quality. Of these 45 local authorities, 12 are expected to achieve compliance in 2018, a further 10 are expected to achieve compliance in 2019, a further 13 are expected to achieve compliance in 2020, and the remaining 10 are expected to achieve compliance in 2021.

Following the publication of the Government's 2017 Plan, ClientEarth announced that it would again take legal action against the UK Government "over its persistent failure to deal with illegal air pollution across the country".⁶⁴ Its grounds for judicial review were set out in a press release as follows:

- 1.The latest plan backtracks on previous commitments to order 5 cities to introduce clean air zones by 2020;
- 2.The plan does not require any action in 45 local authorities in England, despite them having illegal levels of air pollution.
- 3.The plan does not require any action by Wales to bring down air pollution as quickly as possible.⁶⁵

The High Court delivered its [judgement](#) on 21 February 2018.⁶⁶ Mr Justice Garnham told the Court that the approach in the Government's

⁶² The Guardian, [Latest legal challenge to Tory air pollution plans fails](#), 5 July 2017

⁶³ HM Government, [UK plan for tackling roadside nitrogen dioxide concentrations. Detailed plan](#), July 2017, para 96

⁶⁴ ClientEarth, [ClientEarth launches new air pollution legal action](#), 7 November 2017

⁶⁵ ClientEarth, [ClientEarth launches new air pollution legal action](#), 7 November 2017

⁶⁶ [Clientearth No.3, R \(on the application of\) v Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs & Ors](#) [2018] EWHC 315 (Admin) (21 February 2018)

current 2017 Plan to tackling pollution in 45 local authority areas was "not sufficient",⁶⁷ and that in relation to these areas it, "does not contain measures sufficient to ensure substantive compliance with the 2008 Directive and the English Regulations."⁶⁸ The judge did, however, reject ClientEarth's case in relation to the Government's plans for Birmingham, Leeds, Nottingham, Derby and Southampton. He said the Government's approach to those cities was "sensible, rational and lawful".⁶⁹

The court ordered the Secretary of State to produce compliant Supplement to the 2017 plan for the 45 areas in England by 5 October 2018. The 2017 plan remains in force whilst the supplement is produced "to avoid any delay in its implementation".⁷⁰

A [written statement from the Government](#) on the outcome of the judicial review was published on 22 February 2018 giving reaction as follows:

Yesterday the High Court handed down judgment on the judicial review of the 2017 Plan.

The judge dismissed two of the three complaints considered during the case in relation to England. Specifically he found that there is no error in Government's approach to tackling NO2 concentration exceedances in areas with some of the worst air quality problems, and that the national air quality modelling and monitoring that underpin the Plan are compliant with our legal requirements.

In relation to five cities identified in 2015 as having particularly marked air quality challenges, Birmingham, Nottingham, Derby, Southampton and Leeds, the judge found that the Government's approach to tackling their exceedances was "sensible, rational and lawful".

We welcome the fact that the Court has dismissed the complaint relating to these areas with major air quality problems and has found that we are taking appropriate action. We are also pleased that the Court agrees that our evidence in support of the 2017 Plan is sound.

In relation to local authority areas which are expected to achieve compliance between 2018 and 2021, Ministers have already offered significant support, and as recognised in the judgment have "urged and encouraged" them to come up with proposals to improve air quality. However, the Court found that the Government should have legally required the local authorities to take such steps, but acknowledged that further action will not be required in 12 areas where compliance will be achieved this year.

We had previously considered that it was sufficient to take a pragmatic, less formal approach to such areas. However, in view

⁶⁷ [Clientearth No.3, R \(on the application of\) v Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs & Ors](#) [2018] EWHC 315 (Admin) (21 Feb 2018), para 75

⁶⁸ [Clientearth No.3, R \(on the application of\) v Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs & Ors](#) [2018] EWHC 315 (Admin) (21 Feb 2018), para 104

⁶⁹ [Clientearth No.3, R \(on the application of\) v Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs & Ors](#) [2018] EWHC 315 (Admin) (21 Feb 2018), para 101

⁷⁰ "Government air quality plan ruled unlawful" [AirQualityNews.com](#), 21 February 2018

of the Court's judgment, we are prepared to take a more formal line with the other 33 local authorities.

We have already been corresponding with the relevant local authorities to offer them support in identifying measures to improve local air quality. These authorities had already been asked to provide initial information by 28th February on the action they are taking. They have now been asked to attend a meeting on 28th February to discuss their plans, and whether there are any additional actions they can take to accelerate achieving compliance with legal limits for NO₂ concentrations. We also now intend in March to issue legally binding directions requiring these areas to undertake studies to identify any such measures.

As required by the court order, we will publish a supplement to the 2017 Plan by 5th October, drawing on the findings from local authorities' feasibility studies.⁷¹

The Welsh government, which was also named as a defendant in the case, agreed at a High Court hearing in January 2018 to work on a new air quality plan for Wales.⁷² The Government's written statement set out that:

The Welsh Ministers indicated that they recognise that the Welsh element of the Air Quality Plan does not satisfy legal requirements. They have undertaken to publish a supplemental plan, following consultation, by 31 July 2018.⁷³

⁷¹ Outcome of the judicial review of the UK Plan for Tackling Roadside Nitrogen Dioxide Concentrations: [Written statement - HCWS477](#), 22 February 2018

⁷² "Welsh Government's air pollution pledge at court case" [BBC News](#), 25 January 2018

⁷³ Outcome of the judicial review of the UK Plan for Tackling Roadside Nitrogen Dioxide Concentrations: [Written statement - HCWS477](#), 22 February 2018

5. Air quality and Brexit issues

Until a final Brexit agreement is reached with the EU, much of what will happen to air quality standards and enforcement following Brexit is the subject of speculation. The Government has been clear that it has no plans to change limit values and targets for air quality following Brexit. In relation to air quality, the Government has said that the “European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is designed to ensure that, as far as possible, the same rules and laws will apply on the day after we leave as on the day before.”⁷⁴

Concerns remain, however, from certain academics, legal professionals and environment campaign groups that standards could be changed, that they may not align with future EU changes, and that the future enforcement of such standards is unclear. The section below sets out some of the concerns and uncertainties in relation to air quality and Brexit, alongside the Government’s responses and reaction to them, where available.

5.1 European Union (withdrawal) Bill

The [European Union \(Withdrawal\) Bill](#) 2017-19 was published on 13 July 2017. Detailed information and analysis on the Bill is set out in the [Library Briefing Paper on the European Union \(Withdrawal\) Bill](#) and other related briefing papers available on the Parliament website, [Bill documents — European Union \(Withdrawal\) Bill 2017-19](#) page.

The Bill is designed to provide legal continuity by copying over the entire body of EU law onto the UK’s post-exit statute book. In broad terms, this means that all EU air quality law will be converted into domestic law from exit day.

In relation to air quality, the domestic legislation which implements the EU Air Quality Directive ([2008/50/EC](#)) requirements contains a number of EU references by incorporating a number of requirements and technical standards directly from the Directive. For example, assessment thresholds for pollutants (including nitrogen dioxide, particulate matter, sulphur dioxide and carbon monoxide) are specified in Section A of Annex II of the Directive.

Amendments relating to air quality were tabled for the Commons’ Committee stage of the Bill. See for example, amendment numbers 334 and 345 tabled by Jeremy Corbyn.⁷⁵ Amendment 334 aimed to ensure that the UK maintained existing air quality standards and protections following the UK’s exit from the EU. It was discussed at Committee Stage on 12 December 2017. The Government rejected it on the basis that:

While we support the intention behind amendments 97, 98, 96, 138, 333, 334 and new clauses 62 and 63, they give no definition of what an environmental protection is or precisely how one might know that such protections were being weakened or

⁷⁴ [Pollution Control: Written question – 120393](#), answered 4 January 2018

⁷⁵ [Notices of Amendments](#) given up to and including Monday 4 December 2017

narrowed. We believe that the hon. Members would be preparing the starting gun for a vast quantity of litigation so we cannot accept the amendments to clause 7, 8 or 9 or the new clauses.⁷⁶

5.2 Changes to air quality targets and limits

The Government's intention is that under the current provisions of the [European Union \(Withdrawal\) Bill 2017-19](#), law derived from the EU would continue in domestic law after Exit Day. Depending on the terms agreed of any future trading arrangements, once the UK has left the EU, the UK could then potentially amend air quality standards and review any deadlines for meeting them.

Following the referendum result in June 2016 some environment and health organisations expressed concern early on that policies on air pollution could be weakened following the UK exit from the EU. ClientEarth challenged the Government to affirm its commitment to environmental laws, including on air pollution.⁷⁷ The Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, Mary Creagh, expressed the view that EU membership had been key for air quality, and had allowed campaigners to hold the Government to account.⁷⁸ She also said there were "question marks about what will happen to air pollution standards in the brave new Brexit world."⁷⁹

The Government has sought to allay concerns about changes to air quality standards following Brexit by stating that there are no plans to change air quality limit values and targets:

Asked by: Justin Madders. Air Pollution: EU Law

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, whether the Government plans to retain the air quality targets contained in the 2008 Ambient Air Quality Directive after the UK has left the EU.

Answered by: Dr Thérèse Coffey 08 March 2017

The Ambient Air Quality Directive (including its limit values and target values) was transposed into law in England through the Air Quality Standards Regulations 2010. There are no plans to change the limit values and target values in the Regulations.⁸⁰

The Government's [25 Year Environment Plan](#), published in February 2018 stated:

The UK's determination to improve air quality is reinforced by our commitment to meeting ambitious, legally-binding targets to cut emissions of five pollutants – ammonia, nitrogen oxides, non-methane volatile organic compounds, fine particulate matter and sulphur dioxide – by 2020 initially, and by 2030 for a deeper cut. Our commitment to meeting these legally binding targets is not affected by the UK's departure from the EU.⁸¹

⁷⁶ HC Deb 12 December 2017 [c287](#)

⁷⁷ ClientEarth, [Brexit "challenge" to politicians over UK environmental laws](#), 24 June 2016

⁷⁸ [HC Deb 12 July 2016. c193](#)

⁷⁹ [HC Deb 12 July 2016. c193](#)

⁸⁰ [HC Written Question 66372 Air Pollution: EU Law](#), 8 March 2017

⁸¹ HM Government, [A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment](#), February 2018, p97

A December 2017 report by the Environmental Industries Commission, the environmental business membership organisation, on [Improving Air Quality after Brexit](#) suggested that a change to air quality limit values post Brexit could be desirable on the basis that they could be more refined for the UK's specific circumstances, rather than aligned with a more generic EU approach:

These are concentration values for pollutants in ambient air, applying to locations where the public is routinely exposed and averaged over a given time period. While they have been a useful tool to help drive air quality improvements, they also imply that concentrations above the limit value are harmful and those below are not. Health evidence has demonstrated that this is not the case for pollutants such as fine particulate matter or ozone, and may not be so for other pollutants.

However, Limit Values are an accepted concept in Europe and are written into, for example, land use planning processes and tend to be strongly supported by both Member States and NGOs. Moreover, the UK's geographic position in Europe, with weather systems dominated by Atlantic south westerly winds, means that annual average concentrations for particulate matter (PM10 and PM2.5) tend to be lower than more central European states. Compliance with the limit values for PM10 is universal across the UK and thus measures to reduce PM, probably the most harmful of the standard suite of air pollutants, are de-prioritised despite evidence that health impacts continue below the Limit Value concentrations.

Brexit could offer the opportunity to seek examples of policy making in countries and regions outside the EU and to draw on examples more suited to the UK context.⁸²

Air quality standards as part of an agreement on future trade

Future standards on air quality may be linked to any future trading agreement agreed with the EU. This is because access to markets often requires certain environmental standards to be adopted.

In a report on [Brexit: environment and climate change](#) the House of Lords European Union Committee noted equivalence between UK and EU standards may still be required under trade arrangements such as Free Trade Agreement (FTA):

...In other words, equivalence between UK and EU environmental standards would almost certainly be required, as part of any comprehensive FTA, in order to remove non-tariff barriers to trade, thereby ensuring UK access to the Single Market. The UK might therefore need not only to preserve many current standards, but to reflect some new standards as and when they were agreed by the EU, so as to continue to trade into the Single Market.

89. The UK would not necessarily be required to give direct effect to EU law in order to meet EU standards and regulations, "if it could demonstrate that its domestic law had an equivalent effect." For instance, in our report *Brexit: the options for trade*, we cited the example of the EU ETS, where, instead of

⁸² Environmental Industries Commission, [Improving Air Quality after Brexit](#), 14 December 2017, p18

participating in the scheme, the UK could potentially adopt a carbon tax approach in which the price of carbon was similar and could be considered equivalent. As Prof Lee commented, countries could “decide, mutually, to recognise our different safety standards”. Prof Macrory agreed: “Depending on the terms of the agreement, there may be various forms of reciprocal recognition of authorisations”, which would have “implications for trading”.⁸³

The issue may be subject to negotiation, for example, the European Council and the European Parliament’s adopted text on a Future European Union-United Kingdom relationship indicated that adherence to environmental standards would be sought (amongst other issues).⁸⁴

Future divergence

Potentially linked with a future trade agreement is the issue of divergence from any future changes to EU air quality standards.

Commentators suggest that the EU standards will not remain static for long and it is not yet clear whether the UK has any plans to follow any changes to EU standards following Brexit.⁸⁵ As set out above, the UK may wish to consider divergence to make the regulations more relevant to the UK environment and it may not want to follow any new EU standards over which it has had no say.

5.3 Enforcement and compliance

As set out above in section 3.3, the UK is currently subject to EU infringement proceedings on air quality. Following exit from the EU the threat of fines for non-compliance however, could to be removed.

In the March 2017 White Paper on legislating for withdrawal from the EU, the Government confirmed that the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) would cease to have direct jurisdiction over the UK after EU withdrawal, but said any question on legal meanings would still be determined in domestic courts by reference to the CJEU’s case law as it exists on the day of Brexit.⁸⁶

On 12 November 2017, the [Government announced](#) plans to consult on a new, independent statutory body that would hold Government to account for upholding environmental standards in England; and on the scope and content of a new national policy statement to ensure environmental principles underpin policy making. The consultation is expected in spring 2018. It is not yet known what powers are proposed for the new body.

The Government’s announcement followed concerns about a lack of enforcement and accountability mechanisms for environmental

⁸³ House of Lords European Union Committee, [Brexit: environment and climate change](#), 12th Report of Session 2016-17 - published 14 February 2017 - HL Paper 109, para 87-88

⁸⁴ European Parliament, P8_TA(2017)0102 [Negotiations with the United Kingdom following its notification that it intends to withdraw from the European Union](#)

⁸⁵ Environmental Industries Commission, [Improving Air Quality after Brexit](#), 14 December 2017, p12

⁸⁶ [Legislating for the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union](#), Department for Exiting the EU, March 2017, p. 17

protection following an EU exit. In its [report examining the future of environment and climate change policy following Brexit](#), the House of Lords EU Energy and Environment Sub-Committee heard that a range of accountability mechanisms were potentially at risk following EU exit:

The European Commission and the Court of Justice of the European Union have had a strong impact in ensuring the UK's compliance with EU legislation that affects environmental protection. The evidence we have heard suggests the effectiveness of the EU regulatory regime is thanks in part to the deterrent effect of the power of EU institutions to hold Member States to account and to levy fines upon them for non-compliance.⁸⁷

[Greener UK](#), a group of 13 environmental organisations which came together in the wake of Brexit, called on the Government to create “a powerful independent statutory committee to monitor progress” and “establish an effective new approach to environmental regulation.”⁸⁸

A paper published by the Government in August 2017, [Enforcement and dispute resolution - a future partnership paper](#), discusses options for enforcement and dispute resolution mechanisms for UK-EU agreements. A report from the specialist publication ENDS, highlighted how some groups had called for further clarity and “reassurances” about how a regulatory system would be established.⁸⁹

The Government factsheet on environmental protections accompanying the *European Union (Withdrawal) Bill* referred to existing provisions for regulators to enforce environmental laws, the judicial review process and the role of Parliament as ways of maintaining enforcement and accountability.⁹⁰ However, the UKELA has argued that judicial review alone is “ill-suited” to replacing the supervisory role of the Commission, pointing to the costs involved as well as the loss of the less formal mechanisms such as discussion and negotiation.⁹¹

For further information on general environmental accountability and enforcement see Library briefing paper, [Brexit and the environment](#).

5.4 Monitoring and reporting requirements

The Air Quality Directive makes provisions for adapting standardised procedures to streamline the data provision, assessment and reporting of air quality. For reporting purposes the UK is divided into 43 air quality zones. A zone is deemed to be non-compliant if the UK's official monitoring and modelling shows that concentrations of pollutants in the air at one or more locations within the zone exceed certain limits.

⁸⁷ Lords EU Energy and Environment Sub-Committee, [Brexit: environment and climate change](#), 12th Report of Session 2016–17, 14 February 2017, HL Paper 109

⁸⁸ Greener UK, [Securing a healthier environment and nature's recovery: A briefing for policy makers following the EU referendum](#), February 2017

⁸⁹ ENDS Report, [“Ministers' softer stance on European court dissatisfies green groups”](#), 25 August 2017 [subscription required]

⁹⁰ Department for Exiting the European Union, [The Repeal Bill: Factsheet 8 Environmental Protections](#), 8 September 2017

⁹¹ UKELA, [Report on Brexit and Environmental Law: Enforcement and Political Accountability Issues](#), July 2017 [accessed October 2017]

The Environmental Industries Commission has expressed concern that the removal of reporting obligations would “reduce transparency and the capacity to track UK progress from outside Government”, although it went on to concede that it “the current reporting frameworks tend to be highly technical and not necessarily accessible to non-experts.”⁹²

In oral evidence to the Joint Select Committee inquiry into Improving Air Quality, Dr Thérèse Coffey MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, indicated that air quality monitoring and reporting requirements could be changed after the UK leaves the EU:

Dr Coffey: There are parts of the directive that are, in themselves, quite interesting and challenging, and there are definitely things we can do in the future to make some of this more targeted and focused in our assessment and management of measures to improve air quality. At the moment, we have population blocks of more than 200,000 with a certain population density, and that is what we report, in terms of compliance zones. We have 43 zones around the country. That fits in with our European reporting requirements. Potentially, once we leave the European Union and look at this again, we might be able to do something that is a lot more focused and targeted.⁹³

National Air Pollution Control Programme (NAPCP)

As set out in section 2.2 of this paper, the revised 2016 [National Emission Ceilings Directive](#) (2016/2284) (NECD) requires Member States to establish, by 1 April 2019 at the latest, an initial National Air Pollution Control Programme (NAPCP) which must be regularly updated at least every four years.

In a letter from Dr Thérèse Coffey MP to Sir William Cash, Chair of the European Scrutiny Committee dated 17 October 2016, the Minister set out the Government’s position on NAPCP and implementation of the Directive following Brexit:

It is currently expected that the Directive will be transposed by June 2018 and implemented by December 2018. As such, although the first emission ceilings only apply from 2020, a number of provisions will have taken effect before this time, such as the ecosystems monitoring and the submission of the first National Air Pollution Control Programme.

We currently do not know exactly how the Government expects NECD provisions to affect the UK following the UK’s departure from the EU. However, the UK has a long history of working to improve the environment and this commitment will continue after its withdrawal from the EU. Until exit negotiations are concluded, the UK remains a full member of the European Union and all the rights and obligations of EU membership remain in force. During this period the Government will continue to negotiate, implement, and apply EU legislation, and we wish to see the

⁹² Environmental Industries Commission on [Improving Air Quality after Brexit](#), 14 December 2017, p12

⁹³ Oral evidence: [Improving Air Quality](#), HC 433, 30 November 2017, Q169

amended National Emission Ceilings Directive adopted as soon as possible.⁹⁴

5.5 Devolved nations

In the UK, responsibility for meeting air quality limit values is devolved to the national administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has responsibility for meeting the limit values in England and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) co-ordinates assessment and air quality plans for the UK as a whole.⁹⁵

In [oral evidence](#) to the Environmental Audit Committee on 1 November 2017 the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Michael Gove, set out his view of a future framework for the devolved administrations (DAs) in relation to the environment in general:

I foresee Britain leaving the European Union as providing even more opportunities for the DAs to do more in this area. Also, I have to be honest, there are things that both the Scottish and Welsh Administrations have done that have been admirable and in advance of what we have done in England, so they have set the standard in the UK.
(...)

However, it is important we have a UK framework that properly allows the DAs to do what they consider to be appropriate in their own space but at the same time preserves UK-wide rules. We are very keen to get down to the nitty gritty of discussion on what should be in those frameworks with the DAs.⁹⁶

Michael Gove said there was potential for a discussion about whether air quality should maintain common UK-wide rules:

The potential is there for us to have a very fruitful and creative discussion about what should be done at the devolved level and what, for example, common rules on air quality, let us say, should be maintained at a UK level.⁹⁷

He went on set out his view of future regulatory divergence between the UK and the devolved Administrations on air quality:

Q33 John McNally: How do you envisage this regulatory divergence between the UK and the devolved Administrations be managed?

Michael Gove: I do not believe we should have regulatory divergence on things like air quality or water quality.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Letter from Dr Thérèse Coffey Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Defra, to Sir William Cash, Chair of the European Scrutiny Committee, [EM 18167/13: Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the reduction of national emissions of certain atmospheric pollutants and amending Directive 2003/35/EC](#), dated 17 October 2016

⁹⁵ Defra website, [UK and EU Air Quality Policy Context](#) [downloaded on 5 December 2017]

⁹⁶ Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, oral evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee on the [Government's Environmental Policy](#), HC 544, 1 November 2017, Q28

⁹⁷ Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, oral evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee on the [Government's Environmental Policy](#), HC 544, 1 November 2017, Q32

⁹⁸ Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, oral evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee on the [Government's Environmental Policy](#), HC 544, 1 November 2017, Q33

A [Government announcement](#) on 13 November 2017 set out plans to consult on a new, independent body for environmental standards and to set out a series of environmental principles in a new national policy statement. It clarified that there would be wide engagement and work with the devolved administrations on these issues.⁹⁹ A letter from Michael Gove to Mary Creagh MP, Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee stated that:

Our starting point will be that the new body should only cover England and environmental areas that are not devolved. However, we will discuss with the devolved administrations whether they wish to make use of this new body as the already do with the Climate Change Committee. Alternatively they may wish to create their own equivalent environmental body – just as there are Children’s Commissioners for each home nation, for example.¹⁰⁰

For further information about the views of the devolved administrations in relation to Brexit and the environment in general, see Library briefing paper [Brexit and the environment](#).

5.6 International agreements

The Government has indicated support for the current level of protections and regulation from its international environmental agreements. For example, in the February 2018 [25 Year Environment Plan](#), the Government stated:

We remain fully committed to implementing within the UK those international agreements to which this country is a party and will continue to lead their application globally, working in partnership across the UK and internationally.¹⁰¹

A Government factsheet to accompany the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill 2017-19 (then referred to as the “Repeal Bill”) also set out the intention to uphold international obligations, including the Gothenburg Protocol, as follows:

Will the UK continue to meet its international environmental commitments?

The UK will continue to play an active role internationally as demonstrated by the UK ratifying the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. We will continue to uphold our obligations under international environmental treaties such as the Montreal and Gothenburg Protocols, the Stockholm Convention, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).¹⁰²

The House of Lords European Union Committee on [Brexit: environment and climate change](#) from February 2017 noted views that following

⁹⁹ HM Government, [Environment Secretary sets out plans to enhance environmental standards](#), 13 November 2017

¹⁰⁰ [Letter from Michael Gove](#), Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to Mary Creagh MP, Chair, Environmental Audit select committee, dated 30 November 2017

¹⁰¹ HM Government, [A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment](#), February 2018, p129

¹⁰² Department for Exiting the European Union, [The Repeal Bill: Factsheet 8 Environmental Protections](#), 8 September 2017

Brexit, international law would become the “backstop” for environmental standards.¹⁰³

The EU, in areas where it has exclusive competence has entered into agreements on behalf of its Member States (under Article 3 of the [Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union](#)). Where it does not have exclusive competence the agreement is a mixed agreement shared between the European Union and its Member States (under Article 4). The UKLEA report [Brexit and Environmental Law: The UK and International Environmental Law after Brexit](#), has highlighted the Convention on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollution 1979 (which was extended by the Gothenburg Protocol) as being a mixed agreement.¹⁰⁴

One area of uncertainty that has been highlighted in relation to Brexit is around mixed agreements where both the EU and UK have competence (and both are signatories) and the ratification document does not define the division of competences.¹⁰⁵ For example, writing in the ENDS Report, Richard Macrory, professor of environmental law at University College London, suggested that a further agreement may be required before the UK can take on all responsibilities under a treaty:

A smoother way forwards may be for the UK to agree to shoulder all the responsibilities under the treaty in question, perhaps under a protocol. Some have argued that this will require all parties to assent to the agreement – both third countries and the other EU member states.¹⁰⁶

For further information and views on whether such agreements will remain in force from Brexit day, see House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, [Legislating for Brexit: EU external agreements](#) (CBP 7850), 5 January 2017.

In response to a PQ on this issue in September 2017 Dr Thérèse Coffey, Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Defra stated that the Government would:

... continue to be bound by international Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) to which it is party. We are committed to upholding our international obligations under these agreements and will continue to play an active role internationally following our departure from the EU. We will give due consideration to the ratification of MEAs in the future to which the UK is not currently party in its own right, (recognising that some risks have no relevance to the UK.)¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ The House of Lords European Union Committee, [Brexit: environment and climate change](#), 14 February 2017, HL Paper 109, para 52

¹⁰⁴ UK Environmental Law Association, [Brexit and Environmental Law: The UK and International Environmental Law after Brexit](#), September 2017, p90

¹⁰⁵ ENDS Report, [Brexit unlikely to give UK free rein over green laws](#), [subscription needed], vol.499, 17 August 2016

¹⁰⁶ ENDS Report, [Brexit unlikely to give UK free rein over green laws](#), [subscription needed], vol.499, 17 August 2016

¹⁰⁷ PQ [9691](#) [on Environment: Treaties] 18 September 2017

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