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Pollution 'causing early deaths'

Air pollution is causing the early deaths of up to 50,000 people a year and making thousands more ill - but the Government is failing to take enough action to tackle the problem, MPs have said.

The UK should be "ashamed" of its poor air quality and the harm it is causing to people's health and the environment, a report by the Commons Environmental Audit Committee said.

The report said pollutants such as ozone, nitrogen oxides and "particulate matter" from transport and power stations contributed to conditions such as asthma, heart disease and cancer.

The failure to reduce levels of pollution has "enormous" costs for the NHS, and puts the UK at risk of multimillion-pound fines from Brussels for missing air quality targets, the committee said.

It called for the Government to make air quality a much higher priority, to raise awareness and educate the public on the dangers and how to minimise their exposure to pollution.

Air pollution also leads to damage to wildlife and agriculture, with ground level ozone estimated to reduce wheat yields in the south of Britain by 5% to 15%, the report said.

The committee called for the Government to do more to raise awareness of the problem and for more joined up action between departments, as well as greater support to help local authorities address pollution and a shift in transport policy.

EU emissions standards for vehicles were not doing enough to cut pollution, the report warned.

It called for measures such as national standards for low emission zones, like the one covering London, to make it easier and cheaper for local authorities to bring them in.

And more research is needed to understand the impact of particulates created by wear on tyres and brakes and those lying on the road which are whipped up into the air by passing vehicles.