

Air pollution awareness drive must match the scale of heart, cancer and anti-smoking campaigns.

Experts are warning that Britain risks sleepwalking into a health crisis unless the government massively invests in public information on air pollution.

Findings released last week by Clean Air Day, the country's largest air quality campaign, revealed that people respond well when given accurate information and the means to do something about air pollution.

But this is little comfort - according to the charity behind the research - unless the government commits to an information campaign to match the scale of the problem.

No plans

The research was commissioned by Global Action Plan. Chris Large, one of its senior partners, said: "The UK Government knows that children could stop breathing the most dirty air with simple changes to their routine, but it cannot give this basic health advice due to lack of funding.

"When we have needed to fund previous health campaigns such as smoking, drink driving and healthy eating, the government has found the money.

"It's time that funding was found to educate the millions of people who live in areas of unsafe air pollution.

"Air pollution is an urgent public health issue that's up there with heart disease, diabetes and cancer. To properly deal with it we need a campaign on a similar scale to no-smoking."

At present the Department of Health, Public Health England, Defra or any other national body have no plans to run an immediate national public information campaign on air quality.

Raising awareness

Neither are there plans to provide any training for healthcare professionals so that they can provide urgent advice to patients and the public on how to protect their health from air pollution.

There are also no plans to educate school children and parents on how to limit the extent to which air pollution affects their health.

This year's annual Clean Air Day campaign, which is backed by leading academics, sixteen medical colleges and other major health bodies, culminated in hundreds of events across the country on 21 June.

It also inspired the UK's first Clean Air Summit, a gathering of city mayors and other local politicians representing some 20 million people.

The campaign generated more than 1,750 media items and 50,000 social media posts (including those from MPs and ministers) helping to raise awareness of air pollution and

what people can do about it.

Indoor pollution

Before- and after campaign polling showed more awareness of air pollution issues following Clean Air Day.

It also revealed a greater public willingness to address problems when people had reliable information to hand.

Findings included more awareness of the dangers of indoor air pollution following the campaign - up by 12 percent to 74 percent of respondents - while 45 percent of people questioned are now aware that cyclists and pedestrians often breathe cleaner air than drivers.

The same findings revealed that 22 percent chose to cycle or walk a route they had previously driven, compared to 16 percent before the campaign - an increase of 37 percent. And 71 percent now open windows for ventilation when they are cooking or cleaning - an increase of 22 percent.

Profound damage

Large said: "These findings are very positive but we're still only scratching the surface of the problem so far.

"Hardly a day passes without more evidence of the profound damage that air pollution is having on the nation's physical and mental health, especially that of the most vulnerable.

"Clean Air Day is urging the government to fund a major public health campaign to help people avoid pollution every day.

"This should be on the scale of no-smoking or, more recently, Change for Life or Be Clear on Cancer health campaigns. An investment of at least ten million pounds per year is needed.

"Surely there is enough evidence now to demonstrate the need for a nationwide public awareness campaign, funded by the government, to protect the health of the public?"

Source: theecologist