

# Speech: Air pollution is a health emergency

I'm here, as Health Secretary, because air pollution is a health emergency.

When it comes to our health, there's lots of things we can take personal responsibility for: what we eat, how we exercise and whether we smoke, for instance.

And I'm no nanny state politician. I believe personal responsibility is important.

But around a third of what determines the length of our healthy life is the environment we live in – the things we can't, alone, do anything about.

And of those environmental causes of healthy life expectancy, the biggest factor is the air we breathe.

The biggest single environmental cause of death is air pollution. Air pollution causes chronic conditions, and shortens lives.

In short: air pollution kills. Clean air saves lives.

And it's worse than that – because the impact of air pollution is even bigger on children, as their lungs are growing.

I know this. I know more about air pollution than most people.

For a decade, almost, I lived next to a very busy main road.

I'd constantly have to clean the dirt – these horribly black specs that became a carpet – off my window sill.

And to this day I feel guilty that I brought my children into the world living next to the A40.

I'm delighted that I was able to move my family away, but I know not everyone is in a position to do that.

And contrast that with my constituency in West Suffolk where you're much likelier to breathe fresh, clean air blown in from the sea – it might as well be 2 different worlds.

We are the fifth richest country in the world. We've just put an extra £20.5 billion into the NHS. Its budget will be £148 billion a year – £3,000 for every man, woman and child in this country.

Yet air pollution causes around 36,000 deaths each year, and puts extra, preventable strain on the NHS through increased incidents of heart disease, stroke, lung cancer and child asthma.

Surely we can afford to stop killing ourselves with entirely preventable filth, and give every child clean air, no matter where they live, so we can give every child the best possible start in life.

Much of the technology exists, and where it doesn't, let's invent it.

Every new development and new technology should be clean by design – like the NHS is leading the way on.

We all have a part to play. Cycling or walking short journeys instead of driving not only helps our own health, it reduces the health risk to others by helping cut air pollution.

But this isn't something we can each do alone. It takes concerted, far-sighted government action, like the visionary action being proposed today by my brilliant friend Michael Gove.

That's why we are working so closely together. It's why I feel so strongly about these plans. For your children and for mine.

I'm very proud to do my bit, proud of this Conservative government demonstrating bold, progressive, energetic, popular action this day to improve the lives of millions, to deliver for our citizens, and make Britain fit for the future.