

# **To what extent have climate-oriented policies in London and Bristol improved public health and well-being?**

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King's Policy Journal

KCL Policy Research Centre

Centre for Public Health

Word Count: 2664

January 2026

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## **Introduction**

Human-induced global warming increasingly poses significant health risks in urban populations, particularly through air pollution, transport emissions and humidity (EPA, 2025). As a result, growing rates of cardiovascular disease and respiratory infections make climate-oriented policies essential for reducing harm and preventing deaths. Urban populations are most susceptible to these risks due to greater levels of traffic pollution and limited access to green areas, as well as dense and ageing housing (Nieuwenhuijsen et al, 2024).

By focusing on the two cities, London and Bristol, within the United Kingdom (UK), this article evaluates the effectiveness of urban environmental policies on citizens' health and well-being. Although these political strategies aim to improve health outcomes, many are not primarily public health policies, and their impacts are often indirect. This distinction allows for a more holistic evaluation, considering both direct and indirect health effects when assessing climate-oriented policies. London and Bristol are relevant comparative case studies due to their shared health challenges posed by global warming (LSHTM, 2022; Future of London, n.d.), as both cities experience increased air pollution, higher levels of cardiovascular and respiratory illness and susceptibility to mould within poor housing conditions. Although they face similar environmental issues, their strategies to overcome health problems vary significantly. London, as the UK's capital and largest metropolitan area, has implemented large-scale top-down policies (London Air, n.d). Conversely, Bristol operates on smaller-scale initiatives, with bottom-up and community-led policies (CSE, 2025).

This comparison allows for a fair assessment of how climate-oriented policies impact public health across different urban areas. The article focuses on three central issues: cardiovascular disease, physical well-being and illnesses related to humidity. These issues were selected because they are strongly influenced by urban environmental conditions and are addressed through climate-related policy implementation, making them central to evaluating the effectiveness of environmental policy. It concludes that whilst there are efforts made to reduce climate-induced health problems in urban areas, further policy intervention is necessary to effectively combat health risks and secure safety for city residents (WHO, 2025).

## **Pollution and cardiovascular disease**

Air pollution poses a major threat to the health of citizens, especially in urban environments (HEI, 2022). Cities contain substantially higher levels of particulate matter than in rural spaces (Clarity, 2025). These particles enter the public's lungs and bloodstream and are strongly linked to cardiovascular disease (Du et al, 2016). Both London and Bristol have implemented environmental policies aimed at decreasing pollution and, in turn, reducing these cardiovascular risks (London Assembly, 2025; Clean Air for Bristol, n.d.). However, despite this progress, pollution levels remain persistently high and continue to contribute to rising cardiovascular morbidity (Munzel et al, 2025).

In London, even short-term exposure to pollutants in the busiest streets negates the positive cardiovascular benefits of exercise for elderly people (O'Hare, 2017). It is proven that cardiac arrests as well as strokes and asthma attacks, are triggered on "higher air pollution days" (KCL, 2019) in major UK cities. In London, higher levels of pollutants are accountable for 251 citizens hospitalised for strokes and cardiac-related complications.

London's "Ultra Low Emission Zone" (ULEZ) (London Assembly, 2025) is recognised as the world's most expansive clean air zone. Its primary purpose is to reduce air pollution by requiring vehicles to meet emission standards, rather than to directly address cardiovascular disease. A secondary effect is reduced particulate matter (PM2.5), with levels estimated to be 31% lower than they would have been without the scheme (London Assembly, 2025). Implementation of this policy is largely influenced by European Union (EU) Law (London Air, n.d). The mayor must align London's "Air Quality Strategy" (London Air, n.d.) with EU guidelines, suggesting that external regulatory requirements have played a significant role in driving climate action. Despite positive outcomes, London's reliance on external pressures to reduce pollutants illustrates that sustainable policy is not an utmost priority.

In Bristol, Policy BCS23 primarily aims to reduce pollution as it requires that new planning proposals must evaluate their potential contribution to air pollution and its corresponding effects on future tenants (BDFCS, 2011). A secondary effect of the policy is the reduction of pollution-induced health risks. Residents near busy roads experience an 8% increase in the likelihood of coronary heart disease (Clean Air Fund, n.d.). Similarly to London, high-pollution days in Bristol increase asthma hospitalisations among children. The brief illustrates that reducing Bristol's air

pollution by even 20% annually could lower the incidence of coronary heart disease by 3.1%, equating to 62 fewer cases each year (Clean Air Fund, n.d.). Although pollution is lower than in London, policies are still necessary to reduce cardiovascular risks (London Air, n.d.). While Policy BCS23 is primarily a planning and environmental policy aimed at reducing pollutants from new builds, it plays an important role in improving cardiovascular health.

Similar to London, Bristol must comply with EU air quality regulations, meaning that much of the city's action on reducing pollutants is influenced by external pressures. As cardiovascular health conditions linked with air pollution remain high in both London and Bristol, more ambitious policy intervention is necessary to see significant improvements. Considering most prominent health effects are recorded in the two cities' busiest streets, transport emissions are a key driver of urban pollution. Reducing vehicle emissions not only lowers pollutant levels but also encourages sustainable travel, which delivers corresponding physical health benefits (GLA, 2025).

### **Sustainable travel and physical health**

Transport represents the UK's largest output of greenhouse gases, producing over a quarter of emissions in 2021 (Department for Transport, 2023). As global warming continues to amplify health risks in urban areas (LSHTM, 2022), the government has encouraged sustainable forms of travel as a strategy to reduce emissions and improve citizen health (GLA, 2025). The cities of London (GLA, 2025) and Bristol (BCC, 2025) have both adopted sustainable travel policies and schemes to encourage physical wellbeing through active travel.

Investment in cycling infrastructure, such as the expansion of cycle lanes (TFL, 2023) and production of Santander Bikes, also known as "Boris bikes" (BBC News, 2014), has been highly influential in encouraging the public to cycle in place of public transport. It primarily aims to reduce emissions and promote sustainable transport. The infrastructure expansion of cycle routes has proven to be successful, with over 1.2 million cycle journeys made daily, as well as 22% of London citizens living within 200m of an accessible cycle route (Heckwolf, Scheer & Wyckoff, 2024).

Secondary effects of encouraging active transport have improved the physical well-being of London citizens significantly. This is illustrated by approximately 25% of Londoners meeting

the recommended 150 minutes of exercise per week solely through walking or cycling (GLA, 2014). Furthermore, active commuting has been proven to be explicitly linked to a lower Body Mass Index (BMI) (Flint & Cummins, 2016) as well as a 47% decreased risk of mortality (BMJ Group, 2024). Collectively, these findings demonstrate the positive impact that sustainable transport policies have in reducing health risks and overall improving physical wellbeing.

However, cycling in London is not entirely safe. In the first seven months of 2022, 2,280 people were reported killed or seriously injured in cycling accidents, demonstrating the necessity of substantial improvements in cycling safety (Heckwolf, Scheer & Wyckoff, 2024). It is also difficult to establish a definitive link between sustainable transport policies and improved physical well-being. For instance, during the September 2025 tube strikes, many of the public chose to cycle not because they were encouraged by active travel schemes but because public transport was unavailable (BBC News, 2025). Increases in active commuting can also reflect broader trends rather than direct responses to sustainable policy (Cusack, 2021). As such, the causal connection between these policies and physical health is challenging to assess accurately.

Bristol, like London, has adopted sustainable travel policies that improve physical health through active travel, such as cycling. The Bristol City Council aims to be carbon neutral by 2030, and as transport is responsible for a third of greenhouse gas emissions, they have implemented policies, schemes and infrastructure to ensure sustainable travel (BCC, 2025). This has included closing Bristol Bridge to cars, allowing for more straightforward bus routes, as well as the production and encouragement of e-bikes. Policy has extended to the University of the West of England (UWE) and University of Bristol (UOB), which account for a proportion of the population in Bristol (Cork, 2025). UWE has constructed targets for a 2030 action plan for sustainable travel, which includes a reduction in the amount of parking available at the university, encouraging sustainable travel options (UWE, 2025).

UOB has organised a series of bicycle events, including cycling clinics and security, as well as cycling lessons for all students on campus (UOB, 2025). Bristol has integrated public health experts within its transport planning since 2008, ensuring that cycling and walking infrastructure has been shaped via health considerations (EU UMO, 2017). This has contributed to improvements in physical health and activity across the city. Unlike London, Bristol is considered the UK's "safest city for cyclists" (McNamee, 2024), with quality road infrastructure and a strong biking

culture. This means that the public has more confidence in their ability to cycle around the city, encouraging participation in active travel, and thus, increased physical health. This is reflected in data from 2025 that labels Bristol as ninth in the top 10 cities in the UK with the “most bike commuters” (Shehu, 2025).

Although Bristol was named the “UK’s first European Green Capital” (Purely Energy, n.d.) back in 2015 and continues to lead as the greenest city in England, its landscape poses difficulties for sustainable travel. The city’s steep and uneven topography makes cycling to work a challenging and sometimes inaccessible commute for many residents (McNamee, 2024). This is worsened by the uneven distribution of infrastructure. Whilst there are many established and protected cycle routes in the Bristol centre, it is argued that these “disappear and become very disjointed” (Pipe, 2022) as you venture from the centre. These limitations directly influence the extent to which Bristol’s sustainable travel policies and schemes can effectively improve the physical health of its citizens. As a result, more needs to be done to ensure the physical well-being of all through sustainable active travel. One potential avenue for Bristol Council would be to make e-bikes more accessible and affordable, helping to address the challenges posed by the city’s steep topography.

## **Humidity and infections**

Warmer weather and increasingly unpredictable weather patterns are direct consequences of climate change, resulting in more frequent heatwaves in summer as well as milder, damper winters. As mould, a type of fungus, thrives in wet and humid environments, these weather conditions have significantly increased mould growth in UK homes (Mouldmatters, 2025). Not only is mould an unpleasant addition in homes, but it also poses serious health risks, including respiratory issues, infections and, in the most severe cases, death (GOV.UK, 2024). The cities of London and Bristol, with their abundance of ageing houses and high-density rented accommodation, particularly among students, are especially prone to the effects of mould (Mr\_All\_Well, 2025).

Warmer winters in London pose significant issues for the spread of mould in homes because many live in terraced houses or flats with “poor ventilation” (London Damp Proofing, 2025). Without adequate circulation, households trap humid air, forcing condensation to form and

creating mould growth. Unfortunately, London buildings' ageing infrastructure cannot withstand humid environments, leaving properties highly susceptible to damp and mould intrusion (Mr\_All\_Well, 2025). Mould releases particles called "spores" (Breathe, 2017) that are harmful when inhaled, so consistent exposure to this can lead to all sorts of respiratory problems. Common symptoms include coughing, wheezing, and shortness of breath (Breathe, 2017). Long-term mould absorption can cause severe health problems such as infections and death (GOV.UK, 2024). Inhalation of spores can weaken the immune system, making residents more vulnerable to invasive mould infections (IMI) (CDC, 2024). IMIs affect various parts of the body, such as organs, deep tissues and blood vessels and are life-threatening illnesses (CDC, 2024). "Black mould" (Brown, Booth, 2022) is considered the most dangerous type, and prolonged exposure to it resulted in the death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak in 2020.

Following the tragic death of Awaab Ishak, "Awaab's Law" (H&F, 2025) was introduced to address the health effects of mould in households. This law requires landlords to respond within 24 hours to emergency hazards and up to 10 days for significant mould and damp. This policy holds both the local council and landlords accountable for mould left untreated (H&F, 2025) and aims to reduce the risk of both respiratory and infection-related problems. However, it is primarily reactive rather than preventative, addressing the issue only after it has appeared rather than reducing mould proliferation in advance.

London's housing policies increasingly aim to provide future sustainable and energy-efficient infrastructure to lower carbon emissions. The Future of London's initiative outlines how modern and retrofit housing can be designed to support "public health and environmental sustainability" (Future of London, n.d.). However, this scheme can unintentionally exacerbate mould and damp issues, as measures to retain heat and energy efficiency often reduce ventilation, causing a build-up of moisture (Future of London, n.d.). This highlights the complexity of policymaking, where environmental goals must be achieved without compromising public health.

Like London, Bristol's housing suffers from significant damp and mould. Student housing is particularly affected by the unpredictable weather caused by global warming. This is because the low-grade and poorly maintained housing struggles to cope with increased moisture and humidity caused by warmer weather. A survey in 2015 recorded that 75% of students "reported mould problems" (Boobyer & Bullock, 2025).

An article written by law student, Sagal Khalif, at the University of Bristol highlights the ongoing health conditions that she and her other tenants experienced whilst living with black mould in student housing. Khalif details the inadequate response from her Redland-based landlord, Arnold Wette, who reportedly said, “they’re students. They’re supposed to cough” (Khalif, 2025). This illustrates the challenges students face in reporting mould and the health consequences, particularly respiratory issues, that arise when action is not taken. They experience when not helped.

Since Awaab’s law was introduced, Bristol has received a “Huge backlog” (Skirkowski & Miller, 2025) of mould cases, illustrating the extent of mould prominence in Bristol housing. Although this policy was mandatory, Bristol City Council has admitted that it is not yet equipped to comply with the requirements of the legislation due to thousands of previously neglected cases. The 2,200 active cases on record likely represent only a proportion of the mould and damp problems in the city that remain unreported (Skirkowski & Miller, 2025).

Whilst policies such as Awaab’s law represent a step forward in improving health and safety in addressing the risks of mould, the ineffectiveness of this policy in Bristol highlights that more needs to be done. Stricter enforcement, as well as future-proofing homes against climate change and its mould-related consequences, is imperative in reducing respiratory and infection-based illnesses in the UK.

## **Conclusion**

Climate-oriented policies in London and Bristol have had varying degrees of effectiveness in improving public health and wellbeing, largely because many are not explicitly designed to overcome health problems. In both cities, environmental policies such as London’s ULEZ and sustainable transport schemes, as well as Bristol’s BCS23 development policy and cycle infrastructure, primarily target emission reduction and sustainable commuting. Secondary effects of these policies, including reduced cardiovascular and respiratory illnesses as well as increased physical wellbeing, demonstrate that climate-oriented policies can unintentionally benefit health. Similarly, housing-focused policies, such as Awaab’s law, aim to safeguard tenants but have direct benefits for respiratory health.

However, these interventions highlight key problems. Health benefits are severely limited, constrained by the secondary prioritisation of health, infrastructure gaps and inconsistent policy implementation at the local authority level. Policies are often influenced by broader social trends and pressured by external sources such as EU regulation rather than UK policy design alone. This reveals a gap between environmentally induced health risks and the ability of climate-oriented policies to address them adequately. To mitigate health impacts driven by global warming, future strategies should embed public health goals more explicitly within climate-oriented policy.

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