

Tory leadership hopefuls Stewart, Hunt and Gove vow legal right to clean air

Tory candidates back Times campaign

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Three Conservative leadership hopefuls pledge today to give people the legal right to breathe clean air as one of their first acts as prime minister. Backing this newspaper's campaign for a Clean Air Act, Jeremy Hunt, Michael Gove and Rory Stewart all promise to bring in legally binding air quality targets in their first Queen's Speech.

The commitment will raise pressure on the other candidates to support new legislation as part of their campaigns to lead the country.

The UN's most senior public health official warned politicians that they could find themselves facing criminal charges for failing to protect citizens from air pollution. Maria Neira compared the issue to the asbestos scandal of the 1970s, in which governments were accused of having failed to act quickly enough despite knowing the risks.

Speaking to The Times, the director of the World Health Organisation's department of public health pointed to France, where politicians were taken to court and accused of failing to address the known risk of asbestos, and pointed to the case of Ella Kissi-Debrah, a nine-year-old schoolgirl whose fatal asthma attack in 2013 has been linked to high levels of pollution near her south London home.

The Times revealed last month that about 2.6 million pupils attend schools in areas where the amount of fine particles in the air exceeds the WHO guideline limit of ten micrograms per cubic metre. Every school in London is above the WHO limit. Some 234 schools in Birmingham exceed it, as well as more than 100 in large cities such as Leicester and Nottingham.

The microscopic particles can penetrate deep into the lungs and enter the bloodstream, leading experts to warn that they are the most dangerous form of air pollution.

The government's present clean air strategy, outlined by Mr Gove's Environment Department in January, sets out plans to cut the number of people living in areas where levels exceed WHO guidelines by 50 per cent by 2025.

It is understood that Mr Gove has been arguing in cabinet for binding targets based on the much tougher WHO guidelines — something for which The Times has called repeatedly. He revealed that on entering No 10 one of his "immediate priorities as prime minister would be to introduce the flagship Environment Bill I have been developing . . . I would ensure it included legally binding air quality targets which are based on World Health Organisation guidelines and are more ambitious than those adopted by the European Union."

Mr Gove also said he wanted to see pollution monitors in every postcode, particularly near schools and hospitals. He said he would review the plan to wait until 2040 to ban the sale of

new diesel and petrol cars and vans, saying he would “accelerate” the timetable if the evidence showed it was achievable.

Mr Hunt said: “As a father of young children growing up in central London, I really worry about the impact dirty air has on their lungs and as health secretary I saw the burden it places on the NHS.” He said there was “nothing more Conservative” than conserving the planet for future generations, adding: “We need to act before it’s too late.”

Mr Stewart said he had tried to make the government act on air pollution three years ago when he was a junior environment minister. “I am horrified by how little progress has been made, and by how bad our air is,” he said. “My child’s lungs could be as much as a third smaller than normal, because he’s growing up in London. We must act quickly and we must act now.”

Boris Johnson, the frontrunner, stopped short of adopting the WHO target. While he did not commit to binding targets, Mr Johnson said that he had an “open mind” about the possibility of new legislation in his first Queen’s Speech. He added that he would make improving air quality a priority of his administration.

Mr Johnson said he was a “passionate campaigner for improving air quality” who as mayor of London had introduced plans for an ultra-low emission zone. On a new Clean Air Act to confer a legal right to unpolluted air, he said: “I believe that it makes sense to enforce new responsibilities on pollutants, and that this will have more of an impact in improving air quality.”

He added that WHO clean air standards could be “very useful tools” for policymakers that would “certainly be taken into account”. He also said that he would review the 2040 ban on new petrol and diesel cars in office.

A spokesman for Sajid Javid said that the candidate would “look very strongly” at the case for clean air legislation in the Queen’s Speech.

Dominic Raab said that the “key priority” was to ensure existing and already planned targets to reduce air pollution were properly monitored and enforced.

Joe Farrington-Douglas, head of policy at the charity Asthma UK, said that he welcomed the commitments, adding: “We want all candidates in the running to be prime minister to prioritise cleaner air to protect future generations.”

Jenny Bates, clean air campaigner at Friends of the Earth, said: “Whoever our next prime minister is, this should be a priority for people’s health and that of the planet.”