

Press Release

Climate and Health Alliance calls for urgent government action to address the growing problem of poor air quality

Number of deaths attributable to air pollution continues to climb with 24 premature deaths a week linked to air pollution

Dublin, 25 May 2020: The Climate and Health Alliance, a coalition of the leading health charities, medical, and academic organisations from across the island of Ireland, are today calling on the government to tackle the growing problem of air pollution by immediately halting the burning of solid fuels, as estimates from the EPA's latest Air Quality Annual report show that the number of annual premature deaths attributable to air pollution has increased from 1,180 deaths to 1,300.

In launching its 2019 Air Quality Annual report, the EPA recognised that air quality in Ireland was generally good, but that there were concerning localised issues. Despite generally good air quality overall, Dublin and other urban areas were experiencing deteriorating levels of air pollution due to the rise of traffic-related nitrogen dioxide pollution, with one Dublin traffic monitoring traffic location exceeding the annual EU limit value.

"The worsening levels of air pollution in our major cities highlights the urgent need to prioritise active travel and public transport over private vehicular travel and Heavy Goods Vehicles (HGV) in our urban areas," said Alliance spokesperson and Consultant Geriatrician and General Physician, Dr Colm Byrne.

"To reverse traffic related emissions and make our cities truly liveable and healthy for those who live and work there, the government needs to rapidly expand active travel and public transport infrastructure, and investigate the feasibility of introducing a congestion charge system in Dublin and our other major cities"

Of much greater concern was that air pollutants were above the WHO's guideline values for health at 33 monitoring stations across Ireland, largely due to the burning of solid fuels in our cities, towns, and villages. Dangerous levels of fine particulate matter are being emitted as a result of these solid fuels being burned, leading to an estimated 1,300 premature deaths in Ireland, the majority of which are due to cardiovascular disease.

Reacting to these latest figures, Dr Byrne called on the government to immediately rectify this mounting health emergency by introducing stringent solid fuel regulations that swiftly ban the burning of smoky coal nationwide and begin the rapid phasing out of other smoky fuels such as turf and wood.

"It is simply unacceptable that the government continues to sit on its hands and do nothing while more and more people are tragically suffering and losing their lives due to worsening levels of air pollution. They are fully aware of the dire health harms that the burning of solid fuel causes and yet are unable to put the health of the nation above the financial interests of solid fuel companies who they continue to kowtow to".

With recent evidence indicating that long-term exposure to air pollution may increase the risk of death from Covid-19, Dr Byrne stated that this underlined the need for swift government action, particularly as the Department of Communications, Climate Action and the Environment begin to prepare new solid fuel regulations. The Covid-19 pandemic has created a greater sense of awareness of the environment we live in, and the impact that air quality has on our health and wellbeing.

This latest EPA report comes only recently after a study from the RCSI, a member of the Climate and Health Alliance, highlighted that higher levels of air pollution in the winter months is associated with more hospitalisations for all strokes in Ireland, particularly in Dublin. This was due to the higher levels of air pollutants in the air during winter due to the burning of solid fuel burning and traffic related emissions¹.

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Notes to editors

About the Climate & Health Alliance

Established in 2019, the Climate and Health Alliance is a broad alliance of public health NGO's, professional bodies, and academic institutions that share a common goal in advocating for urgent government action in addressing the issue of climate change, its direct impact on public health and the significant co-benefits which will accrue from climate action.

Members of the Climate & Health Alliance include:

Irish Heart Foundation
Irish Cancer Society
Irish College of General Practitioners
Irish Medical Organisation
Children's Health Ireland
Royal College of Physicians Ireland
British Heart Foundation NI
Association Health Promotion Ireland
UCC School of Public Health
Royal College of Surgeons Ireland
Irish Doctors for the Environment
Stroke Association NI
Irish Gerontological Society
UCD School of Public Health, Physiotherapy & Sports Science

The Climate and Health Alliance's website can be viewed here:

www.climateandhealthalliance.ie

¹ Byrne C, P, Bennett K, E, Hickey A, Kavanagh P, Broderick B, O'Mahony M, Williams D, J: Short-Term Air Pollution as a Risk for Stroke Admission: A Time-Series Analysis. *Cerebrovasc Dis* 2020;49:404-411. doi: 10.1159/000510080