

# Q&A: Why do we keep failing to address air pollution?

Dublin smog levels hit 15 times the WHO's recommendations, despite smoky coal ban



[Kevin O'Sullivan](#)

*Last Updated: Tuesday, December 1, 2020, 21:20*



Smog caused by burning smoky coal and peat fires pollutes the air over a housing estate in Dublin, in 1988. File photograph: Tom Stoddart/ Getty

[Kevin O'Sullivan](#)

*Last Updated: Tuesday, December 1, 2020, 21:20*

Despite a 30-year smoky coal ban, Dublin once again earned its “dirty old town” reputation during a weekend with pollution levels in [Rathmines](#) and [Ringsend](#) 15 times higher than EU and [World Health Organisation](#) rules.

But the problem was not just in Dublin – pollution limits were broken elsewhere, too, over the past week including Ennis, Tralee, Cork, [Macroom](#) and [Enniscorthy](#).

PM2.5 particulate pollution comes from solid fuels, while PM10 comes from traffic. WHO guidelines order that PM2.5 should not exceed 10 micrograms per cubic metre, or 25 micrograms on a 24-hour average.

However, last week these limits were exceeded frequently. Records of PM2.5 in Ringsend hit almost 400 in Ringsend, and more than 300 in Rathmines. In Ennis, they reached 329 on Sunday night.

In all probability, nowhere escaped. Smoky coal is banned in most major cities, but not elsewhere. In the meantime, seven Irish people die because of air pollution every two days.

The most recent EPA Air Quality Report noted WHO guideline values were exceeded at 33 EPA monitoring stations, “mostly due to the levels of fine particles in our air”.

## To what extent does weather have an impact on air quality?

The lack of wind, cold temperatures, combined with local geographical features can cause smoke from fossil fuels to stay hanging in place.

In Dublin, for example, winds last weekend were light and smoke remained in place, especially at evening time when people lit home fires, stoves and wood burners.

Bad pollution days are not unexpected for this time of year and are connected to high-pressure meteorological systems that cause slack winds and low temperatures, explains Prof Colin O'Dowd of NUIG Centre for Climate & Air Pollution Studies .

Weather issues aside, there is increasing evidence indicating coal, peat and wet wood should have no place in the energy system any more, because of health effects that, for too long, were underestimated.

### Air Quality Levels at Rathmines, Dublin 6

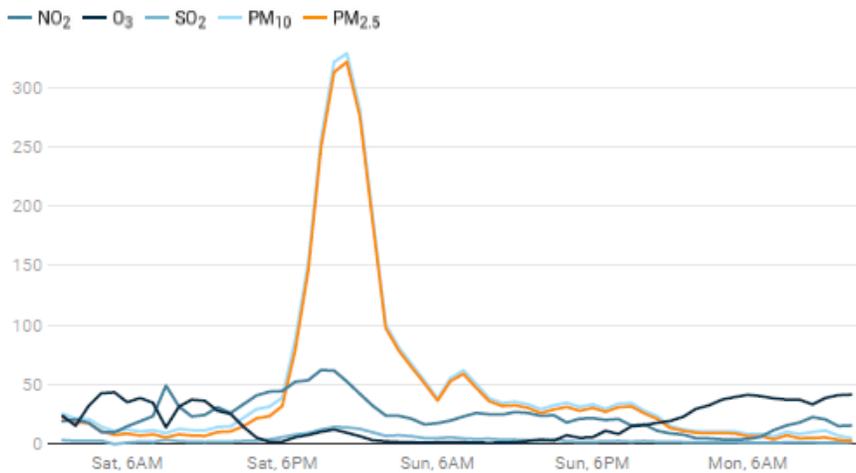


Chart: IRISH TIMES GRAPHICS • Source: EPA • Created with Datawrapper

### Air Quality Levels at Ringsend, Dublin 4

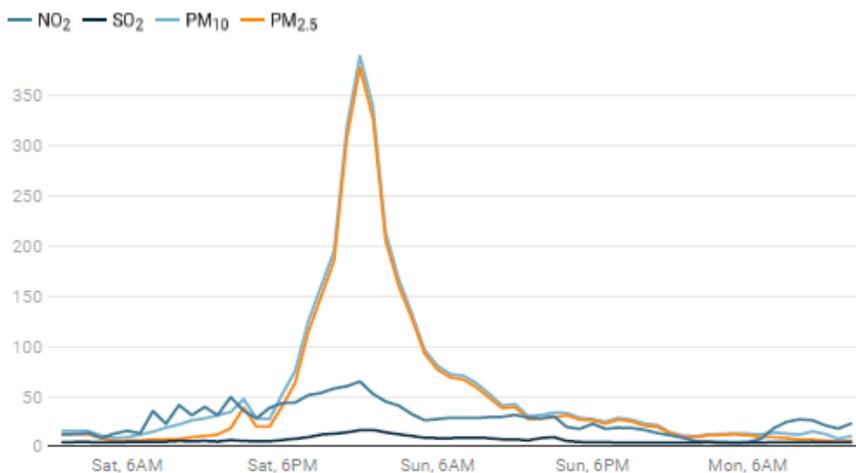


Chart: IRISH TIMES GRAPHICS • Source: EPA • Created with Datawrapper

Weather issues aside, there is increasing evidence indicating coal, peat and wet wood should have no place in the energy system any more, because of health effects that, for too long, were underestimated.

### **What air pollutants are to blame?**

The EPA consistently points the finger at fine particulate matter (PM) – a suspended dust that, when inhaled, causes chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, bronchial asthma, strokes, heart disease and some cancers. And it kills.

### **What's the solution?**

Ban smoky coal everywhere, and enforce the ban. Other smoky fuels, including peat and wet wood, should go after that. Air pollution does not recognise town or city boundaries.

It is imperative that the smoky coal ban is extended nationwide if we are to protect lives, O'Dowd insists. "Across the water, owners of wood burners, stoves and open fires in [England](#) will no longer be able to buy house coal or wet wood, under a ban to be rolled out from next year."

### **Are these measures not too drastic given current fuel-use patterns?**

Many poor people depend heavily on fossil fuels, so supports will be needed to help them. Green taxes for everyone else would help to make "dirty" fuels more expensive.

Meanwhile, the sale of wet wood – which emits more PM2.5 when burned – should stop, along with new emission standards for new stoves.

### **What other steps are needed?**

Heat pumps are part of the solution, but they will require a major State-backed retrofitting programme. The Air Pollution Act 1987 should go, too, replaced by tougher legislation encapsulated in the long overdue national clean air strategy.

Because pollution does not recognise borders, action has to be taken together with Stormont – the smuggling of prohibited fuels, and it happens, must be stopped.

### **Do we know the full health consequences of air pollution?**

The short answer is no. More research needs to be done on the health effects of both indoor and outdoor pollution, says Dr [Clare Noone](#) who is also based in CCAPS. "We are currently working on a pilot study in Galway, that will look at the interaction between indoor and outdoor PM2.5 air pollution."

From a climate perspective, she adds, [Ireland](#) imports 90 per cent of its energy as fossil fuels, which negatively impacts our environment, our air quality, and our health... transitioning away from burning coal and peat is a win-win for climate and air pollution."

### **Is there any action we can take to ease pollution before national clear air strategy emerges?**

There are actions that can reduce the impact of extreme air pollution incidents as occurred recently, says Dr Jurgita Ovadnevaite, a senior lecturer at NUIG school of physics. One of the short-term solutions, in addition to long-term actions to be defined in the national clean air strategy, could be a partial coverage of the cost of "clean" electricity and even natural gas for heating by the Government for the periods of forecasted pollution episodes.

"This subsidising of the electricity for short unfavourable weather has already been deployed in some European countries and would encourage the use of clean energy and reduce the extent of pollution events."