

23011 “Ella’s Law” - Clean air for all in Britain

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Ella Roberta Adoo-Kissi-Debrah ; she loved playing sport, reading books and making music. But living close to the South Circular Road in Lewisham, south London, from the age of seven she began to develop a chest infection and persistent cough. A happy, healthy child was disabled by chronic asthma.

As her condition deteriorated, she suffered seizures and breathing problems, and was shifted from hospital to hospital. Ella died aged nine, in the early hours of 15 February 2013 – 10 years ago today.

After tireless campaigning from her mother Rosamund, including a second inquest into her death in 2020, Ella became the first person in the UK to have air pollution listed as a cause of death on her death certificate in 2020.

Change is desperately needed. If you thought tragic cases like Ella’s were a one-off, think again. A global study has linked almost a million stillbirths a year to air pollution exposure, and it is as bad as smoking in increasing the risk of miscarriage. Long-term exposure to even relatively low levels of air pollution can cause depression and anxiety. About 300,000 lung cancer deaths globally in 2019 were attributed to air pollution.

If ministers were really thinking of Ella and her family on this day, they would adopt Ella’s law. Formally known as the clean air (human rights) bill, this legislation would make clean air a human right for all. It would give parents like Rosamund, who have lost children to air pollution, the right to take legal action under UK law and the resources to make that a reality.

It would also establish a citizens’ commission on clean air – which would review government progress towards air pollution goals annually and advise ministers to tighten them if necessary. And crucially, it would require the government to reduce levels of PM2.5, one of the most toxic pollutants, to 10 micrograms a cubic metre by 2030, rather than the current target of 2040.

This bill is going through parliament right now but it has met roadblocks and murky misinformation.

The environment secretary, Thérèse Coffey, stated last week that she “would have loved” to set the PM2.5 target at 2030, as in the clean air bill, but was unable to do so as it is “unachievable”. Yet a report by Imperial College London found that 97% of the country could reach the 10 micrograms target by 2030. The remaining 3% consists of hotspots in London that, with targeted support in the next few years, could certainly meet the requirements.

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