Public health air pollution impacts of pathway options to meet the 2050 UK Climate Change Act target: a modelling study

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Declared competing interests of authors: Melissa C Lott reports grants from BHP Billiton outside the submitted work. Mike Holland reports personal fees from the NHS during the conduct of the study.

Published June 2018
DOI: 10.3310/phr06070

Plain English summary
Impacts of pathway options to meet the 2050 UK Climate Change Act target
Public Health Research 2018; Vol. 6: No. 7
DOI: 10.3310/phr06070

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Plain English summary

There are many pathways to meeting the UK’s Climate Change Act 2008 (CCA; Great Britain. Climate Change Act 2008. Chapter 27. London: The Stationery Office; 2008) commitment to an 80% reduction in emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050. Some pathways emit more harmful air pollution than others, leading to larger adverse health impacts. This project has investigated some of these pathways using a model of Great Britain’s (GB’s) energy system and a model of air pollution to calculate the health impact of the GB population in 2035 and 2050. We have analysed four future scenarios, two of which achieved the CCA target and two that did not.

The results of this work show that all future scenarios reduce the life-years lost from the harmful gas nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), attributable in part to a high degree of road transport electrification by 2050. The largest reductions in NO₂ are in scenarios that use more nuclear energy than the scenario phasing out nuclear power. In the two scenarios that meet the greenhouse gas targets, levels of harmful particles fall by 2050, but by less than would be the case if there was not also expected to be an increase in wood burning. They also have a bigger impact on premature deaths than the scenarios that do not meet the climate targets. Exposures to air pollutants in more deprived populations are higher in 2011 and remain so in 2050, even though overall levels of pollution decrease. Not including the health impact of air pollution in decisions to reduce greenhouse gases may subject the British population to unnecessary health risks.
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This report

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the PHR programme as project number 11/3005/13. The contractual start date was in April 2013. The final report began editorial review in January 2017 and was accepted for publication in June 2017. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The PHR editors and production house have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors’ report and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the final report document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this report.

This report presents independent research funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR). The views and opinions expressed by authors in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the PHR programme or the Department of Health and Social Care. If there are verbatim quotations included in this publication the views and opinions expressed by the interviewees are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily reflect those of the authors, those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the PHR programme or the Department of Health and Social Care.

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