# A decade on, UK faces ongoing dieselgate legal battle and public health crisis



A decade has passed since the Dieselgate scandal broke, revealing that numerous diesel vehicles emitted dangerously higher levels of toxic nitrogen oxides (NOx) on the road than during regulatory tests. Despite this lengthy period, the implications for public health and legal accountability in the UK remain profound and unresolved. Experts estimate that excess pollution linked to Dieselgate has already caused approximately 16,000 premature deaths and 30,000 new childhood asthma cases in the UK, with a further 6,000 early deaths projected without urgent intervention. Jemima Hartshorn, founder of the campaign group Mums for Lungs, emphasises the ongoing toll on children’s health, recalling her own daughter’s severe respiratory struggles as a stark example of pollution’s human cost.

The UK lags behind other nations in holding car manufacturers accountable. Unlike the United States, which has secured multi-billion dollar settlements against Volkswagen and other companies, and Germany, where heavy fines have been levied, British authorities have yet to impose fines or mandate mass vehicle recalls to address the scandal’s legacy. Instead, more than a million UK motorists have initiated a massive group legal action against multiple manufacturers—including Mercedes, Ford, Peugeot/Citroën, Renault, and Nissan—alleging the use of illegal "defeat devices" that concealed the true emissions levels of their vehicles. This ongoing trial, representing the largest group claim in English legal history, could span several years, with final judgments and potential compensation still pending.

The defendants deny illegality, asserting these technologies were essential for engine protection and compliance with regulations as interpreted. However, court documents accessed by The Guardian reveal sophisticated software manipulations that ramped up NOx control exclusively during the narrow parameters of lab testing, only to relax those controls during normal driving conditions. These defeat devices exploited test conditions such as fixed speed patterns, temperature ranges, and engine torque thresholds to evade detection. Legal experts argue manufacturers prioritized cost savings and driver convenience — particularly the avoidance of using AdBlue, a urea solution necessary for selective catalytic reduction (SCR) that lowers NOx emissions — over genuine pollution control.

The long delay in enforcement and vehicle remediation exacerbates public health risks. Despite having completed the legal framework since 2021 to compel recalls, the UK government has yet to exercise this power. While 76 models are under investigation, progress remains slow. Environmental lawyers warn the absence of a central, accessible database on vehicle recalls and updates frustrates efforts to monitor and enforce fixes. Additionally, the effectiveness of voluntary software updates implemented by some manufacturers is questioned, with independent tests in the EU showing little or no improvement in emissions following these interventions.

Internationally, several manufacturers have faced substantial penalties. Volkswagen alone has paid over €32 billion in fines, compensation, and legal costs since the scandal’s exposure. Recent settlements include a €54 million agreement with Italian Volkswagen owners and a €100 million fine paid by Continental AG linked to the scandal. European Union rulings now clarify that defeat devices broadly operating most of the time are illegal, not just during tests, reinforcing buyers’ rights to compensation even if vehicles met compliance standards on paper.

This multifaceted crisis — combining regulatory failure, corporate deception, and its grave health consequences — underlines the urgent need for tougher enforcement and concrete action. Respiratory experts like Imperial College London's Professor Nick Hopkinson call Dieselgate a "toxic air emergency," blaming delayed government response for allowing millions of high-polluting diesels to remain on UK roads. Legal experts acknowledge the importance of the current trial but warn that even a successful claim may not automatically lead to cleaner air without strong government-led vehicle fixes.

As the legal process unfolds, claimants like Adam Kamenetzky, a South London father who says he was duped into buying a supposedly low-emission diesel Mercedes, emphasise the social injustice at stake. "I’m not in this for a payout. I’m just staggered by the level of injustice," he told The Guardian. Meanwhile, consumer advocates and campaigners press the government to move beyond prolonged investigations and leverage existing powers to force car manufacturers to recall and repair the millions of polluting vehicles still on British roads. The Dieselgate revelation was a watershed moment a decade ago, but for many affected families and communities, the battle for justice and cleaner air continues.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/oct/10/dieselgate-scandal-air-pollution-cars), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/oct/10/dieselgate-scandal-air-pollution-cars)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/oct/10/dieselgate-scandal-air-pollution-cars), [[4]](https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/carmakers-face-uk-dieselgate-lawsuits-worth-at-least-76-bln-lawyers-say-2024-06-11/), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/oct/10/dieselgate-scandal-air-pollution-cars)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/oct/10/dieselgate-scandal-air-pollution-cars), [[4]](https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/carmakers-face-uk-dieselgate-lawsuits-worth-at-least-76-bln-lawyers-say-2024-06-11/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/oct/10/dieselgate-scandal-air-pollution-cars), [[4]](https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/carmakers-face-uk-dieselgate-lawsuits-worth-at-least-76-bln-lawyers-say-2024-06-11/), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/oct/10/dieselgate-scandal-air-pollution-cars)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/oct/10/dieselgate-scandal-air-pollution-cars), [[4]](https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/carmakers-face-uk-dieselgate-lawsuits-worth-at-least-76-bln-lawyers-say-2024-06-11/), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/oct/10/dieselgate-scandal-air-pollution-cars), [[5]](https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/climate-energy/volkswagen-liable-defeat-devices-top-eu-court-rules-2025-08-01/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/oct/10/dieselgate-scandal-air-pollution-cars), [[3]](https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/continental-reaches-deal-with-ex-managers-diesel-scandal-reports-handelsblatt-2025-10-07/), [[6]](https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/volkswagen-reaches-54-million-dieselgate-settlement-with-italian-owners-2024-05-15/), [[7]](https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/volkswagen-reaches-54-million-dieselgate-settlement-with-italian-owners-2024-05-15/)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/oct/10/dieselgate-scandal-air-pollution-cars), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/oct/10/dieselgate-scandal-air-pollution-cars), [[5]](https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/climate-energy/volkswagen-liable-defeat-devices-top-eu-court-rules-2025-08-01/)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/oct/10/dieselgate-scandal-air-pollution-cars), [[4]](https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/carmakers-face-uk-dieselgate-lawsuits-worth-at-least-76-bln-lawyers-say-2024-06-11/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/oct/10/dieselgate-scandal-air-pollution-cars> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/oct/10/dieselgate-scandal-air-pollution-cars> - This article discusses the ongoing impact of the Dieselgate scandal, highlighting the health consequences of excess pollution in the UK, including 16,000 premature deaths and 30,000 cases of childhood asthma. It also covers the legal actions taken by over a million UK motorists against car manufacturers for alleged emissions test cheating, and the slow response from the UK government in addressing the issue compared to other countries.
3. <https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/continental-reaches-deal-with-ex-managers-diesel-scandal-reports-handelsblatt-2025-10-07/> - Continental AG has reached a settlement with former executives involved in the diesel emissions scandal, according to the Handelsblatt newspaper. The agreement, pending shareholder approval, involves insurance companies paying between €40 million and €50 million ($46.7 million to $58.3 million) in damages. This covers only a fraction of the total €300 million in damages linked to the scandal. A company spokesperson stated that the supervisory board is obligated to examine any potential breaches of duty by former executive board members but declined to provide further details. In April 2024, Continental paid a €100 million fine to resolve a separate investigation into the matter. The diesel scandal, known as 'Dieselgate,' surfaced in 2015, revealing that vehicles had been equipped with software designed to cheat emissions tests. Several suppliers, including ZF Friedrichshafen and Bosch, have also faced fines. Volkswagen, where the wrongdoing was first identified, incurred penalties totaling €1 billion.
4. <https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/carmakers-face-uk-dieselgate-lawsuits-worth-at-least-76-bln-lawyers-say-2024-06-11/> - Major car manufacturers are embroiled in 1.5 million lawsuits in the UK over alleged emissions test cheating, potentially costing them at least £6 billion ($7.6 billion). This litigation follows the 2015 Volkswagen scandal, where the company admitted to using 'defeat devices' to alter emissions levels during testing. Companies like Mercedes-Benz and Ford are accused of similar deceptions regarding nitrogen oxide emissions standards, which they deny. Volkswagen has already incurred over €32 billion ($34 billion) in costs related to their 'dieselgate' scandal and settled claims with British drivers for £193 million in 2022. The lawsuits involve 13 vehicle manufacturing groups, with each claim potentially worth £4,000. Legal expenses are also significant, with claimants' and defendants' costs projected to be hundreds of millions of pounds by a third trial slated for 2026.
5. <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/climate-energy/volkswagen-liable-defeat-devices-top-eu-court-rules-2025-08-01/> - On August 1, 2025, the European Court of Justice ruled that car manufacturers like Volkswagen remain legally liable for installing unlawful defeat devices in vehicles, even if those vehicles appeared to meet EU standards. The ruling stems from two German cases involving Volkswagen diesel cars equipped with such devices either during manufacturing or through later software updates. These defeat devices can manipulate emissions output, often under specific conditions like certain temperatures, which automakers claim is to protect engines. However, the court emphasized that meeting EU emissions standards doesn’t automatically render the use of such technology lawful. Buyers affected by these devices are entitled to compensation, which can be reduced based on vehicle usage or capped at 15% of the purchase price, but must still reasonably reflect the damages suffered. The ruling revives focus on the 2015 Volkswagen emissions scandal, where the company was found to have concealed toxic emissions levels, sparking extensive investigations, lawsuits, and significant corporate upheaval. Volkswagen has not yet commented on the ruling, and the financial implications of the decision remain unclear.
6. <https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/volkswagen-reaches-54-million-dieselgate-settlement-with-italian-owners-2024-05-15/> - Volkswagen has agreed to a settlement of over 50 million euros ($54 million) with Italian car owners affected by the 'dieselgate' emissions scandal. The settlement will compensate more than 60,000 owners, who will each receive up to 1,100 euros. The emissions scandal, which surfaced in 2015, revealed that Volkswagen had installed illegal software in vehicles to manipulate environmental emissions tests, resulting in over 32 billion euros in fines and legal costs for the company. This agreement resolves longstanding litigation and includes compensation for customers who bought Volkswagen, Audi, Skoda, and SEAT vehicles with diesel EA189 engines between 2009 and 2015. Italian consumer group Altroconsumo initiated the legal action in coordination with similar organizations in Belgium, Spain, and Portugal, under the Euroconsumers body. This settlement marks a significant step in addressing the repercussions of the dieselgate scandal across affected countries.
7. <https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/volkswagen-reaches-54-million-dieselgate-settlement-with-italian-owners-2024-05-15/> - Volkswagen has agreed to a settlement of over 50 million euros ($54 million) with Italian car owners affected by the 'dieselgate' emissions scandal. The settlement will compensate more than 60,000 owners, who will each receive up to 1,100 euros. The emissions scandal, which surfaced in 2015, revealed that Volkswagen had installed illegal software in vehicles to manipulate environmental emissions tests, resulting in over 32 billion euros in fines and legal costs for the company. This agreement resolves longstanding litigation and includes compensation for customers who bought Volkswagen, Audi, Skoda, and SEAT vehicles with diesel EA189 engines between 2009 and 2015. Italian consumer group Altroconsumo initiated the legal action in coordination with similar organizations in Belgium, Spain, and Portugal, under the Euroconsumers body. This settlement marks a significant step in addressing the repercussions of the dieselgate scandal across affected countries.