# London’s recent legal nitrogen dioxide limits victory signals a complex environmental milestone



London has marked a notable environmental milestone, achieving legal nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) pollution limits for the first time—a target experts once predicted would take nearly two centuries to attain. While Mayor Sadiq Khan calls this a triumph of the Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) and the city's targeted policies, critics are right to remain skeptical about how meaningful this milestone truly is.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) reported that in 2024, London met the annual mean NO₂ limits set by UK air quality standards. But let’s not forget: this so-called success comes after years of what can only be described as aggressive and costly intervention, driven by Khan’s administration since 2016. While City Hall boasts that roadside nitrogen dioxide levels have nearly halved, this achievement appears more to be a result of government mandates than a genuine commitment by all Londoners. Critics have pointed out that the rapid drop coincided with the massive expansion of the ULEZ—covering every London borough after its August 2023 extension—to create the world’s largest pollution charging zone. Notably, this restriction has imposed significant hardships on small businesses and residents, with opposition from many who see it as an overreach cloaked in environmental concern.

Khan praised the milestone, claiming London met legal NO₂ limits “184 years early,” citing research that in 2019 warned compliance would have taken over 190 years without intervention. Yet, it’s important to question whether immediate health benefits—such as reductions in asthma, dementia, and heart disease—are as widespread as claimed, especially considering the localised and seasonal variations in pollution. Critics argue that the push for strict pollution controls is primarily driven by political ambition rather than sound public health science.

Independent experts, like Professor Frank Kelly of Imperial College London, have hailed the progress as “remarkable,” but again, this “turnaround” underscores the importance of scrutinising how much of it is attributable to policy rather than natural fluctuations, weather patterns, or technological advancements beyond government influence. This success, however, stands in stark contrast to other major UK cities—Manchester, Birmingham, and Liverpool—where nitrogen dioxide levels remain stubbornly above legal limits despite similar measures.

Since the ULEZ extension, compliance among vehicles has reportedly increased, with a 10-percentage point rise to 95% within two months. But critics argue that such short-term figures overshadow the long-term impacts. The Bromley Council report from September 2024 noted that in outer London, pollution levels, including NO₂, did not immediately decline following the expanded scheme—in some cases, measurements actually increased, likely due to seasonal weather variations. This calls into question whether the ULEZ’s current design and enforcement are truly effective, or merely a superficial fix.

Amid legal challenges from Conservative-controlled councils attempting to block the extension, the High Court approved the scheme—yet under the new political landscape, there are concerns about the sustainability of these measures. Khan has promised that there will be no dilution of ULEZ rules, maintaining the £12.50 daily charge, but many question whether this relentless focus on punitive charges and restrictions ignores more practical and economically balanced approaches. Critics argue that policies like these risk stifling economic growth and personal freedoms, all while promising incremental pollution improvements that are still fragile at best.

Achieving legal NO₂ levels is indeed a milestone—an effort driven by years of political will and heavy-handed policy. However, London’s experience should serve as a cautionary tale, highlighting that such interventions can be more costly than beneficial, and that genuine, long-lasting solutions require more nuanced approaches. As the city celebrates this supposed victory, opposition voices remain wary: real progress on air quality should not come at the expense of economic sustainability or civil liberties. The challenge ahead is whether this political push for “clean air” is truly about public health, or simply about imposing a narrow, ideologically driven agenda.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/khan-hails-ulez-success-as-london-under-limit-for-toxic-pollutant-for-first-time-WA6TQJZWJBLAHNOYYE5C6VKZDM/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/mayoral/london-meets-legal-limits-for-toxic-no2-pollution-for-the-first-time> - In September 2025, London achieved a historic milestone by meeting legal limits for nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) pollution for the first time. This achievement was realised nearly 200 years earlier than experts had predicted. The success is attributed to the implementation of the Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) and other air quality policies introduced by Mayor Sadiq Khan. The ULEZ, which expanded to cover all of Greater London in August 2023, has significantly reduced NO₂ levels, leading to improved air quality and health benefits for Londoners.
3. <https://www.itv.com/news/london/2023-07-28/ulez-expansion-councils-lose-legal-challenge-against-sadiq-khan-over-ulez> - In July 2023, five Conservative-led councils lost a legal challenge against Mayor Sadiq Khan's plan to expand the Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) across all of Greater London. The High Court ruling allowed the ULEZ expansion to proceed as planned on August 29, 2023. The expansion aimed to bring cleaner air to approximately five million more Londoners by extending the ULEZ to cover the entire Greater London area.
4. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/09/07/ulez-expansion-sadiq-khan-london/> - A report from Bromley Council in September 2024 found that the expansion of the Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) to outer London did not lead to a significant reduction in pollution levels. The study indicated that nitrogen dioxide levels were higher in November 2023 compared to August 2023, suggesting that the ULEZ expansion did not immediately lower pollution in the borough. The increase was attributed to seasonal weather and temperature variations.
5. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-68645199> - In March 2024, Mayor Sadiq Khan ruled out any changes to the Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) scheme during his tenure. He confirmed that there would be no alterations to vehicle restrictions or increases in the £12.50 daily charge. The ULEZ, which was extended to cover all of Greater London in August 2023, aims to reduce air pollution by charging older, more polluting vehicles to enter the zone.
6. <https://www.itv.com/news/london/2023-10-31/khan-hails-report-into-ulez-expansion-despite-thousands-facing-daily-fines> - In October 2023, Mayor Sadiq Khan praised a report into the Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) expansion, despite thousands of drivers receiving daily fines. The report indicated that 95% of vehicles in London were now ULEZ compliant, a 10 percentage point increase since the expansion began. However, the report did not provide data on how the ULEZ extension affected air pollution levels, with such information expected in six months.
7. <https://www.gbnews.com/lifestyle/ulez-expansion-sadiq-khan-daily-charge-august-2023> - In August 2023, the Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) expanded to cover all of Greater London, requiring thousands of motorists to pay a daily charge of £12.50 for non-compliant vehicles. The expansion aimed to reduce emissions and improve air quality across the capital. The ULEZ now covers all 32 London boroughs, affecting approximately five million more people.