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London congestion charge did not improve air quality

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The charge levied at drivers wanting to drive through London may have cleared roads, but the £8 toll has done little for the air.

A new study has found that levels of pollution in the city's congestion charging zone changed little before and after the city implemented the toll. Some pollutants even rose.

But expanding controls to the rest of London should cut back on smog, says Frank Kelly, a researcher at King's College in London, who presented the analysis this week at a Health Effects Institute conference in Philadelphia.

"If one enlarged that area, then you would be able to have a small but important impact on air quality and presumably health," he says.

Something still in the air

In 2003, London began hitting drivers with a £5 toll to enter a 21 square kilometre patch of the city centre. The toll has since increased to £8. By 2006, the number of cars on the road had fallen by a fifth, while the number of public buses – exempted from the toll – jumped by 25%.

"The scheme never really had air quality or people's health in mind," says Kelly. But to gauge whether the fee might improve the air, his team collected air quality measurements over two years before and after London began levying the charge.

Kelly's team noticed little change in pollutants such as smog, diesel soot, and carbon monoxide. Levels of nitrogen oxides increased slightly – Kelly thinks this was because of filters on diesel buses that trap soot, yet spew out the gases.

Cough up or cough

A spokesperson for Transport for London (TfL) told **New Scientist** that congestion charging cut emissions of nitrogen oxides by 8% and particulate matter created by diesel engines by 15%.

"A number of factors mean these do not necessarily feed through to observable improvements in air quality, including the chemical reactions that occur in the atmosphere, the import of pollution from other areas, and the weather itself," TfL says.

Cleaner air could come with the city's newest driving toll, called the low emissions zone, Kelly says. Beginning in November 2007, truck, bus and large van drivers have to cough up £100-200 to enter most of London if their vehicles don't meet pollution standards.

Kelly's team now plans to determine whether the new restrictions improve the air – and people's health.

"If you can demonstrate a health benefit, then you would imagine the public would be more enthusiastic for a scheme where they would have to dip into their pockets every day."