

Melissa Compton-Edwards, Mums for Lungs

Speech to Mortlake Brewery Community Group, 13 February 2019

1. Hello everyone, thank you to Mortlake Brewery Community Group for inviting Mums for Lungs here to talk about our campaigning work and thanks to you all for listening. I'm Melissa Compton-Edwards, a member of the East Sheen branch of Mums for Lungs.
2. We're a growing network of people who are passionate about improving London's air quality. Put simply, we want to breathe cleaner air. We're concerned about the effects of air pollution on us all, particularly children and older people, who are the most vulnerable to the serious health impacts.
3. So, what do we do? We campaign for clean air, whoever is in office. As a group, we've no political affiliations, but often work closely with local government and their air quality officers (such as Carol Lee from LBRUT who is with us tonight). We're air quality champions and draw on expert advice where necessary. Our ambition is to improve air quality effectively and in the shortest possible timeframe. We're well respected by City Hall and have regular contact with their air quality team, thanks to our founder Jemima Hartshorn's hard work.
4. Jemima founded the group with other mums from Brixton, Lambeth, in 2017 and Phoebe Quayle started the first branch in East Sheen in January last year, having recently moved here only to discover to her dismay that our bit of the South Circular is so very polluted. It was in East Sheen that Phoebe suffered her very first asthma attack.
5. I attended the first meeting in Phoebe's kitchen as I'd been concerned about London's toxic air for some time, but had only relatively recently become aware of just how dangerous it is for us. Since I've been actively researching this issue, it seems that barely a month goes by without air pollution being suspected of damaging yet another aspect of our physical and mental health.
6. Only this month I've been reading about new US research which indicates that when students switch to schools with higher levels of traffic pollution,

their test scores and behaviour suffer and they're more likely to be absent. This adds to previous research showing that air pollution can harm cognitive performance.

7. And in January I read researchers at Kings College London have found young people were three to four times more likely to have depression at 18 if they had been exposed to dirtier air at age 12.
8. There's plenty of evidence that's been stacking up in recent years showing physical impacts from cradle to grave. Air pollution causes asthma, heart disease and lung cancer and there are suggested links to dementia. In the womb, maternal exposure can result in premature and low birth-weight babies. Children living in highly-polluted areas of London are more likely to have reduced lung growth. In old age, a life-time of exposure can result in reduced life expectancy, an increased risk of stroke and heart attacks.
9. This information is beginning to reach people via the mainstream media, helped enormously by the fortitude and determination of campaigners like Rosamund Kissi-Debrah, whose daughter Ella tragically died of a severe asthma attack in 2013. Rosamund has research evidence from Professor Stephen Holgate, an expert in asthma management, that Ella's frequent hospital admissions were linked to spikes of illegal levels of air pollution. He discovered that Ella's final hospital admission happened during one of the worst air pollution episodes near where the family live in South London (approximately 25 metres from the South Circular, a known air pollution hotspot).
10. Rosamund wrote in The Guardian newspaper that Professor Holgate's report "concluded that unlawful levels of air pollution contributed to the cause and seriousness of Ella's asthma in a way that greatly compromised her quality of life, and was a causative factor in her fatal asthma attack. He said that there was a real prospect that without the unlawful levels of pollution at the time, Ella would not have died – and gave his "firm view" that Ella's death certificate should take the air pollution into account."
11. Rosamund has recently been successful in getting a second inquest opened

to help understand the role that air pollution may have played in Ella's death.

12. Rosamund's campaign continues to powerfully raise awareness, but she needs all of our support to spread the message wider. Child health experts have said families and parents are worryingly unaware of the severe damage air pollution is doing to young people in the UK. In an opinion poll of health professionals, conducted by Unicef UK, 92% said the public needed to be better informed about the issue.
13. Which is why Mums for Lungs East Sheen has also been seeking to raise awareness of air pollution locally. I wrote this flyer which provides information on toxic air in Richmond and Wandsworth boroughs. It points out the pollution hotspots and also contains recommendations as to what people can do to improve local air quality and their family's health. We've made this available on social media and have also handed it out and given it to nurseries and schools to pass on to parents. (There's also a London-wide version which people in other boroughs can use.) If your school, nursery or workplace would like some of these flyers to hand out or send via email, let us know.
14. So, you may have got our flyer and/or have read the various print, online and broadcast news reports about London's air pollution. (Some of which feature us. For example, Phoebe, our East Sheen group founder, was this week featured on BBC London News about GPs surgeries in high pollution areas.) Assuming you've become aware of the health risks, what do you do now? Move out of London and relocate to Iceland or keep calm and carry on as before? Well I wouldn't blame anyone for wanting to move out of London because of pollution, but I'm hoping that knowing more about this invisible killer will encourage at least some of you to stay and take action to tackle this public health crisis. Which brings me to the other work Mums for Lungs has been doing over the last year.
15. Our East Sheen group's first action was to increase awareness of the Ultra-

Low Emission Zone consultation by taking part in a huge campaign organised by the Lambeth group of Mums for Lungs. This included a social media campaign orchestrated centrally by the Lambeth group, a petition calling for an all London-boroughs ULEZ and door-to-door flyer distribution. The outcome of the consultation was enough public support for an extension of the ULEZ up to the North and South circulars. We'd like it to be an even bigger, London-wide zone and will keep pressing for this.

16. Our current focus is on vehicle engine idling. Idling is a particular problem in our area, particularly at level crossings. We asked for a communications campaign and enforcement of fines against illegal idling in the pre-local election pledges that we asked prospective Councillors to sign up to and are pleased that from 1 March, drivers in this borough who refuse to turn off their idling engines when asked will be fined by the Council.

17. We're also pleased that schools in the borough are being encouraged to hold assemblies and lessons on air pollution and students will be designing posters and making videos and animations on idling.

18. We will keep asking the Council to broaden out this awareness campaign to address all sources of air pollution and to use every communication channel at their disposal to encourage residents to walk, cycle and scoot instead of using the car for short trips.

19. We'd also like to see better anti-idling signage and the fine of £40 increased to at least £110 as soon as possible to reflect the harm done to residents' health.

20. Our Lambeth group has produced an anti-idling flyer which provides positive encouragement to drivers to switch off their engines when stationary and 'Be an Idol'. Our group is currently planning to hand these out to residents in East Sheen on 1 March, together with our air pollution awareness flyer - the day the Council is starting enforcement.

21. As we individually travel on our daily business around the borough, we've been approaching drivers who are idling, giving them our flyer and encouraging them to switch their engines off. Where we see vans, lorries and buses idling, we've been reporting these instances to businesses and TfL. Our members have also taken part in the anti-idling events organised by the Council.

22. School Streets is another ongoing Mums for Lungs' campaign being heavily promoted on social media. The group has a target of encouraging 100 school streets to be set up across London in areas that are illegally polluted by this September. If you haven't heard of School Streets before, the way they work is during term time, at school drop off and pick up, streets around schools temporarily become pedestrian and cycle access only. Vehicles are not allowed to enter unless they have an exemption, normally issued to residents, people working in a School Street zone, businesses based there, or blue badge holders.

23. Signs inform drivers of the restriction before entering the closed zones and non-registered vehicles entering the street during the times of operation will be identified by camera and issued a fixed penalty notice.

24. School streets are being implemented by a number of London Councils. Hackney, Greenwich, Camden, Southwark, Haringey and Croydon have successfully implemented varying types of School Streets. The general feedback has been that they reduce children's exposure to air pollution and improve road safety.

25. Our Lambeth group has had lots of requests from parents interested in lobbying their local school to request School Streets and has produced a Facebook page with information on how to go about it. If anyone here

tonight is interested in exploring whether a School Street might be suitable for an illegally polluted part of Richmond borough, get in touch with us.

26. In addition to Mums for Lungs' issue-based campaign work, we also respond to relevant consultations from national and local government, TfL and other bodies. Recent examples include responses to Lambeth and Richmond Councils on their local plans to implement the London Mayor's Transport Strategy. We also respond to planning applications by major developments such as Mortlake Brewery and the Barnes Hospital Development.
27. The role of Mums for Lungs is to be a constant voice advocating, campaigning and educating about clean air. This is something we do for everyone, and anyone (not just mums!) can get involved in big or small ways, whether that's spreading the word by talking, circulating emails, writing letters or promoting clean air and our group on social media.
28. Some people may prefer just to receive updates, sign petitions and get behind campaigns as and when they can. Or simply to learn how to make small personal changes at home or within the community. Even if you can only spare 10 minutes a week, that can really help, as you could retweet Mums for Lungs' posts on Twitter or distribute our flyers in your favourite local café. Whatever action you are able to take is valuable and will add up to an overall improvement in our air quality.
29. Our next meeting will be in March (date TBC) and we usually meet at 8pm upstairs in The Plough pub in East Sheen, so please come and join us. We publicise the dates on Twitter and via email. There's a sign-up sheet here where you can leave your e-mail address for information and campaign updates.
30. Lastly, I was asked by the organisers to provide two tips. My suggestions for

reducing pollution in our local area are:

- Try ditching the car for short trips to school and the shops and have car-free weekends, walking, cycling and scooting. They're much more fun than being stuck in a car and healthier to boot.

One in four cars on the road at peak times are estimated to be doing the school run, so if parents ditch the car for a short trip to school, that should make a significant difference to levels of air pollution on weekdays in term time.

- Stop using wood-burning stoves as they produce harmful amounts of particulate matter.

According to Dr Gary Fuller, an air pollution scientist at King's College London, woodburning accounts for up to 31% of urban derived PM 2.5 (ultrafine particulate matter) in London and Birmingham. And Dr Fuller points out in his recent book that "even stoves that pass new Ecodesign standards still emit particle pollution. The test limits for Ecodesign stoves still allow the production of around six times more particle pollution than a modern Euro 6 diesel lorry, or 18 times more than a modern diesel car".

So best to avoid using them, as cosy and hygge as they may be.

And if I can sneak another tip in, that would be: keep away from the kerb when walking along busy roads or waiting at bus stops and take quieter roads wherever possible.

31. Thank you so much for coming and I hope that this evening has encouraged all of us to work together to make a difference and clean up the air we all breathe. Please also take our flyers home with you to read at your leisure.