

3rd September 2026

The Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

The Rt Hon Dame Angela Eagle DBE MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Dear Secretary of State,

Re: updating public guidance on protecting health during wildfire smoke and air pollution

At 19:00 on 14th August, the Government issued its first-ever national Emergency Alert for wildfire risk, sent to millions of phones across England and Wales, following a summer of exceptional heat and a series of major fires, including the blaze in Stourbridge that destroyed nineteen homes.¹ We write as that alert reaches the public to raise a gap in the guidance that sits behind it — one that matters directly to people at heightened clinical risk, the community we represent.

The gap

UK guidance in this area has not kept pace with the evidence or with advice now being given by other public health bodies internationally. UKHSA's own guidance on coping with wildfire smoke, on a blog published 14th July 2026, correctly advises that *"face masks such as surgical masks are not usually recommended as they do not necessarily protect against all the pollutants that may be present in the smoke."*² But the guidance simply stops there. It does not go on to say what actually protects against those pollutants, and it makes no mention of the single intervention with the strongest evidence behind it: filtering the air itself.

By contrast, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advises people to *"choose a room you can close off from outside air"* and *"set up a portable air cleaner or a filter to keep the air in this room clean,"*³ and the US Environmental Protection Agency states that portable air cleaners *"can reduce PM2.5 infiltration rates considerably"* during smoke events.⁴ The World Health Organization's own wildfire smoke guidance recommends an FFP2 or N95 respirator specifically for at-risk people who must go outside⁵ — providing helpful information on protections that the UK guidance does not.

The UK's Daily Air Quality Index guidance, which governs advice for adults and children with lung or heart conditions and for older people on days of high and very high pollution, does not mention air filtration or respiratory protection at all.⁶ It advises adapting outdoor activity and following an existing management plan, but offers no equivalent to the international "clean room" guidance that has been standard practice elsewhere for several years.

Nor does UK guidance distinguish between the two different hazards present in smoke and polluted air. Fine particulates require HEPA filtration; the gases and volatile organic compounds released by combustion — including benzene and toluene — require activated carbon filtration, which HEPA alone does not provide. Test data indicate that activated carbon combined with HEPA filtration can reduce these compounds, though evidence on gaseous pollutant removal during smoke episodes remains more limited than for particulates. This does not currently appear anywhere in UK public guidance.

¹ Emergency Alert sent by the UK Government at 19:00, 14th August 2026, to England and Wales: gov.uk/alerts/14-aug-2026-2

² UKHSA, 'Why severe wildfires are becoming more frequent in the UK and how to cope with the health risks', 14th July 2026: ukhsa.blog.gov.uk/2026/07/14/why-severe-wildfires-are-becoming-more-frequent-in-the-uk-and-how-to-cope-with-the-health-risks

³ US CDC, 'Safety Guidelines: Wildfires and Wildfire Smoke': cdc.gov/wildfires/safety/how-to-safely-stay-safe-during-a-wildfire.html

⁴ US EPA, 'Strategies to Reduce Exposure Indoors': epa.gov/wildfire-smoke-course/strategies-reduce-exposure-indoors

⁵ World Health Organization (Europe), 'Public health advice during the wildfires: how to protect your health and keep safe', who.int/europe/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/public-health-advice-during-the-wildfires-how-to-protect-your-health-and-keep-safe

⁶ UK DAQI, health advice for high and very high levels of air pollution: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-effects-of-air-pollution/health-advice-for-the-daily-air-quality-index-daqi>

This leaves an important gap in the advice. Clean indoor air, achieved through ventilation and filtration, was recognised by the UK Covid-19 Inquiry as a core defence against airborne infection. There is no reason the same principle should be missing from guidance on smoke and pollution, where the underlying physics of particulate and gaseous exposure is the same.

We call on the Government to update public guidance so that it:

1. **Names indoor air filtration as a recommended measure during wildfire smoke and high air pollution**, specifying HEPA filtration for particulates in line with CDC and EPA guidance,^{3,4} noting that activated carbon filtration can reduce gases and volatile organic compounds.⁷
2. **Completes the advice on respiratory protection**, rather than only focusing on what is not recommended — specifying that close-fitting FFP2 or FFP3 respirator masks can provide protection for anyone who must go outside during smoke or high pollution, in line with equivalent US and WHO guidance.^{3, 5}
3. **Expands the Clinically Vulnerable groups to reflect international standards**. UKHSA's wildfire guidance omits categories that US EPA⁸ and European Environment Agency⁹ guidance has previously identified as being at increased risk, such as diabetes, obesity, and populations facing higher exposure through outdoor work, income, or ethnicity. We believe UK guidance should also recognise these groups, enabling them to better understand and manage their risks.
4. **Consolidates this advice into a single, clearly signposted public guidance page**, equivalent to the checklists already published by CDC and EPA, rather than leaving it distributed across separate blog posts and index pages.

This does not require new research. The evidence is available, and other public health agencies are already giving more detailed advice. We are asking the UK to reflect that evidence in its guidance.

Given the emergency alert of 14th August, the scale of this summer's wildfires, and the fact that the heat-health alert season runs until 30th September, we ask that this be treated as urgent rather than deferred to a routine guidance review.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these recommendations directly.

Yours sincerely,

Lara Wong

Chief Executive

Clinically Vulnerable Families CIC

⁷ Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Healthy Buildings Program, '3 Ways to Reduce Risk from Wildfire Smoke at Home' healthybuildings.hsph.harvard.edu/3ways-reduce-risk-wildfire-smoke-home/

⁸ US EPA, 'Who is at Increased Risk of Health Effects from Wildfire Smoke Exposure?' epa.gov/wildfire-smoke-course/who-increased-risk-health-effects-wildfire-smoke-exposure.

⁹ European Environment Agency: climate-adapt.eea.europa.eu/en/observatory/topics/health-impacts/wildfires

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