

UNITED KINGDOM

2026 CITY DATA INSIGHTS



The 2026 Europe Cities Report of the Lancet Countdown presents a systematic, policy-relevant set of climate change and health indicators for European cities. This document highlights key UK-specific city-level findings.

As the world's fastest-warming continent, Europe faces an escalating public health crisis. Cities sit on the front line of this threat, with dense populations, heat-trapping infrastructure and limited cooling due to inadequate green space. All of this multiplies the dangers from climate-related heatwaves, floods, droughts and wildfires. These environmental hazards directly harm human health and disproportionately affect the most vulnerable, including children, older adults, outdoor workers and low-income communities. Cities also offer substantial opportunities for effective climate action.

In 2023, more than half of the UK's population (40 million out of 68.9 million people) lived in 135 cities, according to the Urban Audit definition. Around 28% of the urban population lived in the UK's three largest cities, London, Birmingham and Manchester, while only 6.5% lived in 95 small and medium-sized cities. This high population density exacerbates the health risks of climate change for urban populations. Among the UK's urban population, 5.9 million (15.2%) were aged over 65 and 7.3 million (18.6%) were children under 15, meaning over a third are at higher risk from climate change.

Heat and Health

Urban populations are increasingly exposed to extreme heat, contributing to rising heat-related illness and mortality, and undermining livelihoods and wellbeing.

Heat-related mortality

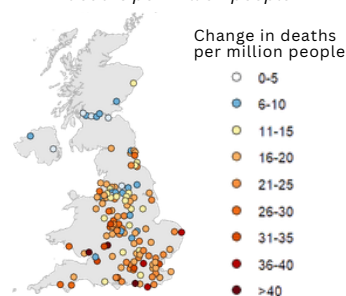


Across UK cities, average annual heat-related deaths increased by 20.6 per million between 2015 and 2024 as compared to 1991 to 2000 (indicator 1.1.2).

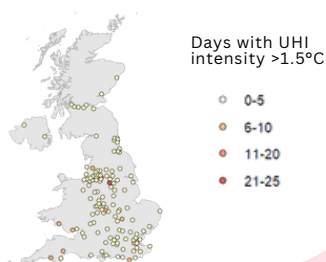


Eastleigh recorded the largest increase in average annual heat-related deaths per million people (354%), rising from 7.4 per million in 1991–2000 to 33.6 in 2015–2024 (indicator 1.1.2).

Change in heat-related mortality rate between 1991–2000 and 2015–24, expressed as the number of annual deaths per million people.



Average number of days with UHI >1.5°C between 2003–2020 across cities in the United Kingdom.



Heat exposure in cities

Most cities trap heat, creating an "urban heat island" (UHI) effect that makes urban areas significantly hotter than nearby rural areas. As climate change raises global temperatures and intensifies heatwaves, the UHI effect worsens health risks, driving increases in a range of heat-related health impacts, including heat exhaustion, cardiovascular strain and mortality, particularly among vulnerable populations.



For example, between 2003 and 2020, Sheffield recorded more than 300 days on which urban temperatures exceeded those of surrounding rural areas by more than 1.5°C. This equates to an average of 20.5 days per summer, more than ten times the UK urban average of just two days (indicator 1.1.1).

Sustainable urban cooling

To safeguard public health and prevent heat-related deaths, cities must adapt to extreme heat. Expanding tree cover offers a practical and effective means of cooling urban environments and building community resilience.

Urban tree cover

To support urban cooling, reduce air pollution and protect public health, the UN Economic Commission for Europe recommends that cities maintain at least 30% tree cover.



UK cities had an average tree cover of 1,059 hectares in 2020, equivalent to 3.6% of total urban land area. No UK city had tree cover of 30% or more in 2020 (indicator 2.2.4).



Carlisle had the largest tree cover by area (15,200 hectares, or 14.5% of total area), while Portsmouth had the smallest (3.9 hectares, 0.1%). Kingston upon Hull recorded the largest percentage increase since 2000 (288%), though from a small starting point, growing from 3.4 to 13.2 hectares (indicator 2.2.4).

Heat-reflecting surfaces

Darker, heat-absorbing materials contribute to increasing urban temperatures. Replacing them with lighter, reflective or natural materials can help lower land surface temperatures, for example, substituting concrete with soil or vegetation. In the UK, however, the expansion of such heat-reflective surfaces has been minimal, leaving considerable scope to increase their use for urban cooling (indicator 2.2.2)

Sustainable and Healthy Transport

Active travel and public transport

Active and healthy transport, such as walking and cycling, and the use of public transport support urban decarbonisation and improve air quality by reducing vehicle emissions. It also builds daily physical activity into everyday journeys, significantly lowering the risk of chronic disease and improving mental health and wellbeing.

The Sustainable Transport Score measures how easily residents can walk, cycle or use public transport in a city, with 7 out of 10 considered a good score. In 2022, UK cities fell short, with an average score of just 4.2 out of 10. On average, cities had 41% of their total area within 250 metres of at least one public transport stop and 38.5% of pathways supported walking, while dedicated cycling infrastructure covered only 10.5% of roads (indicator 3.3.1).

In 2022, Cambridge achieved the highest overall score (5.6 out of 10). Across individual indicators, the top and bottom performers were (indicator 3.3.1):

- Walking: Harlow was the most walkable, with 56% of roads being pedestrian-friendly; Sefton the least, at 27.3%.
- Cycling: Milton Keynes offered the best cycling access, with 22% of roads having cycle lanes; Kettering the lowest, at 2.8%.
- Public transport: Nottingham led, with 63% of its area within 250 metres of a public transport stop; Corby had just 10%.

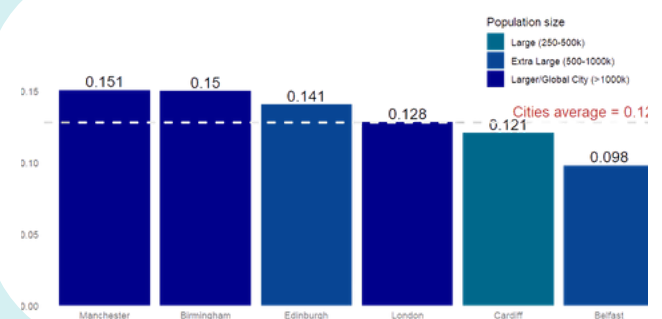
Heat-resilient cycling infrastructure

Climate change is bringing increasingly frequent and prolonged periods of extreme heat to cities, limiting when people can safely walk or cycle outdoors. Building heat-resilient pedestrian and cycling infrastructure, particularly through natural tree shading, is becoming vital to protect urban residents and keep communities moving safely.

In the UK, 12.8% of cycling and shared cycling-pedestrian paths were shaded by tree cover between 2018 and 2020 (indicator 2.2.5).

Among the UK cities exposed to moderate-to-high heat stress, Guildford had the highest proportion of shaded infrastructure at 36.2% (indicator 2.2.5).

Proportion of shaded cycling infrastructure in cities in the UK



Energy, Air Pollution and Health

Fossil fuel combustion is a primary driver of both rapid global heating and fine particulate pollution (PM_{2.5}), each of which poses severe risks to human health. Household solid fuel combustion is a further major source of PM_{2.5} and short-lived climate pollutants. Moving away from these polluting fuels by decarbonising energy systems and electrifying household heating removes these pollutants and greenhouse gas emissions at source, substantially reducing premature deaths and chronic illness attributable to PM_{2.5}.

Sectoral sources of greenhouse gas emissions

Between 2000 and 2024, greenhouse gas emissions per person across UK cities declined by 49.1%, with the largest reduction in the energy sector (81.2%) (indicator 3.1.1). These reductions are possibly linked to the phase-out of coal and a wider transition to cleaner energy, supported by political commitment, regulation and urban planning.

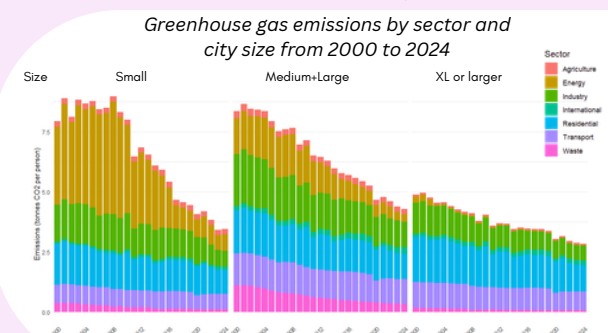
Within the energy sector, Cannock Chase and Warrington recorded the greatest reductions in average emissions per person between 2000 and 2024 (100%), followed by Telford and Wrekin (99.8%) (indicator 3.1.1).

PM_{2.5} attributable mortality

Expanding renewable energy incentives has delivered major public health co-benefits across the UK. Between 2000 and 2023, PM_{2.5} mortality attributable to power generation declined by 93% in UK cities, alongside an overall 61% decline in premature deaths attributable to PM_{2.5} from dirty fuel use across sectors (indicator 3.2.1).

In 2023, London recorded 4,956 premature deaths attributable to PM_{2.5} from dirty fuels, with residential households (35%, mainly from solid fuel combustion) and transport (32%) being the leading sectoral contributors (indicator 3.2.1).

Between 2000 and 2023, Manchester achieved the UK's largest reduction in PM_{2.5}-attributable premature deaths from dirty fuel use, falling by 76.6% (131 fewer deaths per 100,000 people), while London recorded a smaller decrease of 32.5% (25.8 fewer deaths per 100,000 people) (indicator 3.2.1).



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The Lancet Countdown Europe is a regional research collaboration providing an overview of the relationship between public health and climate change, the region's response to climate change, and the health benefits that emerge from this transition. The Lancet Countdown was established in partnership with Wellcome.