REPORT

Institute for European Environmental Policy UK

LEARNING FROM OUR NEIGHBOURS

AIR QUALITY POLICY ACROSS EUROPE

Summary



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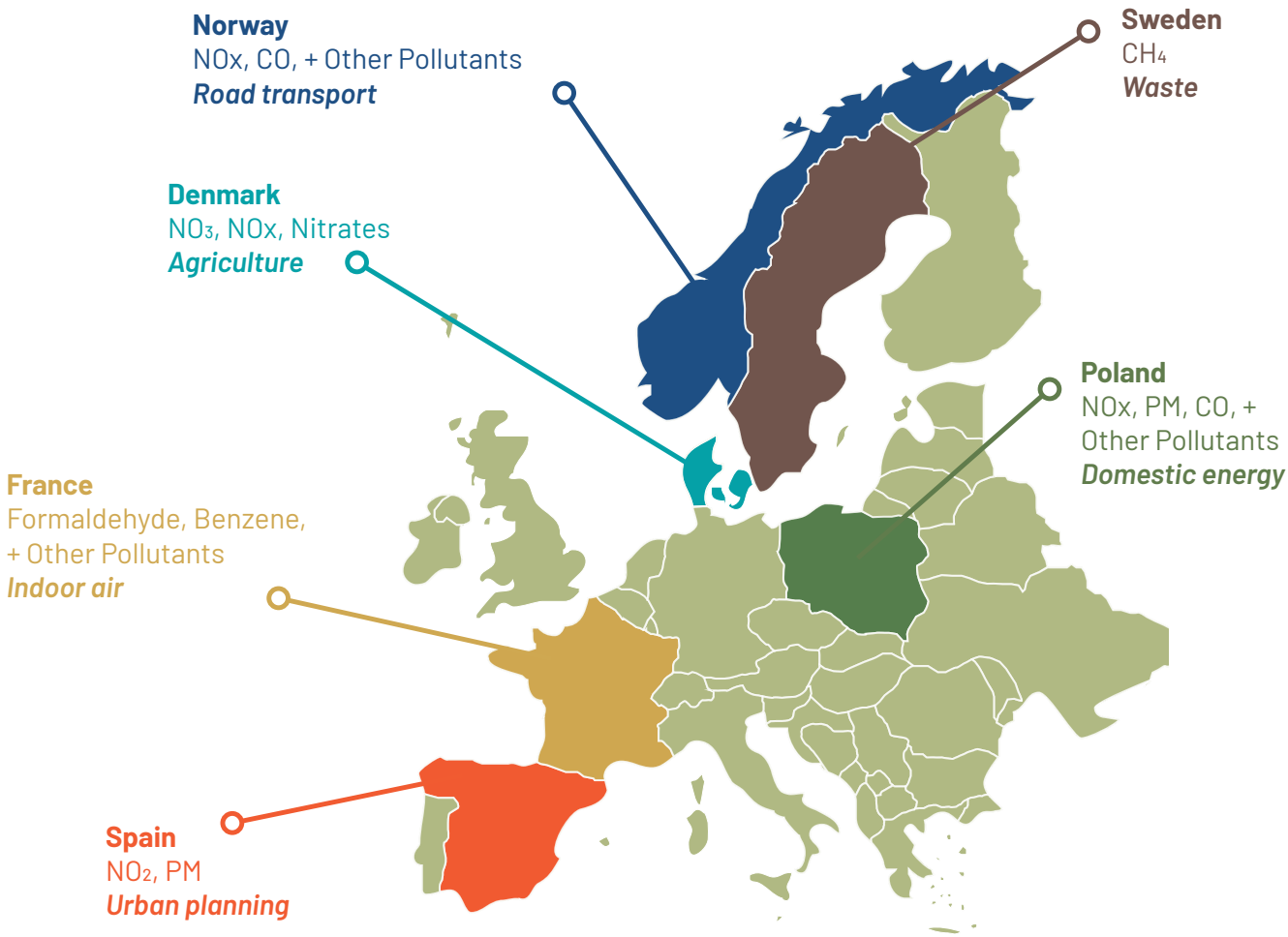
SUMMARY

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After Brexit, continued awareness and learning in both directions between the UK and EU can help to maintain a shared awareness of best practice, shaping informed policy decisions in the interests of the environment and human health.

Air pollution is the greatest environmental threat to public health in the UK, and is responsible for an estimated 28,000–36,000 deaths each year.[1] In December 2025, IEEP UK released our *State of Play* report on the UK's air quality, including comparing UK policy with progress in the EU.[2]

This report of which this is a summary is intended to follow on from and build upon the *State of Play* report by highlighting a series of case studies from the UK's European neighbours. The full report examines six European case studies to draw lessons from policy interventions aimed at improving air quality. The examples collectively cover a broad scope of sectors and major pollutants of concern. While the UK has undertaken measures to address some pollutants, air pollution remains the largest environmental threat to human health in the country. This summary document presents some broad takeaways from across these case studies.



Norway

- A responsive air quality framework with target pollutant values that governments can update over time without new legislation means Norway has more consistent ambition on pollutants and is less prone to outdated air quality targets than the UK
- As well as strong electric vehicle rollout supported by extensive charging infrastructure and fiscal incentives, Norway has combined policy action on greening of domestic heating, and technological improvements to reduce industrial emissions to tackle a range of key pollutants.
- Norway enjoys both co-operation and competition with the EU, despite not being an EU Member State, including through being part of the EU ETS and a member of the European Environment Agency.

Poland

- Regarding subsidies for energy efficiency retrofits, support is needed for implementation at scale, meeting highest socioeconomic need. A subsidy system that is not overly complex and which is accessible and easy to understand is key here.
- Long-term consistency of government support, including financial backing and public messaging around low-emission boilers and heat pumps is essential for sustained uptake by the public.

Denmark

- Denmark takes a comprehensive approach to agricultural emissions. Through pioneering policy such as its 'Green Tripartite Agreement', it has been able to reduce nitrogen pollution while also promoting biodiversity through the restoration of forests and peatland.
- Stronger regulation on key sources of nitrogen pollution, including storage and application of slurry and application of fertiliser, helps to tackle air pollution at source.

France

- France has set an example for the UK and others to follow through its Grenelle II law, mandating the monitoring of air quality in buildings receiving the public. However, this monitoring would ideally be conducted for a broader range of indoor air pollutants.
- Through support from its National Indoor Air Quality Observatory (OQAI), France is moving beyond measurement to providing guidance on best practice action to improve indoor air quality.

Spain

- Barcelona's "superblocks" set a bold international precedent in cleaner and greener urban design. Benefits do vary by context, but superblocks have seen broad local improvements in air quality as well as health and wellbeing.
- The UK's history of greener approaches to urban planning, including the Garden City and New Towns movement make it well placed to build on lessons both from the past and from present practice in Spain as it looks to expand its house building.

Sweden

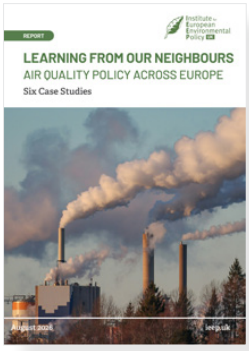
- Like the UK, Sweden has used fiscal policy to reduce the amount of waste sent to landfill, reducing methane emissions, but this has created an unintended problem of an over-reliance on waste incineration, which has negative climate implications.
- Moving further up the "waste hierarchy" to promote more recycling and reuse, particularly of plastic, is essential for a cleaner approach to circular economy.

Endnotes

1 UK Government (2022). *Air Pollution: Applying All Our Health*. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/air-pollution-applying-all-our-health/air-pollution-applying-all-our-health

2 Nicholson, M., Crompton, C., Watkins, E. (2025). *Air Quality Policy in the UK and EU: State of Play*. https://ieep.uk/publications/report-air-quality-policy-in-the-uk-and-eu-state-of-play/

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Contact person Christopher Crompton, Senior Policy Analyst
ccrompton@ieep.uk

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