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NEWS REVIEW



Jonathan Leake
ENVIRONMENT EDITOR

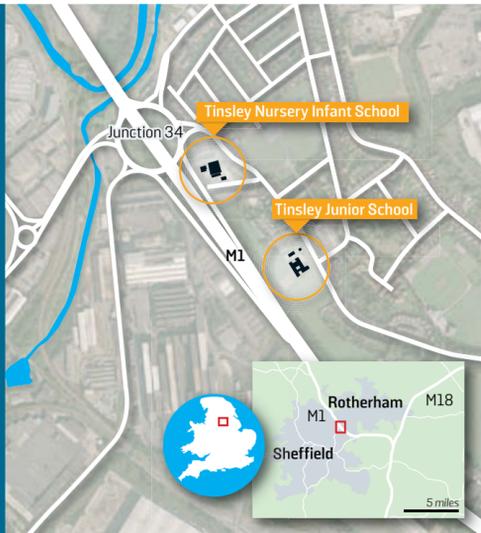
TWO schools in South Yorkshire are to become the first in Britain to be shut because of air pollution.

The busy roads around Tinsley Nursery Infant School and Tinsley Junior School, near Sheffield, are generating so much nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) and so many particulates and other pollutants that the council has deemed the buildings a threat to children's health.

It plans to close them and move the pupils to a new site a safe distance from the roads.

The decision has implications for hundreds of other schools close to main roads in big cities. It could become a key factor for planners deciding on applications for homes, schools and other facilities near highways.

Schools shut under a cloud of diesel



"We plan to relocate Tinsley Nursery Infant School and Tinsley Junior School from their current sites next to the M1 motorway to a new site where air pollution and noise will be lower," said Sheffield city council.

The schools both lie within 50 yards of the M1 and close to junction 34, meaning they are surrounded by busy trunk roads. The EU says the annual averages should be no more than 40 micrograms of NO₂ per cubic metre of air, but nearby

air quality monitoring stations show Tinsley breaches this and frequently records peaks of more than 400 micrograms and sometimes more than 700 micrograms.

Clive Betts, Labour MP for Sheffield Southeast, whose

constituency includes the schools, said: "This problem is caused by increased volumes of diesel cars that produce so much NO₂ it is damaging my constituents' health. It is not just Tinsley – around Britain there are many schools near

busy roads where children face dangerous pollutant levels."

A study for Sheffield council showed the whole area was blighted. "Tinsley has higher rates of emergency admissions for all ages and for under-fives... plus higher admission rates for heart disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and asthma," it said.

Mohammed Zulficar, 44, whose daughter Aruoo, five, goes to the infant school, said he was happy it was moving.

"I suffer with hayfever – well, we call it hayfever, we have sore eyes, runny noses and so on but there's no pollen in winter. There is something in the air. Pollution is very high here and we all worry that it is something to do with that."

Jonathan Grigg, professor of paediatric respiratory medicine at Queen Mary University of London, said air pollution suppressed children's lung growth. "Children's lung functions should increase with age till 18-19 but if they are

exposed to pollution this is suppressed, causing long-term health impacts."

Pollution hotspots such as Tinsley have been largely invisible because the national air quality sensor network run by Defra, the environment ministry, has only 300 monitoring stations to cover the whole UK.

It uses computer models to predict pollution levels in the huge gaps between monitoring stations – but this means hotspots caused by local factors such as roads are ignored.

This is about to change with the launch this week of the Air-Sensa project, which aims to install 40,000 air monitoring systems on schools, public buildings and business premises across the UK.

The project has won the support of organisations such as the Wellcome Trust, a medical research charity, which is mounting sensors on some of its London properties

Jonathan Steel, the chief

executive of Deliver Change, the not-for-profit company behind the project, said the 50-plus sensors already in place across London, half on schools, were already showing dangerous levels of pollution.

"They have only been in place a short while but the data suggests half the schools are experiencing average NO₂ levels well above the legal limit with some very high peaks."

In London alone, more than 1,100 schools lie within 150 yards of major roads. A few have air quality monitors installed by King's College London as part of its air quality network – and they confirm there is cause for concern.

One of the worst, near St Helen's Catholic Primary School in Brixton, south London, shows average NO₂ levels of 250 micrograms.

Betts said: "We need planning guidelines to prevent schools and homes being located in pollution hotspots."

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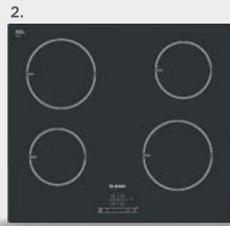
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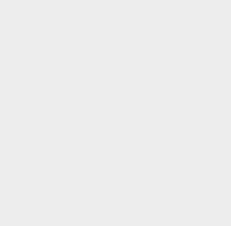


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Boys behind in English at five

Sian Griffiths
EDUCATION EDITOR

BOYS already lag far behind girls when they start school aged five, according to research published today.

The study reveals that, far from boys falling behind over the course of their school careers, a gender gap in language and communication skills is present from the beginning.

A quarter of boys from wealthier families start school aged five with inadequate speech and language skills, compared with just 15% of girls, according to researchers at the Education Datalab and University College London.

Among poorer families, the gap is even larger: 42% of boys lacked the language skills expected by the age of five, compared with 27% of girls. Earlier studies have shown these boys will struggle to learn to read, with knock-on effects throughout their schooling, and later, on their job prospects. Children who read well by the end of primary school will earn on average 20% more by the time they are 40 than less literate classmates.

Experts called for parents to spend more time singing nursery rhymes, playing word games, reading picture books and creating stories with their young sons from birth in an



Experts say boys need help from birth with speech development

effort to stop them falling once they start school. Sue Palmer, author of the book *Toxic Childhood*, said the research was worrying. "The first three months are critical for speech and language development. Mums and dads need to be making eye contact, singing and talking to their sons right from birth."

She said they should not assume that because young boys liked being active, they did not need the same kind of social interaction as girls.

Fathers in particular are being urged to do more with their boys at home. Some experts think boys are falling

behind in the early years because so much childcare at home and at nursery is provided by women, who are more comfortable talking to girls and stimulating their social interaction.

The alliance of charities, libraries and publishers that commissioned the research, which include the charity Save the Children, also called on every nursery to employ a graduate instead of relying on 16-year-olds straight from school. Two out of five private nurseries do not employ an early years teacher.

Giving a child its life chances starts in the pushchair, Frank Field, page 31

Elite team of cyberspies comes in from the cold

Richard Kerbj and Marie Woolf

AN ELITE cyberintelligence unit, staffed by spies and IT experts from the security services and the government, has been established to combat the threat posed by "hostile states [and] lone wolf hackers".

The Centre for Cyber Assessment has been secretly operating from GCHQ in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, for two years but its existence was confirmed only this weekend by Philip Hammond, the foreign secretary.

The unit scored a notable success last year when it identified a plan to disrupt the Nato summit in Wales. As a result, additional IT security measures were put in place and the attack was repelled.

Announcing that the unit has "come in from the shadows" as part of an initiative to encourage industry to share knowledge about hacking, Hammond said: "While the growth of the internet has brought huge social and economic benefits, the cyberthreat to the UK is increasing.

"Hostile states and criminals

are honing their technical skills while terrorists are using social media for recruitment and radicalisation... It is only a matter of time before we have to deal with a major attack on UK interests."

The unit, which uses both secret intelligence and material in the public domain, is tasked with protecting the UK from hackers who try to infiltrate or disrupt government departments and steal industrial secrets. It tracks terrorists seeking to recruit online, organised criminal gangs, so-called hacktivist protesters and hostile foreign powers.

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