

KQ6: How effective were attempts to improve public health and welfare over time?

MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN PERIODS : c.500s-1700s

In medieval times, mortality rates were higher in the towns than in the countryside as people lived closer together, alongside their animals and their filth. Important improvements in public health in medieval times:

- Monasteries like Tintern Abbey followed strict rules of cleanliness.
- Towns began to build provided **public latrines** (toilets) often placed on bridges. By the 15th century, London had over a dozen.
- London produced about 50 tons of excrement per day, so **muck-rakers** were hired to clean the streets. They were paid much better than the average working man. There were also **gong farmers** who cleared out cesspits.
- Towns had bath houses, eg Southwark, in London, had 18 hot baths. Even smaller towns would have bathhouses, often connected to bakeries.
- Towns introduced **quarantine** laws to combat plague, boarding up houses of infected people. People with leprosy, likewise, were confined to lazar houses.
- Crusaders brought back **soap** from the Middle East to Europe.

There were several attempts to improve public health in the 16th century:

- Henry VII passed a law forbidding slaughterhouses within cities or towns.
- Henry VIII passed an Act of Parliament giving towns and cities the power to impose a tax in order to build sewers.

London was not a healthy place to live. There were outbreaks of the plague in 1563, 1575, 1584, 1589, 1603, 1636, 1647, and the biggest outbreak of all in 1665. After the Great Fire of London in 1666, an Act of Parliament was passed to limit fire destruction by making streets wider and by insisting houses were built of stone with tile or slate roofs.

INDUSTRIAL PERIOD : c.1800s

Local and central government were not interested in public health. Serious outbreaks of cholera in 1832 and 1849 forced the government to investigate living conditions in the rapidly expanding industrial towns.

Edwin Chadwick - In 1839 he was asked to lead a Royal Commission into living conditions for working people. In 1842, he published his Report on Sanitary Conditions. His report shocked people but the government was not ready to act.

The 1848 Public Health Act set up a Board of Health run by three commissioners to set up local boards of health in areas with high death rates. 182 towns had set up their own local health board by 1854. The cholera epidemic of 1848-49 increased interest in public health reform. It did not force local authorities to do something.

More improvements in public health:

- In 1859, Joseph Bazalgette began building London's new sewage system; this dumped the capital's sewage downstream, away from the city.
- Sanitary Act 1866 forced local authorities to construct sewers.
- Public Health Act of 1875 made it compulsory for local councils to lay sewers.
- Artisans' Dwellings Act of 1875 gave councils the power to clear slums.

KQ6: How effective were attempts to improve public health and welfare over time?

MODERN PERIOD : c.1900s-present day

[See KQ5 for welfare 1906-1914 welfare reforms]

Attempts were made during the 20th century to improve housing conditions:

- In 1918, the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, promised to clear away slum housing and replace it with 'homes fit for heroes'.
- Housing Act of 1919 gave grants to local councils to build homes, so estates of council houses were built all over the country.
- Mass demolition of back-to-back housing began in the 1920s.
- Beveridge Report of 1942 identified 'squalor' as one of the 'Five Evil Giants' to be tackled by building 'more and better homes'.
- After WW2 there was a housing shortage so grants were given to build new homes and charge low rents; 1.25 million new homes were built by 1951.
- In the 1960s, many inner-city slums were replaced by high-rise blocks of flats.

Air Pollution - air quality in towns and cities was heavily polluted. London experienced frequent smog. In December 1952 the '**Great Smog**' fell over London, so thick it stopped trains, cars and public events. 4,000 people died of respiratory illness. The **Clean Air Act of 1956** encouraged the use of cleaner coal, electricity and gas for heating. It also tried to relocate power stations away from cities. This only temporarily solved the problem of air pollution as a huge increase in car ownership created a new source of pollution – exhaust fumes. In 2003 London introduced the **congestion charge** to persuade drivers not to go into central London and other towns and cities introduced "park and ride" schemes. In 2018 the United Nations warned that there were dangerous levels of air pollution in UK.

Local and national government health campaigns in the 21st century - Government realised it is better to spend money on prevention than having to spend money on curing diseases that could be prevented, e.g. if people stopped smoking this would save the NHS millions of pounds each year.

- 'Walking for health' is a fitness drive to encourage people to take more exercise, to walk 10,000 steps a day, at a moderate to fast pace. 'Be Active' is Birmingham City Council's scheme to provide free leisure services.
- Fruit and vegetables reduces your risk of heart disease and cancer – the 'Five A Day' and the Eatwell Guide tried to get people to eat a balanced diet.
- "Hands – Face – Space" and other campaigns to reduce the spread of COVID 19 during the Coronavirus pandemic.