

Bell Tower Takes Reading Rail Depot Issue to Health Secretary

- Health secretary's intervention sought after transport secretary snubs residents
- Mediation between Reading council and rail companies breaks down
- Local MP involved in latest move to tackle issue

The Bell Tower Community Association and Reading East MP Matt Rodda have urged Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Matt Hancock to intervene on the issue of the nuisance being caused to residents in Cardiff Road by noise and diesel fumes the Reading Train Care Depot, which is clearly a health issue.

The move came after Bell Tower Chairman Jonathan Dart wrote to Mr. Rodda asking him to put questions to the government in the light of its recently published Clean Air Strategy. Bell Tower contacted Mr. Rodda following the breakdown in late January of mediation between Reading Borough Council and the rail companies, Great Western, which operates the depot, and Network Rail, which designed and built it.

A combined effort by the residents, the association and the MP have failed to persuade Secretary of State for Transport Chris Grayling to put pressure on the rail companies to resolve the problem. Mr. Grayling has also rebuffed Mr. Rodda's efforts to set up a meeting between the secretary of state and the residents affected by the noise and pollution from the diesel multiple units based at the depot. This has caused Bell Tower to seek help from other government departments.

The breakdown of the mediation process came at around the time the government published its Clean Air Strategy. In the accompanying press release Mr. Hancock was quoted as saying: "Breathing dirty air is associated with a host of health problems, from asthma to cardiovascular disease and lung cancer...In short: clean air helps you live longer."

This gives rise to the question put in the letter to Mr. Rodda: Is the government really committed to this, given Mr. Grayling's refusal to meet residents of a street who have had a diesel rail depot built directly behind their houses and discuss what he might do to help improve the prospects for their health? Might Mr. Hancock or DEFRA's Michael Gove, the other sponsor of the strategy, be persuaded to meet the residents?

Mr. Dart also pointed out that the government was anxious to receive endorsement for its proposals from the World Health Organisation but asked whether the government was willing to show the same enthusiasm for WHO 2018 guidelines on night-time noise, which recommends an annual average outdoor noise limit of 40 decibels, equivalent to the noise from a quiet residential street. One of the reasons the WHO cited for tightening its guidelines was stronger evidence of the

cardiovascular and metabolic effects of environmental noise. <http://www.euro.who.int/en/media-centre/sections/press-releases/2018/press-information-note-on-the-launch-of-the-who-environmental-noise-guidelines-for-the-european-region>

In the press release and coverage of the document there was no mention of rail, but chapter five of the full document <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/clean-air-strategy-2019> states: "We will reduce emissions from rail and reduce passenger and worker exposure to air pollution. By the spring 2019, the rail industry will produce recommendations and a route map to phase out diesel-only trains by 2040."

The experience of the rail companies' failure to deliver on undertakings to Cardiff Road residents, raises the question on Bell Tower's part: Can an industry which has behaved the way it has over the Reading Train Care Depot be trusted to deliver on this?

Other points made in the Bell Tower letter to Mr. Rodda were:

- One way to incentivise a phasing out of diesel might be to change the law so that when diesel traction is involved Network Rail and the train operating companies do not have permitted development rights and local authorities can deny planning permission.
- Longer term, there should be a strategy for moving rail depots which are likely to remain substantially diesel to be moved away from built-up areas.
- The Clean Air Strategy says the government is sponsoring the independent assessment of air quality at enclosed stations to identify if there is a widespread problem. Could it not also assess train depots?
- The Department for Transport is aiming to commission research in early 2019 that will look at air quality on diesel trains and alongside their routes. Would it be possible for Cardiff Road to be included in this research?

To see full press coverage, including audio and video files go to:

www.bell-tower.org.uk/press

About the Bell Tower Community Association

- The Association was founded in October 2005.
- It represents 600 homes and businesses in the area bounded by Caversham Road, Northfield Road, Barry Place, the residential end of Cardiff Road, Addison Road, Denbeigh Place and Randolph Road.
- It represents the local community, organises events, publishes a quarterly newsletter and operates a members' discount scheme with local businesses.
- It won a Pride of Reading Award in 2007 in the Environmental Projects category for its graffiti clean-up campaign and won third place in the 2010 Reading area of the South East Community Empowerment Awards.
- The neighbourhood has no historic name so the association took on the name of a local landmark, the bell tower on E P Collier Primary School in Swansea Road. The tower can be seen from all over the area.

Further information on the Bell Tower Community Association can be found at
www.bell-tower.org.uk

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