

The Times, May 8th 2019 – “Clean Air for All”

Air pollution fight: School Streets plan targets parents who leave car engines running

Within metres of the runway at Birmingham airport and backing on to the main trainline to London, Marston Green Infant Academy cannot ignore the risks of air pollution to its pupils.

While teachers admit they cannot reasonably object to the nearby jets taking off or halt packed commuter trains, the school has taken action against parents who leave their engines running.

The academy is one of three schools in **Solihull that have banned parents and other drivers from even passing the school at peak times without risking a £50 fine.**

The School Streets scheme introduced by the council is to be rolled out across Solihull and Beverley Elliott, the head teacher of Marston Green, said what was initially meant to be a way of tackling “parking mayhem” was now the beginning of the school’s efforts to improve air quality.

“The scheme was introduced to improve traffic but there has been a knock-on effect,” she said. “The school is the hub of the community and I don’t think it’s always used that well to try and move on issues like air pollution. We don’t want to get into political rows but sometimes we have a huge role to play.”

As well as banning parents from driving past the cul de sac where the school is situated, the scheme has also encouraged pupils to get more exercise by walking, cycling and taking scooters to school.

According to the latest official data, Marston Green was just within World Health Organisation limits for air pollution, but Ms Elliott said that its location meant there had to be a focus on damage limitation to ensure that the air breathed by her pupils, aged from 3 to 7, was as clean as possible.

“Not only do we have lots of little roads around us but we’ve got the NEC, the main London to Birmingham line and the airport runway right along beside the school so we couldn’t get any more air pollution if we tried,” she said.

“So the cars are only part of it. I’d like to say we have less children coming in with asthma. I can’t really say that but I do believe we are minimising the risk of negative pollutants in the air for our children.”

The school is now considering installing an air monitor on site and is not ruling out asking the airport and rail companies to engage in talks on the issue. For now, however, the focus is encourage a change in behaviour from parents who ignore the ban, with teachers told they must set an example and avoid driving near the school at peak times.

Ms Elliott and other teachers have sometimes taken to monitoring traffic themselves but under the scheme only the police can issue fixed-penalty notices. The head teacher says that she feels frustrated that she has “no real remit outside of the school gates” to fine some parents, whom she has repeatedly warned with letters and phone calls. She hoped that their children would ensure they listened eventually.

“We are getting the message across gradually. We are trying train the children up to realise how important it is for their future as well. Teachers telling the parents is one thing but the children saying it is far more valuable,” she said.