

Turn off engine or face parking ban, coach drivers told: Clean Air for All

Graeme Paton, Transport Correspondent, The Times, June 13 2019

Tourist coaches face being banned from parking in central London because of concerns that they pumping out toxic fumes as drivers leave engines idling.

Westminster council has written to coach operators warning them that parking spaces will be removed if drivers fail to switch off engines while stationary.

The council, which covers an area taking in some of the country's most famous tourist attractions, said that too many coaches were being parked for lengthy periods with their engines running.

It is threatening to scrap coach parking in favour of electric vehicle charging points, small parks or cycle bays.

The warning comes amid mounting concerns over the levels of pollution in city centres. Toxic air contributes to an estimated 40,000 early deaths a year in Britain, posing a particular threat to the young, the elderly and those with lung conditions.

Last month The Times launched a campaign to lobby for new controls to be imposed on pollution, with road transport regarded as one of the biggest sources of toxic air in built-up areas.

Westminster has already outlined plans to impose surcharges on car owners who want to park the most polluting vehicles in the borough. Fees will be set at up to £7.35 an hour for pre-2015 diesels. It also wants to introduce more temporary road closures outside at least 20 schools during pick-up and drop-off times to improve air quality for pupils.

Now the authority is preparing to target coaches if drivers fail to turn off engines while parked.

The borough has 68 parking spaces for coaches. Many are next to schools, homes and pedestrian areas. They are often used by tourists and school parties visiting Westminster Abbey, the Palace of Westminster, Oxford Street, Buckingham Palace, Tate Britain, Trafalgar Square, the National Gallery and some of the country's best-known theatres.

In an open letter to coach operators, Westminster said that parking spaces "will be taken away if drivers continue to idle their engines and pump toxic fumes into the air". Westminster suffers from some of the worst air pollution in the country, with road transport contributing to more than half of deadly emissions. National Express, which operates hundreds of buses in and out of London every week, has already pledged to cut engine-idling. Westminster council said that it would consider replacing some of the coach spaces with small "parklets" — green spaces by the roadside — as well as electric vehicle charging points or cycle bays "if engine idling issues continue".

Tim Mitchell, the council's cabinet member for environment, said that some coach companies had been "incredibly supportive of our efforts to stop idling and improve air quality," adding: "We're getting pretty fed up with the rest of the coach industry who simply haven't engaged at all. Hundreds of coaches enter Westminster every day, delivering visitors and schoolchildren to some of our famous hotspots, so if we're going to tackle air pollution in our city, then we need these companies to clean up their act.

"Our approach has always been to ask nicely but there has been little or no response from some of these coach companies. If coach drivers persistently engine idle, we'll simply remove the bay and turn it into a parklet or similar. Our residents would certainly prefer it."