

JOINT STATEMENT to CROXLEY RAIL LINK PUBLIC INQUIRY
THE SEA CADETS & MORRIS MINORS PRE-SCHOOL

You've seen our written submission laying out the points of our concern, and last week we were able to investigate in more depth how the various factors might affect us. As you know, we feel very vulnerable, not so much to being built on, but to being blighted by the prospect of intolerable interference.

We'd like now to re-state our concerns, in order to make sure that there is no doubt later about them: but we'll make reference to the proposals recently made to us by the Project, show the extent to which they address our concerns, and emphasise the effect on us if the Rail Link goes ahead without the measures proposed being delivered.

Background

The Sea Cadet unit TS RENOWN is a youth-activities organisation for young people aged between 12 and 18, under the umbrella of the charity The Marine Society and Sea Cadets. The unit meets on Tuesday and Thursday evenings, and some weekends, through the year, and takes children from Rickmansworth, Watford, Croxley Green and further afield.

We own the building, and lease the land on which it sits from Three Rivers District Council. It is used during the school day by a tenant, the Morris Minors pre-school. The location of the building is crucial to the pre-school, which serves mainly West Watford and Croxley Green; and the revenue from it is essential to the financial security of the Sea Cadet unit.

Mr Morris will introduce the school in more detail.

Morris Minors Pre-school

Morris Minors Pre-school was started by Delia Morris in 1998. Taking children from aged two to five years, it began with just three children. Due to increasing numbers, the pre-school moved to the larger premises at TS Renown in 2002. It was a win-win for the Sea Cadets, as our rent and other support literally keeps them afloat.

Today the pre-school is registered for thirty-two children at any one time. Last term the pre-school was completely full every day, with eighty-five children on roll. There are currently sixty children on roll and this number is set to increase over the academic year. Mornings at the setting are currently full, but afternoons only around half full. The inspector will see the setting at only half capacity when he visits on Thursday afternoon.

In some of the submissions last week I read or heard Morris Minors referred to dismissively as a play group. In my mind a play group is a drop-in coffee morning where mothers meet while their children play. Morris Minors is not a play group.

The last Ofsted inspection assessed the pre-school as "good with outstanding features". In 2008, Hertfordshire County Council awarded the contract to run the

local Sure Start children's centre to Morris Minors Pre-school. Operating from separate purpose-built premises, this centre is now responsible for providing pre and post natal services; outreach support to vulnerable families; and additional services for the 720 children under five and their families in Croxley Green.

The pre-school employs ten staff at TS Renown to provide affordable and flexible pre-school care and education for local families. It is currently the only local provider offering this flexibility of mornings, afternoons or full days. This offer of up to over thirty hours care and education per week enables both parents to have the option of going out to work.

Currently around 60% of children at Morris Minors receive Government funding for up to fifteen hours free care and education. This number rises to around 85% by the summer term. The pre-school fees for non-funded children or extra hours above fifteen are in line with Government funding rates. These charges are generally much lower than the fees charged by chain nurseries or other private day-care establishments.

The County Council has a duty to ensure there are sufficient nursery spaces available in every local area for children to take up their free fifteen hours. If Morris Minors were to close then Hertfordshire may fail in this duty.

The issue

The viaduct will pass, as you've heard, within feet of the building. Its construction will take place, quite literally, on its doorstep and approach. It will have significant adverse impact, both on the environment and by interference with the operation, on all the users of the Sea Cadet Unit building, both Morris Minors during the day and the Sea Cadets in the evening.

We are therefore much concerned that our premises will be so affected that parents will feel obliged to withdraw their pre-school children, and that the Cadets (and their parents) will find it too unpleasant to continue. A lot here is about perception, and unless we're able to manage that perception great damage could be done.

We have looked closely at the potential impact of the Link both during its construction and in operation, and have raised our concerns with Mouchel, the Project developers. We have three in particular, and recent Project proposals address them to the extent I'll show.

1 – Construction Phase – Traffic in the pedestrian approach to the unit

The main threat to the pre-school is the potential for major disruption during this phase. Construction noise and disturbance could easily deter families from using the pre-school. We do not advertise, so most new parents attend through personal recommendation or by finding the pre-school on County websites. New potential parents visiting for the first time could easily be deterred by construction activity so close to the setting.

Access to the building is a serious problem. The turning off the roundabout and the parking area on the approach are used heavily at times of arrival and departure by children attending both Morris Minors and the Sea Cadets. Restriction in access will cause congestion at the entrance to the unit and school site. There is also a

grave risk of an accident occurring involving families arriving on foot with push chairs, scooters and tricycles, etc. As the Inspector will see on his visit, there is only a narrow shared pedestrian / vehicle access roadway to TS Renown, which is now also to be shared with exiting heavy goods vehicles and construction plant.

Ofsted require that there must be emergency access to the pre-school at all times during operating hours. Fortunately the pre-school has never suffered any serious accidents, but there have been instances of a child having a seizure and children suffering severe allergic reactions. In each of these cases the child required immediate medical attention.

We have asked for segregated entrances for construction traffic and for users of the Sea Cadet Unit so that access can be maintained and risk of accident minimised. The Project Team has presented a scheme which gives a separate entrance but shared exit from the construction compound. The proposal is for site traffic to queue on the road to enter and inside before exiting the compound. Exit will be controlled by a banksman. Although far from ideal, if this proposal works in practice, it will allay many of our fears. However, making it work robustly and visibly to give our parents confidence in their safety will not be easy for the contractor's staff.

You heard last week that removal of debris is a usual feature of modern site management. This will also be very important to our visitors. Potential and existing parents viewing the access road to TS Renown as an obstacle course would be very alarmed.

The experience of pre-school personnel during test drilling at the site last year was not positive. Despite consultation with contractor representatives, the entrance to TS Renown was frequently obstructed by site vehicles. Large containers and other items of equipment were delivered and removed from the access road with little thought for TS Renown users. On more than one occasion the entrance gate was completely blocked for nearly an hour, allowing no vehicles to enter or exit. This situation must not be allowed to happen again, and the proposed separation of entrances is essential.

2 – Construction Phase - Loss of Amenity and Facilities due to Noise and Vibration

During the construction phase, we expect noise levels to be very high, particularly during piling operations. Although piling will be conducted using an auger, we had come to believe that we should expect noise levels similar to those using percussive piling, and if so, piling taking place only a few yards from the perimeter fence of the Unit will affect work both inside and outside the building.

- It is close to the outdoor area used by Morris Minors for play and by the Cadets for boating and other activities. This threatens to make outside play/activities are untenable.
- Although the building will no doubt abate the noise to some extent, there will still be real intrusion inside it, affecting both staff (for whom it is a workplace) and children.

We have asked for high noise operations to be scheduled outside times of outdoor activities, and for physical measures to baffle the noise.

The Project has recently proposed scheduling the piling in the school holiday 2014, and we heard in last week's evidence that acoustic baffling would be expected around each of the two piling sites, where in any case auger piling should be quieter.

If those measures are put in place as stated, then we believe that the situation will be broadly tolerable, although the construction will still produce lots of noise with risk of interference. But we remain concerned that, if schedules slip, then we may find piling still going on at the start of that autumn term 2014, and that will be, we fear, very damaging.

We continue to work with the project to visit a similar site so that we can assess the risk for ourselves, but so far they haven't been able to find a site to visit.

The suggestion has also been made that the south side of the building might be opened up to provide the open-air play space we need. This would provide both a visual and an acoustic barrier and would be welcome, but again it's important that it be done as suggested.

3 – Operational Phase - Erosion of Amenity

As the Inspector will see when he visits the site, the Sea Cadet Unit is in a small oasis of calm, surrounded by trees, parkland and the canal. Despite being in a suburban location it is still very quiet, being screened from most traffic and other noise. The surrounding environment is a major factor in its attractiveness as a place for both pre-school and cadet activities.

The removal of screening trees, the construction of a large viaduct and frequent train noise so close to our building will adversely affect the long term amenity of the unit and its suitability for both pre-school and Sea Cadet users. We are seriously concerned that parents, both current and potential, may take their children elsewhere. Any significant reduction in child numbers could undermine the financial viability of Morris Minors which will in turn render the Sea Cadet Unit vulnerable through lack of funds.

We have always reluctantly accepted that there is little to be done to alleviate this problem, given the size and proximity of the viaduct. It will remain a major and lasting factor for both organisations.

We welcome the Project proposals to mitigate the loss of the present peaceful enjoyment of our current surroundings. We pointed out last week that the proposal to provide a temporary play area for the pre-school would be more easily achieved by mirroring the present area on the opposite side of the building rather than by developing the eastern end of the plot. This should be more beneficial to all parties in both the short and long term.

The proposed landscaping of the open ground and access roadway, to make these areas more welcoming and attractive to visitors, would give the pre-school and Sea Cadet Unit the best chance of continuing. Two illustrative options for the regeneration of the public open space after construction were presented by the Proposers last week - we prefer option two, but we accept that in general terms this approach will address many of our concerns, although as you heard both require more work and amendment of the existing Sea Cadet land lease to include

a strip of the land now to be acquired by Hertfordshire County Council at the bottom of the existing old railway embankment.

Summary

You'll see, therefore, that provided the assurances given last week and the proposals put forward by the Project can be made to stick, our concerns will have been addressed to a considerable extent.

But you've heard from Mr Reid's evidence that he expects us to suffer a degree of detriment which is very hard at this stage to quantify.

So: should those measures fail, or fail to materialise, then the effect on both the Sea Cadets and Morris Minors will be as serious as we've always feared. On our side we'll work with the Project as hard as we can to work round them, but we will need real assurance that they'll be put properly in place if our objection is to be met adequately.

Fabian Hiscock
Unit Chair,
Rickmansworth, Watford and District Sea Cadets

Michael Morris
Morris Minors Pre-School