

Press release from:

IAN LIDDELL-GRAINGER, M.P.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

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MP DEMANDS ANSWERS OVER RAILWAY GRANT

MP Ian Liddell-Grainger is demanding an explanation from West Somerset Railway officials as to what has become of a £96,000 grant that was handed over to fund apprenticeships and educational trips.

The money was provided as a result of a successful private bid to a Hinkley Point nuclear power station community fund.

It was given to the railway's official support group, the West Somerset Railway Association, accompanied by a schedule specifying precisely how it was to be spent.

The money was to be used to subsidise up to 30 apprenticeships on the railway and to pay for educational trips for thousands of children from 18 schools along the line, enabling them to learn about the railway's history and heritage.

The grant also included funding for a full-time employee to oversee the apprenticeship programme.

But, said Mr Liddell-Grainger, Conservative member for Bridgwater and West Somerset, he had received disturbing reports that the money had not been spent in accordance with the original bid application.

"My information is that only four apprenticeships have been created and that the programme has now been arbitrarily shut down by the railway company," he said.

“I am also told that the temporary full-time employee has been diverted to other duties. Even more significantly the company has announced the educational trips will not now go ahead - even though funding had already been provided to reserve the additional carriages.”

Mr Liddell-Grainger said he would be seeking an early meeting with railway company chairman Jonathan Jones-Pratt and asking for a full explanation as to what had become of the grant money.

“Grants of this kind are made for specific projects. They do not simply provide a pot of cash to be spent as, when and how someone sees fit,” he said.

“I am particularly concerned that the educational trips were simply cancelled. These would have been an excellent way not merely of teaching children about the railway’s history but also of stimulating interest in the idea of volunteering to work on it - and a lot of teachers and children are going to feel very let down.

“As a charity the West Somerset Railway Association has to give a full account of what income it has received and how it has been spent – and at the end of the day it is answerable to the Charity Commissioners.

“I am hearing a number of extremely worrying reports about the railway, including suggestions that the finances are in a far worse state than people have been led to believe.

“The railway is an enormous asset to West Somerset and the wider county and there is a tremendous amount of support for it among the local community.

“But we must have absolute confidence that it is being properly – and lawfully – managed.”

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