

AdBlock Cardiff briefing, January 2022

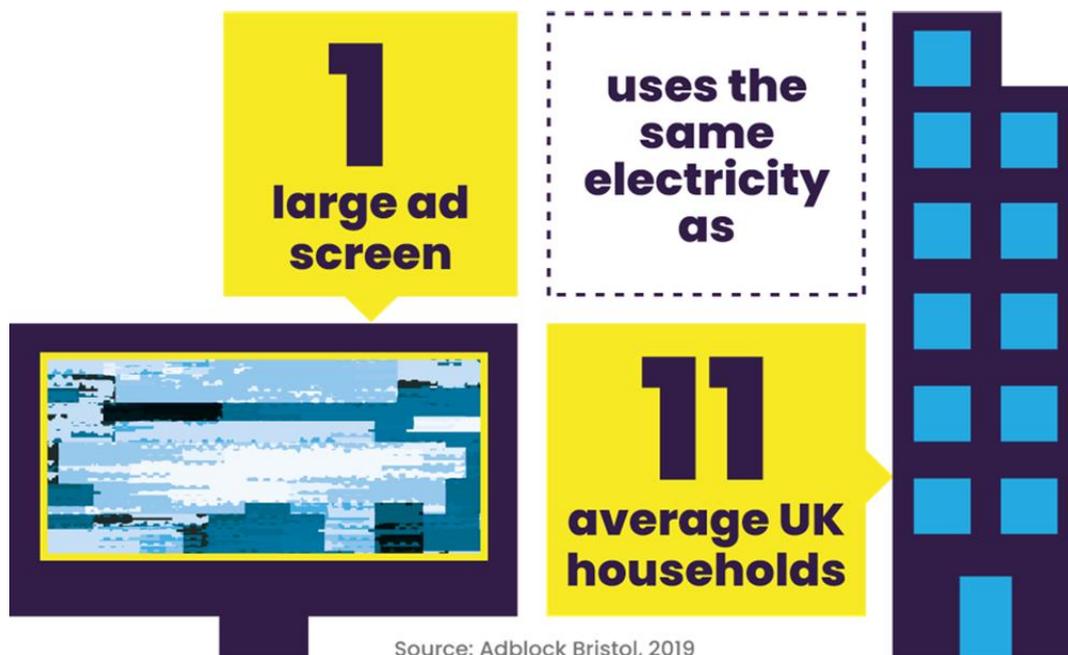
Why is outdoor advertising a problem, and what can be done about it?



Overview

There is a growing concern amongst Cardiff residents about the quantity of outdoor advertising sites across the city. The recent destruction of a Cardiff Bay mural to make way for a fast-food advert¹ was understandably met with condemnation by citizens and councillors alike. Elsewhere, recent years have seen an application to install a large digital advertising display at the Royal Mail HQ on Penarth Road receive 25 objections from Cardiff residents, as well as a proposal² from advertising company Clear Channel to introduce “smart billboards” to Cardiff, which would have allowed bus stops in the city to use citizens’ smartphone data without their consent to show personalised adverts. Cardiff and its citizens are clearly being increasingly blighted by corporate advertising in our outdoor spaces.

This briefing sets out the problems with such a practice and suggests solutions for the incoming council administration after May’s elections.



Key points

- **We have no choice as to whether we are exposed to outdoor advertising messages.** Unlike other forms of print, radio or digital advertising, citizens are confronted by outdoor advertising whether they like it or not as they walk down the street. As the industry itself boasts, “it’s the one medium you can’t turn off.”
- **Advertising has an adverse impact on our mental wellbeing.** Marketing messages regularly present new goods and services as must-have necessities. These tap into our insecurities, our identities and our aspirations, placing extra pressure on us to spend. Academic evidence³ has demonstrated a negative link between advertising and wellbeing.
- **Advertising has an impact on us at a subconscious level.** Psychological research into advertising⁴ shows that we do not have to consciously engage with adverts in order to absorb their messages. We can process them quickly and subconsciously.

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- **Advertising is environmentally damaging.** Typically, a large digital advertising billboard will be packed with thousands of LEDs that use large amounts of energy – over the course of a year, it is estimated⁵ that it would be equivalent to 11 typical households. In 2019, Cardiff Council passed a climate emergency motion and resolved to "work with partners across the city and region to develop and implement best practice methods that can deliver carbon reductions and help limit global warming" – banning outdoor advertising would be a major statement of intent.
- **Advertising prioritises big business over the local economy.** Cardiff has a thriving culture of small independent businesses. Large format and high-volume outdoor advertising is typically more available to large multinational corporations. As such, they encourage us to spend our money on firms that take money out of the local economy.
- **Outdoor advertising undermines our ability to solve collective problems.** Those who can afford billboard advertising are more likely to be large firms whose interests may run counter to those of wider society. For example, Cardiff Council has made huge strides in tackling congestion issues – yet polluting car companies continue to roll out advertisements that link car ownership and car brands to concepts of success, power and wealth. Our ability to solve major issues of the day such as air pollution and climate change depend on regaining public control of public space and our economy.
- **Adverts do not offer the financial benefits which advertising companies claim.** Although selling off public space for advertising may bring a short-term financial benefit to the landowners, ultimately we all pay the price for advertising through increased charges for goods and services by the companies running the adverts.
- **There is a precedent to do something different.** The French city of Grenoble became the first European city to remove outdoor advertising in 2015. Over 300 ad spaces, including 64 billboards were replaced with new trees and community spaces. Sao Paulo in Brazil introduced a ban on outdoor advertising in 2007 labelling it as a form of “visual pollution”.

Recommendations

- The wider societal benefits to Cardiff of removing billboards would outweigh the narrow financial benefits to the council⁶. Cardiff would be the first UK city to ban billboards, leading the way to a happier future for our cities which prioritises citizens’ wellbeing over corporate profit. This would be a great move for tourism, as well as being a decisive step towards a cleaner city with a healthier and well-adjusted population. It would also sit very comfortably with the wellbeing objectives of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the aspirations of [Child-Friendly Cardiff](#).
- As a priority action, Cardiff Council should remove existing billboards from residential areas where they have a negative impact on the visual amenity of our neighbourhoods.
- Furthermore, when the Cardiff Local Development Plan is next reviewed, it should include a presumption against outdoor corporate advertising.
- Cardiff Council’s WLGA representatives should engage with other local authorities in Wales and the Welsh Government to progress a Wales-wide ban on outdoor advertising.

¹ BBC News (2022) [Cardiff's 'Mona Lisa' mural removed for McDonald's ad](#), BBC News online (accessed 28 January 2022).

² Deacon, T. (2020) [Bus stops in Cardiff will soon know where you've been to show you personalised adverts](#), WalesOnline (accessed 28 January 2022).

³ Michel, C., Sovinsky, M., Proto, E., & Oswald, A. (2019) [Advertising as a major source of human dissatisfaction: cross-national evidence on one million Europeans](#), Vox EU website.

⁴ Heath, R., & Nairn, A. (2005) “[Measuring Affective Advertising: implications of low attention processing on recall](#)”, *Journal of Advertising Research*, vol. 45, no. 2, pp.269-281.

⁵ AdBlock Bristol (2020) [The electricity cost of digital adverts](#), AdBlock Bristol website (accessed 28 January 2022).

⁶ We would urge Cardiff Council to publish financial data showing all financial receipts to the council for public advertising in the city in order that a proper cost-benefit analysis can be carried out.