

Briefing for Candidates: Local Elections 2026

Adfree Cities, April 2026

Advertising billboards are unpopular and harm our communities

When residents find out about planning applications for new digital advertising screens, they often submit many objections to the planning authority.

Concerns raised over billboards:

1. **Public health:** Advertising promotes unhealthy products such as junk food, gambling, alcohol and petrol/diesel-powered cars that are actively undermining the public health goals of local authorities on healthy eating and air pollution, or council initiatives to reduce alcohol- and gambling-related harm and addiction.

2. **Environment:** Advertising content normalises high-carbon products/services such as polluting cars or airline travel which is incompatible with many local authorities' declaration of a Climate Emergency. Advertising for private cars also prevents a behavioural shift to mass transportation that forms part of many local authorities' roadmap to net zero.

3. **Energy use and visual clutter:** One double-sided digital pavement advertising screen uses three times the electricity of the average British home and increases light pollution. Outdoor advertising degrades the character of neighbourhoods attracting fly-tipping and anti-social behaviour.

4. **Local economy:** Advertising billboards benefit big corporations over small businesses which return more money back into the local economy, supporting high streets and local employment. Some Business Improvement Districts have stated their opposition to billboards for this reason and that billboards suggest that an area is not "a pleasant place to stop and spend time".

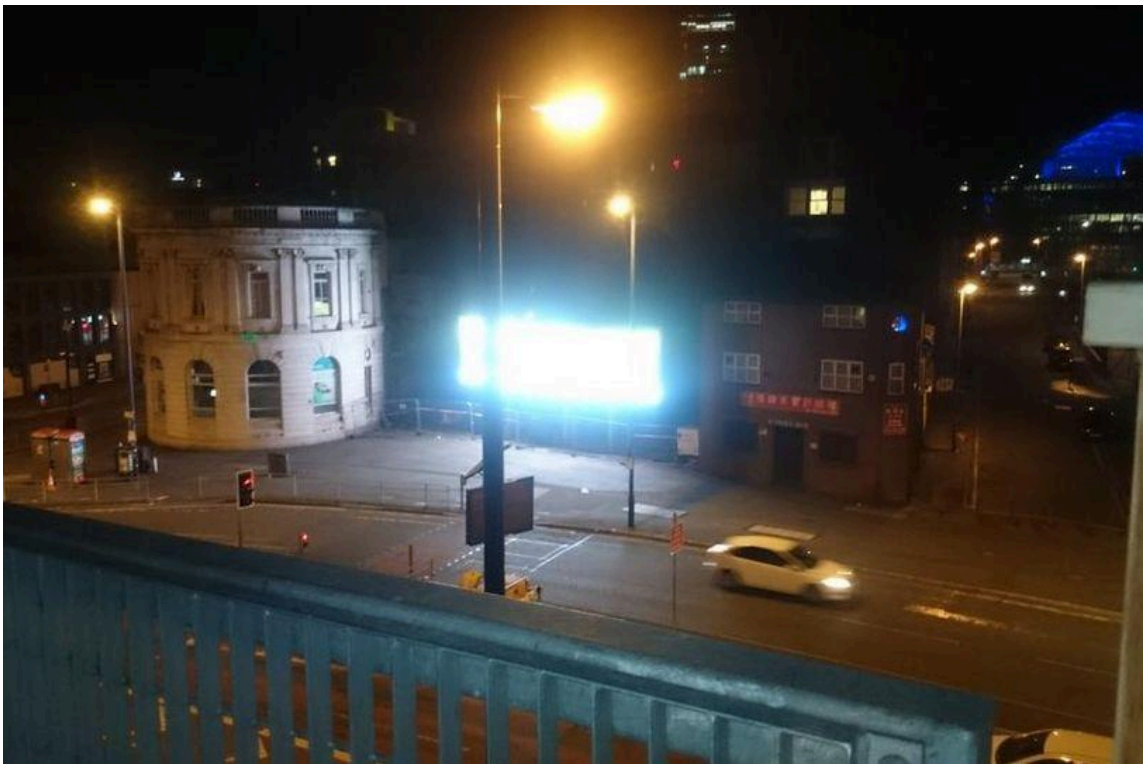


Image: The impact of a bright digital screen on residents in Manchester.

Policy Recommendations

Policy Recommendation 1:

Create an Advertising and Sponsorship Policy to govern the content of advertising sites within council control (e.g. bus stops)

Councils have commercial contracts with outdoor advertising companies and it is possible for councils to limit the most harmful forms of advertising on these sites.

Create or update council Advertising and Sponsorship Policies to **exclude ads** for:

- Unhealthy foods, i.e. those High in Fat, Salt or Sugar (HFSS).
- High carbon products e.g. fossil fuel companies, polluting vehicles, flights. This is also understood as a public health issue by the Faculty of Public Health.
- Gambling, payday loans, vaping and alcohol.
- Meat, dairy and/or industrially farmed animal products.

Many councils in the UK have introduced Healthier and Ethical Advertising Policies, including Edinburgh, Sheffield, Brighton and Hove, Cardiff, Liverpool, York, Hackney, Devon County Council and many more. Municipal bans have also been secured on advertising for high carbon products in Amsterdam, Utrecht, The Hague, Haarlem and several other Dutch cities.

Case study: Sheffield

Sheffield City Council introduced a Healthier and Ethical Advertising and Sponsorshi in 2024. Council-owned billboards around the city no longer promote fossil fuel cor airlines, airports and fossil fuel-powered vehicles, underscoring the city's commitr sustainability and its efforts to improve air pollution.

The policy also restricts advertising and sponsorships promoting health-harming p including gambling, alcohol and unhealthy food, helping to reduce and prevent c health issues, with potentially significant co-benefits for the council and local health s

With exemptions for small local businesses, the policy ensures the city's local econc thrive while protecting community health and wellbeing.

Policy Recommendation 2:

Include recommendations for advertising in Local or Neighbourhood Plans

Council's Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) determine planning applications for new advertising infrastructure, including digital advertising screens. Councils can include specific policies in their Local or Neighbourhood Plans (or equivalent) that outline a rationale for refusing new advertisements. An example is Bristol's most recent Local Plan review (2023, not yet formally adopted; Policy AD1: Advertisements (p198))

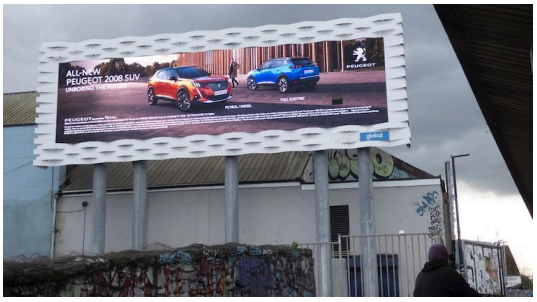
The alternative approach is for residents to spot and respond to planning applications one at a time. This 'firefighting' strategy is not sustainable and residents will struggle to keep up with the raft of applications being submitted. (For example, in Bristol where 86 new applications for screens were submitted at once.) Advertising firms can use their financial power and salaried staff to outpace residents who volunteer their time to object to applications.

Historically many billboards have also been installed with no permission. Councils can use their enforcement powers to make sure that these are removed.

Supplementary information can be found here:
https://adfreecities.org.uk/how-to-create-ad-free-cities/ask-your-council-for-change/policy-recommendations/

Types of Billboards

There are different types of outdoor advertising billboards. These consist of large digital advertising screens, older paper poster sites and bus stop advertising panels (digital and paper).



Large digital advertising screens



Large '48 sheet' size paper poster billboards



Stand-alone 'bus stop size' digital screens (called 'six sheet' size)



Digital screens and paper six sheets at bus stops. These could be controlled by an 'Advertising Policy' created by the council.

Adfree Cities

Adfree Cities is a network of grassroots groups across the UK who are concerned about the impacts of corporate advertising on our health, wellbeing, environment, climate, communities and the local economy. We campaign for happier, healthier cities free from the pressures of corporate outdoor advertising.

www.adfreecities.org.uk