

Living Next to Digital Billboards

Survey of residents and commuters near to digital advertising screens on the M32 in Bristol

August 2021

In 2020, Adblock Bristol created [a survey](#) for residents to express their views on the new digital advertising screens located in Eastville on the M32 in Bristol, England. Anyone who lives, works or travels within view of the large screens was encouraged to participate. 100 people responded. This document summarises their views.

Above image: a digital advertising screen constructed next to the M32 in Eastville, Bristol in 2019

Key findings

- Respondents raised a number of complaints about the new digital screens on the M32 including:
 - degradation of their neighbourhood and social cohesion
 - a feeling that the commercial interests of advertisers were prioritised over residents' mental health and wellbeing.
 - ecological impacts of light pollution from the digital screens
 - climate impacts of the consumerism model promoted on billboards
 - distraction to drivers and road safety
- 24 respondents live near the billboards. Of these, 15 mentioned light pollution directly entering their windows.
- 4 respondents directly mentioned their children having to pass by the billboards, and three mentioned its impact on the amenity of Stoke Park.



Impact statements

Of the 100 responses, 31 mention social impact, and 26 mention personal mental health and 40 mention road safety.

Additionally, two responses mentioned that exposure to digital advertising screens is particularly problematic for them owing to their ADHD. One factor that frequently came up was that billboards

were **unavoidably** distracting: either you were distracted by looking at them, or distracted by trying not to look at them.

The full versions of anonymised responses [can be read here](#).

Social cohesion and impact on local residents

Submission number or first name + neighbourhood	Quoted submission
#1: Toby, Redfield	“I find them impossible to ignore, and this makes me feel resentful that people are allowed to dominate that stretch of road to try and sell something that I have no interest in and has no connection to the local area.”
#6: Lucy, Easton	“The billboard light shines into our bedroom window. The billboards are horrible to look at and affect my sleep.”
#5: Polly, Easton	“My home looks out on to the motorway. Everytime I look out of my bedroom window I see a large digital screen glaring at me. It obscures my view- it is grotesque and bright and makes me feel angry that companies are flashing their advertisements in my home and trying to sell me their product. I find it very intrusive in my life. The screens lower my mood and make me feel sad.”
#16: Jade, Whitehall	“It feels like a horrible dystopian nightmare, they're distracting, they feel intrusive.”
#26: Alan, Easton	“The billboard is in direct line of sight from my bedroom window. It is an eyesore and distracts from the trees that I would otherwise see, which previously went a long way to improving the view over the motorway. Now I do not want to look at the trees as I get an ugly, glaring screen instead. The light from the billboard dominates the view from my window at night. I have to close the curtains if I want to avoid it imposing on me in the evenings. Despite the M32, the area is made up of charming buildings and the billboards really bring the overall quality of my area down. It is clear that these signs have been allowed here because of the poorer demographic in the area, these signs would not have been allowed in Clifton.”
#28: Isla, St Werburghs	“I find it invasive, the area is already way too populated and the M32 and Stapleton road are so full of cars we are bombarded by lights, noise and pollution. To have another, this time electric lighted invasive thing for advertising somebody's profit at the cost to local people's lives feels completely mercenary and tells us we do not matter. We the people of Bristol matter even if we can't afford to live in Clifton. No one would put a sign that big on the Downs or in Clifton village. Why is it ok to put it here where we live?”
#32: Lex,	“This stretch of the M32 now has two digital billboards that have

Eastville	caused increased light pollution in the local area. This light is a real nuisance to residents, especially at night. It is definitely lighter throughout the night than it was before the billboards. I have bought new black out blinds but they don't completely cut out the light coming into my bedroom."
#43: Emily, Eastville	"These billboards make the area feel, in short, dystopian. The eerie blue light they cast makes everything seem surreal, and makes it difficult to focus on objects coming toward me when I'm cycling...[...] I am very lucky to live on Purdown green space. This is, in my opinion, the most beautiful view of Bristol, and one of the city's genuinely untouched beauty spots. The bright light of the billboards now totally dominates the view, cutting through the pretty twinkling lights of the city. One of the billboards is above the garden of the Black Swan, a popular pub and venue on Stapleton Road, and a hub of diverse East Bristol culture. Prior to lockdown, I stopped visiting the venue because the billboard completely ruined the atmosphere in the garden. The billboard is so bright and so distracting that it is impossible to have a conversation when anywhere near it. All these things represent things which make us proud of Eastville: the beautiful hilltop views, the green spaces and cycle paths, the diverse and vibrant culture, and the thriving music scene. All of them have been negatively impacted by the billboards. The billboards therefore send a message that Bristol as a city cares more about advertising for capitalism and mega-companies (none of whom are even based in Bristol), rather than celebrating the things which Bristol's citizens love."
#60: Alice, Redfield	"Seeing electronic billboards makes me angry that they're allowed to be put up in the first place - they visually detract from our environment, they're harmful to nature and I resent being constantly marketed at in the place where I live. They are also distracting to drivers and I think they lower the tone of the whole city. I really dislike them and it makes me feel negatively towards the council."
#82: Harriet, St Werburghs	"They feel like an unattractive and tacky welcome to Bristol, and not in keeping with the area or surrounding skyline."
#89: Catherine, Clay Hill	"I love this area but the billboards really annoy and distract me when I'm coming back into Easton. I hate that my attention is being grabbed by something that is so visually dominant and outsized compared to its surroundings and trying to sell me something not relevant to my life or the local area either!"
#92: Jen, Easton	"They make our part of the city feel like an unloved industrial wasteland".
#96: Rob, Easton	"When I see these billboards, it makes me feel powerless in the face of very large companies that just want to sell me stuff and have no interest in my welfare. The size of them is the main factor in this and the rapidly changing images make me feel like someone else is in control of the city I live in and that I don't have agency or a full democratic say in my community. There are thousands of people in our community who would say that they want this visual blight to be completely removed."

<p>#96: Anon., Brislington</p>	<p>“I went on a speed awareness course a few years ago and was reminded about maintaining focus at all times when driving. I also have ADHD, so the electronic billboards are particularly distracting. I also have frequented the nearby Black Swan pub, with the beer garden at nighttime being a place where many new friends were made under a pleasant twilight glow - that was until the electric billboard arrived and is invasively bright and distracting. The intrusive blue-light is an assault on the physical senses, as well as representing the antithesis of the local community values.”</p>
<p>#102: Mo, St Werburgh’s</p>	<p>“Billboards make me feel very sad that commercial interests are considered to be more important than the detrimental effect that they have on the environment and the local community.”</p>
<p>#103: Mike, Easton</p>	<p>“The billboards add to the sense that this is a neighbourhood that 'doesn't matter', where the built environment and people's enjoyment of their living space can be ridden rough-shod over. There's already the M32 - a vast, community-dividing act of civic vandalism which should never have been built; the looming monolith of the Ikea store, bitterly opposed by local residents, but built despite their anguish. On top of that we have these billboards, treating the neighbourhood not as a treasured home, but as a thoroughfare, a corporate tool for sale to the highest bidder. It's disgusting. The existing billboards should be dismantled as a matter of urgency, and no future boards should be allowed.”</p>



Above: A second digital billboard on the M32 overlooking the Black Swan pub in Easton built in 2019.

Mental health

Submission number or name	Quoted submission
#20: Amy, Easton	"I live with one shining directly into my upstairs window, blocking my only view of any green space. I can no longer see any green space from my house, which is detrimental to mine and my flatmates mental health. The light at night is distracting and I resent having advertising shining into my home without my permission. It totally undermines the aesthetics of the area which already has to deal with the M32 running through it, And I have no doubt that my home will lose value because of it."
#33: Anon, Bishopston	"As I have ADHD I find that distracting billboards drain me of energy due to the extra concentration it takes to avoid the unnecessary glaring lights and imagery. As a result, I am put on edge for fear of having an accident caused from my mental fatigue."
#36: Suzy, Bishopston	"I find the billboards invasive and distracting. It makes me feel incredibly deflated that my return home to Bristol involves no choice but to be bombarded with advertisements. It feels stark and unwelcoming. I also find the adverts very distracting, particularly those by the Junction 3 slip where traffic changes lanes."
#45: Aisha, Eastville	"I have my first child on the way and I am worried about the billboards' effect on their mental health throughout childhood."
#47: Jess, Easton	"I resent being forcibly advertised to by these neon nightmares. It does not make me feel good on my way home and has an impact on my wellbeing and sense of community, like ownership of my neighbourhood is being taken away and handed to huge corporations."
#48: Nicola, Stokes Croft	"I resent the fact that these billboards pollute our city. Both in terms of polluting our minds and the amount of power they take to operate. They do not add anything to anyone's quality of life. They pretty much invariably glorify and promote unsustainable lifestyles. Most people looking at these ads probably have no prospect in their lives of affording the items/experiences advertised. They just make everyone feel shit."
#57: Martha, Easton	"Billboards distract me when I am driving due to the high intensity of their light. They also advertise things that are bad for my mental health (weight loss / buying materialistic things etc), and a bad influence on my small child".
#63: Jane, Southmead	"It is difficult to describe but the sudden interruption into my brain whilst driving makes me jump in shock, I guess it's a reaction when driving that I think I may have to react suddenly to an accident, and I get a fight or flight adrenaline surge. As well as being a dangerous distraction, this effect leaves my heart pounding and takes a few miles to recover. Adrenaline effects like

	<p>this have been shown to have long term detrimental effects on health and so this worries me as well as the immediate driving danger”.</p>
<p>#67: Peter, Easton</p>	<p>“They pollute my lived environment with adverts for things i do not want, they are an abomination, this is Bristol not the set of Bladerunner!”</p>
<p>#70: Gillian, St Werburgh’s</p>	<p>“They are on the main gateway into our city and stamp our city lives with a nasty, overscaled dominant message that commercialism and profit is the only imperative for us, never mind our humanity. It is deeply upsetting to feel that my only value is as a 'consumer.'... They encourage envy and unhappiness by advertising consumer products that many cannot afford and which destroy our children's future because of over consumption.”</p>
<p>#72: Reuben, Easton</p>	<p>“When I return home and pull off the M32 at J2 I have a general sense of relief and happiness to be back in Bristol and approaching home. Yet when I see the billboard towering above the houses it makes me feel angry and depressed. I am confronted with the waste of energy and the sense that the companies and financial forces behind this installation have more power than any of the citizens living beneath it.....This stretch of the Stapleton road is certainly not the most picturesque area of Bristol, but despite the grime and the oppressive nature of the M32 at this point it has always maintained a character which feels Bristolian, the skate park, the street art, the small businesses and the occasional encampment all exist despite the concrete wasteland. It is part of the spirit that makes it feel like a homecoming each day and reminds me why I am glad to live here. But the new advertising monolith towers above all of this and seems to sneer at our shabby lives. It is a reminder that someone else is getting rich and enjoying another level of glamour and luxury, while we make the best of our poor and pathetic lives. I don't want to buy whatever they are shouting about. I just want them to..... leave me alone. This is not a healthy and positive mind-set to have triggered so regularly.”</p>
<p>#88: Heather, St. George</p>	<p>“During a time of stress and financial hardships I hate the companies who are spending far too much money trying to sell me things I clearly can't afford right now.”</p>

Environmental impact

Submission number or name	Quoted submission
<p>#7: Adam, St Agnes</p>	<p>“It's depressing to be so aggressively advertised to when I'm on my way to work in the mornings and it makes the whole area</p>

	less attractive.”
#11: Rachel, Eastville	“No thought was given to those residents that live so close to m32, who already deal with high levels of air pollution but now also have extra light pollution and unnecessary advertisements on their doorsteps.”
#31: David, Easton	“Having now lived with the two existing billboards for some time I can confirm that they don't become any easier to tolerate; they remain a grotesque blight on the area. Indeed the levels of night-time light pollution they generate are quite extraordinary. On a cloudy night the sky above our property is now never dark but glows with a queasy blue/green reflected light. One striking indicator of the impact is the birds in our back garden, who now continue to restlessly chirp throughout the night, triggered into thinking that it's a perpetual first light of dawn. It's heartbreaking really.”
#50: Sally, Eastville	“The lighting from the billboards is garish and unnatural. It makes me think of dystopian sci-fi films.”
#54: Rhea, Redfield	“Bristol has also declared a climate emergency in the last few months. What kind of impression is given to residents and newcomers to the city by driving past digital, energy-consuming signs at the gateway to the city? Absolutely no one wants this. Please respect residents, road users and nature and deny these digital billboards”.
#77: Anne, Lockleaze	“Standing on the top of Purdown in fog and mist at the end of 2020, I looked towards the city and it had disappeared, all but the massive digital billboards which could be seen despite the distance and the fog. Until I saw them it felt like I could be looking over the sea or empty countryside. The billboards can literally be seen from over a mile away, telling observers only negative things about our city.”
#83: Ellie, Whitehall	“When I see the billboards it makes me feel as though profit is more important than the mental health or the environment of the people of East Bristol. It makes me aware that electricity is powering messages to consume and to disregard the climate crisis. It also makes me feel powerless in the face of pollution and congestion - the enormous message is buy more, drive more, carry on as usual. We all need the opposite message right now.”
#86: Sandy, Stokes Croft	“This hideous visual pollution greets me every time I enter the city on the M32.”
#93: Jeremy, Clifton	“I find them distracting and can hardly believe that the billboard proponents' statement "that they are hardly noticed" can be true. If so then they are not serving their advertising function!. The view down the M32, whilst not the most exciting in the city, does give a fine view across Bristol to Dundry and the Mendips beyond, particularly spectacular in the early evening in spring and autumn. This is marred by these ugly intrusions into the urban landscape.”
#99: Sarah,	“Intrusive and alarming how the brightness of the light is seen

Easton	from so far. Negative impact also on insect populations/biodiversity as well as major contribution to light pollution.”
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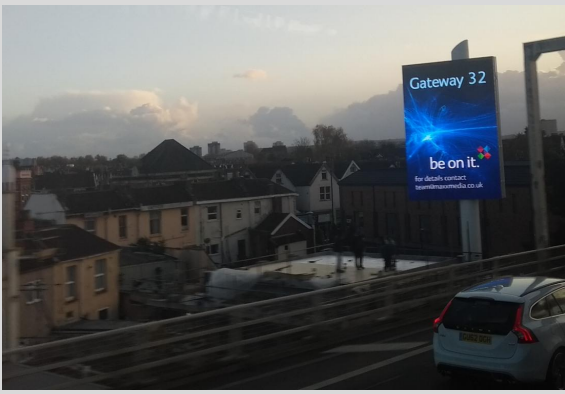

Driver distraction and road safety

Submission number or name	Quoted submission
#10: Alison, Easton	“The billboards are dangerous and should be removed.”
#94: Emily, Bishopston	“We have regularly commented on the visual impact when driving of these billboards, especially when dark. They can completely take over your vision and find them extremely distracting and dangerous when trying to move lanes at this point - which is where two lanes are merging and already a point of difficulty for many drivers. I believe these specific billboards to be an extremely dangerous addition to the road at this point and am surprised they have been allowed to be installed to purposefully take the attention of drivers at a point where uttermost care is needed.”
#97: J., Bishopston	“I went on a speed awareness course a few years ago and was reminded about maintaining focus at all times when driving. I also have ADHD, so the electronic billboards are particularly distracting. I also have frequented the nearby Black Swan pub, with the beer garden at nighttime being a place where many new friends were made under a pleasant twilight glow - that was until the electric billboard arrived and is invasively bright and distracting. The intrusive blue-light is an assault on the physical senses, as well as representing the antithesis of the local community values.”

Mode of interaction with the digital ad screens:

- 72 of the respondents commute past the billboards. Of these, 46 drive past the billboards, 26 cycle or walk.
- Some people live near the screens *and* commute past them. Most of the respondents are commuters however.
- Of the non-commuters, the overwhelming reason for responding has been the intrusion of the billboards into their property.

Planning background

Digital Screen	Details:
 A portrait orientation digital advertising screen is mounted on a tall pole. The screen displays the text 'Gateway 32' at the top, followed by 'be on it.' and 'for details contact 0117 925 0000'. The background of the screen is blue with a starburst effect. The screen is situated on a street with residential buildings in the background.	<p>Portrait orientation advertising screen Operated by Global</p> <p>Granted planning reference in 2016. Original application for 2 screens rejected. One screen granted permission on appeal.</p> <p>Planning reference: 16/05968/A</p> <p>468 - 470 Stapleton Road, Eastville, Bristol, BS5 6PE (Shah Jalal Jame Mosque)</p>
 A landscape orientation digital advertising screen is mounted on a tall pole. The screen displays the text 'SAINT LUCIA' in large letters, with 'There's no time like the now! Book' below it. The background of the screen shows a scenic view of Saint Lucia. The screen is situated on a street with residential buildings in the background.	<p>Landscape orientation advertising screen Operated by Global</p> <p>Granted planning permission in 2016.</p> <p>Planning reference: 15/04407/A</p> <p>420 Stapleton Road Easton Bristol BS5 6NQ</p>



Adblock Bristol is part of the Adfree Cities network of 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