

Briefing for Candidates

Local Elections 2023

Adfree Cities, April 2023

Advertising billboards are unpopular and harm our communities

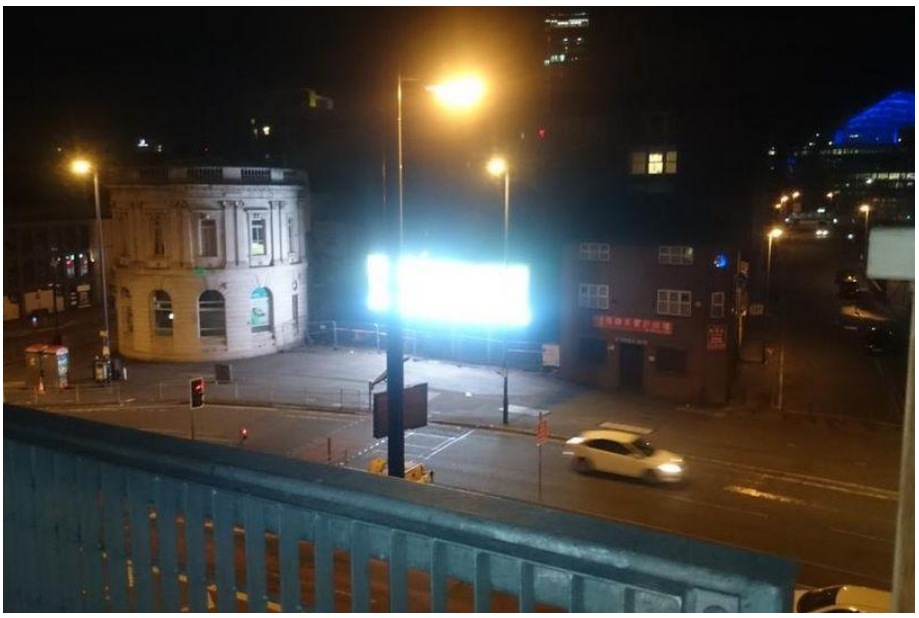
When residents find out about planning applications for new digital advertising screens, they often submit lots of objections to the planning authority.

Concerns raised over billboards

1. **Public health:** Advertising promotes unhealthy products such as junk food and polluting cars that are actively undermining the public health goals of local authorities on healthy eating and air pollution. See more information in our Local Economy briefing.

2. **Environment:** Advertising promotes an unsustainable and outdated model of consumerism that is incompatible with many local authorities' declaration of a Climate Emergency. Large new digital advertising screens require a huge amount of electricity - the equivalent of 11 average UK homes. More information in our Environment briefing.

3. **Advertising billboards benefit big corporations** over local businesses. McDonalds, KFC, Tesco and Coca-cola are all in the top 10 companies using outdoor advertising. Some Business Improvement Districts, for example Bedminster in South Bristol, 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".



The impact of a bright digital screen on residents in Manchester. Light pollution is also a big issue with these advertising screens and has a huge negative impact on people and the environment.

Policy Recommendations

Policy Recommendation 1:

Create an 'Ethical Advertising Policy' to govern the content of advertising sites within a council's control (e.g bus stops)

Councils have commercial contracts (known as Advertising Concession Agreements) with outdoor advertising companies such as Clear Channel UK or JCDecaux. It is possible for councils to limit the most harmful forms of advertising on these sites. We recommend councils exclude advertising for the following products on these sites:

- Advertising for junk foods, those High in Fat Salt or Sugar (HFSS) (see food charity Sustain's Healthier Food Advertising policy toolkit for more info)

- Advertising for high carbon products such as polluting SUVs, airlines and fossil fuel companies (see Low Carbon Advertising Policies - Toolkit for Local Policymakers by Badvertising for more info)
- Advertising for gambling, payday loans, alcohol and vaping.

The Greater London Authority, Transport for London, and Bristol City Council have all implemented similar policies in recent years with Cambridgeshire, Norwich, Liverpool and North Somerset councils also passing motions for similar bans. Municipal bans have also been secured on advertising for high carbon products in Amsterdam, Utrecht, The Hague, Haarlem and several other Dutch cities.

Policy Recommendation 2:

Adopt a moratorium on new digital billboards

Planning authorities (councils) determine planning applications for new digital advertising screens. A council could adopt a moratorium on all new ad screens. This would send a message to advertising companies wishing to build new screens that the local authority is not supportive.

Currently, planning regulations only allow councils to consider such an application on two grounds: public safety and 'amenity'. This does not take into account the multiple unique impacts of digital advertising screens including on light pollution, energy use and climate, biodiversity, health and wellbeing; and it does not allow councils to make decisions on these applications in line with current priorities.

A moratorium would be a temporary prohibition on granting new applications and could be in place until outdated national planning policy is reformed to allow councils to consider the specific impacts of digital billboards on local communities in planning decisions.

The alternative approach is for residents to spot and respond to planning applications one at a time. This 'firefighting' strategy, on an application-by-application basis, is not sustainable and residents will struggle to keep up with the raft of applications being submitted. Advertising firms can use their financial power and salaried staff to outpace residents who volunteer their time to object to applications.

Supplementary information can be found here: www.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