

EMAIL TO MATTHEW SMITH, B&NES COUNCIL

Dear Matthew,

REGULATION OF A-BOARDS

The FoBRA committee, on which all member associations sit, has asked me to write to you about the problems caused by A-boards in Bath.

There has been a huge proliferation of boards in the last year or so, particularly it seems since the Council published its guidelines on the subject. We think these create problems in many ways:

- They cause an obstruction of the pavement for all pedestrians, but particularly for those who are partially-sighted, have a walking impairment, or who use wheelchairs or mobility scooters. They are equally awkward for parents with children in prams and buggies. The failure to take account of the needs of these different groups is surely contrary to the Council's equalities commitments.
- The huge variety of sizes, shapes and colours is visually unsightly, detracts from the beauty of our streets, and is completely inappropriate in a World Heritage Site.
- A-boards have proliferated in key streets such as Bartlett Street, George Street, Milsom Street, Broad Street and Northumberland Passage. In many of these the footway is already narrow. Together with other street furniture such as phone and letter boxes, tables & chairs, streetlamps, litterbins, cycle stands, etc, there is a massive cumulative impact on the public realm, which the Council's published strategy aims to declutter.
- In some streets, nearly every business has its own A-board. It is hard to see how any of them can achieve the advantage it seeks in these circumstances.
- Some businesses (eg Same Same But Different) go over the top with several boards. It is hard to see what additional benefit there can be after the first board.
- A-boards obstruct the operation of street cleaning, causing delay and inefficient working.

In our view it is time for a fundamental review of the use of A-boards. The business community asked for a light-touch regime, and this is what the Council has provided. Your guidelines were clear and simple, but businesses have almost completely ignored them. So we need a different approach.

We think the ideal solution would follow on the excellent work which Vaughan Thompson recently demonstrated on city dressing. The keynotes of his approach

were that there should be an agreed, uniform style, with the design tailored to the location. Hanging signs are traditional, are more visible, and are less obstructive than A-boards. Flags and banners may be suitable for some purposes, particularly for temporary events. Large directory boards listing all the businesses in a street or a block can also be successful. If any of these are fixed to listed buildings, they will need to be appropriate in style and Vaughan's work could lead to agreed options, as has been done with street furniture under the Public Realm and Movement Programme. The Council could encourage businesses to use these methods, perhaps through a fast-track approval scheme.

To encourage businesses to look move to this new system, it would be appropriate to ban A-boards after a period of grace, eg three months, and to remove any which remained on the streets after the deadline.

An alternative approach would be to license the use of A-boards, as the Council does with tables and chairs, and to charge a fee to cover the cost of administration and enforcement. I'm sure you can produce accurate figures, but a back of the envelope calculation suggests an annual fee of around £100 per board for full-cost recovery. There would need to be simple rules similar to your existing guidelines, and, if a business does not comply, the Council would remove and recycle the offending board.

Please let me know what you think. It's time for change on this, and you can count on support from residents.

Best wishes,

Henry Brown, 16 December



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