

COMMUNITIES, TRANSPORT & ENVIRONMENT P D & S PANEL – MONDAY, 13 JULY 2015

Thank you for allowing me to address you this morning. I should say that I am a Friend of Bath Abbey, and I serve on the Friends' Executive Committee. But I am speaking this morning in an entirely personal capacity.

This will be a short statement, because I do not want to labour points which are familiar to the Panel. The reasons for the proposed Public Space Protection Order are set out in the background papers to the consultation document. In short, there have been longstanding and increasing concerns about buskers using – or, should I say, abusing – amplification in Abbey Churchyard and Kingston Parade. They have been a severe nuisance to users of the Abbey, by intruding on services, choir rehearsals and the quiet enjoyment of the building by visitors. The so-called 'traffic light system' which requests buskers not to perform at sensitive times has too often been flouted. Visitors to the Pump Room have also suffered from over amplified busking, as have residents and workers in the vicinity, including Council staff in the offices above the Roman Baths.

The noise nuisance provisions in the Environmental Protection legislation have proved too slow and cumbersome to be workable. Now, at long last, we have the means to exert effective control by means of a Public Space Protection Order. The Order will not prevent busking, but it will forbid buskers using amplification in three specific sites adjoining the Abbey.

I believe there has been a large response to the consultation document. I myself submitted comments. I am looking forward with great interest to the presentation which your officers will be making to you. I do not know whether the Panel intend afterwards to make a recommendation to full Council, but, if so, I hope it will be to encourage the Council to proceed to make the Order.

I am well aware that there are people, chiefly in the busking community, who are opposed to the proposed Order. I will not take up your time by debating the arguments at length, but I would like to make a few key points. It is often said that the buskers are popular or, at the very least, the crowds of visitors in Abbey Churchyard and Kingston Parade do not seem to mind them. Obviously, sensitivity to noise and musical tastes vary from person to person, but transient visitors and shoppers do have the option of moving on if the busking is disagreeably noisy. Businesses, workers and residents in the vicinity are stuck with the noise.

Second, the environs of the Abbey are very special. The Abbey, the Roman Baths and the Pump Room are, in conjunction, the very heart and soul of what the city is and presents to the world. Quietness and calm are essential for the proper enjoyment of this unique space and its buildings. Obviously, mass tourism makes that a challenge, but we can do something by eliminating the added cacophony of amplified busking.

Third, there is no practical alternative to a total ban. For all sorts of practical reasons, which I do not have time to elaborate, any form of subjective half-way house would be unworkable.

Finally, the proposed Order is not the thin end of an anti-libertarian wedge. There may be, and probably are, other sites in the city where a ban on amplification could be considered. But they must make their case. We are concerned today solely with the environs of the Abbey. I hope the Panel will agree with me that this site is very special and, on its merits, deserves the protection of the proposed Order.

Thank you for listening to me.

BRIAN WEBBER