



Title	Review of the 'Guide for Busking and Street Performance in Reading'
Purpose of the report	To make a decision
Report status	Public report
Executive Director Commissioning Report	Emma Gee
Report author	Rob Abell, Consumer Protection Group Manager
Lead Councillor	Cllr McGoldrick, Lead Councillor for Environmental Services and Community Safety
Council priority	Secure Reading's economic & cultural success
Recommendations	1. That the committee note the report and that no changes are proposed to the Guide for Busking and Street Performance following the review.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. As a joint initiative between Reading Borough Council and Reading Business Improvement District ("BID"), a Guide for Busking and Street Performance ("The Guide") was produced and published in November 2024 following a resolution to adopt it at the Licensing Applications Committee ("LAC") on 14 November 2024. It was also resolved that the Director of Planning, Transport and Public Protection be granted delegated authority to make future changes to the guide.
- 1.2. The Guide was produced using best practice examples which have been adopted by towns and cities across the country. The draft Guide was approved for consultation at Licensing Committee on 7 July 2024. The consultation exercise was conducted between 25 July 2024 and 15 September 2024 and the responses helped to inform the final guidance document. The guide is positive and encouraging in tone.
- 1.3. The Guide (in pdf form) is hosted on the Visit Reading website here: <https://www.visit-reading.com/business/bid/busking-guide>, and also included with this report as Appendix 1. BID paid for hard copies to be printed which have been given to individual buskers directly and provided to local businesses to use when engaging with buskers along with BID wardens and the Police.
- 1.4. At the November 2024 LAC it was resolved that a further report be submitted to a future meeting to review the success of The Guide. This committee was considered to be more appropriate as there are no licensing implications. Members of LAC and our Lead Member at the time agreed with the decision to switch this review to HNL.
- 1.5. Since the initial Guide was published, the BID has taken the lead on collating feedback, including complaints. They have provided data which is included with this report as Appendix 2.

2. Policy Context

- 2.1. Section 1.9 of the Council's Street Trading Policy October 2023 – October 2028 states street trading consents on a daily rate will be required by buskers who wish to sell items associated with their performance, e.g., media containing recordings of music. Other than this the Council currently has no specific policy regarding busking or street entertainment. It can be noted that due to the limited ability to enforce and the changing nature of performances, these activities have not been consistently enforced. Unlike fixed premises seeking to put on performances or for street trading activity (the sale of goods), there is not a licensing regime for buskers.
- 2.2. Reading's Cultural and Heritage Strategy 2015-2030 vision states, "By 2030, Reading will be recognised as a centre of creativity with a reputation for cultural and heritage excellence at a regional, national and international level with increased engagement across the town. Realising the vision will require everyone involved in the cultural life of Reading to work together".
- 2.3. The BID (Business Improvement District) is a defined area where businesses have voted to invest collectively in local improvements to enhance their trading environment. The BID delivers year-round added value projects and services to maintain the vibrancy of the town centre, funded by a levy, which helps to keep Reading town centre safe, relevant and attractive for both residents and visitors. BID services and activities to improve the environment in the town central district are additional to the services provided by the Council.
- 2.4. Under the Environmental Protection Act 1990 the Council have a duty to investigate any complaint of statutory nuisance from a person living in its area. With statutory nuisance linked to physical premises (as opposed to transitory shoppers moving through a town centre)
- 2.5. There is no licensing regime relating to busking and local authorities take different approaches in how they seek to regulate the activity. Views on busking and individual performers are often subjective and can be polarised. There are no clear cut solutions to the problems associated with busking which cause a nuisance, but guides or codes of conduct are seen as best practice and enforcement recognised as being a challenge.

3. The Proposal

Current Position

- 3.1. Busking and other forms of street entertainment are important to the vibrancy of the Town Centre. However, at the same time, buskers and street entertainers share the streets with everyone else that lives, works, and visits the town, and certain areas of the town centre experience a high number of loud performances daily. This can have a detrimental effect primarily on the businesses and staff located near to where the performances are taking place. Despite the introduction of The Guide, complaints are still received from members of the public.
- 3.2. The location of busking and street entertainment in Reading is primarily concentrated in the centre of Broad Street but increasingly both ends of Broad Street are also being used. These areas are attractive due to the high footfall and proximity to major shops in the town.
- 3.3. Religious preachers and faith groups also operate in the town centre along areas of Broad Street. The Council recognises the right to freedom of religious belief and freedom of expression but considers that this activity should also follow the principles of The Guide to foster good community relations, especially with regards to noise levels and the use of amplification. This was reflected in the responses received during the consultation and this was therefore included in scope of the final guide.

- 3.4. In the previous report the main complaint categories were listed in relation to busking and street performance from shoppers and businesses located close to where the performances are taking place and this informed the review of the Guide taken forward:
- Unreasonable levels of noise often from the use of amplifiers and loud instruments.
 - Sound clash from multiple loud buskers and street entertainers in the same area.
 - Performance fatigue due to buskers and street entertainers performing one after another in the same place for several hours every day.
 - Limited and repetitive repertoire or frequently repeating the same song.
 - Obstructions caused by performers and audiences that can impede entrance or exit of businesses and impact street traders.
 - Acknowledging the wide variety of views, the quality of some performances can be objectionable to some and not others.
- 3.5. The Council recognises many street entertainers have built their livelihoods performing in public spaces and wants to continue to support opportunities for buskers and street entertainers in the town. At the same time, the Council also wants to protect the needs and rights of residents, visitors and businesses.
- 3.6. Reading BID have operated a registration scheme for buskers in the past but this did not deter non-registered acts from performing which undermined the scheme and thus it became ineffective. There is no enforcement mechanism to allow only registered acts to perform and remove unregistered acts that turn up.
- 3.7. Reading BID have been tracking reports using a reporting link they have been sending out on a weekly basis, recording complaints coming in via email, verbally, through social media channels, text messages and personally witnessed by BID wardens and other BID staff. This information is included alongside this report as Appendix 2.
- 3.8. The complaints, as well as feedback taken from BID when they have engaged with buskers help us form a view on whether the Guide is working.
- 3.9. In January 2026 Thames Valley Police (TVP) requested views from the public on busking via a social media post. The link to the post, image of original post, and collated comments people left on that post are within Appendix 4. People were candid, and whilst there were negative comments, on the whole the feedback demonstrated a lot of public support for busking and the performers.
- 3.10. The Council has existing enforcement powers to tackle busking and street entertainment that is causing adverse impacts on the surroundings. However, in practice only in very serious incidences would these powers be used. In line with the Regulators' Code, Officers would be required to collate strong evidence over a period that an individual is persistently causing a statutory nuisance or negative impact by acting unreasonably or refusing to co-operate. This perceived lack of enforcement results in frustration from both the responsible busking and street entertainers as well as residents and businesses, that action cannot be taken quickly or effectively.
- 3.11. The enforcement tools available and their associated challenges are detailed below:
- 3.11.1. Environmental Protection Act 1990 (EPA). The Council can issue Noise Abatement Notices if the performance is considered a statutory nuisance by a determining Environmental Health Officer. A statutory nuisance is an objective standard defined as having a persistent or detrimental effect on a person's quality of life. Whilst often considered unreasonably loud, these activities do not usually meet the threshold to be considered a statutory nuisance.
- 3.11.2. Section 137 of the Highways Act 1980. Enforcement officers can use this power to move people along if they are causing an unlawful obstruction to the Highway, however, it is difficult for officers to demonstrate that a busker or street entertainer has wilfully caused an obstruction and often it is not the busker or street entertainer themselves but the audience that is causing an obstruction. In addition, it does not apply to any busking that takes place in open spaces that do not constitute the highway.

- 3.11.3. Under Section 62 of the Control of Pollution Act 1974 no amplification is allowed in any public street after 9pm and before 8am. In general busking activity takes place during the day when footfall is at its highest.
- 3.11.4. Community Protection Notices (CPNs) made under s.43 of the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. This would require both investigatory resources from RBC and/or TVP to issue the notices and legal resources to defend any challenges to the notices. CPNs can only be issued to over 16's. The Officer issuing the notice has to be "satisfied on reasonable grounds that (a) the conduct of the individual or body is having a detrimental effect, of a persistent or continuing nature, on the quality of life of those in the locality, and (b) the conduct is unreasonable". This is our most viable enforcement route for persistent detrimental busking activity by any individual offender, and it would be Reading officers who would issue them.
- 3.11.5. Public Space Protection Orders (PSPO) are aimed at ensuring public spaces can be enjoyed free from anti-social behaviour and help deal with persistent issues that harm communities, by designating an area to prohibit or control activities that are detrimental. The Council have a (recently introduced) PSPO for controlling certain types of anti-social behaviour at the more serious end of the scale; these do not cover busking. There is an option to potentially include busking in the PSPO or create a new additional one just for busking.
- 3.11.6. Officers consider a PSPO established to tackle adverse impacts generated from busking would be disproportionate to address the scale of the problem experienced in Reading and would be against the spirit in which the Council are seeking to strike a balance between protecting communities from adverse impacts whilst continuing to find opportunities for busking and street entertainment to take place. These activities and those of street preaching could be incorporated in our broader PSPO but that would be dependent on a separate needs assessment process.
- 3.11.7. Two examples of where PSPOs cover these activities are: Coventry City Council who have as part of their city centre PSPO, a prohibition from performing which is contrary to the "Coventry City Centre Code of Conduct for Performers" and Leeds City Council whose city centre PSPO prohibits "Person(s) within the restricted area will not create loud and persistent amplified sound which could reasonably cause annoyance". Leeds have also developed a code of conduct for preachers to follow to remain compliant with the PSPO.
- 3.12. Further analysis of the feedback received from BID is shown in Appendix 5. A number of key themes were identified:
- Excessive noise and amplification
 - Repeated non-compliance with guidance
 - Significant impacts on businesses, staff and residents
 - Repetition, duration and lack of rotation
 - Street preachers
 - Conflict
 - Public realm impact

These issues were taken into account as part of the review of the main sections of the Guide:

3.12.1. Dedicated Pitch Areas

There is some precedent (such as in London Underground tube stations) for marking out pitches, and/or having a location map of dedicated busking areas. The aim of such an approach is to reduce clustering and prevent the sound from one performance bleeding into another. It would be seen as legitimising or authorising buskers to occupy those areas. This approach could be taken either with or without also operating an auditioning or booking process (discussed below).

By setting out areas and legitimising them the Council would be taking responsibility for any nuisance caused to neighbouring businesses. These were the circumstances when Global Radio (which owns Heart, Capital, and LBC) launched a landmark legal case against Westminster City Council, accusing it of failing to control loud buskers outside its Leicester Square offices. In March 2025, a District Judge ruled in the company's favour, declaring the music from the pitch a statutory nuisance that the Council permitted and did not abate. Westminster now has a suspension in place for [all their pitches](#) in Leicester Square, Trafalgar Square, Piccadilly Circus and other areas.

Note that London Authorities are able to have a licensing regime, with conditions attached by virtue of the London Local Authorities Act 2000 (Part V – Busking) which is not a legal mechanism available to Reading. If setting out pitches was favoured it would have to be administered by BID and positioning agreed with the town centre businesses to avoid risk of legal challenge, as well as ongoing monitoring by BID. It is unlikely businesses would agree to pitches in locations where buskers already operate and this would not prevent other buskers locating in non-dedicated pitches unless appropriately enforced. With no dedicated resource and the risk of legal challenge it is not proposed to change the guide in this respect.

3.12.2 Noise Levels/Amplification

In the previous consultation and from viewing complaints since The Guide has been in place, several residents have expressed concerns about the volume of performances suggesting specific decibel limits should be included with enforceable measures for when buskers exceed these limits. The use of amplification in general was also raised with some advocating purely acoustic performances. Many people have found amplified music too loud and intrusive leading to a negative impact on their experience in the Town Centre. Removing consent to use of speakers, or playing accompanying music from mobile phones or any amplification devices is an option. It might render some of the acts less attractive, or impossible to perform altogether (such as the performer who is accompanied by a skeleton drummer, or a violinist playing over a musical accompaniment) when playing an amplified backing track is integral to the performance.

Consideration has been given to setting a decibel level in The Guide however it was decided not to include a set specific numerical level by officers and members at the time. There are difficulties with how such a level would be measured and by whom. Environmental Protection Officers who are trained in acoustics were consulted and advised that recording accurate measurements would be problematic without setting up specialist devices. Every pitch will have a different acoustic dynamic related to the location, type of sounds and weather conditions which will all have an effect on the sound quality, travel and volume of the performance. Therefore, as a variety of factors can affect sound levels, it is difficult to provide a 'set decibel' for buskers to follow. This approach is consistent with guides and codes of practice in place in other towns and cities.

The original intention was to ask buskers to exercise common sense to avoid a disturbance however following the consultation and further consideration further clarity was added to The Guide to aid performers in setting their levels. The Guide currently states: *The performance noise level should be set just above the level of background street noise so you can be heard but not cause undue interference to others. Your performance should not be audible in nearby shops and offices and there should be no*

spill-over of noise to other buskers. It further advises: *Avoid the use of amplifiers, loudspeakers, megaphones, or any similar equipment in your activity as this may cause a nuisance. If you do have small portable amplification equipment and you are asked to turn the level down by an authorised officer, then you must comply with those instructions. Avoid any amplification after 9pm - Under the Control of Pollution Act 1974 section 62, no amplification is allowed in any public street after 9pm and before 8am.* Although the Guide needs to specify this, as it is the law, enforcement of it is again an issue, nevertheless there is no recommendation to change this content in The Guide.

3.12.3. Length of Performance

Performers prefer a longer duration allowing for more elaborate setups and to provide time to build rapport with the audience. A balance was struck in The Guide to provide opportunity, variety and interest whilst avoiding the repetitive nature of some performances. After deliberation The Guide was written to contain this wording: *Avoid repetition of songs as this is often a cause of complaint. Change locations after a maximum of two hours and avoid returning to the same location for three hours. A culture of sharing and swapping pitches with other performers is encouraged.* This has not caused an issue, the main concern from feedback is noise level (and ability) rather than length of time. There is no change proposed to the Guide on this aspect.

3.12.4 Rights of Buskers and Street Preachers

The Council have received representations asking to address the rights of buskers and street preachers. Some buskers have asked for advice on dealing with harassment or unreasonable complaints. Many people appreciate the positive atmosphere and sense of community that street speakers and performers can bring to the town. There is a suggestion that buskers should be seen as skilled professionals who contribute to public safety and vibrancy and a call for more support to get performers into venues. One respondent to the previous consultation stated that buskers were not being treated as stakeholders and The Guide implied all performers were the cause of dispute. The Guide is constructively pitched to be positive and encouraging in tone. The intention of The Guide is to create a fair balance between encouraging buskers and performers but also recognising that they can be a cause of complaint. The Guide must set out certain principles to follow but this does not take away the fact buskers have the right to perform, and The Guide is intended to help ensure this is done in a way which is not intrusive to others. The Council and Reading BID believe the balance is currently right and there is no change proposed to the Guide on this aspect.

3.12.5 Enforcement

Reading BID Wardens have been the primary resource in engaging with buskers and promoting the principles of The Guide to performers. No enforcement action has been taken since The Guide has been in place. Dealing with problem buskers who fail to adhere to The Guide remains the main area of concern. There is no enforcement team resourced to provide dedicated enforcement, and the question remains if it is in the public interest to create a resource particularly given the additional financial implications and opinions are likely to be fairly polarised in respect of formal enforcement. Some people would like to see busking banned altogether, whereas others will see it as a form of intrusion for the Council to be heavy-handed in its approach to buskers.

The existing legal tools outlined in section 3.8 above will continue to be considered in extreme and persisting cases that, following proper investigation and assessment, are of such seriousness that there remains no option other than formal enforcement action after more proportionate methods to achieve a cessation of the nuisance have been exhausted. Those rare incidents will be considered on a case-by-case basis and dealt with as any other criminal investigation undertaken by Public Protection. It is considered that the enforcement measures already available to officers are sufficient, but there is an ongoing issue that these types of cases are resource intensive. Given no dedicated resource exists, priority would need to be given to these instances at the expense of other cases being progressed within the Public Protection service area, including licensing and

Environmental Health. Kingdom enforcement, who are the Council's current contracted environmental enforcement partner have been approached but the option to include busking is not available within the current contract and there is no legal framework for them to fine buskers.

3.12.6. Scope

The scope of The Guide has been to predominantly focussed on street performance in the form of busking. Music performances account for most of the busking activity currently in Reading Town Centre. The scope of The Guide does however, also capture performances of art or theatre where it is intended to entertain or engage with the public. Additionally, The Guide is explicit in stating the principles of the guidance also apply to other activities *which may have a similar impact in the town*, including street preaching. This scope was set following the previous consultation and is still considered to be both appropriate and relevant. There is no current desire to broaden or restrict the scope.

3.12.7. Auditions/Bookings

Responses in the previous consultation, and discussions with Councillors have debated whether auditions were feasible and necessary to improve the quality of performances and attempt to exclude undesirable performers. Although a potentially appealing prospect there are no additional resources to undertake that labour-intensive work, and a system to ensure robust, objective and recorded decision-making would be required. Potentially this would also require an appeal mechanism. What constitutes a 'good' performance is highly subjective and (to some degree) a matter of personal taste. It would still fail to address the matter that there is not a straightforward and quick enforcement route if a non-approved artist turns up to perform near a sanctioned auditionee. Therefore, it is not recommended to introduce auditioning or booking artists to The Guide.

4 **Summary and Conclusion**

4.1 Complaint Summary

Complaints about buskers, street performers, and street preachers in Reading are overwhelmingly focused on excessive amplified noise, often at very high decibel levels, which disrupts businesses, staff, residents, and visitors. There is consistent evidence of repeat offenders ignoring guidance and continuing problematic behaviours such as high-volume amplification, prolonged performances, and handing microphones to members of the public (including children). The impacts include loss of trade, inability to work effectively, and a degraded town centre experience. The data suggests that voluntary guidance is ineffective in isolation without enforcement, and many stakeholders are calling for stronger regulatory controls, particularly around amplification and compliance.

4.2 Commentary from BID and Views of Buskers

BID have responded to say The Guide has worked well as a conversation piece when speaking with buskers who are willing to engage. The Guide has helped to explain the negative impact of amplification, and the printed material backs up this message. Those buskers willing to engage in the conversation about amplification have, in general, adhered to the requests of the BID Wardens. The Guide works with a willing audience but those unwilling to comply will not engage in a conversation or printed material and have not adjusted their behaviour.

4.3 Conclusion

Given the analysis of complaints, consultation, and social media comments, the view is to continue to use The Guide as a tool to help buskers self-regulate and officers will continue to look on a case-by-case basis at using available powers where offences are potentially being committed. Considerable time, debate, consultation and consideration was put into the creation of The Guide as a means of stimulating discussions with buskers

and seeking co-operation from reasonable-minded performers, with care taken to set the tone right. On the whole that works, but it is recognised there is a low-level continuance of complaints, and a handful of performers know about The Guide but choose to ignore it. The enforcement measures haven't been tested for effectiveness but will continue to be considered on a case-by-case basis. In addition, BID will issue further communication plans for continued promotion of The Guide and to engage with performers.

4.4 Conclusion regarding Public Spaces Protection Orders (PSPOs)

Controls relating to busking could be included into the recently implemented PSPO which currently covers aggressive begging, alcohol-related anti-social behaviour, dog control, anti-social use of e-bikes/e-scooters, littering and dog fouling. This is considered likely to be disproportionate, and potentially not the best use of public funds as the purpose of a PSPO is to address persistent anti-social behaviour in public areas.

The majority of busking in Reading is not akin to the threshold of the recently adopted anti-social behaviour controls for dog fouling or aggressive begging. There were no comments received on busking as part of the Community Safety Survey or when discussing the PSPO at residents' forums as an area of concern to address an anti-social behaviour issue.

The PSPO regime is rarely used by Local Authorities to control busking as it is generally seen to be too heavy handed. A few examples have been found (Coventry City Council; Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea; and Blackpool Council) where Councils use a PSPO to require that buskers comply with the Guide they have set out, but this is not widespread. The London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham set out the conditions relating to busking directly in the PSPO.

5 **Contribution to Strategic Aims**

5.1 The Council Plan has established five priorities for the years 2025/28. These priorities are:

- Promote more equal communities in Reading.
- Secure Reading's economic and cultural success
- Deliver a sustainable and healthy environment and reduce our carbon footprint.
- Safeguard and support the health and wellbeing of Reading's adults and children.
- Ensure Reading Borough Council is fit for the future.

5.2 In delivering these priorities, we will be guided by the following set of principles:

- Putting residents first
- Building on strong foundations
- Recognising, respecting, and nurturing all our diverse communities
- Involving, collaborating, and empowering residents
- Being proudly ambitious for Reading

5.3 Full details of the Council Plan and the projects which will deliver these priorities are published on the Council's website - [Council plan - Reading Borough Council](#). These priorities and the Council Plan demonstrate how the Council meets its legal obligation to be efficient, effective and economical.

5.4 A refresh and marketing of the Guide will contribute to the themes of Inclusive Economy and Healthy Environment by making Reading a nicer and more attractive place to live, by improving the town centre experience, through helping develop a vibrant, attractive, and economically successful town for residents to live in and for businesses to thrive. The policy will also improve the quality of lives of residents by reducing the impact from excessive noise.

6 Environmental and Climate Implications

- 6.1 The Council declared a Climate Emergency at its meeting on 26 February 2019 (Minute 48 refers).
- 6.2 There are no environmental or climate implications arising from the decision. Many buskers and street performers are acoustic, no significant amounts of power or natural resources are used, and air quality is unaffected.

7 Community Engagement

- 7.1 Consultation or community engagement is not required at this stage, however depending on the decisions made by this Committee in terms of next steps, if there would be good value from consulting with stakeholders and there would be an expectation from those stakeholders that they would be consulted with, then we can undertake a consultation exercise if directed to and bring those results back to a future Committee.
- 7.2 It is worth noting that the original Guide was developed in partnership with Reading BID, Reading Economic Delivery Agency (REDA) and Thames Valley Police. A public consultation of the draft Guide was conducted through the Council website and promoted by Reading BID, to engage: all local businesses in the town centre, buskers and street entertainers, pro busking groups such as Keep Streets Live Campaign, the Musicians' Union and members of the public.

8 Equality Implications

- 8.1 The buskers and street performers in Reading are from a diverse range of backgrounds and a vibrant mix of ages, disabilities, races, religions and beliefs. There are no identified potentials for this matter to impact disproportionately on any specific protected characteristic.
- 8.2 It is recognised that the code of conduct will incorporate activities of faith groups and faith groups which could be from a specific racial or ethnic group. An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) has therefore been completed. It is not expected there will be any significant adverse impacts on specific groups due to race gender, disability sexual orientation, age or religious beliefs. At this stage the EqIA concludes that this will not have a significant impact as the code is intended to be collaborative and aims to adapt rather than restrict activities.

9 Other Relevant Considerations

- 9.1 All relevant considerations are already discussed within this report.

10 Legal Implications

- 10.1 The preparation and distribution of a Guide does not require any specific legal power. The Council has delegated powers to enforce the provisions of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, Antisocial Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, Highways Act 1980 and Control of Pollution Act 1974.

11 Financial Implications

- 11.1 There is no agreed budget provision for any work on this topic.
- 11.2 There are currently no financial implications unless a decision is taken to explore doing something significantly different from the current position. Necessary funding would need to be identified upfront to enforce busking as outlined in the report.

12 Timetable for Implementation

- 12.1 If a decision is taken to re-issue The Guide (with or without a change in content), Reading BID will take the lead role on the Guide as they have established links with the businesses in the town centre where most complaints arise. BID wardens, Police and Council officers can use it to promote our objectives by having some printed hard copies to distribute.

- 12.2 A communications campaign is also proposed. All those actions would be best achieved over the course of the Summer 2026, however if the decision is taken by Committee to conduct any consultation work now it would be likely to delay a launch of a new guide to Spring 2027 as street performances decline considerably in the Autumn/Winter periods. BID would effectively take the lead as they have done previously which would include advertising and hosting the guide.

13 Background Papers

- 13.1 There are none.

Appendices

1. Existing Guide for Busking and Street Performance in Reading, November 2024
2. Complaints Spreadsheet
3. AI Complaints Analysis & Summary
4. Facebook Comments (responding to the TVP social media post)
5. Analysis of the Complaints Spreadsheet by themes