

Appendix 5 – Analysis of complaints spreadsheet, grouped by themes

Main themes

Excessive noise and amplification (by far the dominant issue). This is the core driver of almost all complaints.

Key characteristics

Frequent references to very high-volume levels, supported by readings:

- Typically, 80–90+ dBA, with peaks close to 100 dBA
- Amplification (speakers + microphones) is the main cause.
- Noise carries into shops and offices, and up to 500m away (residential impact).

Impacts described

- Cannot hear customers or colleagues.
- Telephone calls and meetings disrupted.
- Customers leaving premises.
- Staff moving to back offices.
- People leaving the town centre early.

Pattern: This is not occasional — it is persistent, daily, and predictable.

Failure to comply with guidance / repeated warnings ignored.

There is strong evidence of systematic non-compliance.

Multiple instances of:

- Buskers being spoken to repeatedly.
- Guidance leaflets issued
- Requests to reduce volume ignored.
- Some individuals identified as repeat offenders (e.g. named performers)

Typical behaviours

- Turning down volume temporarily when observed, then increasing again
- Ignoring wardens or BID staff.
- Continuing despite direct intervention

Use of microphones by the public (especially children)

A distinct and serious theme emerged from issues reported combining noise nuisance and safeguarding concerns.

One particular identified busker:

- Handing microphones to members of the public
- Encouraging shouting/screaming
- Repeated references to young girls (approx. 13–15)
- Extremely high noise spikes
- Filming and photographing young participants.
- Physical contact (e.g. hugging) described as inappropriate.

Impact on businesses and the local economy

This is a major theme throughout with reported impacts including:

- Loss of trade (customers leaving, doors closed)
- Poor customer experience
- Staff stress and reduced morale

Inability to conduct:

- Retail sales (John Lewis, M&S, Primark, etc.)
- Professional meetings (HSBC, Deloitte)
- Medical consultations (opticians)

To those static businesses experiencing nuisance, busking is being experienced not as ambient entertainment, but as a material business disruption.

Repetition, duration, and lack of rotation

Complaints highlight how often and how long performers remain in one place.

Key points:

- Same performers in the same locations daily or near-daily
- Sessions lasting several hours at a time.
- Repetitive music, same songs played on loop.

Impact:

- “Relentless” experience for workers
- Cumulative effect on wellbeing and tolerance

Street preachers / religious groups (similar issues)

Issues are not limited to buskers. Complaints include:

- Loud amplified preaching
- Groups using speakers at high volume.
- Same impacts as buskers: Cannot hear conversations, and disruption to businesses.

Additional issues:

- Refusal to engage when challenged.
- High decibel readings comparable to amplified music

Pattern: The issue is amplified sound in public space generally, not just music.

Conflict, accusations, and difficult interactions

Several incidents show escalation when challenged.

Example:

- Accusations of: Racism when asked to move or reduce volume.

Buskers:

- Refusing to engage
- Smiling/ignoring requests
- Denying behaviour despite being observed

Public realm impact / town centre experience

A broader reputational theme.

Feedback includes busking described as:

- “Oppressive”
- “Unpleasant”
- “Letting Reading down”

Visitors:

- Leaving early
- Avoiding staying in the area

Common proposals

- Licensing system
- Ban or restriction on amplification.
- Stronger enforcement powers
- Clearer rules with consequences
- There is a clear perception that current guidance alone is ineffective.

Notable clustering of complaints

The data shows:

Repeat complaints about specific individuals.

Particularly:

- One frequently referenced busker near John Lewis
- One regularly referenced busker outside M&S/Primark (with a specific description redacted for the purpose of this public report)

This indicates: A small number of performers generating a disproportionate number of complaints.

Overall synthesis

The dataset supports the following conclusions:

- This is primarily a noise control issue.
- Driven by amplification, not busking itself.
- Impacts are economic, operational, and reputational.
- Not just subjective annoyance
- There are secondary risk issues - Safeguarding (children + filming + physical contact)