

Letter from Westminster



THERE has been discussion in recent weeks of BoomTown Fair and plans to increase the size of the festival over the next two years.

I remain a supporter of BoomTown which, let's remember, takes place over one long weekend once a year. I declare an interest in that I am a festival-goer myself having attended Glastonbury, and others, since I was quite young but I hope that's given me a balanced view and a level of insight into what really goes on. Bottom line; I think we should see the whole picture when forming an opinion.

First and foremost, we were all teenagers once and thousands of young people living locally safely enjoy BoomTown and the opportunity to see acts such as the Gorillaz, Ziggy Marley and The Specials just up the road.

Secondly, BoomTown adds significantly to the local economy as thousands of visitors come through the city and spend their money. Festivals are big business these days and we should recognise that, at Matterley, we have one of the best festival sites in southern England.

Third, BoomTown is - quite properly - subject to very stringent licensing and noise regulation via Winchester City Council.

Having spent time on-site in the central control room, I know they are clear how seriously we in the local community view the terms of their licence and how we expect it to be adhered to in both the spirit and letter of the law.

And then there's money; which reminds me BoomTown has to-date raised some £32,000 for local charities and organisations including the Air Ambulance, Trinity, Naomi House and Street Reach as well as smaller sums for others. We should all, especially those in receipt of the big sums, be careful not to pop up on TV criticising with one hand while taking the BoomTown shilling with the other.

Finally, drugs; and I do not for one moment skirt over the dangers or the tragic deaths we've seen at BoomTown in previous years. I've spoken to parents who've lost children.

But I don't believe the problem will go away if we bury our heads in the sand or move the festival elsewhere. As the local MP, and as the public health minister, I am glad the organisers are committed to working on ways we can use an event that captures the attention of young people in a way we cannot - to talk frankly about the dangers of drug use.

The recent film BoomTown released about their harm reduction programme - and on-site 'loop' testing programme - was a landmark piece of work. I think there's now a huge evolution in the festival world and a chance for it to step up and finally realise the public health potential of our growing festival industry.

Steve Brine MP

25/1/18