

Call to stop smokers' parade

Exclusive Chris Osuh

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THE Health Secretary is being asked to stop a float of `unrepentant smokers' entering a Manchester International Festival parade.

Promoters have advertised in tobacconists and on the internet for smokers to join the festival launch parade, which is costing an estimated £250,000.

The hour-long extravaganza, called Procession, is being put together by Turner Prize winning artist Jeremy Deller who has been given a commission reputedly worth £50,000 to showcase the city, its history, traditions and characters.

Festival bosses decided on Thursday to press ahead with the smoking element of the spectacle, partly paid for by the 10 councils of Greater Manchester, despite criticism from town hall chiefs.

Now Pat Karney, NHS director of Smoke-Free Manchester, is writing to Leigh MP and health secretary Andy Burnham to stop the smokers taking part in the parade.

It is understood Coun Karney has the support of Sheila Newman, Manchester council's director of children's services, and former Lord Mayor of Manchester Glynn Evans, the council's executive member for health.

Coun Karney told the M.E.N.: "It's a family event and there's going to be thousands of children and young people there.

"Featuring smokers makes a mockery of the millions that has been spent on smoking cessation programmes.

"There's no doubt that kids do see smoking everywhere and that it's a free society but to spend public money in this way would be a complete disgrace and bring shame on Manchester."

Manchester council's communities and neighbourhoods committee unanimously passed a resolution on Tuesday condemning the smoking element as `an appalling waste of taxpayers' money'.

Senior doctors, led by anti-smoking campaigner and director of public health for Bury, Dr Peter Elton, are to petition Manchester International Festival bosses for a meeting.

Dr Peter Elton told the MEN: "The issue is that there are hardened smokers going on this float. Processions are very attractive to children. Our concern is that it could make smoking attractive."

Other floats include the Alternative Project, featuring the young people who hang around outside Urbis, a musical tribute to Oldham's first fish and chip shop, and a debut of a new piece of music played through the sound systems of souped-up cars.

Procession organisers are also calling on mill workers, rose queens, ramblers, Happy Mondays fans and descendants of people involved in the 1819 Peterloo Massacre to join in.

The parade will travel down Deansgate, from Liverpool Road to Manchester Cathedral, on July 5 - the opening weekend of the two-and-a-half week arts extravaganza which is expected to cost around £9.6m.