

Location, Location, Location

Phil Hadfield, Stuart Lister, Dick Hobbs and Simon Winlow look at developmental controls to prevent alcohol-related crime and disorder.

There is an old adage in the leisure industry that there are three priorities in establishing a successful business: location, location and location. Following John Major's famous response to Tony Blair's repetitious 'education' slogan, this article will argue that the priorities of agencies attempting to prevent alcohol-related crime and disorder should focus on the same priorities as leisure industry developers, only in a different order! Alcohol is our 'favourite drug' and the commercial lifeblood of the night-time economies which have become such a salient feature of the contemporary urban context (Hobbs et al., 2000). Yet the rapid expansion of alcohol-led leisure development within our town and city centres has also had a number of largely unforeseen and problematic consequences (Hadfield et al., 2001). It is now widely acknowledged that the crime, disorder and anti-social behaviour found in central nightlife areas has become one of the most significant areas of concern for agencies involved in crime management and community safety. Approximately 70% of the first wave of local authority crime audits published in England and Wales identified alcohol as a problem, particularly in relation to disorder. We would argue that an essential prerequisite of any effective response to alcohol-related public violence and disorder is to recognise that such incidents are highly concentrated in both space and time and that their vagaries almost invariably reflect local trends in leisure development. This issue is of fundamental importance and yet is rarely reflected in official (for example, Home Office, 2001) or academic discussions of the topic.

Although the vast majority of night-time leisure venues may be responsibly run and of benefit to local economies, all too often the 'entertainment offer' is targeted at a socially narrow, youth and drink-based segment of the market. Relatively little violence may occur within licensed premises themselves, rather problems tend to flare on the street and around taxi

ranks and fast-food outlets as people compete for scarce resources and antagonistically inclined groups connect. Once drinking circuits are established around clusters of licensed premises such areas can become citywide or even regional attractions for revellers and the increased activity levels begin to place a chronic drain, not only upon local policing, but also upon the resources of the NHS, the criminal justice system and the tolerance levels of local residents. Furthermore, the pressure of market forces ensures that new alcohol-led businesses have a tendency to displace the less profitable, non-alcohol-based activities which attract other types of night-time visitor. This loss or discouragement of wider community participation in night-life is important as the very presence of socially and culturally diverse crowds can serve to 'normalise' the on-street environment and enhance informal controls.

Development issues

In 1999, a 12-month survey of patients attending the Accident and Emergency department of Hereford general hospital found that 44% of alcohol-related night-time assaults, for the county of Herefordshire as a whole, occurred in just one street. Whilst recorded violence and disorder in Newcastle-upon-Tyne fell between 1997 and 2001, significant rises were recorded in the Quayside area corresponding with its emergence as the North East's most popular night-time destination. Between 1997 and 2001 the Quayside experienced a 19% increase in the total capacity of its licensed premises, a 38% increase in drunk and disorderly offences, a 38% increase in assaults and an 18% increase in criminal damage.

Manchester's 2001 crime audit recorded 1,277 assaults in and around one small area of the city centre with a particularly high density of licensed premises. This figure was more than double the number recorded in any other part of the city centre. The same audit identified the Peter Street area as a hotspot for 'assault and wounding.'

This area had not appeared in the two previous audits, however, during 2000 a large multi-leisure complex and a number of licensed premises opened in the vicinity, transforming a comparatively quiet street into an extremely busy drinking circuit.

Were one asked to



The Urilift, City of Westminster

deliberately devise a way of exacerbating problems of alcohol-related crime and disorder in a small English market town one would be hard pushed to better a proposal to replace the only cinema with a 700 capacity bar/nightclub sitting cheek and jowl next to several other high capacity licensed premises and adjacent to a late-night kebab shop in an area with no late night public transport and assault and disorder rates already four times higher than those of any other location in the county. Yet in the night-time economy, locations that are 'bad' for crime and disorder are invariably 'good' for business and the ambitious 'roll-out' plans of the licensed trade ensure that proposals of this kind are commonplace.

Designated 'stress areas'

Whilst spatial-temporal factors are but one constituent of the complex and multi-faceted alcohol and crime nexus (see, Roberts et al., 2001), practitioners should be alert to the potential benefits of anticipating and 'planning out' such problems at the earliest stages of the development process. Whilst many local authorities continue to facilitate further expansion of the night-time economy, in London the City of Westminster has embarked upon a policy of restraint. A number of locations, including Soho and Covent Garden, are now designated as 'stress areas' in which the number of licensed premises is adjudged to have reached 'saturation point.' Accordingly, the council are developing more integrated planning and entertainment licensing strategies and, as a matter of policy, now refuse almost all development applications which would lead to further expansion of the capacity or extension of the trading times of licensed premises within the 'stress areas.' The City of Westminster has also commissioned an investigative study of initiatives adopted by cities around the world. One of the first fruits of this exercise is the introduction of the UriLift, a hydraulically powered version of the French 'pissoir.' This cylindrical urinal, which remains below ground during the day, has been successfully used in Holland to reduce public male urination.

Effective development management

Due to the scale of development pressures being placed upon the West End of London and its unusually (for Britain) mixed business/residential profile, the area's problems are in many ways unique and there are unlikely to be many places where such a firm regulatory stance would be similarly appropriate. That said, there is a pressing need to follow other European countries in introducing more effective development controls; under the present regulatory system however, this is easier said than done. Licensed premises are subject to three forms of municipal control - planning, public entertainment licensing, and liquor licensing - yet there is often little co-ordination or consistency of practice between the various regulatory bodies. Subsequently within this archaic system, various legal and procedural loopholes exist which enable applications that are opposed by the police, local authorities and residents' groups to slip through the regulatory net. Moreover, much depends upon the opinions of the lay licensing justices who are effectively charged with playing the role of Town Centre Manager and Community Safety Officer rolled into one.

If, however, as seems likely under the *Time for Reform* proposals (Home Office, 2000), alcohol licensing powers are transferred to local authorities, councils will gain jurisdiction

over all three forms of control, allowing, in principle, much greater scope for 'joined-up' thinking and integrated policy. Each local authority would be given powers to develop a comprehensive licensing policy for its area, thus providing a framework within which the licensing committee's decisions on individual applications could be assessed. Applicants would be required to submit a proposed operating plan, setting out how the premises are to be run. Applications would be considered on their individual merit and, crucially, on their potential impact upon the locality. Unlike licensing justices, local authority licensing committees would have the expertise and relevant knowledge to consider applications holistically within the crime preventative context of Section 17 of the *Crime and Disorder Act*. Much has been made of Government proposals to abolish statutory opening hours and also of the assumed benefits of 'staggered' closing times, but this seems unlikely to become an issue of crucial concern for under the proposals there would be local licensing plans to ensure that 'round the clock' trading was only permitted in certain areas, subject to community consultation. Such regulations could be used to promote a more balanced and mixed economy whilst recognising that what may be one part of a city's additional development pressures might be another area's regenerative blessing.

Clearly the current regulatory framework is not working, thus the proposed reforms should perhaps be seen not as a threat, but rather as an opportunity to devise a system which is more efficient, more democratically accountable, more attuned to local conditions and ultimately more effective in reducing alcohol-related crime and disorder. Through the responsible implementation of such policies, local authorities would have the power to regulate in ways which improved the environment of their night-time urban centres as places to work, live and visit, whilst also, by encouraging wider community participation, providing new commercial opportunities for the leisure industry itself.

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