

Transformations in the night-time economy in English town centres: challenges to management

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Abstract

The state of many British town centres in the evening and at night is a cause for concern. In the early 1990's a vision was introduced for Jane Jacobs' inspired mixed-use centres with a strong residential component and a variety of small and large businesses whose operating hours extended into the evening. Coupled with this went a relaxation of the licensing laws, an encouragement of a café culture and the provision of new cultural attractions. The central quarters of many towns and cities enjoyed a brief period of 'renaissance', only to find that this was being rapidly undermined by a proliferation of bars, pubs and nightclubs fuelled by the British culture of youthful binge drinking. This paper reports the findings of a postal survey and other secondary evidence that reveals the conflicts and tensions that lie at the heart of problems associated with British town centres during the hours of darkness. On the one hand there is agreement that town centres need to be safe and attractive places to visit and to live in. On the other there are economic gains for major entertainment operators in selling alcohol through youth orientated venues. Some of the impact of these establishments can be managed through extra public services such as transport, cleansing and policing. The responsibility for payment for extra services is denied by the operators who argue that they already pay excessive taxes that are levied on the sale of alcohol. The conflicts between 'private affluence' and 'public squalor' continue despite the best efforts of authorities to regenerate and revitalise their town centres.

Keywords: town centres, night-time economy, management, sustainability, transformation, alcohol.



1 Introduction

Over the last decade many British town and city centres have undergone a transformation. This transformation has been experienced in different stages in different places. In the early 1990's the consultancy, Comedia [2] described a situation where centres were deserted at night save from young 'lager louts' moving from pub to pub. Then followed regeneration initiatives [3] and in some centres mixed-use quarters emerged with new cultural attractions, cutting edge late night bars and clubs, restaurants and 'loft' apartments (see Hobbs *et al.* [4] for a discussion of Manchester). The private sector swiftly realised that profits were to be made and thereon followed what has been described as a 'relentless expansion' of night life with corporate providers taking over smaller operators [5] and expanding venues into large-scale 'drinking factories'[6]. Venues that cater for a youth market, particularly of 'vertical drinkers' have dominated provision. Different centres are going through different trajectories with some secondary towns going straight from small pubs and lager louts to a domination of late night bars and others hosting quarters that are still 'cutting edge cool'.

Until 2004 this transformation evoked little response at a national level. Academic research and the proposal to introduce new liquor licensing legislation provoked some interest. The House of Commons conducted a Select Committee *Inquiry into the Evening Economy and the Urban Renaissance* [7]. That Inquiry heard evidence from local authorities, the police, trade organisations, health charities and residents and other pressure groups about the threats posed to the revitalisation of town centres by the expansion of what has become to be known as the 'night-time economy'. Anecdotal evidence was brought forward about the problems of litter, noise and cleansing as well crime and disorder [8]. Since that initial hearing concerns about crime and violence associated with binge drinking encouraged by the night-time economy have grown. Whilst violent crime is undoubtedly important, this paper pays attention to other aspects of the problems that are of equal concern to local councils and that have received less publicity. Issues such as transport, cleansing and noise also directly threaten the social and environmental sustainability of town centres.

2 Background to survey

The researchers decided to undertake a postal survey of all local authorities in order to investigate the differential state of the night-time economy in England. The survey was commissioned by the Civic Trust, which is a charitable organisation and represents civic societies throughout Britain. Specific funding came from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Institute for Alcohol Studies, which is also a charitable organisation.

The survey was posted out in December 2003 to all 383 local authorities in England, the area within the ODPM's authority. It was decided to survey all authorities and not just urban centres, because newspaper reports had commented problems of disorder in small coastal towns and the Inquiry had heard evidence



of problems in sub-centres. The survey was followed up by telephone calls to ensure an adequate rate of return.

The response rate was normal for postal surveys, with 89 responses received comprising 23% of the total. The responses were received in a geographical spread in which all regions in England were represented. The majority of the responses were from Inner London (12.4%), outer London (12.4%) and urban areas (47.2%) which when combined comprise 72% of the total. Nevertheless rural and deep rural areas were also represented making up the remaining 28% [10].

3 Extent of growth in the evening and night-time economies

In attempting to ascertain the extent of growth a distinction was made between the evening and night-time economies because it could have been possible for a locality to have been experiencing a growth in late night activities, after midnight, and not in evening activities, defined as before midnight. No authority made a response that indicated a growth in their evening economy without a commensurate rise in their late night economy.

The picture that emerged was of expansion, but which was unevenly distributed. Nearly all London authorities had experienced 'significant growth'. Similarly, almost all respondent authorities in the South-East and North-West had seen growth in their night time economies. Those not experiencing expansion include a mixture of urban and rural authorities and the remaining respondent London boroughs (see Table 1). These responses provide greater depth to other studies that have concentrated on a small number of urban centres [11].

Table 1: Has there been a significant growth in evening/late-night activities in your area in recent years?

	no	yes	Grand Total
Deep rural	0.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Outer London	0.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Inner London	9.1%	90.9%	100.0%
Urban	14.3%	85.7%	100.0%
Rural	23.8%	76.2%	100.0%
Grand Total	13.5%	86.5%	100.0%

4 Problems

A question was asked about problems and respondents were asked to grade their responses on a scale of one to five where five was classified as a very serious issue and one, not a problem. Grades four and five were amalgamated as a 'major issue'. 74.2% of authorities responding agreed that the development and management of evening/late night activities were now considered to be a major



issue in their area. Those disagreeing included mainly deep rural areas and some parts of Inner London.

Table 2: Is the development/management of evening/late night activities now considered to be a major issue in your area?

	no	not particularly	yes	Grand Total
Outer London	0.0%	9.1%	90.9%	100.0%
Urban	4.8%	19.0%	76.2%	100.0%
Rural	0.0%	28.6%	71.4%	100.0%
Inner London	0.0%	36.4%	63.6%	100.0%
Deep rural	25.0%	25.0%	50.0%	100.0%
Grand Total	3.4%	22.5%	74.2%	100.0%

Table 3 sets out the most interesting results of the survey from an environmental point of view. These illustrate that the problems that local authorities experience with most severity relate to infrastructure and services and not to crime. The most serious problem recorded was of insufficient public transport at night. This was reported as a severe problem in the outer London boroughs (63.6%), on the one hand, and in rural areas (61.9%), on the other. Both outer London boroughs and rural areas tend to be highly dependent on buses and on the private car.

The second most serious problem reported by 33.7% of local authorities as serious or extremely serious is litter or rubbish on the streets. This was especially important for London boroughs and other urban areas. One inner London authority reported making additional waste collections, as did a major coastal city. The third problem is linked as it relates to the fouling of streets, by urination or worse. 30% of local authorities reported it as being serious or extremely serious. Public urination is not a civil offence in national legislation, but can be prohibited by local authority by-law. It also constitutes a health hazard.

The fourth most significant problem related to the perception of place feelings of safety. One town council in south central England reported: 'A smart restaurant near the core would fail unless their customers are deposited and picked up from the door of the establishment'. A spa town commented that 'tourists do not venture out at night'. The domination of micro districts within town centres by a youthful age group was a common theme.

Noise disturbance to local residents came fifth on the list. It was the inner London boroughs who recorded this as a serious problem. Poor signage is also a problem, and one provincial city council reported that because of this customers from bars and night clubs tended to get lost and to follow routes through residential neighbourhoods. Another commented that it was difficult for its planning authority to decide 'which venues create a positive impact on the city and those which cause additional noise and disturbance in partly residential areas'.

Table 3: Do evening/late-night activities cause significant problems in your area or raise significant issues?

N	Issue	Type of problem	1 – no problem	2 – small problem	3 – problem	4+5 – serious or extremely serious problem	N/A	Total
1	Insufficient public transport at night	Transport, public, private	2.2%	16.9%	25.8%	52.8%	2.2%	100
2	Litter/rubbish on streets	Waste management	4.5%	27.0%	33.7%	33.7%	1.1%	100
3	Fouling of streets, public spaces	Anti-social behaviour	10.1%	25.8%	30.3%	30.3%	3.3%	100
4	Area feels threatening or unsafe	Perception of place	12.4%	20.2%	34.8%	29.2%	3.3%	100
5	Noise disturbing local residents	Anti-social behaviour	9.0%	22.5%	40.4%	28.1%	0.0	100
6	Rowdiness, fighting in the street	Anti-social behaviour	2.2%	33.7%	39.3%	23.6%	1.1%	100
7	Vandalism	Anti-social behaviour	12.4%	39.3%	30.3%	15.7%	2.2%	100
8	Drug dealing	Criminal activity	19.3%	36.4%	23.9%	13.6%	6.8%	100
A	Additional policing required	Policing	2.2%	12.4%	32.6%	50.6%	2.2%	100
B	Additional servicing of area required	Better management required	7.9%	24.7%	38.2%	23.6%	5.6%	100

Other problems that had been listed in the questions because they had either been highlighted in the press or in secondary sources were not recorded as being serious or extremely serious. For example, rowdiness and fighting on the street was not a typical night-time economy issue for outer London boroughs.

5 Benefits of expanding the night-time economy

Whilst the expansion of the night-time economy raised many problems, most local authorities perceived it as bringing benefits to the locality. These are set out in Table 4. 46% of local councils regarded an improvement in vitality of their areas as being the main benefit of increased night time activities. One inner London authority saw expansion as 'increasing facilities for residents and boosting the Borough's cultural economy'. Over time, such an increase in vitality might bring other benefits, such as a growth in non-alcohol based activities. 37% of respondents perceived an 'increased number of jobs' as a benefit. Expansion of the night-time economy has sometimes been pursued as a conscious regeneration strategy where traditional sources of jobs have been in decline through industrial re-structuring [1].

Table 4: What are the main benefits associated with evening/late night activities in your area?

NN	Benefit	Type of benefit	1	2	3	4+5	N/A	Totl
1	Improvement in vitality of the area(s)	Greater footfall, enhanced perceptions	4.5%	14.6%	28.1%	46.1%	6.7%	100
2	Increased number of jobs	Economic	4.5%	15.7%	34.8%	37.1%	7.9%	100
3	Attraction/expansion of leisure venues	Non-alcohol based NTE	12.4%	25.8%	25.8%	29.2%	6.7%	100
4	Greater number of tourists	Economic	19.1%	31.5%	20.2%	20.2%	7.9%	100
5	New residents moving in	Sustainable neighbourhoods	36.0%	22.5%	18.0%	11.2%	12.4%	100
6	Inward investment in other businesses	Economic vitality	29.5%	23.9%	3.4%	10.2%	33.0%	100
7	Increased perceptions of safety	Enhanced perceptions	49.4%	18.0%	13.5%	7.9%	10.1%	100

25% reported an increase in non-alcohol based leisure venues, such as cinemas, theatres and gyms. A diversification of the evening economy through an expansion of leisure venues other than drinking and eating places, was recorded as beneficial and extremely beneficial by 54.5% of outer London



boroughs and other urban areas. One London authority that suffers from high levels of social deprivation reported that the expansion of the nighttime economy in one of its minor centres had proved a ‘useful marketing tool’, presumably for boosting the Borough’s image.

It seems that very few local authorities reported that expansion of their night-time economies increased perceptions of safety. This is consistent with the problems reported in Table 3, but lies in direct contradiction to conventional thinking expressed in Planning Policy Guidance 6 (now revised) about ‘crowding out crime’ [14]. It would seem that the presence of people on the street only heightens a sense of safety if they are sober. A relatively small proportion of authorities mentioned new residents moving in as a benefit. Again this is consistent with the problems recorded in Table 3 and points to the need to contain the expansion of the night-time economy in order to create sustainable town centres.

6 Responses to problems

The problems with the night-time economy arose so quickly that local authorities and local police forces were required to respond without the benefit of guidance from central government. A question was asked about specific policies and strategies that had been developed in response to problems, other than changes to policies that were being developed any way, such as licensing strategies.

Table 5: Is your authority proposing any new measures to improve the management of areas of intensive evening/night-time activities?

NN	Measure	Type of measure	yes	N/A	Total
1	Improvements in surveillance (CCTV)	Pub and club watch schemes directly linked to police CCTV	77.53%	22.47%	100
2	Improvements in/ or partnership with police (e.g. neighbourhood wardens, community support officer)	Community safety strategies; joint licensing enforcement visits; community support officers	76.40%	23.60%	100
3	Late night economy partnership with entertainment industry	Multi-stakeholder working groups	50.56%	49.44%	100
4	Improvements in lighting	Environmental improvements; gating	43.82%	56.18%	100

The most popular approach to improvements focused on crime and disorder (see Table 5.). 77.5% of local authorities chose improvements to CCTV systems as their most important response. This apparent discrepancy with the ranking of problems where crime and disorder issues were not reported as being the most pressing problems might be explained by the offer of grants from the Home



Office to install CCTV cameras. Furthermore the linking of the CCTV cameras in pubs and clubs (Pubwatch) to a centrally run police CCTV control room encourages the involvement of the private sector in environmental management.

The second most popular initiative again involved crime, 76.4% of districts cited setting up new partnerships with the police or improving existing ones as a new management response. Approximately half of the respondents, 50.56% intended to set up working groups where representatives of the licensed trade, different local authority departments (licensing, environmental health, planning, cultural development) and other agencies such as the police, the youth service and the health service could meet and work together. The relatively low response to making environmental improvements, 43.82%, such as gating dark alleyways and improving lighting might be explained by the difference in response between rural and urban areas. Urban areas may have already carried out this work.

7 Commentary

7.1 Extent and nature of problems

The survey highlighted the differences between town and city centres with regard to their geography. It was found that 'deep rural areas' were experiencing serious issues with regard to the expansion of their night-time economies and this was not just a problem for the big cities. This suggests that the planning of historic market towns, with their numerous pubs and hostelries, need to pay attention to this issue.

Furthermore, although media interest has concentrated on crime and anti-social behaviour, for local authorities, the questions of infrastructure in the form of transport, cleansing and waste are equally severe. One provincial city summed up this concern with the comment: 'Without doubt there has been a recent change of culture within the city centres where there has been a drastic increase in the number of licensed premises with no additional resources to deal with the issues that result.'

An additional concern is also that although central Government planning policy has sought to encourage the return of residential uses into town centres, a significant number of authorities were reporting conflicts between residential and entertainment uses in terms of noise. The Commons Inquiry heard evidence that these problems were leading some residents to consider moving out of these centres entirely, thereby potentially undermining their sustainability as mixed-use centres.

From the point of view of encouraging the diversification of the evening economy, there was encouraging evidence of the appearance of new non-alcohol based leisure activities, although this was in only a minority of town centres. Other centres bemoaned the problem, with one rural authority commenting: 'How can a local authority encourage cafes and retailers to continue in medium sized market towns where the businesses concerned do not/have not identified a commercial need?'



7.2 Private affluence and public squalor

Much of the public discussion about the costs of the proliferation of bars and clubs has focused on policing. The most recent central Government discussion document, *Drinking Responsibly* [13] proposes 'Alcohol Disorder Zones' where in the case of sustained problems with crime and disorder, the police and the local authority can temporarily create a designated area within which the proprietors of licensed premises have to contribute to the costs of policing and cleansing. There are no firm figures for how much the night-time economy costs in any one town centre, although many surveyed commented on the resource issues resulting from 'insufficient funds to manage town centres in the evening/night-time (e.g. street cleansing, ad hoc repairs, anti-social hours etc.'

The other scheme that is being suggested by central government to deal with the costs of the night-time provided is BIDs, or Business Improvement Districts. Modelled on the North American concept. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has introduced legislation to set up pilot schemes in 22 local authority areas [14]. The objective of the scheme is to provide extra services in designated town centre locations, that are extra to those normally provided, but paid for by private businesses. Although it is early in the process, these indications suggest that BIDs will not provide a universal solution for local authorities seeking to recover the costs of expanding night time activities.

The Prime Minister made a statement in 2004 in connection with binge drinking to the effect that that if the problems associated with unbridled expansion of the night-time economy persist and incur extra costs to the public purse, then the Government would demand extra contributions from the operators of late night entertainment. The response from trade organisations was that they considered that sufficient contribution was already made in the form of taxation, that is from the Customs and Excise duties on alcohol and through the business rate which is charged locally [15]. Both of these payments go directly to the Exchequer and none stay with the local authority.

On an individual basis operators have argued that local authorities could do more by recognising that night-time activities are as important as day-time and that services should be re-configured to meet this temporal change. Our survey found that some authorities were indeed doing this and, for example were arranging extra refuse collections at night. However even this is not without cost, as operatives may need to patrol in pairs at night for extra security. The issue of subsidy further applies to the diversification of evening and night-time activities. Cultural policy in England is geared towards the daytime opening of libraries, art galleries and museums. Extending the opening hours of these facilities would involve extra subsidies from either central or local government.

8 Concluding comments

At end of the 1980's town and city centres were considered a problem in terms of their economic and social sustainability because of a lack of people and activities. Local authorities have been keen to encourage the expansion of



evening and night-time activities, but it is the alcohol based late night activities that have expanded the most. These in turn threaten the overall sustainability of town centres after mid-evening through the demands that they place on local services and through heightening perceptions of threat and lack of safety. Despite the increased turnover and profit that is being generated costs are falling on central and local government and hence on the local and national taxes. These conflicts point towards the need for stronger planning controls and an enforcement of 'polluter pays' principles to urban life.

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