

# RIDING THE TIGER?

## Norwich's Night Time Economy

### 1. INTRODUCTION.

Our Environmental Audit last year examined the condition of Norwich's central spine road from St Stephen's roundabout to Foundry Bridge. Originally it was also intended to look at the situation on Prince of Wales Road and Riverside, where the vast mass of bars, restaurants, pubs and clubs constituting Norwich's Night Time Economy (NTE) are situated.

It quickly became obvious that the problems and opportunities faced by residents and visitors, businesses, regulatory authorities and the police, were such that a separate inquiry was needed. It was also necessary to await and assess the impact of the new Licensing Act which came into force in November 2005.

It is plain from anecdotal evidence, plus reports and comments in the press, that the existence of the NTE is causing anxiety, even fear, among the citizens of Norwich. Is this justified, or mainly a matter of inaccurate perception? Either way, such a state of mind will eventually affect development and investment in the city centre, at a time when the historical tide of households moving out to the suburbs and county is being reversed on a major scale.

We visited Prince of Wales Road and Riverside through the night on a Friday and a Saturday both before and after the introduction of the Licensing Act in November 2005. We also interviewed officers in charge of policing on the streets, night club owners, publicans, residents and customers. We hope the following report will be of use to all such stakeholders in the NTE.

### 2. THE CONTEXT OF THE AUDIT

Prince of Wales Road and Riverside in the small hours have been described as "The most dangerous streets in Norfolk", but our inspections late on Friday and Saturday nights failed to confirm this. We found police and private security teams clearly in control, allowing large numbers of mainly young people to enjoy themselves.

This is not the whole truth of course. There *is* far too much drunken violence like the attack on a beggar at Thorpe Station in April. There were four separate drunken brawls in the Norwich area, three of them within the NTE, on the Saturday night we were with the police. Local residents suffer rubbish, noise and public urination, and the new Act has resulted in longer opening hours, particularly for pubs, which are now competing more vigorously for custom with the night clubs which have monopolised the city's post-midnight drinks trade until now.

At the same time it is important to keep things in perspective. Weekend violence on the streets of Norwich is no new thing, as any experienced policeman, magistrate or local historian will tell you. Since Operation Enterprise, the successful multi-agency crackdown on Norwich's NTE problems that was launched three years ago, public order offences have fallen by forty one per cent. With an estimated 7,500 revellers every Friday, on average only four people are arrested for offences of violence. On Saturdays, with 10,000 on the streets, the figure is around five. *[Police statistics]*

The Police and the premises operators agree that there are four main problems:

**Violence**, normally erupting in queues for taxis and takeaway food

**Lack of public transport**

**Not enough public toilets**

**Rubbish and noise**

These are all solvable. Indeed, moves are afoot (detailed below) which may improve the area considerably. And not before time. Late night shopping is bound to increase, Norwich City Centre is being repopulated, and family shoppers and the more affluent and vocal citizens moving into new housing rising and about to rise in King Street and other areas bordering the NTE district are unlikely to accept present levels of violence, noise and mess.

### 3. BACKGROUND

**The rise of the Night Time Economy is a national phenomenon.** One quite unintentional result of legislation "freeing-up" the brewing industry a couple of decades ago was the split between the brewers and distillers and the licensed trade itself. Formerly pubs and clubs were owned by and tied, for the most part, to regionally based brewers who had an understanding of local needs. Pubs and clubs are now mostly owned by large national leisure groups, whose sole aim would appear to be to maximise profit without sufficient consideration being given to local needs.

Continuity of ownership is also a problem. Blocks of licences tend to be sold off fairly regularly. The biggest Norwich nightclubs are owned by just two operators. If Luminar, the largest, disposed of its interests in Norwich, four of the largest premises (Chicago and Liquid on Prince of Wales Road, Lava and Ignite in Riverside) would be under new ownership.

**The Civic Trust** is the national umbrella body for civic societies like the Norwich Society. The Trust is nearing the end of a three-year project on the problem of Night Time Economies throughout England and Wales, involving national and local government, business, residents, police and other stakeholders. Entitled *Management of the Evening and Late Night Economies*, it has included a major series of surveys (see their website).

One of these (Survey of Corporate Operators and National Providers & Survey of Local Managers in Five Selected "Hotspots") highlights the problem local communities face from the operation of major nightclub and pub chains. The Civic Trust says these

national operators are “highly fragmented and fiercely competitive”, with a marked reluctance to take responsibility for the problems which they bring to local NTEs. Every city and town up and down the country is struggling to cope with the problems created, yet “operators at national level clearly expect the public sector to provide a robust regulatory framework, to tackle crime and disorder, provide public transport, policing, cleansing and public amenities to enable businesses to flourish and the evening and night time economy to work well”.

In other words these highly profitable national companies are expecting a hidden subsidy from the local taxpayers, who pick up the tab for the problems caused by concentrating vertical drinking establishments in single clusters. Here in Norwich, as elsewhere, it is evident that Local Government is increasingly and understandably reluctant to pay for the next set of initiatives needed to cope – initiatives including more public toilets and subsidised late night transport.

The Civic Trust report concludes “it is.... unlikely that any immediate improvements will be achieved... without direct central government intervention“. It is important that Norwich and Norfolk join with other local authorities to lobby for such intervention. The polluter, after all, ought to pay. One solution, which we outline below, may be the formation of a ‘Business Improvement District’ encompassing Prince of Wales Road and Riverside.

## 4. COPING IN NORWICH

Before we discuss present initiatives and potential future solutions, it is important to stress that Norwich has already come a long way in coping with the NTE problem. On examining the Civic Trust research it was striking how often initiatives and solutions adopted by other communities, including Manchester, Birmingham, Newcastle and London, have already been tried, tested and adopted by Norwich.

As just one example, **Operation Enterprise** was set up some three years ago by bodies including the police, council, licensed trade, health services and voluntary groups to begin the process of civilising the NTE. It has been a major success. One stakeholder goes so far as to call it “magnificent”. The operation was financed on a one-off basis, and although wound up in March 2006, the multi-agency teams put in place continue, with, we are assured, sufficient finance to work effectively.

It is no secret that at the time police felt the situation was getting away from them. As noted above, up to 17,500 people are estimated by police to visit the City’s pubs and clubs over two nights at the weekend, the largest establishment (Mercy, in the old ABC cinema building) holding up to 2,300 people. The Central Norwich Citizens Forum believes the figure is larger - up to 17,000 on both Friday and Saturday nights.

Anecdotal evidence and the arrest figures indicate that on Friday night crowds are edgier, with more same-sex groups, and Saturday night is more settled. Police “customers” at this time are not the same people they see during the week... they tend to be generally law-abiding citizens undone by drink.

**Trouble** comes when drunken people mingle in crowds competing for services like transport and food outlets. Before the new Licensing Act there were two pinch points - pub turnout time between 11pm and midnight and club turnout at 2am. As a result of the Act both pubs and clubs now close later, and the earlier pinch point has effectively disappeared. Shifts for the 25-odd police officers on weekend duty in the NTE have run from 8pm to 4am and will need to be changed. This has resource and cost implications for the Police and taxpayers.

## 5. THE EFFECT OF THE NEW LICENSING ACT

**The police** we spoke to (all of them operational) welcomed the Licensing Act 2003, the major part of which came into force in August 2005. They believe that staggering closing times may have reduced drunkenness - it has certainly not increased it - and very much appreciate their new powers to close bad premises immediately and (in conjunction with the local authority) to attach much stiffer extra conditions to licences.

**Closure Orders** can be issued to premises licensed under the Act (including pubs, clubs, restaurants and fast-food outlets) under three sets of circumstances:

risk of serious public disorder (typically rival groups of football fans threatening violence, entailing closure of whole streets or districts);

risk of imminent disorder at an individual venue (this can be issued by a Police Inspector or above rank with immediate effect);

breach of the operating conditions attached to a licence (for instance serving after hours, not operating with CCTV cameras or properly trained and accredited door staff). If the situation hasn’t changed within seven days police can apply to the courts for an immediate closure.

Since the Act came into force, the police have not needed to issue either type of the risk of disorder notices, though they believe firmly that the “blockbuster power” to close individual venues down on the spot is the big stick which makes the Act work - “part of the toolbox“, as one Inspector put it. Four breach-of-conditions orders had been administered, but all had been dealt with by the licensee without court proceedings being instituted.

**The Act could be a big motor for change.** Cheap drink offers and lack of seating in the barn-like premises that the big drinks retailers favour are identified as the two main contributors to binge drinking. As with football crowds, sitting people down immediately and obviously decreases the potential for conflict.

It is possible that conditions could also be attached to licences banning “Happy Hours” or Two-for One offers and insisting on larger seating areas. It is not clear, however, whether this would work. Operators have indicated that, since supermarkets sell cheap alcohol, they might mount a legal challenge to license conditions banning Happy Hours and two-for-one offers as being unreasonable and in restraint of trade.

The Civic Trust calls for Government intervention to solve the “inter-related problem of price discounting and the close proximity of similar venues”. In the meantime some NTE districts are going for a voluntary “Gentleman’s Agreement” approach.

**Partnerships** at local level between operators, police, planning authorities and residents, underpinned by vigorous use of the new powers in the Licensing Act, are universally seen as the way forward. The undoubted and continuing success of the nationally-acclaimed ‘Home Safe and Sound’ project (initiated by Norwich Licensees themselves in 2000, after three tragic deaths, to help those in trouble or overcome by drink), has led to the establishment of the Norwich Licensing Forum (NLF) in early 2005.

The NLF has three hundred members, and joining it is now a condition of all licences. Representatives of the operators, Licensees, Police, Local Authority departments, Magistrates, and food outlets meet monthly. Quarterly meetings are held with local residents. The Forum would be an ideal arena to test the prospect of a voluntary agreement on drinks discounting.

**Violence:** the police believe they are now able to be pro-active rather than reactive, nipping trouble in the bud. One indication of this is the reduction of violent crime in the city centre and an increase in arrests for public order offences - often the precursors of violence.

Two notes of caution: a persistent comment by police at all levels is that the new Act has yet to be tested in high summer - cold and wet have a way of nipping outdoor hooliganism in the bud - *and* during the World Cup, when big screen-fed football passions will be high. And next year’s smoking ban will bring in a whole new set of public order problems, decanting clubbers back into the less controllable street environment throughout the night so that they can have a smoke. Discussions on the effects of the ban are already underway at the NLF, and best practice should be studied in places like Scotland and Ireland where bans are already in place.

In the meantime we need to emphasise how well the Norfolk Constabulary handles problems in Norwich’s NTE. We were impressed by the officers at Inspector and Sergeant level we spoke to, and at their firm grasp in managing volatile situations. The three keys seem to be visibility (most officers wear fluorescent jackets and are deliberately scattered in clumps throughout the area), approachability (we witnessed many instances of low-level banter and advice-giving) and speed of response.

**Radio Links:** when we visited the NTE during November, private security staff on the street told us that they needed a common radio network linked to the police, to liaise in advance of possible trouble and co-ordinate responses. This has now been launched as the SIREN system, and already has 20 subscribers. We suggest that membership should be made compulsory as a licensing condition for all establishments within the NTE area.

## 6. GETTING PEOPLE HOME – A KEY PROBLEM AREA

Dispersal is reckoned by all involved to be the biggest problem now facing the area. Street crime is (more or less) controlled by good policing, and the new Act means going-home time is more staggered than it used to be, but when thousands of people leave venues in the early hours, many of them drunk, to queue for scarce transport or takeaway food, some level of violence is likely. Getting people home as quickly as possible is therefore vital, yet we were told by police that some could wait for as long as two hours at the end of a night before getting a taxi.

**Public Transport:** at the moment taxis are the only forms of public transport available when clubs close apart from the Number 25 bus (see below). When we began our inquiry in October/November 2005 discussions were underway between the Norwich Licensing Forum and FirstBus to begin early morning services to the City outskirts and the County, accompanied by security staff. These bus bouncers (we were told by the NLF) could be paid for by NTE operators.

Many months later, discussions are still going on. Plainly Firstbus is not keen to carry thousands of possibly troublesome, post-clubbers home in the small hours, though we would have thought a predictable, captive clientele would be commercially attractive. The demand could be easily researched through websites run by all the big clubs.

This is probably the most important transport initiative. The Number 25 bus has been running successfully through the night to and from UEA without incident for years. If FirstBus aren’t interested, then other operators should be sought by the NLF as a matter of urgency. Norfolk County Council now runs its own bus services to and from Park and Ride sites and round Norwich’s outskirts, and other bus companies could be eager to break into FirstBus’s near-monopoly in Norwich.

In the end a subsidy may be necessary. But why should we, the citizens of Norwich and Norfolk, have to pay to carry away customers who make national drinks operators’ balance sheets so healthy? The answer (see below) may be a Business Improvement District, where businesses pay an extra tax in return for extra services (like late night buses) designed to attract and sustain a high number of customers.

The Licensing Forum has also discussed the possibility of early morning trains with One, to no avail so far. Again, the possibility of a subsidy could concentrate commercial minds considerably.

**Taxis:** there are not enough taxis available at crucial times. Very few black cabs choose to work into the small hours, and private hire cars are resistant to sharing schemes, with parties assembled by taxi marshals trawling up and down the queues. At times of most demand ranks aren’t long enough to cope. More taxi marshals - club security staff wearing another hat - and Cabsafe schemes (where customers pay their fare home on entering clubs and staff tell them when their lift is waiting) would help. But the key here would be those urgently-needed all-night bus services.

**Street Layout:** We heard two interesting suggestions from police working the area. It is felt that more taxi bays would be helpful, especially at the top end of Prince of Wales

Road. Even more radical would be an examination of extending the traffic restrictions on Castle Meadow, limiting through traffic to buses, taxis and emergency vehicles, down into Prince of Wales Road as far as Eastbourne Place on Friday and Saturday nights. New

wider pavements and traffic-calming pedestrian crossings are working well, but something like this might be useful if the practice of drivers with customised cars “cruising” round and round the NTE continues to grow.

**Toilets:** the existing automatic unisex toilet in Eastbourne Place is inadequate and (so we were informed) unpopular with women. Given the lack of provision, understanding police sometimes turn a blind eye to occasional public urination. It is a long-standing complaint that Norwich City Council appears to have no policy for public toilets apart from closing them down.

People turning out of a nightclub where they’ve drunk a lot of liquid and having to wait up to two hours for a taxi home may find being “personally irresponsible” a matter of urgent physical necessity. More seriously, the question again is “Who pays?”.

There are solutions. Some NTEs (Durham, Reading, Belfast, Soho and Westminster) have invested in pop-up toilets which rise from the pavement during set hours. Westminster also puts portable urinals in the street, which are taken away after clubs have closed and people have dispersed. Others issue yellow cards to street urinators with prosecution for a second offence, and in Wrexham “street micturators” are offered the choice of a fine or clearing up after themselves with a high-pressure cleaner.

But all these cost money. Again we would urge consideration of a ‘Business Improvement District’ to enable the industry which profits most from the existence of Norwich’s NTE to help pay for clearing up (literal) pollution.

**Rubbish and Noise:** the street cleaning services seem to be doing a very good job when they start at 5am, and more bins are on the way. All-night rubbish collection would improve things, particularly for residents who have to leave for work while clearing-up is still in progress, and a clear, simple scheme for identifying fast food outlet packaging would help single out where most mess originates.

As far as noise control goes, measures ranging from proper soundproofing to simple acts like closing kitchen doors and windows can now be enforced under the new Licensing Act, and noisy premises can be closed down immediately. Late-night rowdiness can now be dealt with by on-the-spot fines or even Asbos. But as we point out above, this issue will become more and more important as home-owners move back into the City, many of them into developments within decibel-measuring distance of the NTE.

**Left Hand and Right Hand:** a particular planning problem has arisen in some parts of Norwich’s NTE where individual premises can have different closing times, depending on whether they look at their planning permission or their licensing conditions. Many operators are confused. Although planning permission may have imposed a closing time of midnight, the City Council, as Licensing Authority, have also permitted the same premises to have a drinks licence until 2am. We are told that the problem is particularly bad in Wensum Street where two pubs have licences which permit them to serve food later than nearby fast-food outlets - which have to close because of historically older licence conditions.

**Parking:** a constant source of annoyance for backstreet residents who find their permit spaces occupied. Unfortunately the moral high ground here is abandoned by some residents who sell visitors’ permits to NTE customers.

## 7. A BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT FOR NORWICH?

**Business Improvement Districts or BIDs were part of the Local Government Act 2003 and introduced into England in 2004.** They were defined by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister as “A partnership between a local authority and the local business community that develops and takes forward projects and services that benefit the trading environment and the public realm”. Put simply, councils and businesses can get together to raise an extra rate to invest in improvement of a particular area.

More than 20 pilot schemes are already in place, including one in Great Yarmouth. Businesses in Ipswich will vote on one this summer. But they can’t be imposed - and this may be the weakness where NTEs are concerned. Businesses in the defined BID vote by postal ballot. More than 50 per cent must be in favour and the Yes vote must represent *more than fifty per cent of the rateable value* of the votes cast. In other words, where NTEs are dominated, as Norwich is, by a small number of national operators, they can block the entire proposal.

But you don’t know until you try. We would urge Norwich City Council to investigate the possibility of making a BID (as it were) as soon as possible, and Norwich’s NTE operators to give that initiative every possible support. The extra money raised could be the key to solving most of the area’s outstanding problems, including all-night transport, more toilets and better street cleaning. It could also help defray the cost already born by the community at large of extra policing.

## 8. CONCLUSION

After a somewhat precarious start, Norwich is riding the NTE tiger quite well. Imaginative policing and energetic teamwork by most stakeholders (including residents and operators) has put us in a better position than some other communities. But the effort is beginning to run into major difficulties, most centred round the question of who pays for further improvements.

The installation of a **Business Improvement District** in the NTE area of the City would solve that problem. If the City Council, through the Norwich Licensing Forum, can’t persuade the businesses involved, it should, in concert with as many other authorities as it can find, lobby the Government for the power to raise a special business rate in NTE areas. The polluter who profits should pay a reasonable amount of that profit towards clearing up his pollution.

Even if a BID is not possible, it is essential that the police and City Council continue to make robust use of their new powers under the **Licensing Act**. Used as a *planning tool*, they could eventually help to reconstruct City Centre nightlife on more civilised, user-friendly lines.

Other cities like Newcastle have told Civic Trust researchers that they are looking to use it as a lever to change overall planning policies - restricting the size of bars, for instance, to take the large pub chains out of the equation. More restaurants, fewer takeaways and more live music venues can all be encouraged. Our city should look to push this particular envelope as well.

At the more immediate and more detailed level, our Audit of the NTE area showed that there are a number of specific proposals that need to be pursued:

**An attempt to negotiate a voluntary agreement on drinks discounting** through the Norwich Licensing Forum.

**All night buses**, running on radial routes to the City outskirts and surrounding towns.

More toilets.

**Larger taxi ranks.**

**Membership of the SIREN radio link to be a condition for licences within the NTE.**

**Considering closing part of Prince of Wales Road to through traffic on Friday and Saturday nights.**

**More taxi marshals and Cabsafe schemes.**

**All-night rubbish clearing.**

**Sorting out confusion between some planning and licensing permissions.**

Properly controlled and guided, NTEs can regenerate city centres and provide thousands of jobs; badly handled, they can blight an entire district. The Norwich Society would support every effort to prevent such blight happening. The flood of citizens moving back into new residential schemes in the centre of Norwich, opposite Riverside in King Street, for instance, or between Rose Lane and Prince of Wales Road, means failure in this matter cannot be contemplated. We have to succeed.

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Norwich Society Environment Committee May 2006

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**References:**

The Civic Trust research [2003-6] is available on their website [www.civictrust.org.uk/evening](http://www.civictrust.org.uk/evening).

Information on BIDs can be found on the websites of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister [www.planning.odpm.gov.uk](http://www.planning.odpm.gov.uk) or the National BIDs Advisory Service [www.ukbids.org](http://www.ukbids.org)

Norwich Society 2005 Environmental Audit (10pp.) Available from the Norwich Society – see contact.

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