

Inside Track magazine

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Afraid of the dark?

Downtown after dark – not your typical family destination. Gillian Hudson visits her home town of Leeds to investigate a scheme trying to make city centres more approachable

What's your perception of city centres after dark? For some, they're a haven for antisocial behaviour where young people drink too much and cause damage. While the risk of being a victim of crime is at its lowest level since 1981, shaking off their reputation as 'no-go' areas for families is quite a challenge.

A major objective for the Home Office is to help people feel safe in their local communities – an important by-product of a national project called Light Night. One night a year, cities around the UK invite residents to view them in a different light. Coordinated by local city councils and the Association of Town Centre Management (ATCM), Light Night sees venues open from dusk till dawn to showcase all the elements of a city centre – museums, galleries, restaurants, shops – encouraging people who wouldn't usually be in town to feel welcome there.

Based on events like Nuit Blanche in Paris and Notte Bianca in Como, the Light Night concept has spread to 80 cities worldwide. This year Belfast, Birmingham, Liverpool, Nottingham and Sheffield join Leeds in offering residents and visitors the opportunity to come together and focus on their shared culture, history and identity.

Leeds City Council's James Hill believes Light Night is not just about injecting culture into a city, it's also about affecting culture change: "People drink in the city after dark, so why shouldn't they take part in cultural activities there too?"

We're not looking to drive drinkers out of the city but we want to open it up to people – families, children, older people.”

Martin Blackwell, ATCM's development director agrees. “The night-time economy is lucrative for local business and creates significant employment. But the rapid growth has caused problems and our key objective is to improve the reputation of cities and make them places that people of all ages and backgrounds can enjoy.”

Despite initiatives like the Best Bar None Awards (see box) and considerable investment in the infrastructure of cities – street cleansing at night, more taxis and late night bus services – there is still a lot of work to be done in encouraging certain groups to come into town. How can Light Night succeed in improving reputations where funding has not? “We think the most effective approach is to let people positively experience their city after dark. This is about the community taking some action,” says Martin.

According to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, there is a significant link between participation in cultural activity and people being satisfied with the area in which they live. And according to the Institute for Public Policy Research, people who participate in cultural activities are more likely to trust the police, the legal system, politicians and Parliament.

Back stage pass

There are some general principles - performers are not paid and all events are free. Leeds Light Night focuses on art and culture with museums, galleries, shopping centres, places of worship, theatres, universities, colleges, shops and arcades playing host to events that range from the sublime to the ridiculous.

A summer party hosted in a heated marquee on the main shopping street saw the Black Dogs art collective serving ice cream and encouraging dancing till the small hours. Meanwhile, the grand Victorian library hosted opera on its spiralling staircase and the town hall flung open the doors on its basement

prison cells, which date from 1850. “These are parts of the city that people may not have seen before,” says James. And it really pulls in the punters, even for more established venues. Last year, the Henry Moore sculpture institute had its busiest day on record.

More unusual places get a look-in too. “We like to exploit the potential of locations that people rarely visit. St John’s church for example has no lighting, but last year we hosted a tour, with audio commentary and torches. Six hundred people went through the doors that night.”

Canalside, around the Holbeck area of Leeds, has a reputation as a ‘no go’ area. This year, a trail of helium balloons guided people round sights of interest. James explains: “We want people to realise that this area has been hugely regenerated and improved. There’s a new underused footbridge that goes over the canal and could cut down journeys around the city if only the public would feel confident enough to walk round there. There are also some really good pubs.”

More than 42, 000 people were attracted to the 68 venues at this year’s Leeds event. Large numbers don’t necessarily mean trouble though. “In Nottingham, for example, 40,000 people took part but the crime rate actually went down. We’ve found the effect is to civilise the streets,” says Martin.

With the help of ATCM, Light Night is growing, with 20 cities getting involved next year and 50 the year after. “My aim is to get every centre in the UK doing this,” explains Martin. “In Germany, 120 locations take part each year. Como in Italy is a town of 50,000 people, but it attracts 200,000 for Notte Bianca and the whole community gets involved. Safe streets bustling at 3am – that’s what we’re aiming for.”

Look out for Liverpool’s Light Night on January 10 2009, which rounds off the city’s year as European Capital of Culture. Visit www.lightnight.co.uk for details

BOX OUT

When 2001's British Crime Survey revealed that a high proportion of crime was connected to poorly managed bars, pubs and clubs, Greater Manchester Police took action. Its Best Bar None Awards are now running in 30 UK cities.

Backed by the Home Office, the scheme rewards landlords who encourage responsible drinking, help prevent alcohol-related crime and offer a safer, more welcoming environment.

"Safer Leeds" has run the scheme for three years and this July named Flares, part of a chain of bars, as its overall winner. "We carry out an assessment on bars, clubs and pubs who apply, looking at things like whether regular reviews of security take place and if staff are properly trained to ensure they don't serve people who are drunk or underage," explains project officer, Jo Rostrum.

Premises which pass the assessment become accredited, encouraging trade and attracting lower insurance premiums.

The scheme is helping Jo build up a relationship with licensees in the area: "I alert them to events like football matches and they let us know where trouble hotspots are. We're building up a lot of trust."

To keep Leeds streets safe during the party season, marshals will manage the inevitable taxi queues from now until the New Year. "We're also going to trial 'street angels' who will give help or reassurance to late night revellers – or just point them in the direction of the nearest taxi rank," explains Jo.

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