The TCPA’s publication of *Reuniting Health with Planning* was prompted by reforms in three overlapping areas in England: the National Planning Policy Framework (2012), the Health and Social Care Act 2012, and the Localism Act 2011. These reforms, the report argues, signify official recognition of the influence that planning and environmental factors have on health and wellbeing inequalities. Some of those influences are relatively well understood and uncontested – for example the need to provide adequate, accessible green space for exercise and relaxation. However, environmental influences in respect of other societal issues, often framed within health contexts, may be much less well understood.

Popular media coverage of young people in England portrays an epidemic of ‘binge drinking’, suggesting that many town and city centres have become dominated by associated anti-social behaviour and violence during the evening. In fact, the majority of young people in England do not regularly drink to excess, and drinking among young men has even been declining. However, it is a fact that binge drinking is normalised for numbers of young people, and those who do binge drink place themselves at greater risk of a number of serious health problems. Significantly, the negative effects of alcohol on health are not spread consistently across England: while there are intra-regional variations, Northern regions fare worse than the South East in particular. The reasons behind this variation, however, are not well understood.

In 2010 the authors were commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to undertake an 18-month project to investigate whether it was possible to identify location-based differences in youth drinking practices in two areas with contrasting levels of alcohol-related harms, located in the North East (high alcohol harm) and the South East (low alcohol harm). The study examined the lives of three age groups – 15-16, 18-19 and 22-14 (i.e. both above and below the legal age for drinking in England) – and it looked at opportunities for, and constraints on, alcohol consumption by exploring the full range of leisure activities engaged in by the participants.

**Leisure behaviours**
Young people in the two locations shared many patterns of leisure behaviour. Outside the home, teenagers below the legal drinking ages spent time...
socialising in parks and shopping centres and going to the cinema. The key difference for this age group was that in the South East they had access to a much wider variety of hobbies and pastimes outside the home than those in the North East. This availability of diversionary activities appeared important in diverting attention away from drinking, and involvement in a variety of clubs and pursuits offered opportunities to increase feelings of achievement and self-worth.

In terms of alcohol consumption, two other factors seemed significant. Outdoor drinking was more commented on in the North East, and more generally young adult orientated drinking was highly visible and concomitant with non-alcohol-based leisure activities popular with this age group (for example going to the cinema).

For the older age groups, the ‘night out’ in youth-orientated bars and clubs with friends was important in both areas and followed similar routines, with elements of both predictability and spontaneity. Sociability and the need to ‘catch up’ with friends were the aspects of the night out most emphasised by study participants.

A key difference between the two areas appeared to be the extent to which they facilitated particular types of drinking behaviours. In the North East, the compact city centre at the heart of the study area had multiple clusters of youth-orientated bars and the functional separation of different leisure pursuits such as shopping, multiplex cinemas and restaurants reduced the visibility of alcohol-related leisure.

### Implications for planning

In both areas, young people actively sought out clusters of youth bars and clubs and were prepared to travel considerable distances to access them. Bars and clubs that were lively and noisy were preferred; clusters provided the opportunity to visit different venues in search of the best crowd (this was particularly commented upon in the North East). Young people were age-sensitive, preferring to be among their own age group. These preferences are clearly at odds with attempts to diversify entertainment offers in town and city centres, which have been part of many local authorities’ planning and licensing policies and central to schemes such as the government-supported ‘Purple Flag’ award. This suggests that such approaches to moderating the more harmful aspects of youth drinking are likely to fail; it may be time to think afresh.

Young people go out to socialise and be convivial with others; such intents are positive in terms of health, wellbeing and sense of self-worth. At a time when traditional social solidarities, through work and family life, are subject to change, these opportunities to form and reinforce friendships and bonds are arguably even more important. Rather than attempts to simply eradicate youth drinking in town centres (which may also have the unintended outcome of simply displacing drinking to the home), policy might usefully focus on those elements of the night out that are positive and consider how these might be reinforced, while attempting to ameliorate the worst impacts of excessive drinking.

For example, young people like to dance; and dancing is itself good exercise and healthy. However, respondents in the study complained about restrictions surrounding dancing. One approach could be to offer incentives for youth-orientated night-time leisure which focuses on dancing, live music and other pleasurable/alternative activities – with alcohol, although available, a secondary feature. Incentives might, for example, involve waivers on business rates, the purposes of these initiatives being specified in planning and licensing conditions. Furthermore, the approach could be central to the development of new youth-orientated clusters outside of existing centres.

This latter point would run directly contrary to the National Planning Policy Framework. However, our study concluded that a perverse impact of concentrating retail and leisure activities, particularly in the city centre in the North East case, is to make visible and thereby normalise young adult-orientated drinking. The use of the ‘sequential test’ in relation to leisure uses will perpetuate and reinforce this
issue. Alternatively, however, Local Development Frameworks might attempt to separate useful adult drinking from those places where young teenagers are most likely to gather.

In terms of the younger group, planning also has a role, for while planners cannot themselves provide the range and variety of facilities highlighted as

‘Our study concluded that a perverse impact of concentrating retail and leisure activities, particularly in the city centre in the North East case, is to make visible and thereby normalise young adult-orientated drinking. The use of the ‘sequential test’ in relation to leisure uses will perpetuate and reinforce this issue’

important, they do have a role in guiding local communities to allocate land to allow such facilities to be provided. Planning obligations in the Community Infrastructure Levy and provisions made in Community Infrastructure Plans could be used to provide access to sports and leisure facilities. Further ideas for this age group might also be facilitated, such as the use of vacant premises for schemes like pop-up cinemas and youth projects.

Conclusions

Accommodating youth drinking seems, at a superficial level, to be entirely at odds with an agenda that is traditionally concerned with light, clean air, green space and physical exercise. Nevertheless, this study, alongside others, has demonstrated that youth drinking and ‘going out’ forms a significant part of public life for young people and a backdrop to their expression of friendship. Planning can play a role in reducing the environmental stimuli that encourage binge drinking, through placing a cap on the concentrations of youth-orientated bars and dance bars in existing centres.

Further, demand could be managed through planning for new clusters of youth-oriented entertainment venues, with incentives for more activities such as dancing and live music. One of the barriers to doing this is the sequential test for town centre development, still relevant for retail, but which may actually be counterproductive for night-time leisure activities. One solution to this conundrum might be through introducing time as a firmer element in planning policies and lifting day-time restrictions for evening and night-time activities.

In investigating the differences between the South East and North East case study areas, it was evident that the historical pattern of development underpinned subtle differences in behaviour. While the participants in the study reported similar customs and ways of meeting each other, it was evident that the South East, with its dispersed pattern of settlements, provided organisational obstacles for the kind of celebratory outings that are accompanied by excessive drinking. This prompts the reflection that built environment outcomes tend to be long lived and might impact on several generations. These impacts can also be seen in the provision, or lack of it, of high-quality green spaces and other facilities, thereby providing further evidence that provision for youth is not a luxury, but a necessity.

More generally, there is an increasing body of evidence that is unpicking the complex ways in which aspects of the physical, economic and social environments in which we live impact on our health and wellbeing. The move of the public health function back into upper-tier local authorities provides an opportunity for fresh thinking on issues such as spatial planning and alcohol consumption. However, this can only happen where is there is adequate resourcing and relevant professionals are open to this opportunity. At a time when resources are under threat and both health and planning are subject to uncertainty and change, this is a huge ask of the new system.

● Tim Townshend is Director of Planning and Urban Design in the School of Architecture, Planning & Landscape, Newcastle University, and Marion Roberts is Professor of Urban Design in the School of Architecture and the Built Environment, University of Westminster. The views expressed are personal.

Notes

4 The website of the Purple Flag scheme, managed by the Association of Town Centre Management, is at www.purpleflag.org.uk/about-purple-flag.html