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Open arms: the role of pubs in tackling loneliness

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Open Arms: The Role of Pubs in Tackling Loneliness

Dr Thomas Thurnell-Read

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About the Report Author

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About the Research Partners

***The Campaign to End Loneliness** creates change in policy and practice – so that fewer people experience harm as a result of chronic loneliness and more people feel connected to their communities and experience positive relationships that sustain them. The Campaign to End Loneliness bring together the wide range of organisations that work on loneliness, help new entrants get up and running with the best information and knowledge, and collectivise their voices to ensure they are heard by policy makers.*

*Headquartered in Edinburgh, **HEINEKEN UK** is the UK’s leading pub, cider and beer business. HEINEKEN UK own around 2,500 pubs as part of our Star Pubs & Bars business, and employ around 2,300 people. HEINEKEN UK are passionate about our cider and beer brands and the outstanding service that we offer to our customers. Their portfolio of brands includes Foster’s, Heineken®, Strongbow, Desperados, Kronenbourg1664, John Smith’s, Bulmers, Amstel, Birra Moretti and Old Mout backed by a full range of niche and speciality brands.*

***Pub is the Hub** is a not-for-profit organisation initiated by HRH the Prince of Wales in 2001, which offers independent specialist advice on rural services diversification or community ownership of pubs, so they can provide viable local services at the heart of the community. With a proven track record of rural project development and delivery over the last 19 years, Pub is The Hub has worked with great licensees to open post offices, shops, libraries, cafes, community cinemas, allotments, play areas and much more. Since 2013, the organisation has also been able to offer small grants through its Community Services Fund.*

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, heartfelt thanks are due to the research participants who completed surveys, took part in interviews or, in particular, participated in focus groups. Various organisations have been instrumental in providing support, input and insights for the research upon which this report is based, including but not limited to: *Independent Age UK; Pub is the Hub; Neighbourly; Campaign for Real Ale; The Chatty Café Scheme; British Beer and Pubs Association; Pint of Science; UK Men’s Sheds Association; and Castle Rock Brewery.*

Foreword

Purpose of this work

Pubs, and their publicans, are a key part of our community infrastructure alongside libraries, cafes, shops and community centres. Given their role we wanted to build our understanding of how pubs can use their place in our social life to tackle loneliness.

This research was undertaken prior to the Covid-19 pandemic hitting the UK. With vulnerable people shielding, people losing loved ones, isolation and feelings of loneliness have impacted many more (young and old) people as a result of the Covid crisis. At the same time, pubs, as the natural hub of local communities in bringing people together, have been closed for the majority of the pandemic.

Within this context, the report and its findings highlight why tackling loneliness is more relevant than ever.

What we did

In collaboration with HEINEKEN UK and Pub is the Hub, we commissioned Dr Thomas Thurnell-Read, a senior lecturer in sociology at Loughborough University to talk to people working in pubs and the wider industry about ways they are helping to build social connections.

Most importantly, Dr Thurnell-Read spoke to people who might be at risk of loneliness in 10 focus groups conducted across the country in rural, suburban and urban areas. There was an emphasis on people from older age groups as well as specific groups including members of the Caribbean community and people with learning difficulties.

Robin Hewings,
Director of Campaigns, Policy and Research, the Campaign to End

Executive Summary

Context

Loneliness is widespread in modern Britain (BBC, 2018) and affects people of all ages and from all backgrounds (Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, 2017). There's an increasing societal concern for the negative impact loneliness and social isolation can have on communities and individuals' mental health.

Historically, pubs have been venues for sociability and companionship. They are often perceived in playing a role in connecting individuals, groups and communities in beneficial ways. The research was guided by the belief that pubs can, and often do, have a social value beyond their economic role.

The purpose of this research was to develop our understanding of current and potential opportunities for British pubs to play a significant role in the fight against loneliness.

Findings – what people value about pubs

The research found that pubs are identified as places that have an important social function in providing a space for different forms and levels of social interaction. They can be places that offer the opportunity to make new friendships and they are often frequented to meet up with close friends and family on a regular basis, but also to celebrate special occasions.

Going to a pub, particularly for the older generations we spoke to, is not necessarily about drinking alcohol. People go for teas and coffee. They are popular places for a meal out.

In addition, many of the research participants spoke of the range of activities and events pubs organise and the benefits these services offer in coming together and interacting with others.

Opportunities and challenges for pubs to help tackle loneliness

Designing out loneliness

The research found that the potential of pubs being welcoming places that encourage connection is not always being realised.

Some of this is due to relatively practical reasons that are nevertheless important barriers for, especially elderly, people to go into a pub.

For example, a lack of transport or the layout of a pub can be a challenge. Tables and chairs can be too close together making it difficult for people with walking sticks or wheel chairs. Pubs where the lighting is softer or the music very loud might also dissuade older people visiting a pub.

Older people also said they might avoid pubs altogether or after a certain point in the evening, as they feel the atmosphere changes. They mentioned louder music and particularly swearing.

Creating a space that works for all is vital and there is a real opportunity for pubs to consider and literally design out loneliness.

Being inclusive and reaching out

Above all, pubs must feel inclusive and welcoming. Across the research, the most prominent examples of pubs playing a social role in their local communities tended to be those that catered to a range of customers and made people feel welcome and valued. They need to bring people together so people can socialise across age groups, and other social differences.

Some of the most successful community pubs do this with real purpose running a diverse set of their own activities as well as being a place for the community to connect.

Most common are live music, quizzes and board games. A number of older people lamented the decline in singing around a piano.

Pubs are also allowing community groups to use their space, arranging lunches for special occasions such as Christmas and Easter, and community noticeboards. There are pubs with fitness and wellbeing classes such as yoga. Meetup events for different types of people can bring people together with something in common. An example is being a parent of a young child, a time that is a real risk for loneliness.

The research also highlighted that pubs are not necessarily always felt as welcoming for people from ethnic communities. This is clearly a very important takeaway and one that needs to be understood better in order to make pubs inclusive spaces for all to enjoy.

The role of pub staff

The research highlights the important role staff in pubs play in making customers feel welcome and respected.

Skilled and experienced pub staff facilitate social interaction and help forge social linkages that might not otherwise find expression. It is therefore important to recognise the huge amounts of undervalued or unacknowledged skilled labour done by staff working in the pub and wider hospitality trade in terms of welcoming, attending to and supporting individuals and groups at risk of loneliness.

We have presented the voices of older people and highlighted the most promising ways in which pubs are tackling loneliness in their community. What will work in any given establishment is always down to the judgement and skill of publicans. Only they know which community group to reach out to, which person would welcome a bit of extra attention, which other services to branch out into. They need the freedom and support to pursue ideas that will work in their community.

Recommendations

The research suggests a number of recommendations for how pubs, and their staff, can address loneliness:

- Pubs should embrace a wide and inclusive remit to appeal to a wide range of customers.
- Continued efforts should be made to ‘design out’ loneliness and ‘design in’ social interaction.
- Pubs must reach out and collaborate with local community groups, and pub chain operators should look into building connections with national charities that work with those at most risk of loneliness.
- The skills and experience of the pub trade deserve a better image as playing an important social role.
- Specific training and materials to help people working in pubs to address this agenda.

Introduction

This report examines the role that pubs can play in tackling loneliness. Given both the long history of pubs as venues for sociability and companionship and recent widespread concern about increasing levels of loneliness and social isolation in the United Kingdom, pubs are felt to have a role to play in connecting individuals, groups and communities in beneficial ways. While pubs are still recognised as playing a central role in communities, especially in rural areas, the pub sector is subject to many challenges and the past twenty years has seen over 20% of the UK’s pubs close (BBPA, 2019). Pubs now compete with a wide range of other options for people to spend their leisure time and a proliferation of online social spaces. Despite these changes, pubs continue to offer a space in which people can meet to socialise in rewarding ways. In fact, the appeal of pub going is, for many, that it offers a traditional form of offline socialisation which is still highly valued. Many pubs are now offering a diversity of events and activities to appeal to a wider range of customers than might have been the case in the past.

The research this report is based on was commissioned by The Campaign to End Loneliness, in collaboration with HEINEKEN UK, with the aim of investigating the role played by pubs in fostering social interaction and combatting social isolation and loneliness. The research sought to identify the ways in which pub going can provide individuals with opportunities for beneficial social interaction which many people of different ages and backgrounds currently struggle to find elsewhere. The research was guided by the belief that pubs can, and often do, have a social value beyond their economic role. The report therefore aims to add to our understanding of both current and potential opportunities for pubs in the UK to play a significant role in the fight against loneliness and draws widely on empirical research with a range of stakeholders and groups in order to identify existing best practice and future opportunities.

Although the research reported here was commissioned and carried out prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the findings of the report are of increased relevance given both the intense operational pressures experienced by the pub sector and the renewed relevance of protecting vital social connections within communities. The impact of the pandemic has further highlighted the special social function played by many pubs and many of the concerns which were revealed during this research have taken on a new significance as we consider how the pandemic has and will reshape social networks and community attachments. Further still, there is an added urgency to the wider debates about how best to limit, mitigate or prevent the many damaging effects of social isolation and loneliness.

The report is structured as follows. In the next section, key definitions relating to loneliness and social isolation are set out. This is then followed by a section briefly outlining the historical and contemporary social role and function of pubs. Following a short section outlining the research methods used, the main body of the report is then presented as two sections, each summarising key findings from the research. The first of these examines the different forms of sociability fostered by different types of pub going and, in so doing, presents evidence of the social value offered by pubs as spaces of meaningful and beneficial social interaction. The second findings section focuses more closely on the opportunities and challenges faced by pubs and includes a number of specific examples of good practice identified during the course of the research. The final section of the report summarises the key findings and contributions made by the research. The report closes with a number of recommendations as to how the pub sector can meet its potential of playing a significant role in combating loneliness and social isolation.



Defining Loneliness and Social Isolation

What do we mean by loneliness and social isolation?

The research follows the Campaign to End Loneliness (2019) in defining 'loneliness' as a subjective feeling regarding the quality of a person's social relationships and defining the related, but distinct, term 'social isolation' as an objective measure relating to the low number and limited reach of an individual's social connections (Age UK, 2019). Thus, a person may have many social connections and still feel lonely while, equally, another person may not feel lonely despite having few social connections if those they do have are felt to be meaningful and effective in satisfying their social needs. Loneliness may be experienced as recurring feelings of a lack of closeness to others, of having limited opportunities for companionship and of not having people to talk to or turn to in times of need. Loneliness therefore relates to 'a deficit between the actual and desired quality and quantity of social engagement' and is associated with time spent 'being alone', living arrangements involving 'living alone' and levels of 'social isolation' involving higher or lower levels of integration with individuals and groups in the wider social environment (Victor et al., 2005: 358). Loneliness is often associated with forms of social disconnectedness involving infrequent involvement in social activities and limitations to one's social networks and opportunities to meet new people and make new friends (Cornwell & Waite, 2009). Loneliness is therefore an important social issue that impacts individual levels of wellbeing but has wide and varied causes and implications.

A diverse range of causes have been suggested for the recent surge in loneliness in the UK and beyond. Along with demographic background, reported health and wellbeing and access to personal resources, the use of community resources has been identified as a major contributory factor causing loneliness.

What causes loneliness and what impact does loneliness have on individual wellbeing?

Loneliness is widespread in modern Britain (BBC, 2018) and affects people of all ages and from all backgrounds (Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, 2017). However, particular individuals and groups are at greater risk than others meaning the risk of loneliness is particularly pronounced in adolescences (The University of Manchester, 2018) and in older age (Psychology Today, 2019). Trajectories of loneliness in later life are varied and can include a steady increase in feelings of loneliness or a sudden later onset of loneliness, often associated with life transitions and changes such as retirement or bereavement for a long-term partner or close family and kin (Victor et al., 2005). Those at risk of loneliness, including but not limited to the elderly, may struggle to make or maintain social connections with others and as a result can experience isolation, irregular or fleeting social contact and a loss of confidence in their ability to engage fully in social situations. In particular, loneliness amongst older men may be exacerbated by gender-specific notions associating masculinity with independence and autonomy which lead to older men being reluctant to reach out to or seek support from others (Willis et al., 2019).

A diverse range of causes have been suggested for the recent surge in loneliness in the UK and beyond. Along with demographic background, reported health and wellbeing and access to personal resources, the use of community resources has been identified as a major contributory factor causing loneliness (Elwood et al., 2013). Further still, a long running cultural shift involving the privatisation of leisure whereby leisure activities are increasingly home based (Glover, 2018) means that the risks of isolation stemming from wider social disconnections is particularly high.

Loneliness has tangible outcomes in terms of both poor physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008) and these outcomes can further social isolation and feelings of loneliness in a vicious circle where the feeling of loneliness leads to further social isolation which in turn worsens the sense of being lonely. Loneliness can leave individuals isolated from both their local communities and from wider society, particularly in rural locations (Kelly et al., 2019). Critically, both loneliness and social isolation carry associated health risk which are particularly prevalent amongst older people who may experience decreasing levels of mobility, social interaction and social networking as they transition into older age (Coyle & Dugan, 2012). It is therefore important to note that although loneliness is a subjective emotion it has both wider causes linked to economic, social and cultural changes in wider society and specific implications for personal physical and mental wellbeing.

How can we combat loneliness and social isolation?

Interventions to help reduce isolation and loneliness can be initiated at the individual, the community and the society wide level (Alpert, 2017). For example, the NHS (2019) and Mind (2019) both make a number of recommendations for things that individuals can do to help alleviate feelings of loneliness, including joining classes or groups focused on particular shared interests and enjoyable activities, as well as taking trips to places where you can just ‘be around other people’. Interventions aiming to mitigate the harms of social isolation and loneliness are varied and include: social facilitation interventions involving group-based activities to foster social interaction and mutual support; psychological therapies delivered by health professional; health and social care provision; befriending interventions; and leisure/skill development interventions (Gardiner et al., 2018). Even seemingly mundane leisure activities can provide people with pleasurable social interactions that help to stave off feelings of loneliness and isolation (Glover, 2018). A report by the University of the Third Age (U3A, 2018), for example, outlines the positive impact of ongoing learning in sociable contexts both in terms of self-esteem and self-confidence and in relation to building and maintaining a greater number of social connections with likeminded others.

The quality of a person’s social relationships has been identified as a common thread across studies seeking to examine the conditions under which quality of life, satisfaction and wellbeing can be improved (Victor et al., 2000). Because relationships, connections and activities are amongst the most consistently identified components of positive ageing (Bowling, 2005), building strong relationships and resilient social networks is amongst the most obvious things that prevent loneliness and increase wellbeing. Social relationships can vary by structure (e.g. the quantity and density of social relationships) and by function (e.g. the extent to which particular relationships are valued for providing support to the individual) and social interactions can vary by both quantity and quality (Valtorta et al., 2016).

The social sciences have a long history of researching social interaction and theorising the impact of social changes on individual belonging and community cohesion. Theories of social capital, such as that outlined by the influential American scholar Robert Putnam (2000), include both physical and social ‘resources’ in their definition of social capital and have argued for the importance of social spaces and places where people can gather for informal social interaction. Further, an important distinction is made by Putnam between ‘bonding social capital’, as the strong and meaningful



‘bridging social capital’, as the links between individuals or groups who might otherwise have no connection. It is shown that both forms of social capital play a crucial role in maintaining feelings of connection to both community and to wider society, as well as to a person’s understanding of their position in society relative to others.

Such theories prove useful in informing this study by attuning the research to both the quality and quantity of social connections in the life of any individual plus the locations in which such social interaction takes place. It is therefore important to consider the degree to which pubs represent both a physical and a social resource for local communities. As the findings below demonstrate, there is a widespread belief that pubs can and do act as important community resources and provide places where social connections and social capital, in various forms, can be fostered in meaningful ways.



The Social Role of Pubs in the United Kingdom

The public house is widely accepted as being woven into the cultural fabric of British society (Jennings, 2007). Pubs, inns and taverns have a long and varied history involving mixed social, cultural and economic functions, including serving alcoholic drinks, providing food and meals of various forms, offering accommodation for travellers and a space for a diversity of social, cultural and civic undertakings (Lane, 2018). The pub has, throughout modern history, been acknowledged as an important space for social gatherings in which members of a community can interact with each other in various ways.

The pub is still generally viewed as a place where, for the price of a drink, a person can pass time in the company of others and engage in pleasurable social interaction typically based around conversation with friends, acquaintances or fellow customers. This is the principle appeal of pub going to many and is, in essence, the central premise of this research undertaking. There is a long tradition of pubs playing a central role in many communities (Mass Observation, 1943), and pubs continue to provide important social spaces that are integral to the economy, social life and identity of many communities (Cabras et al., 2016). In rural areas, in particular, the village pub can play a significant role in the economic, social and cultural life of the village (Markham & Bosworth, 2016).

In recent years, the term ‘community pub’ has come into common usage to describe venues that play an important social role for the local area. Such pubs, though difficult to define, are widely valued as ‘offering a space where local people can meet and socialise’ and ‘are perceived by the public to be an important place where people from different backgrounds can meet and interact’ (Muir, 2009: 54). There is a lasting perception that such pubs are places where lively conversation ensures between regular customers who are well-known to each other and to venue management and staff (Watson & Watson 2012). In this, there is a sense that the social value of pubs is proven in the quality and quantity of social interactions that take place within them.

At a time when social isolation is reaching unprecedented rates, the pub is an institution offering readily accessible and easily engaged with opportunities for pleasurable social interaction. Following the influential American Sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1989), pubs often serve the purpose of being a ‘third place’, a space other than the domestic home or the workplace where people meet to converse, interact and form and maintain social bonds. Indeed, research by the University of Oxford commissioned by the Campaign for Real Ale has shown that pub goers are likely to experience a boost in social connection, making more informal acquaintances and more friendships (Dunbar, 2016). Particularly during older age, then, pub going may retain a role in staying socially active (Bareham et al., 2018).

While we may speak of the pub and be relatively sure that there is widespread consensus on the key features of what it entails, there is and always has been great diversity in the precise form and style of different venues (Lane, 2018). The pub sector, and British drinking patterns in general, are subject of increasing diversification and a trend away from regular beer consumption in a ‘local’ pub towards a wider range of consumer practices (Meier, Warde & Holmes, 2018). This has involved changes to the composition of ownership and the profile of pub going customers and in recent decades pubs have gone from being almost exclusively leisure spaces for working-age men to catering to both men and women, as well as families, and a range of ages (Williams, 1996). Most notably, during the 1980s and 1990s, alcohol consumption became concentrated into the Night Time Economy of city centres and increasingly segregated between venues catering for different market demographic (Chatterton & Hollands, 2003; Hadfield, 2006; McGregor, 2012). More recently, the trend has been towards the diversification of drinking locations, included but not limited to the huge growth of home consumption of supermarket bought alcohol and the emergence of new drinking locations, such as beer festivals and microbreweries associated with the rise in real ale and craft beer (Thurnell-Read, 2018). Further still, recent years has seen a decrease in overall consumption levels and a rise in those, especially amongst the young, who abstain from alcohol consumption entirely. In response to changing customer demands and economic pressures, many pubs have also shifted from a ‘wet-led’ business model where the majority of revenue is derived from drinks sales to a ‘dry-led’ offering based on food and, in some cases, entertainment, events and corporate hospitality.

Such trends, as well as recent and complex social upheavals, mean that the position of the ‘traditional’ pub is increasingly precarious. The research revealed that amongst stakeholders and pub sector workers there was a keen awareness of wider cultural trends that are already actively impacting the industry and reshaping the relationship between pubs and current or potential customers. The findings outlined below are best understood against a wider backdrop of changes both within the pub sector and across wider society. The research on which this report is based was conducted prior to the outbreak of Covid-19 in the spring of 2020. Whilst the full impact of the pandemic on the UK pub sector is yet to be felt and fully understood, it is likely that the social role played by pubs will once more emerge, albeit facing considerable challenges in doing so.

Research Design and Methods

To explore this multifaceted issue, a mixed-method approach was adopted which combined both quantitative and qualitative methods and included reviewing existing academic literature and research reports. The research project intended to focus primarily on the insights offered by two specific groups. First, the experience and opinions of those with either direct experience working in the pub trade, at any level, or those with considerable experience in organisations or other roles related to engaging in activities linked to improving social integration and activity in communities. Second, the experiences of groups of individuals who, given their age, location or other personal attributes, might be vulnerable to loneliness or social isolation. The framing of this research is sociological in that it is concerned with the lived experiences of individuals and groups and seeks a rounded understanding of how the social issues being examined interconnect with wider social, cultural and economic changes and processes.

The multi-stage research undertaken can be summarised as follows:

Online Survey: An online survey of individuals employed in the pub, bar or hospitality sector launched on 20th May 2019 and closed on 1st July 2019 having received 72 valid responses. The survey consisted of 23 question relating to activities, opinions and values about the role of social role of pubs and to respondent information (e.g. length of industry experience, current role, age, gender etc.). The survey sought to reveal key trends and patterns in the feelings and values of pub sector workers in relation to the role of pubs in tackling social isolation and loneliness.

Pub Sector Interviews: A series of 10 semi-structured interviews with pub and bar sector workers drawn from respondents to the online survey focused on personal experiences of engaging in activities that allow pubs to play a greater role in fostering social interaction and tackling social isolation. Interviews included a range of roles and levels of experience, although most had extensive experience in the sector.

Stakeholder Interviews: A further series of 10 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in both the pub and beer sector and age and community related organisations. These interviews represent the insights of individuals with key roles in major organisations with relevant remits.

Focus Groups: A series of 10 focus groups involving a total of 86 participants were carried out in various urban, suburban and rural locations in the UK during July and August 2019. The locations of the focus groups were: Huddersfield, Nottingham, Birmingham, Redditch, Chapel-en-le-Frith, Coventry, Greater Manchester (x2) and London (x2). The majority of groups involved participants accessed through existing community networks and local group activities. Two of the ten groups where specifically involving members of the British Caribbean community and one group involved young adults with various learning difficulties.

Ethical approval for research was received through the Loughborough University Ethics Approval (Human Participants) Sub Committee and the research was carried out in accordance with the principles set down by the British Sociological Society (BSA) in their Statement of Ethical Practice.

All interviews and focus groups were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service. The resulting transcripts were analysed by the researcher and extracts are included in this report without reference to specific names, locations or organisation roles and titles to preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of research participants.

More than Just a Place to Drink: Pubs, Sociability and Social Interaction

The analysis of data collected during the research reveals a complex picture. The diverse contexts in which pubs operate means that there is no single definitive account of how pubs can play a role in tackling loneliness. Rural pubs face quite different operating conditions from pubs in suburban and urban locations. There is also great variety in the size and operational structure of any given pub meaning what works for one venue might be unfeasible or ineffective for another. Further still, attitudes to pubs and experiences of pub going varied by age, gender, social class and locality.

Yet, across these variations, several cross-cutting themes emerged. Pubs were seen as being important to the wellbeing of both communities and of individuals and were valued for being a central feature of local communities, especially in villages, towns and suburban areas. For example, 76.4% of survey respondents felt that the venue where they work makes a positive contribution to the local community, while 63.9% felt that their pub was one of the main places that people living in the local area can socialise. 85.9% of respondents agreed and strongly agreed with the statement 'When a pub closes the local community suffer'. There was also a widespread recognition that pubs provided at least the promise of beneficial social interaction and opportunities to make new or maintain existing friendships. This comes at a time when – as was widely discussed during interviews and focus groups – spaces in which social interaction take place and where a sense of community can be formed and maintained are increasingly scarce.

Across the research phases there was agreement that pubs have an important social function in providing a space for different forms and levels of social interaction. This spanned from occasional visits to pubs as 'something to keep you busy' and 'get you out of the house', through to regular outings with family and friends and even large celebrations of major birthdays and anniversaries. Importantly, sociability in pubs took on a range of forms and included low level, but still highly valued, regular visits as well as a more intense engagement where the pub serves as both a primary site of social interaction and also a space in which people forge new friendships and learn new skills and hobbies.

Throughout the research it was clear that pubs are understood to provide more than just a space solely for the purchase and consumption of alcoholic drinks. As the manager of one estate pub in the Southeast of England explained, he felt pubs should be 'the hub of the area and the place where everyone can go'. Further, as one pub staff interviewee explained:

'It goes beyond just being a business or a place to go and consume alcohol. More important than the alcohol is the opportunity for socialising.'

Pubs were therefore regarded as places for pleasurable social interaction and as places to meet with friends and family. In fact, with the steady increase in off-trade alcohol sales in recent decades led by supermarkets who offer considerably discounted prices, drinking at the pub is increasingly seen by pub goers as having to offer something that home consumption of alcohol cannot. This meant that the primary appeal of pubs is not necessarily the chance to purchase and consume alcohol, as this can be done more cheaply elsewhere, but the opportunity to be sociable and be around and interact with other people.

Many participants spoke of visiting pubs frequently but rarely drinking alcohol. For many, good tea and coffee, a range of soft drinks and well-priced food were more likely to be the main purchase once in the pub than alcoholic beverages. In the majority of cases food was central to the motivations of many pub goers and has, likewise, become a major or even majority strand of many pubs incomes (Williams, 1996; Lane 2018). While the shift to food-led offerings by many pubs is often explained as economic necessity, it is worth noting here in the scope of this research project that food is viewed by many as more assessable and inclusive than drinking alcohol.

Amongst older participants, regular alcohol consumption was quite rare. Drinking was always spoken of as being at a moderate or 'sensible' level which rarely exceeded more than a one or two drinks on any single occasion. Many regularly ate meals or drank coffee in pubs or bars and chose to drink alcoholic drinks on certain occasions but not others. In some focus groups the rise of no and low alcohol drinks was discussed. However, much of this was in terms of the lack of options on offer. With older age sometimes comes a decreased desire or ability to consume alcohol caused by, for example, the requirements of prescription medication or a general lowering of tolerance for the varied effects of alcohol on mind and body. However, many pubs increased availability of good quality tea and coffee as well as new and varied soft drinks, with non-alcohol alternatives such as 'mocktails', juices and smoothies a development welcomed by many focus group participants. Given the increased competition from cafes, juice bars and dessert parlours, it was felt that pubs only offering a standard range of soft drinks brands and fruit juices were not keeping pace with the changing consumer tastes and customer demands.

The appeal of pubs is therefore not that they sell alcoholic beverages but that they offer something that is difficult to recreate at home; namely a pleasurable social experience. To add depth to this observation, the remainder of this section is divided into three sub-sections, each examining a different form of pub going, and its associated social value, identified during the research.

“One of the Regulars”: Regular Routines

The pub was seen as one of several places that remained an option for participants in the research to seek companionship beyond the home and the workplace. Notably, this often took the form of regular but short visits to a local pub, often as part of other activities and routines. Many research participants explained that conversations with friends was the main appeal of visiting the pub. The importance of sociable conversation was emphasised by a focus group participant in South London who explained how he primarily visited the pub for relaxed interactions with friends by saying:

‘Basically, I don’t go to the pub for entertainment myself. Some pubs, they do have bands and things, but I don’t like loud music. I don’t go to the pub for that. I went to a pub on Saturday, I was passing again, and they were playing loud music. I’m not sure that I enjoyed it that much. For me, I sit with friends and have a good chat, have a meal, that’s for me’.

This participant, and many others, felt that the pub offered them a place to be relaxed, to feel welcome and to maintain pleasurable social connections with others. Whilst some pub visits are planned, many are spontaneous when ‘passing’ and feeling the need for relaxed sociability and companionship. This was commonly contrasted with ‘sitting at home feeling sorry for oneself’. For many older participants, the sociable atmosphere and relaxed pace made the pub an appealing place to socialise. A focus group participant in a suburban town in the West Midlands explained that:

‘I love being with people. I mean there’s nothing I like better than being able to talk to people and, you know, not just about silly things but having a good laugh and, you know, generally speaking, bringing yourself out of what you’ve been doing and what you haven’t been doing, lots of things, you know’.

It is important to acknowledge the emotions involved in these feelings. As loneliness is a subjective feeling, being engaged with others in a way that helps an individual feel relaxed and sociable can be of real value in reducing feelings of loneliness. Further, as will be examined below, the above quotes highlight the importance of pub atmosphere and environmental context; where pubs can create a relaxed, informal and welcoming environment older residents are likely to find them more approachable and enjoyable.

The interactions offered in the context of a regular drink or meal at the pub may individually seem insignificant but cumulatively offered regular and consistent social contact that was recognised across the research data for its value in combating social isolation and loneliness. The pub was felt to provide a place for regular social contact that is of real value to those, particularly the elderly, whose access to social interaction elsewhere may be either minimal or inconsistent. This was particularly supported during focus groups, where numerous participants spoke of the pub as an opportunity to get out of the house and to have a conversation when they might otherwise go a whole week without speaking to someone face-to-face. Many participants spoke of the importance of regularity and routine in that they would build a visit to the pub into other regular activities such as grocery shopping, a visit from a relative or attending a fitness class or cultural activity such as a book group. Notably, because such routine pub visits typically supplemented other activities taking place during the daytime, afternoon visits to pubs appeared to be favoured by older participants.



For some participants, a routine of regular pub going was a continuation of earlier habits and could involve, for example, keeping in touch with former colleagues long after retirement. For others, pub going was an activity that they ‘had more time for’ in older age and was either directly part of conscious efforts to spend more time out of the house in social settings or as part of an associated activity such as joining a book club or a walking group. Pubs are therefore amongst the most popular choice for carrying on the social connections established elsewhere.

The ability of the pub to welcome individual customers through conversation between patrons or between staff and customers was valued for offering reassuring, low level, social contact. Pub and bar staff interviewed were also quick to explain how the pub is an important space for social interaction to take place. Pub staff felt able to identify customers who wished to converse with them. One interviewee, the owner of a free house in a rural village in the midlands, explained that:

‘People don’t visit a pub just for the alcohol, it’s the social interaction quite often...If they sit near the bar, then usually they want a bit of social interaction, you know, they want to be spoken to, you know, really, that’s how I see it. It’s, the pub offers a lot more than just a drink and a sandwich or a meal, or it should do, yeah’.

As is examined further below, experienced pub staff develop the ability to judge which customers are seeking or would appreciate a greater level of interaction than the simply exchanges involved in ordering drinks and food.

A picture therefore emerged of pubs offering a space for those who otherwise live alone to meet or be around others from the local area as well as to interact with pub staff in informal but meaningful and appreciated ways. While we might imagine that pubs play such a role in rural locations, the research shows that this could equally be the case in both urban and suburban areas. For example, a pub owner in a busy town in the West Central Lowlands area of Scotland described how:

‘People come in maybe three, four days a week, they’re treated as a friend rather than as a customer. Particularly the older people, some of them live on their own and they get that social interaction that they don’t get anywhere else. We have regulars – like we’ve Christmas parties for them, we have other activities for them. They’re just made to feel included.’

Similarly, a pub manager in Birmingham spoke of how:

‘We are surrounded by blocks of flats round by us, a lot of tower blocks, and the people in the tower block – which is right next to the pub – they are all like individual sort of flats. So, the pub plays a main sort of role for them to get together, you know. If they weren’t in the pub, they probably wouldn’t even know each other, you know, from the flats.’

Across the research, many participants gave examples of the benefit of ‘popping to the local’ and some spoke with pride about being known by name and having a regular order which staff knew and anticipated. One barman with over 15 years of experience interviewed in the West Midlands described how, at the suburban pub he worked in:

‘There’s a bloke that comes in every Sunday dinner time. He has a couple of pints of mild. He doesn’t interact much but like I say, he benefits in getting out the house. Even if he just comes out for a couple of milds on a Sunday, that might be the only time, apart from a bit of shopping, he actually gets out the house and sees other people.’

This importance of routine is also found in a review of research on older people’s drinking habits carried out by Bareham et al. (2018) where it was found that drinking routines could help older people stay in touch with others and maintain their social networks. Because social relationships vary by both structure and function (Valtorta et al., 2016), it is important not to overlook what might appear small or fleeting social interactions that nonetheless serve a significant social function. A conversation between regulars in a pub, or between a patron and a member of the pub staff team, can go a considerable way to alleviate feelings of loneliness even though it lasts merely seconds or minutes.

“A Nice Day Out”: Special Occasions and Outings

While, as discussed above, participants spoke of enjoying a regular and routine visit to their local pub to feel socially connected, many also spoke of visiting pubs in other locations as something they greatly enjoyed and looked forward to. This usually took the form of a day trip involving visits to other attractions, shopping or venues which included stopping at a pub for a drink, a snack or a meal. For many of the older focus group participants such outings were a common and highly valued activity especially when involving close family members, groups of friends or social groups linked to activities such as Church or volunteering involvements.

For many participants, pub going was a way of showing their fun side. Specifically for older participants, this appeared to mean challenging ideas about the elderly sitting at home ‘feeling sorry for themselves’. In many focus groups, participants spoke of planning a visit to a newly refurbished or newly opened pub and, further, of telling their friends about the experience if it was positive. Evidently, people like to tell stories to others about their visits to pubs. One focus group participant, for instance, referred to ‘having a story to tell’ when she spoke to her daughter on the phone if she could explain she had been out for the day and had ‘a nice lunch somewhere’. Similarly, one older woman participating in a focus group in the suburb of a large Midlands city explained that:

‘We went to the garden centre first and then we went to the [local pub] and it was really nice because it was a nice day. We just went in and ordered our meal. We didn’t have any problems. The meal was nice. We all had a good time and then [the pub] was by the canal so you could see all the ducks and everything and then afterwards, you could sit outside in the gardens and we had a drink and a chat and that was lovely.’

In this extract, the repeated use of ‘we’ demonstrates that this was a collective experience for this individual and that she felt part of a group of likeminded individuals.

However, it is also worth noting that some focus group participants felt that such trips were restricted to weekends or certain times of the year when family member were available and willing to accompany them. In several focus groups there were discussions of how isolated older people can feel when family members who live in different towns, cities and, for some, countries only visit occasionally. Indeed, as the next section explores, some of the best examples of pubs tackling social isolation were those offering activities where new

social networks were established beyond the reliance on existing friends and family.

A recurring theme in focus groups was that there are times of the year when people feel lonely if they are not spent with friends or family. Christmas, Easter and major Bank Holidays, as well as birthdays and anniversaries, in particular, were strongly associated with family togetherness. This meant that these were times when people may feel particularly isolated. However, the research also highlighted examples of pubs playing a leading role in tackling this issue. There are numerous examples of pubs offering Christmas meals for local residents and several pubs identified during the research present examples of their Christmas, Easter and Bank Holiday community lunches being covered in local press, benefiting the pub in terms of customer engagement and retention, but also addressing wider issues relating to awareness of isolation.

A number of the focus groups were drawn from communities or groups who had participated in the Brewing Good Cheer campaign ran by HEINEKEN UK in recent years. This initiative, that involves pubs hosting Christmas lunches for local community groups, was positively received by all those who had participated. Participants felt this was a positive scheme and an enjoyable experience, with participants reporting being made to feel welcome and valued. This was of particular worth to older individuals and those with fewer family members.

The research showed that pubs retain considerable appeal as places to be around others, especially on special occasions or events. In a different way to the regular pub going of the previous section, these occasional visits were less about regularity and routines and more about marking occasions and given one’s social life a rhythm which meant both having things to look forward to and gathering pleasurable memories and stories to tell others. Notably, in a number of focus groups discussion segued into detailed descriptions of outings and events where group participants appeared to take great joy in telling others of fun and enjoyable days out. Again, it is worth noting the emotional content of these moments, as participants expressed positive feelings of joy, happiness and excitement that are clearly of huge value in combating the negative emotional impact of loneliness and isolation.

“Joining In”: Pubs as Spaces for Engaging in Activities

In addition to the regular and occasional pub going examined above, one of the key findings relates to the benefits offered by pubs running events, classes and activities. We know that leisure activities, particularly those that involve and encourage social interaction, can be highly beneficial in terms of wellbeing and social inclusion (Glover, 2018). During the research, the best examples of this involved pubs providing various opportunities to socialise and to connect with others through participation in structured activities and events. Many instances of this involved activities readily associated with pubs. When surveyed, pubs staff reported live music (62.9%), pub quizzes (61.4%), traditional pub games (44.3%) and board games (35.7%) to be the most common leisure activities available in the venues in which they currently worked. Further, 61.4% reported that their venue cooperated with local charities and organisations whilst 58.6% offered a function room for hire. When survey respondents were asked which activities their venue might offer in future to tackle social isolation, the most popular choices included offers on meals and drinks for pensioners, public talks and lectures and book groups.

Across the survey, interviews and focus groups it became clear that a great many pubs are currently offering a range of activities that to be involved with. The increasing diversity of activities and initiatives offered in pubs was striking. Many pubs can and do offer a wide range of events and activities, as a pub manager of a popular Southwest London pub explained by saying:

‘Yeah, so we do a few things, so it’s, particularly around daytime actually we do, to bring together people that it’s not just about coming and drinking. So, on a Monday and a Tuesday morning we do bridge, which is kind of forty to sixty people, generally speaking who are retired, you know, with the vast generalisation that is generally what it is, because it’s peoples’ spare time, I guess. They come and play together, we’re just about to take on a yoga class and she referred to them all as our ‘oldies’ who come on a Monday morning. So, they, within that then they also build up their, a lunch club and stuff like that, and they come in then and have their Christmas dinner with us, and all those sort of things. Every other week we do a mum or parent and baby thing, so we do Babble Talks, which is like Ted Talks but for people with babies. So it’s grown up conversations, but you can bring a screaming child with you. We also have the same with Screaming with Laughter, which is a daytime comedy club, which you can bring a baby to.’

During focus groups, the range of activities that could be offered in a pub were discussed at length. Notably, many older research participants recalled a time when pub games like dominos and darts were more common and better organised than they tend to be now and others lamented the decline of pub singing accompanied by piano.

Throughout focus groups, pubs hosting group activities was one of the most common examples of ways in which pubs can play a direct role in combatting loneliness. This included many examples of groups relating to health, wellbeing and fitness including yoga, meditation and wellness classes as well as dance, singing and music. The research revealed numerous examples of pubs being sites for learning new skills and engaging in new activities. The welcoming and convivial atmosphere of many pubs meant that they were spaces in which people felt comfortable trying new activities. A participant in a focus group in the East Midlands who runs various classes in wellbeing and adult dance mentioned that spending time in the pub after the class had ended allowed the group of regular participants to further develop their friendships. She said that:

‘We also use the pub afterwards and we have a meal and a drink and, probably, I’d say three quarters of that group stay for social contact after that.’

With the challenging trading conditions faced by pubs in recent years, most notably the competition from the rise of drinking supermarket bought alcohol at home, many pub staff interviewed spoke of needing to offer a range of activities. Pub sector interviewees were prominent in discussing examples of pubs introducing a great range of activities and initiatives to increase engagement and interaction. As one interviewee representing a leading beer and pubs consumer group put it:

‘We started seeing all this diversification, so community cafes offering free meals to old people on Christmas day, book clubs, knitting clubs, just all the weird and wonderful things that happen in pubs that you don’t necessarily see every day but they’re providing community space.’

Other cultural activities that many focus group participants spoke positively of include activities such as bingo, stand-up comedy and karaoke.

In rural areas, where the provision of social support faces complex issues (Kelly et al, 2019), pubs and pub staff are a resource that can be used by the immediate community. Many pubs are providing a venue for interventions and activities but also benefit from staff who are well integrated into communities and can help to identify at risk individuals and groups and to promote intervention initiatives. For example, the landlady of a rural village pub in the East Midlands explained that the varied activities taking place in her pub were ‘filling a gap’ in the village which otherwise lacked options for residents to interact and bond. She explained that:

‘We do a pub quiz alternative Monday nights. And then the other Monday, when we’re not doing a pub quiz, we run a craft group, sort of a ‘Stitch and Natter’...So, people just bring their own little projects and that’s been lovely. That’s only been going a couple of months. And we’ve got people that come along there and they’re, ‘well I don’t know how to knit or crochet.’ And someone else is, ‘oh that doesn’t matter, come and I’ll teach you how to do it. I’ll bring you the stuff.’ So, we’ve got a couple of ladies that have never done any crafting before and [they are] learning off people. And you’ve got others that it’s just a real sharing of knowledge as well as just again nice conversation about things that are going on.’

There were also numerous examples of pubs working with existing groups in the local community. For example, the director of a midlands brewery with a small but growing estate of pubs explained that:

‘We’ve made space available for community meetings. So, whether it be a formal or informal group that needs somewhere to have a private room, we’ve made sure that’s available and working with the various organisations within a community to get them used to using us as a community hub and venue.’

A key theme emerging from the data analysis, which these examples illustrate, is the importance of pubs hosting varied activities to engage customers. The group nature of such activities is vital to the research. Many valued the structured nature of group activities and group leaders were often singled out in focus groups as playing a key role in making older or more isolated individuals feel welcome and encouraged to participate in the group. The informality of the pub also meant that it was a place

people felt confident to try something new, without the pressures of, for instance, signing up for a formal series of classes for which a substantial fee might be payable upfront. Given the evidence that one of the major barrier to initiatives designed to tackle or prevent loneliness is that many individuals simply do not see themselves as lonely (Latson, 2018), groups and events taking place in pubs can encourage social involvement in a positive way, with a clear emphasis on fun and enjoyment and a point of access that feels less intimidating. Such activities can benefit by avoiding the possibly stigmatising effects of interventions specifically labelled as targeting ‘the lonely’ and echo comments made by stakeholders who highlighted the need for a ‘positive framing’ of social inclusion and involvement over negative messages about ‘isolation’ and ‘loneliness’.

Retirement, divorce and bereavement are often an impetus to learn new skills and make new social connections (U3A, 2018). Pubs which host varied activities, groups and classes are well placed to cater to this need. Pubs play a prominent role in attempts by older participants to keep active. This could involve activities taking place in pubs or as a supplementary to activities elsewhere. Attending an evening class, film screening or book group would then naturally flow into a visit to the pub where conversation would carry on. Importantly, pubs could provide a space in which leisure activities were enjoyed with others rather than alone or in isolation. This is important, as research by Gardiner et al. (2018: 153) who state that ‘activities or interventions which supported productive engagement seemed to be more successful in alleviating social isolation than those involving passive activities or those with no explicit goal or purpose’. Such interventions are supported by both academic literature and the views of key stakeholders with experience in tackling loneliness and fostering social interaction. Loneliness has been likened to a ‘negative feedback loop’ where those experiencing loneliness become more distrusting of others or more easily stressed or anxious in social situations, both of which in turn lead to further social isolation (Latson, 2018). It is important, therefore, to acknowledge the role that socially active and pleasurable pub going can play in creating a positive reinforcing circle, where increased social activity builds confidence and positive habits, encouraging further involvement in social events and local community activities.



The Role of Pubs in the Fight against Loneliness: Opportunities and Challenges

The previous section explored findings relating to pub going, forms of sociality associated with it and indicated some of the benefits provided by pleasurable social interactions taking place in various forms in pubs. This section considers the social function of pubs in more detail and, in particular, examines the opportunities and challenges currently facing the pub sector if it is to further enhance its role in the fights against loneliness and social isolation.

The research also identified numerous examples of pubs providing services to their local communities. The most common and most obviously beneficial examples involved pubs offering space to local groups with function rooms being available free of charge for classes and community groups. The research also identified numerous examples of publicans being proactive in communicating and collaborating with local groups and authorities. Several pub managers interviewed spoke of the goodwill generated by offering free use of function rooms to local groups, and some offering free hot drinks and snacks. This goodwill stemmed from members of the groups using the space but also from other customers who appear to appreciate seeing the pub in use in varied ways by varied individuals and groups. This was telling in one focus group conducted in a suburb of a city in the East Midlands, where participants spoke at length about the atmosphere and 'everyone is welcome vibe' generated by the pub being busy and occupied throughout the day. This insight was supported by a representative of a charity involved in combating social isolation and encouraging interaction, who spoke of the value of regular social activities such as tea mornings.

Often, small ideas or gestures signalled a wider commitment to the social role played by pubs. A pub in the Midlands that installed a taxi order point reported that it had made it easier for older customers to visit the pub, often as part of their weekly errands shopping for groceries, knowing that they could easily organise transport home. Similarly, a number of pubs examined during the research included community notice boards where leaflets and posters were placed to notify patrons of classes, events and activities in the local area. Beyond these examples, several initiatives stand out for their potential to tackle loneliness and social isolation. For example, one pub in the Southeast of England had developed 'Join Me' cards which could be placed on tables by customers who wished to show they were open to being joined in conversation. The pub manager also spoke of making clear to his staff that engaging customers in conversation, especially those using the 'Join Me' cards, was part of their role and they should not feel rushed away from engaging such customers in conversation. Such initiatives take inspiration from the 'Chatter and Natter Tables' pioneered by the social enterprise Chatty Café, where a table is reserved and identified as somewhere people can sit if they are 'willing to chat'.

Barriers to Social Interaction in Pubs

Many findings are broadly positive and optimistic about the role that pubs can play in combatting loneliness. Significant barriers do, however, appear prevalent in the accounts of elderly focus group participants who spoke enthusiastically about the idea of pub going, particularly where it involved meals or joining structured group activities, but pessimistically about the realities of taking regular trips to the pub. Indeed, for many of the older participants, pub going was a habit and common practice earlier in their life which had greatly reduced or ceased entirely in later life. Notably, as might be expected, pub going was far more common during youth and became restricted once 'settling down' to raise a family. Beyond this, a range of barriers were identified. These included physical barriers, cultural barriers and social barriers.

Concerns about transportation and access were cited as the most common reasons for a reduction or cessation of pub going in older age. For example, a male participant in a focus group in a town in the West Midlands, explained that:

'I only don't go at the moment because I can't get there, you know. If I could get there, I would, because it's somewhere that you can go in and there's people that you can talk to and, you know, at least pass some sort of conversation with them and if you want to join in drinking. But I mean you don't have to. But no, I don't go now, but it's only because I can't get there.'

Discussion of transportation and access issues were common in rural areas but also in suburban settings. In particular, many suburbs of towns and cities have seen closures of pubs leaving some individuals dependent on longer trips by car or public transport in order to visit pubs in town or city centres. In several focus groups, older participants singled out specific pubs with sizable car parks and/or disabled parking bays that meant they, or a family member, were able to drive directly to the pub alleviating the concerns about transport and accessibility.

A large amount of focus group discussions focused on the physical layout and design of pubs. In general, pubs with low lighting were seen as dark and unwelcoming by all participants. For elderly participants specifically, however, this also raised concerns about comfort, accessibility and safety. One participant of a focus group in the West Midlands explained how having reduced mobility and using a walking stick meant that some pubs weren't suitable for him. He said that:

‘And if you’re like – say me, for instance, I have to have a stick now. I haven’t always did, but before I had the stick, I’ve seen many a person, you know, sort of really fumbling round because it was too dark for them to see and the toilets are right up the other end of the place anyway. You know, and you’ve got steps to go up so you’ve got to be either with somebody or get somebody to take you, you know what I mean, which isn’t always available.’

Poor layouts, uneven or narrow spaces and impractically placed toilets were all raised as reasons to avoid certain venues. The larger pubs run by national chains where, in particular, mentioned in several focus groups for having toilets sited up or down flights of stairs. More generally, concern amongst elderly research participants related to access to and cleanliness of toilets in pubs, with too few pubs considering the access needs of customers with physical impairments relating to reduced mobility.

Something raised in all focus groups involving older participants was the importance of pub furniture in terms of accessibility and comfort. The reduced mobility of older pub goers means that low sofas and high tables and stools, increasingly common in many pubs and bars, present barriers. Casual dining, which was a popular activity for many participants, required comfortable seating and a steady table. Further, a number of participants spoke positively of venues where either full table service was available or, at least, staff proactively offered to bring drinks and food to the table.

Noise was also a recurring point of discussion in focus groups. Many older participants felt pubs that were noisy with loud music, sport on televisions or from fruit machines and juke boxes made it hard to hear and uncomfortable to converse. Interestingly, several examples of pubs already mindful of this were identified. In these venues, certain times were designated as meet up and chat times where music was lowered and lighting raised. In one case, a specific area of the pub had its seating reorganised during the day time to make access easier for the groups of older residents from the nearby housing estate who met regularly for lunch on several days of the week. Pub staff interviewees also spoke of training their staff to be mindful of such needs and knowing to adjust volume of music for older customers either when asked or primitively during certain times of the day.

Beyond the physical layout and general atmosphere, the social context and setting was highly important. A significant barrier identified by numerous participants in the research was social confidence. As one focus group participant explained, older individuals often:

‘...don’t necessarily have the confidence to go and do it on their own, because of their life circumstances, people lose confidence if they’ve not been working or they lose their partners.’

This point was also raised by several stakeholders in age and community related organisations. For instance, it was felt that many elderly individuals slipped into a situation of being disconnected and isolated following the death of a spouse. Stakeholders suggested that perhaps pubs can play a role in providing opportunities for such individuals to socialise again and to regain confidence.

Many older female focus group participants made it clear that they felt pubs to be less welcoming places for individual females or that there was still a cultural prejudice that meant entering a pub alone as a woman was socially frowned upon. For example, one focus group participant in rural Derbyshire explained that acquaintances from a local Church group she was part of would gladly participate in a trip to the pub as a group but not as unaccompanied individuals. She said:

‘If they knew they were with a group of people that they knew, they’d probably come along. But if they thought they were going through the door on their own, if I even thought I was going through the door on my own, I wouldn’t go. That is a big thing.’

These discussions tended to gradually shift to the efforts that can be made by pubs to ensure they feel welcoming and hospitable for older customers, especially those who may lack confidence to enter a venue without knowing if it will be welcoming and to their tastes or not. For example, a participant in the focus group carried out in a city in the West Midlands described how:

‘It could just be me saying to my nan, I’ll take you and granny up to the local pub, because they’re both 91. My nan would be like, I’m not doing that. She would say ‘no’. If she got there and it was all set up nicely for the community, there were other older women, other women, or other families, she would be interested in that. The problem is that these are the things that pubs need to do... people who walk past and say, ‘I don’t think I’ll go in there’. They need to do something a bit different to show that they’re inclusive, like a family fun day, come down with your family.’

Notably, busy city centre pubs and pubs associated with drunkenness and poor behaviour were a cause for concern and participants spoke of avoiding such spaces. For example, during one of the two focus groups conducted in the Greater Manchester area, the following exchange addressed the change in atmosphere that occurs around drinking venues later in the evening:

Participant A: Just walking down Market Street, though, at night-time, if you go up to a certain time, you can see them all enjoying themselves and it’s a lovely atmosphere. Once you’ve gone past that [time], you know, you have to get out again.

Researcher: There’s a point that it changes?

Participant B: It changes completely.

Participant A: People come back on – on the night bus, people were a little bit merry, somebody might even start singing. It was a nice sort of – whereas after a certain time in Manchester, then it’s not, you know, and people are more likely to be violent than they were then.

Here, participants are suggesting that there is a point where the convivial atmosphere around pubs and bars is enjoyable but can quickly turn. Notably, across most focus groups there was a similar pattern of especially older participants saying they preferred visiting pubs during the afternoon or early evening but then that they would try to leave for home before the latter part of the evening when behaviour of others might become unruly or unpredictable. Such comments clearly echo wider concerns about youth drinking and disorder in city centres identified in previous academic studies of the night-time economy (McGregor, 2012). In several focus groups, the issue of swearing and poor language was identified as creating an atmosphere of incivility in which many felt unwelcome or unwilling to participate. This echoes research that shows the welcoming atmosphere of pubs is easily threatened through misuse and misappropriation of space. Where conflict arises between different users of the pub there may be disagreements about accepted conduct, levels of drunkenness, noise and cordiality of social interactions (Goode & Anderson, 2015).

Finally, in two focus groups carried out with participants of Caribbean heritage, and likewise for three participants of Nepalese heritage in a London focus group, there was discussion of some pubs feeling unwelcoming for people from minority ethnic communities. For instance, two of the Nepalese participants recalled regular drinking in pubs in their youth when serving in the British Army but said that this had become far less common in older age as they felt less welcome in many pubs and tended to prefer spending time in leisure spaces specific to the Nepalese community or at home.

The Importance of Pub Staff

Across the various forms of pub going identified during the research, a common unifying strand is the important role played by pub staff in creating a welcoming environment and sociable atmosphere. The general social ambience of the pub setting was perhaps the key criteria predicated a positive experience. A friendly atmosphere in which both staff and other customers show courtesy and an informal and relaxed tone appeared to be essential to most participant’s description of a positive pub experience. Across focus groups, and in interviews with pub and bar staff, the ability of staff to make customers of all backgrounds and ages feel welcome and at ease was paramount. One pub staff interviewee spoke of training staff at her busy Southwest London pub to:

‘Learn to read the tables...some people want to chat and some people don’t, you know, you need to be able to judge what sort of mood they’re in and how they’re feeling and how you can make their evening better.’

Further, focus groups and interviews draw out interesting examples of pub staff going out of their way to check on the wellbeing of older customers. These comments echo advice that indicates the benefits of a regular ‘check in’ with individuals at risk of loneliness (Nuffield Health, 2019). For example, in a focus group conducted in a rural town in the East Midlands, one participant who ran a one-room local micropub explained:

‘I look after a gentleman who lives behind the pub, by accident, but I’ve ended up taking care of him. He’s 65, 66, and he comes in for a drink and we make sure he gets home safe and things like that, sorted out meals for him, Wiltshire Farms. Everyone knows him...he lived in [the town] for five years before he started coming in my pub and he didn’t know anybody.’

One of the matters raised most often in focus groups was the importance of service and welcome. While some older participants referred to a feeling invisible and ignored when being out of the house, many older participants spoke of pubs as places where they liked being ‘made to feel special’ and ‘treated with respect’. Several participants mentioned pubs as being unhurried and having attentive service from staff in contrast to many retail settings where long queues at tills and an increasing use of automation such as self-service checkouts have left older shoppers feeling rushed and undervalued. Important here seemed to be the

small gestures that pub staff could make towards older customers which communicates that they are welcome and respected and, also, that they may have specific needs requiring a little more attention in order to access and enjoy the pub as a social space. A pub manager in a suburban area of Birmingham explained how:

‘Yeah, older people obviously need some help and support sometimes. We get them taxis and make sure that, some of them do like a drink and they need help getting home and things like that.’

The vast amount of work in the pub trade involves direct interaction with customers and being able to make patrons feel welcomed and comfortable is a crucial job skill. Skilled and experienced pub staff facilitate social interaction and help forge social linkages that might not otherwise find expression. It is therefore important to recognise the huge amounts of undervalued or unacknowledged skilled labour done by staff working in the pub and wider hospitality trade in terms of welcoming, attending to and supporting individuals and groups at risk of loneliness. A huge value is placed on pub staff knowing the names of regular customers as well as taking the time to learn some details of customers’ interests, hobbies and current or past occupation. Many staff are aware of this and spoke of their ability to ‘spot’ customers who were keen to speak or simply be acknowledged and welcomed. Experienced staff who took some time and effort to get to know regular patrons were highly valued. Further, pub sector interviews showed that experienced and skilled pub staff are adept at creating introductions between customers. In one example, the manager of a suburban pub spoke of being able to instigate conversations between regulars with a shared interest in particular sports or a shared career paths (e.g. both served in the Army; both former teachers) and having seen such introductions develop into sustained friendships on numerous occasions.

Combining insights from the survey and pub staff interview data, a general trend is that pub sector staff feel confident that they can engage with potentially socially isolated individuals yet feel that implications for financial costs and staffing are a prominent constraint. The survey showed 89.9% of respondents felt that they were good at making customers feel welcome, while 59.7% felt that they had adequate training in how to interact with potentially isolated customers. The data show a concern amongst pub sector participants reflecting the realities that limit the degree to which opportunities to engage in tackling loneliness can be pursued. The survey of pub and bar staff revealed financial costs (59.3%), staffing implications (44.1%) and venue location (33.9%) to be the biggest barriers to pubs taking a more prominent role in combatting loneliness and social isolation. Indeed, an interviewee

with extensive experience in the pub trade explained that the role of pubs in tackling social isolation was often dependent on what he described as the ‘hero licensee’ who would ‘go above and beyond’ in taking a personal interest in the lives and welfare of pub patrons.

While pub staff pride themselves on professionalism and on their ability to interact with customers and colleagues in a genial and egalitarian manner (Sandiford & Seymour, 2010), a challenge for the sector therefore relates to the ability to recruit, develop and retain skilled staff who are committed to enhancing the social value of the pub. One pub sector organisation representative interviewed explained this dilemma as follows:

‘So, the pub is very demanding. It’s got to offer something more than an individual can find by staying at home, playing with your mates, drinking with your mates, somewhere where it’s a place to meet and greet. Now, that at the end of the day is very much dependent on the hero licensee being there. It doesn’t matter how nice and smart or comfortable your building looks, if you get a bad vibe when you walk in, you probably won’t go again, and you’ll probably tell me about it, and I won’t go. So, we are so dependent on the support provided by a good licensee. I don’t think we should underestimate all the work you are doing, that in order to be successful, we have to take licensees with us. We can tell the customers – tell everybody else how wonderful the pub could be, but unless their experience of going to the pub is going to help break down that sense of isolation, help break down the anxiety that they’ve got through loss of services, or the over used word at the moment, loneliness.’

Notably, then, on the theme of opportunities and challenges, the skill and experience of pub staff is both the sectors greatest asset and one of its biggest challenge as it seeks to continue to play a role in combatting social isolation and loneliness.

Widening the Remit and Social Function of Pubs

The research findings indicate a complex situation where pubs are highly valued and there is a widespread consensus that they can play a positive role in local communities and, in particular, in the lives of individuals and groups in need of regular social contact and interaction lacking elsewhere for a number of reasons. Within the pub sector, there is a strong feeling that pubs can or, indeed, must step in to provide spaces of social interaction that are now increasingly rare given closure to other civic and public spaces and a more general drift away from community orientated leisure towards social interaction which is based in the home or online. For example, a stakeholder involved in policy and research for a beer and pubs organisations explained that:

‘We’ve seen kind of a big decrease over the last kind of ten years in places like community centres, parish halls, even kind of churches and pubs quite often, especially in rural areas, are the last place that’s almost a public meeting space for people.’

As already identified, many pubs are becoming more ambitious in their offering of activities and events and in many cases this involves an either conscious or associated widening of customer appeal and engagement.

A further theme identified in the research therefore relates to pubs changing, adapting and diversifying both their function and their customer base. For example, a recently retired participant in a focus group in an East Midlands suburb spoke positively of her local pub in the following way:

‘I live here, so it’s very local for me. It’s a family orientated pub where there’s so many activities which also really helps, you know, the baby massage and people having coffee here, as well as the pub in the evening. But all the other, the crafts – there’s so many others, there’s the dementia group here, it’s very inclusive of people, apart from the stairs upstairs it’s very inclusive and easy for people to access on the ground.’

There is a well-established idea that the pub has historically been a place where social barriers are overcome and social mixing across age and social class divisions takes place. However, recent decades have seen a trend towards market segmentation that means not all pubs cater well for different demographics. In spite of this trend to market segmentation, many pubs do succeed in catering to the tastes of different age groups and customers of varied social class backgrounds. This perhaps represents a positive continuation of the trend evident since the end of the last century meaning the demographic of pub-goers is more diverse and no longer solely comprising working-age males (Williams, 1996).

Those pubs that do succeed in welcoming a mixed clientele were spoken of positively by those participating in focus groups. Older participants in particular valued the chance to mix socially with others and to see young people and families out enjoying their leisure time together. One stakeholder interviewee explained that ‘we know how important intergenerational interaction is for positive ageing and wellbeing’ and noted that social spaces where older and younger residents interacted were increasingly rare. This was supported in focus groups where participants spoke about enjoying meeting different people including those younger than themselves. Indeed, on more than one occasion, focus group participants said they did not ‘feel old’ and did not want to socialise ‘only with old people’. As such, pubs could provide a valuable contribution to society in offering spaces that are intergenerational at a time when social, economic and political divisions between generations are more pronounced and problematic.

Across the research, the most prominent examples of pubs playing a social role in their local communities tended to be those that catered to a range of customers and made people feel welcome and valued. Stakeholders and research participants alike all indicated that in striving to fulfil their potential social function a pub must feel inclusive and welcoming. One manifestation of this, as noted above, is that the pub is a space which brings people together and socialisation across age groups, and other social differences, can take place. A further example of this important, yet challenging, issue comes from the focus group involving young adults with learning disabilities. For these young people, a trip to the pub was meaningful and empowering as it involved being in control of their own leisure time and doing something pleasurable such as watching football or signing karaoke. Similarly, one participant in a focus group spoke about how her adult son who has autism really enjoyed a trip to the pub with the family and took pride in him being able to go to the bar and order a round of drinks for his family. There was a sense that pubs, or at least certain pubs, provided a space in which individuals who otherwise might have more limited social opportunities could socialise and feel more confident in their social abilities.

In several focus groups, participants acknowledged the importance of pubs in offering some welcome respite for those with caring duties. It is important to remember that older people are amongst the most active providers of support, not merely recipients of support offered formally or informally by others (Bowling, 2005). This was expressed by a participant in a focus group in Greater Manchester who explained how a visit to the pub could be valuable as respite from caring duties for others. She said that:

‘So you become an elderly person caring for a younger older person and so it’s really important then that you’ve got somewhere and something

that’s about you and not about caring for other people, and your conversations have got – they’re more exciting when you can say, on Monday I go here, Tuesday I go there and Wednesday I did that. You’re not boring to other people or your family. You can be spontaneous.’

This is an important observation to make as it indicates that individuals can become isolated by their responsibilities as carers but also that regular social outings, such as a trip to the pub, are valued in mitigating this isolation. In two of the ten focus groups, participants discussed the suggestion that pubs could offer special

offers or occasions for carers and that these could provide a valuable opportunity to develop social networks of mutual support for those who otherwise might be isolated by their near continuous responsibilities as carers for others. Similarly, although not widely acknowledged in the clinical and academic literature on loneliness, new mothers were a group identified during the research as being potential beneficiaries of social contact provided by pubs. Several examples were identified illustrating ‘Mum and Baby’ clubs meeting in pubs as a chance for mothers to meet, share their experiences and develop mutual support and beneficial social capital.

Changing Times in the UK Pub Sector

Whilst the research identified a range of reasons to be optimistic about the continued and ongoing role of pubs in British society, the extremely challenging conditions in which pubs currently operate cannot be ignored. Certain economic realities underpin the research with sector workers and stakeholders referencing operational costs such as business rates and uncompetitive pricing of beer to tied estate venues. Many participants in focus groups also showed concern and even sadness at the rate of pub closures. In some cases, there was a palpable sense of loss and participants with vivid memories of their local pubs could detail pubs to have closed or changed usage in recent years. The closure of pubs parallels the full or partial closure of public libraries, leisure facilities and other community infrastructure to have suffered a decade of austerity-led cuts and divestment.

Pub closures and declines in pub going were not felt to result in a reduction in alcohol consumption. Rather, alcohol continues to be consumed but takes place within the home and more likely in isolation and lacking the social benefits identified above. In some cases, the closure of pubs is a very tangible manifestation of wider changes affecting towns and cities. For instance, participants of one of the focus groups in South London lamented the closure of many local pubs which might be understood as part of the ongoing gentrification of the area. One elderly male participant explained that:

‘Which is to me, personally, like I said, the little pubs – I was gutted when my pub on the corner closed down, a small pub. Because it was close to home and everybody knew everybody. On a Sunday, they would actually cook lunch and everybody was welcome to come and have something to eat, but that’s gone. That little community thing has gone.’

Whilst the UK pub sector is comprised of several large pub owning companies, on the one hand, and a diverse mixture of independent free houses, on the other, it is worth noting that many of the best practice examples identified during the research were pubs owned by small pub owning groups (5-20 pubs) and regional breweries with small but growing estates of pubs. Such enterprises perhaps benefit from being embedded in local communities and having the size at which a dedicated marketing and estates management team becomes viable yet not so large as to become overly hierarchical in a way that restricts individual managers or publicans from taking initiative in responding to local tastes.

It is important to recognise that there is no one-size-fits-all model for a successful pub. While the image of what makes a community pub is clear, the conditions under which such pubs thrive and the actions taken by pub owners, managers, staff and customers to bring this about are varied. Such depends on location, local context and history, the personnel involved and the demographic profile of existing and potential customers. The role of pub staff and management is pivotal. While pubs offering a range of social activities, groups and events appears to be central is clearly one of the main ways in which pubs can play a role in the fight against loneliness, each venue or chain of venues must make judicious decisions as to how best to serve existing patrons and foster links with new customers.

Summary and Recommendations

The research on which this report is based aimed to identify the role which pubs can play in combatting loneliness. The results of this project highlight some of the perceived benefits of the range of social interactions that pub going involves and found that pubs are still viewed as spaces which can help maintain both the quantity and quality of social relationships (Victor et al., 2010). Participants in the research readily recognised the appeal of a well-run, welcoming and inclusive pub.

While pub going takes various forms, pubs reflect a range of social connections including stronger and weaker social ties, all of which are important in making people feel less lonely and in establishing, maintaining and, in some cases, repairing the social connections that prevent loneliness. A key finding has been that there are clear examples of the valued role pubs can play in different forms of social interaction. Notably, low-level but regular social contact provided by the routine and regular pub visits is recognised as playing a significant role in allowing people to feel active and connected with the outside world. Pubs were also the site for socialising with established friends and family on special occasions, particularly at times of the year when individuals may feel more acutely aware of their own loneliness.

The examples of activities and initiatives identified during the research are varied but they all have in common a desire on the part of pub managers and licensees to play an active role in their communities and to make extra efforts to connect with their customers. This parallels the appeal made by the *Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness* (2017: 20) for business leaders to drive innovations that can tackle loneliness by allowing premises to be used for community events and ‘encouraging staff to take time for a smile and chat with customers who may be lonely’.

Based on these insights, the following recommendations are made:

- Embrace a **wide and inclusive remit** meaning pubs strive to appeal to a range of customers in a welcoming and inclusive manner. While focusing on the needs of particular groups is important, this does not mean exclusively focusing on the elderly.
- Continued efforts should be made to **‘design out’ loneliness** and **‘design in’ social interaction**. Physical, social and cultural barriers barrier to social inclusion should be identified in the design of pubs and efforts made to remove such barriers. Whilst there is a nostalgia for what a pub ‘should’ look like, seating and layout should be varied and efforts made to ensure the needs of those with physical impairments or mobility issues are met. Likewise, adjustments to lighting and noise levels can prove meaningful in improving access opportunities.

- Pubs must **reach out and collaborate** with local community groups, charities and other groups whilst pub chain operators should look into **building connections** with national charities and organisations that work directly with those at most risk of loneliness. The potential for meaningful collaboration is particularly evident in terms of pubs becoming spaces for activities, events and group meetings.
- Efforts should be made to **acknowledge the skills and experience of the pub trade**. Pub staff, like many across the hospitality sector, develop and possess a range of soft skills relating to customer service and communication, all of which are vital resources in the fight against loneliness and social isolation. Important steps can be taken to improve the image of work in the sector.
- Efforts can be made to **increase the availability and quantity of training materials** specific to enhancing the capacities of those working in pubs to recognise and respond to the needs of individuals and groups at risk of loneliness and social isolation. This should draw on the existing, yet often unacknowledged, skills and experience of pub staff and should be produced in collaboration with organisations working with key groups including the elderly such as *Independent Age UK*, *University of the Third Age* (U3A) and *Men’s Sheds Association*.

In conclusion, loneliness is a multifaceted and complicated social issue that pubs can and do play a role in tackling. The research has shown that the social benefits provided by pubs are varied. This report identifies varied examples of pubs actively encouraging meaningful social interactions which benefit their customers in terms of providing meaningful social interactions. Whilst there are significant barriers and limitations, the potential for pubs to retain a social function placing them at the forefront of tackling social isolation and loneliness and, more generally, contributing to the sustainability of local communities is clear. Luckily, there is widespread support for initiatives that allow pubs to build and maintain social networks. While we can recognise the cultural value of the ‘traditional’ pub, many pubs are changing in ways that widen their appeal and enhance their social value.

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