EXPERT COMMENT: Rural pubs really do make countryside communities happier – but they are closing at an alarming rate

Ignazio Cabras, **Professor of Entrepreneurship and Regional Economic Development at Northumbria University, discusses findings of his recent study into the impact of pubs on communities.**

The village pub is a key – even clichéd – feature of rural England. They evoke images of pork scratchings and perilously low beams, frothy pints of warm ale and the summertime knock of willow on leather. They are often described as "friendly" and "homey" and many believe that they foster social relationships among residents, strengthening the level of cohesion in villages and positively contributing to communal well-being. But very few studies have tried to verify scientifically whether this is the case.

In one of my recent studies, funded by the British Academy and published in the International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, I examined communities and parishes with no more than 3,000 individuals, situated at least five miles (or 10 minutes' drive) from towns or larger parishes of 5,000 inhabitants or more.

Together with Dr Matthew Mount of Leeds University, we collected information from several sources, including Actions with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) and the Office for National Statistics (ONS), to create an index measuring levels of community cohesion and well-being within communities across the English countryside.

We then focused on 284 parishes – and investigated the impact pubs had on community cohesion. Overall, we found that pubs had a positive, statistically

significant impact on social engagement and involvement among residents living in the English countryside. We also found that this positive effect increased threefold between 2000 and 2010 (the period we examined) – possibly because pubs have become increasingly important as other essential services such as post offices and village shops have closed.

Stronger communities

Our analysis also highlighted that parishes with a pub had more community events – such as sports matches, charity events, and social clubs – than those without or those with just sports or village halls. Simply speaking, opportunities for communal initiatives would be vastly reduced, if not nonexistent, in these parishes without the presence of pubs. But the presence of more than one pub provided no additional benefit. In other words, two pubs don't lead to a stronger sense of community than one – and may even increase the likelihood of other problems, such as noise.

Our study reaffirms the significant role played by local pubs. But this comes as pub numbers are in rapid decline. Figures released by the British Beer and Pubs Association in 2016 show there are approximately 50,800 pubs open in Britain today – compared with nearly 68,000 in 1982. That's a decline of 25% while the British population has increased by 14% over the same period. And when judged against the findings of our study, that has to be bad for community cohesion.

A number of factors are responsible for this decline, including a general reduction in customers' visits to pubs and more competitive alcohol prices in off-licence retailers. In rural areas, this decline has been exacerbated by smaller village populations and fewer public transport options. Some pubs will have closed because they were poorly run, but can we preserve healthy pubs from unnecessary closures?

A dwindling party

One way to help save these vital rural institutions would be to better identify and define "community pubs". This would help to legislate in favour of those pubs that really are an asset for their community, and to design policies to support these businesses, such as ad-hoc rate relief schemes.

Since 2012, Asset of Community Value (ACV) / Community Right to Buy legislation has given community groups six months to draw up and submit a case to retain a pub. However, if there is no such ACV or preservation order in

place, it is still too easy for developers to buy up and convert long-established pub premises. Tougher legislation would help avoid unnecessary closures, and provide a platform for improving planning regulations.

The lack of infrastructure represents another major problem for rural pubs. Public transport is inadequate – especially in the evening – in many rural areas, which hinders the chances of any business relying on the sale of alcohol.

Incentivising local taxi schemes could enhance the attractiveness of pubs and many other businesses geographically spread and not well served by transport routes. The provision of additional financial support by local authorities for new taxi companies would help to keep tariffs down and encourage rural residents to use them more frequently. This would benefit all businesses, including pubs, operating in the local supply chain.

But while the government should support rural pubs, residents must also play their part. It really is a case of use them, or lose them – and once a pub is gone, it may well be gone forever.

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