

04/05/2021

Written submission to APPG

For some context, I am the licensee of an independent freehold pub. Whilst the pub is in the town centre is it a 'back street' rather than a high street pub. I own the building, having purchased it from Enterprise, and the pub has operated from this site for at least 300 years.

I operate as a 100% wet pub in a traditional style with no televisions/sport. I have been a publican for over ten years and have owned this establishment for over 6 years, during which I have continually invested in the fabric of the site. The pub employs three people and is very much a community pub.

I have been shocked and saddened by the government's apparent hatred of wet led venues. As a community venue a significant number of my customers are single and this is their only social interaction yet we are all judged by the pictures of city centre 'youth club' pubs.

Everything that a pub does is documented in risk assessments, as publicans we are responsible for mitigating legal, licensing, fire risks and ensuring the health and safety of our staff and customers. Despite all of this we are not deemed to be capable of managing the covid risk within our premises.

Lockdowns are, naturally, awful and we spend a lot of time using social media and other channels to keep in touch with those who are on their own. The challenges of trying to decipher what is coming next whilst managing customer expectations takes a significant toll on the mental health of those of us in this trade. Personally, I have busied myself with CapEx tasks that were planned but always with the nagging fear that the restrictions (not covid itself) may be the final nail in wet pubs coffin.

The hardest part is trying to trade with restrictions. I am nearly 50 and December was the first time in my life that I hated going to work, the same is true of my staff. We are supposed to be the hospitality trade but the government turned us into the hostility trade. Repeating rules literally hundreds of times a day, every day was soul destroying.

When the government announce pubs are open and we can all go and have a pint it sounds great but for us it means rules, you can't sit there, you can't go and see your mate for a chat, put your mask on it is endless.

I am on the Isle of Wight so we do see a fair number of tourists and, in December we were tier 1. The rules were clear and the geography helped us to enforce that you abide by the rules of where you live, since I do not serve food, I could only accommodate tier 1 customers. I adopted a policy of asking people where they came from and explaining that I had to refuse them if they were basically not local.

Not one of the people turned away from a half empty pub in torrential rain said 'it's nice to see you following the rules and running a safe pub', not one of them thought that either. The next time those people visit they won't bother coming here because I am not friendly.

It is not just tourists I have had countless customers tell me that they won't come back because they are sick of being told off. I can only answer that I don't blame them. Community pubs are where we meet up with people that is our purpose, to be a social hub. With restrictions you are forced to sit alone and pay me 3 times more than you would in the off trade, what is the point.

When you see the crowds in the red tops or ministers in pubs having a pint it is clear that nobody understands the broad range of pubs in this country. For us as a community pub there is no opportunity in restricted opening. We have to open because others do and we cover our costs but what we actually being, in effect, forced to do is to destroy our own business.

From a staff mental health perspective that sums it up. Every day that we are open we are making people hate the experience, replacing the good memories with bad ones and destroying our own future. We do this for less money, more work and absolutely no pleasure. I am not open yet so when I am asked 'bet you can't wait to open?' it saddens me to say that I hate it and I see true opening (back to normal) drifting further away by the day.

Wet pubs turned a corner a few years back and we started to realise that, as a country, we quite like them. The trade is nothing like it used to be and certainly the younger generations are more event led than session led so they come out for a birthday rather than every Friday. What is clear from the pandemic though is that we need our community pubs. I have had a number of local covid deaths and the impact on the bereaved is tragic. The inability to hold a wake means that there is no celebration of the life of the deceased and more importantly it is so hard for those left to support close relatives.

Community pubs are a social asset and I strongly believe we do a great deal to support people's mental health. Because we sell beer does not mean we are dens of drunks, in the main alcohol is secondary to the support of a social network. The ongoing restrictions will continue to drive trade away from community wet led pubs and when we are gone, we are gone.

The pub goer has little loyalty and this is reflected in the strong outside only sales at the moment. So, we will meet up with mates and go to the chain pubs because we can, it's what we do. But you don't hold a wedding reception or a wake in Wetherspoons. You don't head to a 500-capacity venue because you have had a bad day and want to unload your troubles on the bar staff. You don't pop in there to borrow a tenner off the landlord for your electric key or leave your spare house key behind the bar. These and so many more are things that you do in your local, that's why we need to save our locals.

The Eat Out to Help Out scheme was insanity. People rushed back to food venues anyway because the restrictions have little impact on the experience. Seated table service is the norm for dining venues. We must lose the restrictions on wet pubs or we will lose wet pubs and I do not want to be the last publican in my pubs 400-year odd history.

I apologise for the length of the submission; it is a reflection of my passion for this trade. I will end, if I may, with some simple bullet points against your three areas of inquiry:

Impact on pubs

- A negative effect on the mental health of staff and publicans alike, made worse by the restricted opening. Most would rather stay closed longer and reopen with no restrictions
- Lack of any visibility for lifting restrictions is torturous to mental health. No clear exit from seated/table service so no visibility of normal.

Community Impact

- Pubs are a staple of the community we expect them to be there when we need them. Restrictions and closures have changed this with many of us now altering hours rather than staying open when we are quiet.
- We need social hubs in the community, large chain pubs do not fill that role

National Context

- The broad-brush policy has treated us all as drunk tanks and shows a distrust of vertical drinking. Restrictions should be controlled by venue specific risk assessments.
- Standing at the bar is critical to the pub experience, restricted opening is hostility in place of hospitality.
- Vaccine passports must be offered to pubs as an option. Restricted opening and free entry or passport and no restrictions must be a choice for venues to make. Failure to do this will mean that you can dance in a nightclub but have to sit down in a pub!
- Business rate reform is essential for this trade.
- We don't need vat cuts or eat out to help out schemes we need to be able to have an opening party, do what we do best however we do that. Let us open normally and we can do the rest.
- Beer duty cuts help the brewers not the pubs, off trade taxation to bring better parity of pricing is needed. As a publican I am responsible for my customers the same cannot be said of the supermarkets fuelling park bench drinkers.