



The Great British Pub has been the cornerstone of our community since medieval days – the social glue that connects everything together.

What makes our local a local is not just the opportunity to eat and drink, meet friends and celebrate a special occasion, watch sport, take part in open mic nights and charity quizzes, or even embark on that nervy first date, but it's also about identity, the fact that the aroma, framed photographs, memorabilia, and uneven floor convey stories of the village and its dedicated residents.

Our national treasure also remains an economic hub with Pub is the Hub, a not-for-profit organisation who I have worked closely with over recent years, continuing to offer expert advice and support to communities who are looking to relocate, re-open or introduce vital services and activities in their local pub such as post offices, shops, libraries, cafes and even cinemas.

This in turn provides fantastic job prospects and anyone with the desire and commitment to succeed has that opportunity to progress. My previous employer, Stonegate Group's award-winning Albert's Theory of Progression (ATOP) career development programme underpins that 'Bar to Boardroom' ethos.

Then, and maybe most importantly, is the role pubs can play in combatting loneliness and social isolation. The recently-launched 'Open Arms' report undertaken by Dr Thomas Thurnell-Read from Loughborough University in partnership with The Campaign to End Loneliness, Heineken and Pub is the Hub, only helps reinforce this point with 64% feeling that the pub is one of the main places to socialise in their local area and 86% agreeing that when a pub closes the local community suffers.

The pub is more than just a place to have a pint, a glass of wine and meal, it is the core of the community and should never be seen as the problem but rather part of the solution.

Even when pubs were mandated to close last year, publicans refused to be defeated and formulated plans which allowed them to continue serving their local communities. From converting their pubs into shops, to raising money for local charities and even feeding the NHS and school children in the absence of free school meals - no challenge was ever too great.

'Pubs Matter' - it is therefore incomprehensible that the pub was left in the lurch by Government last year, and into this year, with totally inadequate support and absurd and unjustifiable restrictions such as the substantial meal and 10pm curfew.

The doors are slamming shut on our good times; it has been estimated that catastrophically 6,000 licensed premises permanently closed in 2020 due to the pandemic (CGA/AlixPartners) – and I fear things could actually get much worse before they get better.

That is why the Chancellor, conspicuous by his absence of late, needs to step up again (next month's Budget could be too late for some) which will allow our pubs, other hospitality venues and brewers, to reopen properly along with a stimulus package that helps them to thrive, not survive and be there for the people that need them most.

The industry doesn't want handouts, just a helping hand out of this chaos. Keep the VAT relief (at 5%) and include alcohol, keep the business rates relief (at zero) as well as a beer duty cut and give these businesses support which will drive that economic recovery.

We're even willing to work with Government to consider some sensible, evidence-based additions (going to the pub shouldn't be a sterile experience) rather than the autumn model – but let us open at the same time as non-essential retail, not later, as we have already invested millions in COVID-secure measures.

Pubs are the living rooms and hearts of our communities and publicans can't wait to get back to what they do best of welcoming and looking after people.

And whilst consumer confidence remains fragile, it's pleasing to see in the latest CGA data that there is pent up consumer demand and encouragingly confidence is predicted to outstrip concern once the most vulnerable groups have been vaccinated and is expected continue to build as the vaccination rollout continues.

26% of consumers strongly agree that they 'can't wait to go out again' and over half of the population are expected to return to a venue in the first few weeks following re-opening.

Yes, there is no doubt that pubs will need to continue to diversify and remain agile to manage labour costs and adhere to guidelines, but whether Government likes it or not, our national treasure has and will continue to play an instrumental part in all of our lives.

That's why it's incumbent on all of us that own, operate and love pubs to make as much noise as possible and let MPs know the strength of industry feeling as to why pubs must be further supported in next month's Budget.

Jon Dale is the former Director of Communications for Stonegate Group, and current Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Beer Group Steering Committee and PubAid Steering Group member.