

Pubs 'play part in combating isolation'



Pubs like this – The Grey Horse, Balerno – are key places for people to meet. Picture by Nigel Duncan Media

There are currently 4,600 pubs across the country and over 120 breweries and beer and pubs contribute £1.7b to the Scottish economy.

They also support the employment of nearly 60,000 people North of the Border.

The Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) consider that pubs are vital to preserving Scottish culture.

And the organisation considers that pubs provide important community spaces for people to meet and socialise in.

CAMRA's vision is to have quality real ale and thriving pubs in every community and there are currently over 5,000 CAMRA members in Scotland.

However, many pubs in Scotland are struggling and CAMRA claim that is because pub companies are taking more than is fair or

sustainable from pub profits.

Licensees, they allege, are being forced to buy the beer they sell from the company they are tied to rather than on the open market.

This means they are paying at least 50 per cent more for their beer and often paying above market value for rents.

As a result, many licensees are reported to be struggling to make a living and this is contributing to the rate of pub closures in Scotland which currently stand at one per week.

Neil Bibby MSP has introduced a Members Bill to the Scottish Parliament which is called the Proposed Tied Pubs (Code and Adjudicator) (Scotland) Bill.

This would introduce a Scottish Pubs Code and Adjudicator to govern the relationship between tied tenants and their pub companies ensuring that tied tenants in Scotland are no worse off than those who are free of tie.

In February 2017 following the last business rates revaluation, CAMRA welcomed the introduction of a 12.5 per cent cap on business rates increases for hospitality businesses, which includes pubs.

The Government made a good first step towards this in extending the 12.5 per cent hospitality cap for 2018-19 but this relief must be made permanent to ensure the long-term viability of pubs.

In the long-term, CAMRA say more must be done to address issues with the business rates system, which disproportionately affects high turnover, property based businesses such as pubs.

Therefore, a full review of the business rates system is needed to address the issue of the disproportionate level of business rates burden facing the pub sector.

Another big issue for CAMRA is the Planning Protection and the Community Empowerment Act.

Planning permission is needed to change the use of a pub however it is possible for developers to demolish freestanding pubs without planning permission provided the pub in question is outside of a conservation area and not listed as a heritage site.

This planning loophole needs to be closed so that planning permission is always required before a pub can be demolished.

In 2015 the Government introduced the Community Empowerment Act which enables community groups to take on the ownership of pubs where they are owned by public bodies via the Scottish Government.

The scheme so far has had little take-up and CAMRA want to see MSPs championing the use of the Community Empowerment Act and encouraging local communities to take on the ownership of local pubs should they come under threat.

Since Scotland's new drink driving law was brought into force in December 2014, reducing the alcohol limit for drivers 80 to 50 milligrams of alcohol in every 100 millilitres of blood, indications have shown that it has contributed to a change in people's drinking habits.

Many people are now opting to drink at home rather than going out which, CAMRA claim, is having a significant impact on pubs, particularly in rural area.

CAMRA say: "Pubs play a crucial role in fostering social cohesion and provide a supervised drinking environment that encourages moderate drinking.

"Recent research conducted by Oxford University found that people who regularly use a local pub have more close friends on whom they can call for support, are happier and more

trusting of other and feel more engaged with their wider community.”

Pubs also play an essential role in combating isolation and loneliness, bringing communities together and supporting personal well-being.

With the closure of community spaces, CAMRA claim pubs play an ever important role in providing a shared environment for people to socialise and for community groups to meet.