



Nik Antona is national chairman of CAMRA, the Campaign for Real Ale

Cheers

PUBS – BRINGING LIGHT AND LIFE TO DARK WINTERS

CAMRA is highlighting pubs which go the extra mile to combat loneliness, says CAMRA's national chairman Nik Antona

As the seasons change and we batten down the hatches against winter, loneliness can inevitably seep into our life, taking a massive toll on our mental health and well-being.

There's something about the confinements of winter and the inability to enjoy the outdoors which makes winter particularly bleak and dismal.

Christmas can exacerbate this feeling for those without local friends or family, making the festive period an uncomfortably stark reminder of what they're missing out on.

Loneliness can be as damaging as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, according to the Campaign to End Loneliness, and is considered to be a growing epidemic.

One estimate claims that more than two million people over 50 are faced with social isolation.

Pubs have naturally become places of refuge in the harsh winter months.

CHEERFUL

From cheerful roaring fires creating a welcoming, cosy ambience to hearty meals and pints to warm you from the cold, a pub can shed its summer skin as easily as a chameleon and become a beacon of light, when the cabin fever starts to set in.

Most pubs around the country are aware of the important role which they play in combatting loneliness.

Publicans and their staff provide stability and regular human contact for many who experience loneliness and social isolation.

Alongside efforts to make pubs look as welcoming as possible on a cold winter's day, heart-warming examples seem to emerge each year around Christmas – such as The Alexandra, in Wimbledon, offering a full turkey dinner and beer to anyone alone on Christmas day.

But pubs are for life, not just for Christmas.

The good work our pubs do in bringing communities together and combatting isolation should be shouted about all year long.

CHATTY

Consider, for example, The Kingslodge Inn, which works with Age UK to host lunchtime meals for isolated elderly Durham residents or The Queen's Head, in Harrow, north London, which runs a 'chatty tables' scheme, where several tables are earmarked as areas in which customers would welcome the company of strangers.

Even something as simple as a live music night or a comedy evening can encourage people to leave the confines of home and socialise with others.

Beer has an equally important role, although you can visit a pub without having a drink, of course.



Loneliness can be as damaging as smoking 15 cigarettes a day



One of the things which makes a pint so appealing is that it can lower inhibitions and reduce social barriers, according to the report – Friends on Tap.

The report examined whether there was a beneficial impact on social skills of drinking alcohol, such as the ability to interpret social skills correctly, by asking customers to rate the attractiveness, approachability and trustworthiness of a set of photographs of male or female faces, both before and after consuming a drink.

It found that people feel generally somewhat more comfortable about strangers with low levels of alcohol consumption.

Social groups, such as a CAMRA membership can also be a lifeline for many.

Sometimes, just being invited on a brewery tour or a pub crawl with like-minded beer-lovers can change someone's day for the better.

I know that, for a lot of volunteers like me, a CAMRA membership is like being part of a family.

We look forward to the beer festivals and branch meetings across the country as the very foundation of our social circle.

IMPORTANT

That's why this issue is so important to us at CAMRA.

We have recently launched a national campaign to promote the valuable work which pubs do with the Campaign to End Loneliness, the University of Bristol and the Plunkett Foundation.

As part of the campaign, we are working on a report to highlight those pubs which go the extra mile to combat loneliness and isolation – to demonstrate the important role which they play in today's society.

Our aim is to get those examples out in front of the public like never before.

We want to not only encourage more pubs to get involved in running similar schemes, but also show those who might be struggling that their local could be a lifeline.

It doesn't matter whether you're 18 or 81 – anyone could be struggling with loneliness and isolation this winter; a visit to your local could be just the cure – whether for a free lunch, a comedy evening or a quiz night.

If you know of any great pubs making a big difference in people's life, please get involved in the campaign by letting us know (press@camra.org.uk); we will do our best to spread the good news.

● For more information: www.camra.org.uk