MEN IN PUBS
PROJECT SUMMARY

A project exploring the role of pubs as social spaces in the lives of older men.

What did we set out to do?

As the UK population ages, the number of older people at risk of social isolation and loneliness is on the rise, which can have a detrimental impact on physical and mental health outcomes for older adults. Despite this, evidence for 'what works' in reducing loneliness and social isolation amongst older people is limited, and studies that focus on older men alone are yet more limited still. We know that women are likely to have wider social networks than men and a predictive factor specific to older men's lives is a reduction in levels of social contact. We are a new interdisciplinary partnership at the University of Bristol. Our objective is to explore how pubs as social spaces in the lives of older men can potentially reduce loneliness and social isolation.

At the start of our project, we set out to establish new collaborations with third sector organisations and Bristol-based stakeholders from the local hospitality sector and to create a novel beermat that would prompt conversation among men in pubs. Between January and July 2018, we wanted to explore the following questions with older men 65+ years of age and service providers providing support to older people in the Bristol area:

- *In what ways do pubs feature in older men's (65+) life-histories?*

- *What is the current role of pubs in older men's social lives?*

- *How have these social spaces impacted on men's social connections and networks in later life?*

What did we achieve?

Across six months, we carried out the following activities:

Launched a 'design-a-beermat' competition to help us design a beermat that would promote conversation among pub-goers, particularly amongst men, in pubs. We've worked with games designer Mufti Games to finalise our beermat design and bring it to fruition.

Facilitated a half-day workshop in a pub (The White Harte on Park Street) to bring stakeholders together (older men and representatives from services who provide support to older people in the community) and to initiate conversations about pubs in the lives of older men. Part of our workshop included research provocations on this topic and a pub quiz (it was a pub event after all!)

Held a focus group in another local pub with 11 men 65+ years of age to talk about their experiences of pubs across their lifetime and to learn from them about the role of pubs as important social spaces.

We finished our project with a launch event in a pub (of course!) to launch our Beermat(es) with collaborator Mufti Games. The launch was held at The Eldon House in Clifton.

What did we learn?

There were a number of key learning points from our discussions with men (62-81 years of age) about going to pubs:

1. *Reasons for going to the pub*:

Men's reasons were many and varied, including: to interact with other people; to get out of the house and break their daily routine (for those living on their own); to enjoy live music with others; and as a reward in the working week. Of course, drinking beer and ale was also a good reason for going to the pub, however for most of the group this was incidental to other aspects of enjoying social time in pubs:

> *It's one of the few pubs that doesn't serve real ale, I would think that I don't actually go into pubs to drink. I go into pubs to listen to music, to talk with people, to perhaps meet in a group and whatever. I do think I do drink because I feel obliged to drink, you know? I'm going somewhere where it costs you a lot of money to run this place, and my way of repaying you is by drinking. I'm not there to drink four pints. I might drink one pint in two hours. [FG participant]*

> *and I drink real ale, but I really enjoy the company. It's an Irish pub and I drink Guinness there, and I enjoy that. [FG participant]*

Some men did not drink alcohol while regularly visiting the pub. One group member had stopped drinking due to alcohol dependency in his earlier life while others talked about enjoying non-alcoholic drinks in pub environments:

> *But I still go in a pub, I think, three times- I've been in one this morning. Went to Wetherspoons, had a cup of coffee and did my paper puzzle, you know? I love it. [FG participant]*

2. *Changes to pub experiences across generations*:

Group members shared their observations of how much pubs had changed over their lifetime. They identified a number of significant changes including: - the higher cost of buying alcohol in pubs now compared to earlier decades; the generational changes in younger people tending to drink at home rather than in the pub or to 'pre-load' at home before going out to other night venues; the more flexible and extended opening hours of pubs; fewer social activities available in pubs such as dartboards and skittles; and, the difficulty of hearing other people over the playing of televisions and loud music. While some group members talked about enjoying live music in pubs, most of the group expressed a dislike for pubs that played recorded music loudly. While they were seeking to use pubs as a space where they could socialise, they perceived that young people were seeking to use pubs as a space where they could be entertained:

> *Also, from speaking to youngsters, they go out to be entertained. The idea of just going in a pub and sitting there talking, what's the point of that? You could do that at home, and you're paying four times the price. Why would you do that? [FG participant]*

The group discussed how it was less acceptable now to spend time in the pub if you were unable to afford multiple drinks. It was no longer acceptable to 'come in and nurse a pint', as stated by one of our participants.

3. *Social networking in the pub*:

A significant use of the pub for group members was as a social space for connecting with people in your social network or for meeting other people in the local community from different walks of life. In contrast, they perceived that younger people used social media online and technology, such as smart phones and tablets, as their main social networking tool. Group members expressed some concern about whether technology was able to replace the value of face-to-face social interactions they enjoyed at the pub:

> *The social networking we're generally talking about is where people go into pubs to socialise. That's now been replaced for the new generations of the last three decades with technology. They use technology for that social network, not going down the pub. [FG participant]*

4. *The important role of pub landlords*:

The group talked about the role of the pub landlord and staff in creating a social space where people felt welcome. It was important to most of the participants that the pub was a familiar environment, they were greeted by name and that their likes and dislikes were known:

> *As soon as I walk in, it's, "Hello, Bob." And they know what I drink, a 64, and it's ready waiting for me. By the time I've got my seat, put my papers there, put my glasses there, that's my seat now. Gone back to the bar, it's ready waiting for me. That's what I enjoy. [FG participant]*

The workshop participants also commented on the importance of the landlord in creating inclusive and friendly environments for people at risk of loneliness and social isolation. The men's group felt that it was the role of the landlord to get to know their frequent customers and provide a point of regular social interaction, particularly for pub-goers who may be experiencing loneliness. However, many pubs are now being run by managers rather than landlords, and this can mean frequent changes of staff who do not know their clientele on first name basis:
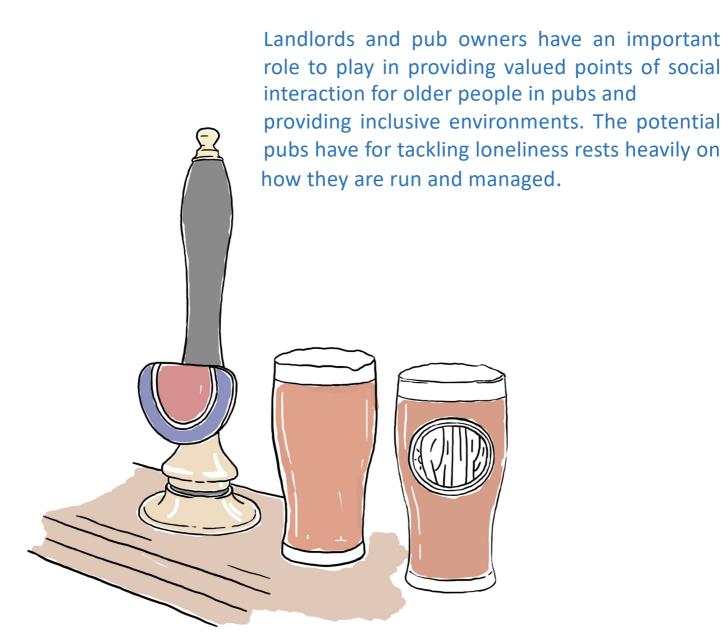
> *Over half the pubs in the country are owned by people who don't want to own pubs. They own properties where they're renting out the space for pubs. [FG participant]*

As a result, the owners may not be interested in investing in the pubs they own, but rather in the property value they represent. This was perceived to be a primary reason for the closure of many pubs. Other authors have discussed the decline of community pubs in England and their importance as safe places to meet and interact with others. Another group member discussed how some local communities are now getting more involved in owning pubs:

> *... some pubs are closing in villages and being taken over by communities. And that's been quite interesting. You do get things like meals in pubs, the meals on wheels in pubs for old people, and they're much more of a hub. They're consciously serving a community purpose. [FG participant]*

Takeaway messages:

Older men go to pubs for a variety of reasons, including social interaction with others, and not just for the enjoyment and consumption of alcohol. Older men emphasised the pub as a central point in the local community for connecting with others in their social network and local area. Pubs can be expensive places for drinking which can deter people from continuing to enjoy pubs as social spaces and to instead drink at home in isolation from others.

Landlords and pub owners have an important role to play in providing valued points of social interaction for older people in pubs and providing inclusive environments. The potential pubs have for tackling loneliness rests heavily on how they are run and managed.

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