



PUBS AS SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

The wellbeing value of connection and moderate drinking



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Introduction

This research examines the basis of UK alcohol policy. It finds policy draws mainly on evidence of harms from excessive drinking to justify tighter blanket regulation and higher taxes. Policymakers have given far less attention to a growing body of research showing wellbeing benefits from pubs and light to moderate drinking.

While the negative consequences of harmful use of alcohol are often visible and quantifiable, the everyday social benefits associated with pub-based socialising and moderate, social drinking are diffuse, preventative in nature, and therefore more likely to be overlooked.

This report outlines the evidence base for such benefits, exploring the role of pubs as social infrastructure, encouraging community interaction and addressing social isolation, and detailing how moderate drinking is associated with social interaction and individual wellbeing.

It then seeks to tangibly quantify the wellbeing benefits associated with pubs and moderate drinking, including in cash-equivalent terms, by applying the Treasury's own methodology. This helps fill an important gap, providing a more balanced cost-benefit analysis than past research often has, due to an historic tendency to focus on more easily quantifiable negative effects.

While this report highlights the social and wellbeing impacts associated with moderate drinking, it is important to recognise that for some individuals, abstaining remains the safest choice. By fully accounting for the wider welfare benefits of pubs and moderate alcohol consumption, the findings underscore the need for more balanced, proportionate alcohol policies that support public wellbeing without compromising efforts to address alcohol-related harms.



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Pubs as social infrastructure: The wellbeing value of connection and moderate drinking

SUMMARY

Much of the current alcohol policy debate focuses on the harms associated with misuse, often as a justification for tighter regulation and higher taxation. By contrast, far less attention has been given to the positive role that pubs and moderate drinking play in supporting wellbeing, social connection and community life. This creates an asymmetry in policy appraisal: the costs of alcohol are routinely counted, while its benefits, particularly those associated with pub-based social interaction, are rarely measured.

This report seeks to correct that imbalance using HM Treasury's wellbeing valuation framework. Applying the Green Book's WELLBY methodology, it estimates the social value generated by pubs as spaces that support sociability, routine contact and community engagement. It also considers the personal wellbeing benefits associated with moderate drinking.

Pubs are central to this analysis. In the UK, they function as a form of low-cost, privately funded social infrastructure, providing spaces for regular interaction, conversation and shared experience. Pubs deliver many of the same social benefits that government seeks to promote through loneliness strategies, community grants and public health interventions.

A substantial body of evidence shows that regular social interaction of this kind is strongly associated with higher life satisfaction, reduced loneliness - nearly three quarters of people believe pubs help combat loneliness in their local area - and stronger social ties. It also contributes to lower mortality and morbidity, through mechanisms including reduced psychological stress, known for an association with cardiovascular disease, increased social support and stronger social norms around healthy behaviour.

Using conservative assumptions, we estimate that pub-based social interaction generates a wellbeing value of around £1,000–£2,000 per regular pubgoer per year. With close to 30% of UK adults visiting pubs on a regular basis, this implies a total annual wellbeing-equivalent value of around £15–£30 billion per year. To put this in context, the upper end of this range is broadly equivalent to the entire contribution of the beer and pub sector to UK economic output (GVA), highlighting the scale and societal importance of these social spaces. Alongside these wellbeing benefits, there is also evidence that moderate drinking, a common pub-based activity, is associated with higher individual life satisfaction. This report seeks to also model that wellbeing gain.



Pubs strengthen social connection

Regular pub socialising is associated with higher life satisfaction and reduced loneliness



Pub-going

£1,000 - £2,000 per person per year

The policy implication is not that the harms associated with excessive drinking, whether in pubs or elsewhere, should be ignored. Awareness of those risks is already close to universal: 96% of UK drinkers report that they understand the harms associated with alcohol consumption. Moreover, while this report highlights the social and wellbeing impacts associated with moderate drinking, it is important to note that for some people, abstaining is the better choice.

Rather, the implication is that alcohol policy should be informed by a more balanced and internally consistent assessment of both harms and benefits. At present, there is a risk that policymaking becomes skewed toward excessive restriction because the costs of alcohol are routinely quantified and emphasised, while the contribution of pubs to social connection, community life and wellbeing, and the role moderate drinking can play within those settings, is largely overlooked. A fuller and more balanced evidence base should support more proportionate, credible and effective policymaking.

HEADLINE FINDINGS

- Pub-based social interaction supports stronger community connections and helps combat loneliness
- These gains have a wellbeing-equivalent value of around **£1,000–£2,000 per pubgoer**
- Across the UK, these wellbeing benefits add up to around **£15 billion – £30 billion per year**
- Moderate drinking, by promoting relaxation, stress reduction and social bonding, is also associated with higher levels of life satisfaction
- The omission of these benefits risks biasing policy toward excessive restriction

PUB-BASED SOCIAL INTERACTION CONTRIBUTES AROUND £1,000-£2,000 PER PUBGOER

Regular socialising in pub settings is associated with higher wellbeing



This is equivalent to around **£2,000 per person annually in wellbeing terms**



Resulting in a UK annual wellbeing-equivalent value of up to **£30bn**

The omission of these benefits risks biasing policy toward excessive restriction

Asymmetry in the treatment of pubs' and alcohol's costs and benefits

Many studies assessing the social costs of alcohol routinely incorporate emotional and external harms, such as the distress associated with alcohol-related crime. Yet these same studies often overlook the potential social and emotional benefits associated with moderate drinking in pub settings, including higher life satisfaction, reduced loneliness, stronger community ties, and the reinforcement of local identity and cultural traditions. In practice, pubs function as important forms of social infrastructure: accessible communal spaces that facilitate regular interaction, shared experiences and civic connection.

This asymmetry is not a neutral methodological choice. By systematically counting harms while excluding the wider social value associated with pubs and moderate social drinking, policy appraisal risks presenting an incomplete picture and biasing decisions towards ever more restrictive regulation.

The exclusion of social and emotional benefits is typically justified on the grounds that such effects are difficult to measure and monetise. However, difficulty of measurement does not imply absence of value. Where policy appraisal consistently counts costs but omits benefits, decision-makers are presented with an incomplete picture of the welfare effects of alcohol consumption, particularly in pub-based environments.

POLICY COUNTS THE COSTS BUT OFTEN IGNORES THE BENEFITS

Included	Excluded
➤ Healthcare cost ➤ Crime ➤ Alcohol misuse harms	➤ Wellbeing and life satisfaction ➤ Social connectivity ➤ Pub/community value

Policy Decision risk being biased when only one side is measured

A clear example is the 2003 Cabinet Office report on the cost of alcohol misuse, still widely cited in contemporary policy debate, which explicitly acknowledges this methodological gap.¹ The authors note that, owing to the challenge of quantifying the social benefits, “no such research exercise has been conducted and as a result external benefits are not included in the cost estimates of this study.”

Other studies acknowledge in principle that alcohol can generate private benefits. These include the pleasure individuals derive from drinking, and, in some cases, social benefits, such as increased sociability.² However, despite recognising these effects conceptually, research assessing the social impact of alcohol has focused overwhelmingly on harms and costs, without attempting to measure or quantify these emotional or social benefits.

Purpose and scope of this analysis

This report addresses a simple but important gap in the policy debate: while alcohol policy routinely quantifies harms, it rarely attempts to value the benefits associated with pubs as spaces of social connection and community interaction, or the role that moderate drinking can play within those social settings. Our analysis does not seek to minimise or discount the very real harms associated with excessive alcohol consumption, nor does it suggest that increased consumption would improve wellbeing. Instead, it focuses principally on the wellbeing and social benefits linked to pub-based interaction and participation, alongside the evidence that moderate drinking, as practised by the majority of UK adults, can form part of those broader social experiences. By largely excluding these benefits from research and appraisal, current policymaking risks presenting an incomplete picture of alcohol's overall social effects.

We set out survey evidence and academic research on the wider social benefits of moderate drinking, paying particular attention to the role pubs play as spaces of social connection. Using official wellbeing and alcohol-consumption data, we also estimate the association between moderate drinking and life satisfaction.



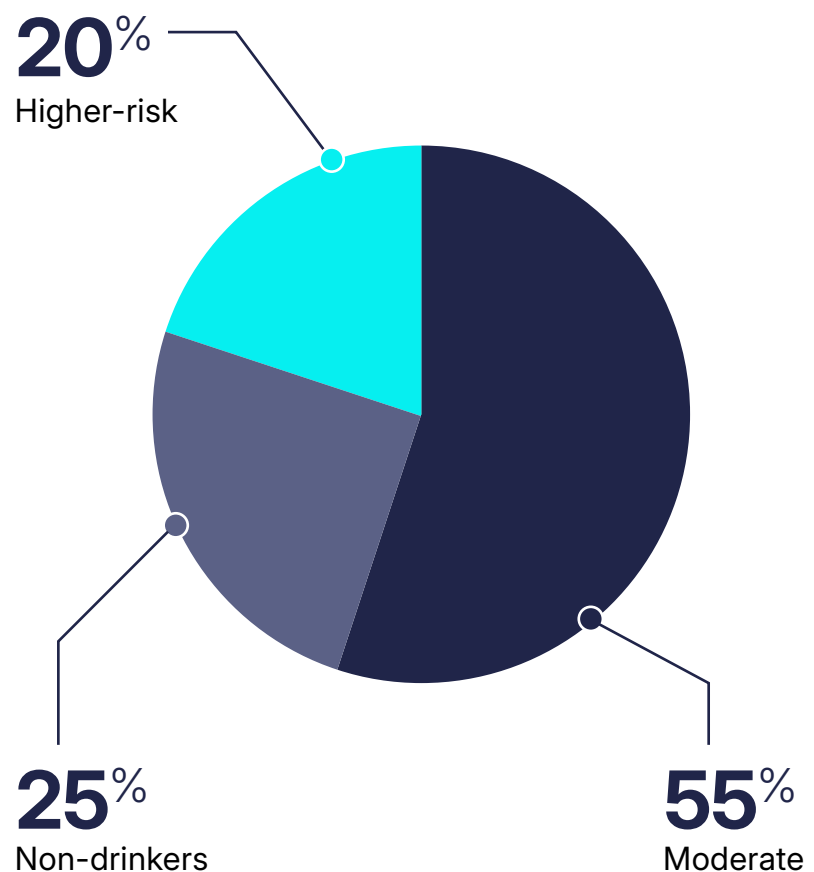


Beer, moderation and pub settings

Beer is typically consumed in social, communal settings such as pubs, where drinking tends to take place at a slower pace and at lower alcohol-by-volume strengths than many other alcoholic products. It is also the most widely consumed drink in UK pubs, accounting for a substantial share of on-trade sales, reflecting its central role in social drinking occasions.

As a result, beer is especially relevant to any discussion of wellbeing, sociability and the role of social infrastructure. This report therefore places particular emphasis on beer in pub settings, where many of the associated social and community benefits are most visible, while also considering the broader wellbeing effects of moderate drinking.

UK ADULTS BY DRINKING HABITS



Moderate drinking is the norm for most adults

Any sensible alcohol policy should start from the fact that moderation, not misuse, is the dominant pattern of drinking in the UK. The official Health Survey for England shows that a clear majority of adults drink at low or moderate levels.³ 75% of people aged 16 and over report consuming alcohol. Within this group, three-quarters consumed up to 14 units of alcohol in the previous week, the maximum recommended by the UK Chief Medical Officers.⁴ This is three times the share who drink at levels associated with increasing or higher risk of alcohol-related harm. If this pattern holds across the UK as a whole, it implies around 31.2 million moderate drinkers.⁵

It follows that for many consumers, moderation is expressed not through abstinence but through ordinary, low-intensity social drinking occasions, often involving beer in pubs or other communal settings. Survey evidence also indicates that moderation is front-and-centre in most drinkers' attitudes to alcohol. For example, polling by the International Alliance for Responsible Drinking (IARD) in the UK and US finds that almost nine in ten agree that moderation is a responsible way to enjoy alcohol. Most view it as part of a balanced lifestyle. Awareness of risk is close to universal: 96% of UK drinkers and 94% of US drinkers report that they understand the risks associated with alcohol consumption.⁶



Beer and the pub as social infrastructure

9/10 agree that moderation is a responsible way to enjoy alcohol

Pubs are the main social setting in which beer and moderate drinking are embedded in routine British life, and they provide the repeated, low-barrier interactions through which social connection and reduced loneliness are generated.

Modern experimental and observational research supports this interpretation. Studies by academics at the University of Oxford find that regular customers of local pubs tend to have larger and more closely knit social support networks, which are in turn associated with higher life satisfaction, stronger subjective wellbeing and greater trust in others.⁷ This aligns with the widely held perception of the pub as a social institution: a space where, in exchange for the price of a drink, individuals can engage in informal, enjoyable social interaction.⁸ As the sociologist Reid Allan observes, drawing on ethnographic research in pubs:

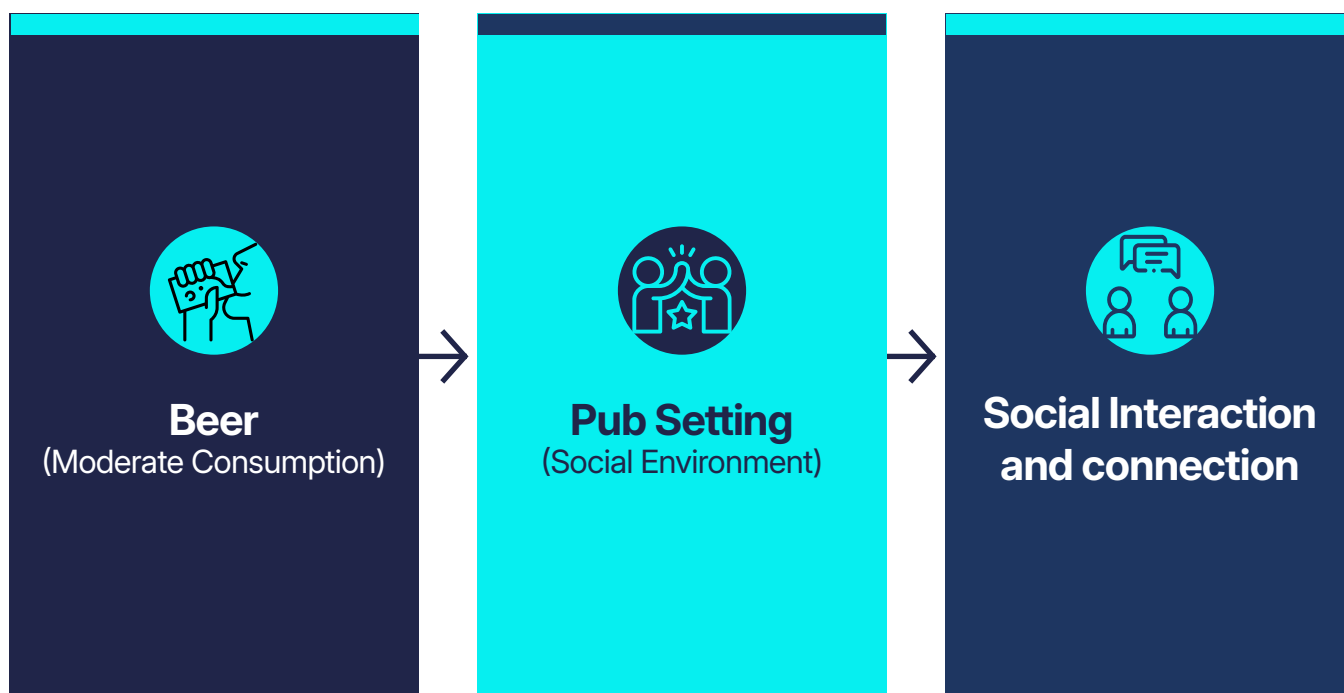
*"A home is a place where individuals are regenerated or restored, and the home away from home of the pub is a space for "the regeneration of spirit"... The local was indeed a home away from home for many. It was a space of communal domesticity, a second living room to its staff and regular patrons. The atmosphere was convivial and sociopetal, and the way in which patrons and staff used the space worked dialectically with the social atmosphere, so that everyone felt at home."*⁹

From a public policy perspective, pubs, where beer is the most widely consumed drink and accounts for a substantial share of on-trade sales, function as a form of low-cost, privately funded social infrastructure. They provide accessible spaces for regular interaction and, in doing so, deliver many of the same social outcomes that government seeks to promote through loneliness strategies, community funding and public health interventions.

Pubs also contribute to wellbeing through their role in sustaining local identity and pride in place, as highlighted in evidence from recent industry research, including analysis by Punch Taverns.¹⁰ In many communities, they are more than commercial venues: they are longstanding institutions, visible landmarks and focal points of neighbourhood life. Their value lies not only in the building itself, but in the social practices pubs support - the repeated interactions, shared routines and local networks that give places their character.

By sustaining these everyday connections, pubs help reinforce the sense of belonging and civic attachment that sits at the heart of current policy priorities around community resilience, regeneration and pride in place. Importantly, these benefits are not marginal or niche; they are experienced by a substantial proportion of the population.

Research by Kantar shows that nearly 30% of UK adults - around 16 million people - visited a pub at least once in the previous week. These visits are not solely for drinking; pubs are increasingly hubs of community life, providing opportunities for entertainment and engagement such as



quiz nights, karaoke, live music, charity fundraisers, and local interest events. Analysis by Punch Taverns highlights that pubs with strong community engagement not only support their local neighbourhoods but also tend to perform better as businesses.¹¹

Evidence from Pub is the Hub demonstrates the tangible social value created when pubs invest in providing community services or activities. Their analysis finds that for every £1 invested, pubs generate approximately £8.28 in social value, highlighting the outsized impact pubs can have as community hubs beyond simply serving drinks.¹²

The range of activities offered by pubs draw a diverse

range of people, many of whom may not necessarily be visiting for alcohol but for the shared experience of socialising, learning, or supporting local causes. Indeed, almost nine-in-ten pubs now sell no-and low alcohol options and nearly one-in-three pubs visits are completely alcohol free.^{13 14} This demonstrates their role as inclusive social spaces where people gather for conversation, meals, events, and entertainment, without the sole focus being on alcohol consumption.

Public perception aligns with this scale of engagement. Polling by the think tank Localis found that 72% of respondents believe pubs have a positive impact on community life.¹⁵ More than four in five (81%) agree that

30%

(16 Million)

of UK adults visited a pub at least once in the previous week

pubs are important in bringing people together, compared with just 14% who disagree.

There is also a strong recognition of pubs' role in tackling social isolation. Nearly three quarters of people believe pubs help combat loneliness in their local area. Beyond informal social interaction, many pubs actively support wider community life. Some 42% of people are aware of pub events that bring communities together; 27% know of pubs supporting charitable causes; 19% are aware of pubs providing support to vulnerable people locally.

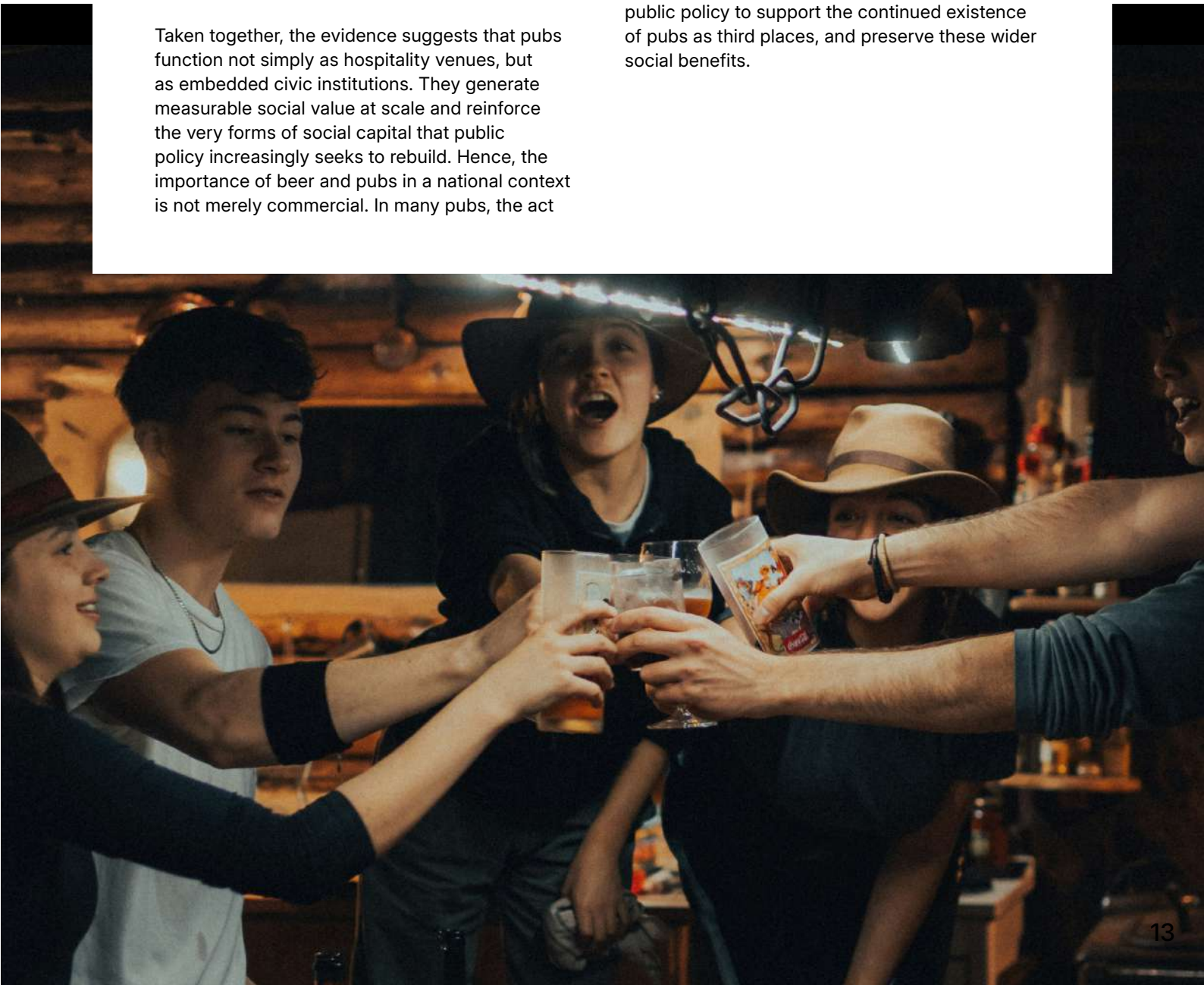
In many parts of the UK, particularly rural and small-town areas, pubs are increasingly one of the few remaining accessible spaces for regular social interaction. Over the past two decades, thousands of pubs have closed, and other community amenities such as village halls, post offices, and local shops have also diminished.¹⁶ As a result, pubs often function as important hubs of social life, providing a space where residents of all ages can meet, share experiences, and maintain local networks.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that pubs function not simply as hospitality venues, but as embedded civic institutions. They generate measurable social value at scale and reinforce the very forms of social capital that public policy increasingly seeks to rebuild. Hence, the importance of beer and pubs in a national context is not merely commercial. In many pubs, the act

of sharing a pint is part of the social ritual through which casual acquaintances become regular contacts, and regular contacts become trusted friends.

These observations align with the wider literature on "third places". Coined by the American sociologist Ray Oldenburg, the term refers to social spaces distinct from both the home ("first place") and the workplace ("second place"), where people can relax in public and form meaningful social connections.¹⁷ Pubs serve as vital third places in communities, offering a space for people to meet, engage, and participate in social activities beyond simply consuming alcohol. These spaces, often the heart of neighbourhood life, offer something to everyone, from socialising with friends and family to attending events, watching sports, or engaging in community-driven activities.

As a result, pubs play a vital role in combating loneliness and fostering social cohesion. Yet they are increasingly under threat from the growth of online socialisation and changing patterns of everyday life. There is therefore a clear case for public policy to support the continued existence of pubs as third places, and preserve these wider social benefits.



Pubs' benefits for older people and reducing loneliness

For older age groups in particular, beer and pub culture can play an important role in maintaining social activity. It enables people to stay in touch with friends, supports relaxation during leisure time, and helps preserve routine and structure following retirement. These factors are increasingly recognised as protective against loneliness and will only grow in importance as the population ages.¹⁸ Many people, including those not drinking alcohol, turn to pubs as essential places for social connection and community bonding.

Other research highlights the social value of pubs, noting that they:



facilitate everyday social interactions with neighbours, staff and regulars;



support inclusive and cross-generational social networks;



provide structured opportunities for connection through events and activities; and



offer reliable, routine social contact over time.¹⁹

Strong social relationships of this kind act as a buffer against both mental and physical illness. Loneliness and social inactivity among older adults are linked to a significantly higher mortality risk, while those with limited friendship and family ties are more likely to be at risk of heart problems.²⁰

There is also evidence that moderate alcohol consumption itself may boost relationship-building. A study by Dunbar and colleagues corroborates a common perception - that alcohol can increase willingness to initiate social interactions and thus build relationships, by reducing inhibition and risk perception²¹

Applying HM Treasury's preferred wellbeing value to pubs and alcohol

The key innovation in this report is to apply HM Treasury's own wellbeing valuation framework to pubs and alcohol policy, a field in which such methods are widely used elsewhere, but rarely here.

Advances in empirical economics have made it possible to link changes in life satisfaction to monetary values in a credible, policy-relevant way. The primary purpose of valuing wellbeing in this way is to ensure that policy decisions reflect the full range of impacts on people's lives, not just those that are easiest to measure in financial or market terms.

In traditional cost-benefit analysis, policymakers tend to place greater weight on impacts that have clear monetary values, such as tax revenues, healthcare costs, or productivity gains, while non-market outcomes like happiness, social connection, and reduced loneliness are often excluded or treated qualitatively. This creates a systematic bias: policies that deliver measurable financial returns are favoured, even if they generate smaller overall benefits to society than interventions that improve wellbeing but are harder to quantify.

One approach, used by HM Treasury in their Green Book guidance, is the Wellbeing Adjusted Life Year (WELLBY) framework.²² One WELLBY represents a 1-point or 10% increase in self-reported life satisfaction for one person for one year. The Green Book recommends valuing a single WELLBY at £13,000 in 2019 prices for an individual on the median income.²³ This is equivalent to around £16,700 in 2025 prices after adjusting for inflation.²⁴

Applying this framework to pubs and alcohol policy brings it into line with how government already evaluates comparable non-market outcomes in areas such as loneliness, mental health, employment and culture.²⁵ The question is not whether wellbeing should be valued in monetary terms - HM Treasury already says it should - but why alcohol policy has so far been treated as an exception.

The cost of loneliness and how pubs reduce these costs

Government guidance drawing on Green Book wellbeing methodologies provides a robust framework for quantifying the social costs of loneliness, capturing impacts on subjective wellbeing, health outcomes and productivity.²⁶ Using these methods, the annual wellbeing cost of severe loneliness is estimated at £9,537 per person per year in 2019 prices (£12,241 in 2025 prices). Even lower intensities of loneliness carry substantial costs: moderate loneliness is associated with an annual wellbeing loss of £8,847 (£11,356 in 2025 prices).²⁷

At the same time, a substantial qualitative literature points to the role of pubs and other informal social settings in reducing loneliness by facilitating regular, low-barrier social interaction, as we have seen. Pubs in particular function as accessible community infrastructure: they provide shared spaces that support routine social contact, inter-generational mixing and the maintenance of social ties, all of which are protective against loneliness. Evidence linking moderate drinking with lower reported loneliness is typically mediated through these social mechanisms, rather than alcohol consumption per se.

While there is limited direct causal evidence showing that pub closures increase measured loneliness scores, the wider evidence strongly suggests that the loss of pubs can weaken local social infrastructure. Studies of pub closures link them to social isolation and declining community identity²⁸, while longitudinal research in rural England finds that pubs support social engagement and community cohesion²⁹. This is consistent with qualitative evidence from loneliness research, which identifies pubs as accessible spaces that help generate regular, low-barrier social contact.

Taken together, these strands suggest a plausible and economically meaningful channel through which pubs and moderate drinking may generate welfare benefits. Small shifts in loneliness, from severe to moderate, or from moderate to mild, are associated with wellbeing gains valued in the thousands of pounds per person per year under HM Treasury's own Green Book methodologies.

This means even modest reductions in loneliness, through the greater social connectedness pubs unlock, could translate into substantial aggregate welfare gains – complementing existing public health and social policy objectives aimed at tackling loneliness.



How we use official wellbeing data to assess pubs' and alcohol's effects

In quantifying the wellbeing gains of pubs and moderate drinking, we use official surveys conducted by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). These surveys ask respondents directly about their happiness and life satisfaction, alongside detailed questions about lifestyle, including alcohol consumption. This allows us to examine how pubs and moderate drinking is associated with wellbeing in practice, rather than relying on theoretical assumptions.

Across several ONS surveys, respondents are asked a core set of wellbeing questions scored on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means "not at all" and 10 means "completely".³⁰ These include:



"Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?"



"Overall, to what extent do you feel that the things you do in your life are worthwhile?"



"Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?"



"Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?"

The same surveys also collect information on income, employment, health, family circumstances and other factors known to influence wellbeing.

Results: pubs' quantified value in alleviating loneliness

Research consistently highlights social relationships as a key determinant of life satisfaction. Studies show that social participation, trust, and community belonging are positively linked to higher life satisfaction.³¹ Conversely, loneliness is strongly associated with worse wellbeing outcomes.³² Similarly, a recent longitudinal study showed that social support, an important component of social interaction, is significantly associated with later life satisfaction.³³

As outlined, pubs provide low-barrier, informal social environments that encourage repeated interactions, supporting both close personal relationships and broader community connections. They function as important

elements of social infrastructure, particularly in rural and suburban communities.

Studies consistently find that individuals who engage in regular social interactions report higher life satisfaction, with research showing that social interactions in community spaces can increase life satisfaction by approximately 0.2–0.4 points on the ONS' 0–10 scale.³⁴

It is therefore plausible that pub-based social interactions could provide a similar boost to life satisfaction for regular pubgoers. A conservative estimate of this effect is a 0.3-point increase in life satisfaction (Table 1).

Table 1: Life satisfaction gains from social interactions

Level of additional social interaction	Life satisfaction uplift	WELLBYs	Annual social value per person (2025 prices)
Low	+0.2	0.2	£3,340
Medium	+0.3	0.3	£5,010
High	+0.4	0.4	£6,680

These estimates reflect the value of social interaction rather than pubs alone – such interactions could naturally take place in other settings. But to account for the specific role of pubs in generating wellbeing benefits, we apply an attribution factor.

As mentioned earlier, Kantar data shows that nearly 30% of UK adults visit pubs at least once a week. This percentage can be used as a rough estimate for the proportion of regular social interactions occurring in

pubs and the corresponding share of wellbeing benefits attributable to pub-based social interactions.

Applying this attribution factor, we estimate that pub-based social interactions contribute a cash-equivalent wellbeing value of approximately £1,000–£2,000 per pubgoer annually. With close to 30% of UK adults visiting pubs on a regular basis, this implies a total annual wellbeing-equivalent value of approximately £15–£30 billion.



Moderate Drinking



**£1,000 -
£2,000**

per person per year



**Pub-based Social
Interaction**



£3,000

per person per year

To put this in context, the upper end of this range is broadly equivalent to the entire contribution of the beer and pub sector to UK economic output (GVA), highlighting the scale and societal importance of these social spaces.³⁵

Our estimated per-person wellbeing effect of pubs sits within the range commonly reported for other everyday lifestyle and social activities valued using the same methodology. For example, Department for Culture, Media and Sport-commissioned wellbeing valuation work has estimated the annual wellbeing value of arts and cultural participation at around £1,000–£2,000 per person (at 2013/14 prices)³⁶. Meanwhile, regular volunteering was valued at approximately £3,000 a year per person by the HACT charity in its influential Social Value Bank work³⁷.

Similarly, research on access to green space, including work by the University of Exeter, has produced³⁸ population-level wellbeing valuations running into the tens of billions of pounds annually, reflecting widespread participation rather than large individual effects. These benchmarks demonstrate that large aggregate wellbeing values are a common and accepted feature of applying WELLBY-based methods at scale, and provide important context for interpreting the results presented in this study.



Past studies associate moderate drinking with improved individual wellbeing

It makes intuitive sense that moderate drinking, including moderate beer consumption in social settings such as pubs, can contribute to individuals' happiness and wellbeing. Alcohol consumption can be a source of immediate pleasure and enjoyment. Survey-based research by Baumberg Geiger and MacKerron, for example, finds a strong association between drinking occasions and higher reported happiness, albeit the effects appear smaller and more variable beyond the immediate moment.³⁹ Consistent with this, a MORI survey found that "pleasure" was the third most commonly cited positive association with alcohol.⁴⁰

In economic analysis, pleasure is often proxied through the concept of "consumer surplus": the difference between what individuals are willing to pay for a product and the price they actually pay.

In 2024, UK consumers spent just over £27 billion on alcoholic drinks, which implies that this was the minimum value consumers collectively applied to alcohol consumption.⁴¹ However, this study deliberately avoids relying on a conventional consumer-surplus framework. The consumer surplus approach rests on major, and often unrealistic, assumptions: that individuals are fully informed, perfectly rational, and able to anticipate the consequences of their choices. In such settings, standard welfare measures risk mis-estimating true welfare gains and can give a misleading impression of what genuinely enhances individuals' wellbeing.





Moderate drinking and wellbeing are positively correlated

Instead, our analysis focuses on the ONS Opinions and Lifestyle Survey, which regularly gathers data on people's behaviours, experiences and views, including alcohol consumption. We identify survey waves that include both wellbeing questions and detailed measures of drinking behaviour.⁴² This enables comparison of reported wellbeing between moderate drinkers and people who do not drink alcohol, while controlling for age, income, employment status and other characteristics.

Using this information, we also model how far moderate drinking correlates with self-reported wellbeing, while controlling for a range of factors and the main recognised determinants of wellbeing. This approach allows us to isolate, as far as possible, the association between the two. In selecting control variables, we draw on those identified by Fujiwara and Campbell in research for HM Treasury and the Department of Work and Pensions.⁴³ Our model is set out in the technical annex to this report.

The results indicate a positive, statistically significant correlation between moderate alcohol consumption and self-reported wellbeing. Moderate drinkers report higher life satisfaction than non-drinkers, even when controlling for income, employment status, health and other drivers of wellbeing. Holding other factors constant, moving from abstention to moderate drinking is associated, on average, with a 0.18-point increase in life satisfaction on the ONS scale ranging from 0 to 10.

This is comparable in scale to wellbeing effects found for other everyday leisure and social activities. DCMS-commissioned wellbeing valuation research finds positive associations between life satisfaction and participation in sport, arts attendance, attending plays, music events, dance and craft activities.⁴⁴ Converted into a 0–10 life satisfaction scale, these effects typically fall in the range of around 0.06–0.13 points, depending on the activity.

While causality cannot be proven, the result is consistent with a substantial body of international evidence linking moderate consumption with social connectedness, relaxation and enjoyment.

The model explains only a modest share of the variation in life satisfaction, which is unsurprising given that wellbeing is inherently multi-dimensional and influenced by many factors beyond those captured here.

Sociability and social bonding: why the results make sense

In social settings such as pubs, beer consumption often accompanies and may help reinforce other bonding activities, such as conversation, laughter, music, shared rituals and storytelling. These activities stimulate the release of endorphins, neurochemicals associated with pleasure, stress reduction and social bonding. By easing anxiety and lowering inhibitions at low doses, alcohol may support social interaction and feelings of belonging.⁴⁵

This fits with a substantial body of evidence which suggests that alcohol can also play a role in reducing loneliness and strengthening community ties, particularly when consumed in social settings such as pubs. Anthropological research indicates that shared drinking rituals may have supported social cohesion in early human societies by fostering trust and reinforcing group bonds, particularly as communities expanded beyond close kinship networks.⁴⁶

As Dr Dan Malleck, an alcohol policy specialist at Brock University in Canada, observes, moderate drinking can play a socially functional role that is difficult to capture using conventional harm-based metrics:

"Mild, moderate drinking loosens people up, creates social bonds, creates benefits, boosts creativity and innovation, and encourages relaxation. The challenge is that what we can easily measure are outcomes like death, violence, accidents and injuries. It is much harder to measure the absence of harm." ⁴⁷

The role of drinking in fostering trust is sometimes framed through the concept of 'costly signalling'. As the anthropologist and social scientist Ben Tannenbaum explains, from an evolutionary perspective, humans build trust through shared social activities. Participating in communal activities, such as drinking together in a pub, signals that you are willing to engage openly with others and fosters social cohesion within the group.⁴⁸

This interpretation is supported by Edward Slingerland's work on the social function of alcohol. Slingerland argues that alcohol has historically helped humans overcome barriers to cooperation by reducing suspicion and strengthening affiliative ties within groups.⁴⁹ In this sense, moderate, social drinking can be understood not simply as consumption, but as part of the ritual architecture through which people build trust, connection and belonging.

Drinks like beer are especially relevant to this discussion because they are commonly consumed in slower, more social and more routinised settings than many other alcohol products. In pubs, beer drinking is often embedded in conversation, meals, sport, music and other communal activities, rather than rapid or solitary consumption. This makes beer particularly important to understanding the social and wellbeing dimensions of moderate drinking.

Those dimensions highlight once again the broader challenge for policy appraisal: while the negative consequences of alcohol are often visible and quantifiable, the everyday social benefits associated with moderate, social drinking are diffuse, preventative in nature, and therefore more likely to be overlooked.

Conclusion:

Recognising the full value of pubs and moderate drinking

The central finding of this report is clear and compelling: alcohol policy should distinguish between harmful drinking and moderate, socially embedded consumption. While harms associated with alcohol are routinely captured in policy appraisals, the wellbeing and social benefits of moderate drinking, particularly in pub settings, are often overlooked. This incomplete picture risks skewing policy toward excessive restriction, when a fuller understanding points to a more balanced approach.

Applying HM Treasury's wellbeing valuation methods demonstrates that these benefits are meaningful. Pub-based social interaction generates measurable gains in life satisfaction, equivalent to £1,000–£2,000 per regular pubgoer each year. These values are on par with wellbeing gains already recognised by government in other areas, such as culture, volunteering, and tackling loneliness.

Pubs matter in more ways than simply selling alcohol. They are enduring social institutions that provide low-barrier opportunities for connection, belonging, and community participation. Across the UK, pubs also help sustain local identity, civic attachment, and pride in place. Their value lies not only in what is consumed, but in the relationships, routines, and shared experiences they nurture.

This evidence does not diminish the importance of addressing the harms associated with excessive drinking and these findings should not be interpreted as a recommendation to drink. Public health risks remain real, and targeted interventions are justified. Moreover, while this report highlights the social and wellbeing impacts associated with moderate drinking, it is important to note that for some people, abstaining is the safest choice. This includes individuals who are pregnant, underage, or driving, as well as those advised by a healthcare professional to avoid alcohol. Everyone should make decisions about alcohol consumption in consultation with their GP or another qualified health professional, based on what is right for them.

Taken together, the evidence does show that policy can be both effective and proportionate, recognising that moderate beer consumption in pubs is socially and culturally embedded, distinct from harmful drinking, and capable of generating positive impacts for wellbeing and community cohesion.

By fully accounting for these benefits, policymakers could develop a more nuanced, evidence-driven framework. Recognising the social and wellbeing value of pub-based socialising would not ignore harm. It would simply ensure that regulation is proportionate, fair, and aligned with the broader principles of cost-benefit analysis applied across government policy.

Technical annex:

Data and econometric methods

This technical annex sets out the data sources and econometric methods used to estimate the association between moderate alcohol consumption and subjective wellbeing.

1. Data Sources

Our analysis uses data from the 2017 Office for National Statistics (ONS) Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN). The survey interviewed 7,122 individuals using a multi-stage stratified random sampling design, ensuring national representativeness of the UK adult population. The year 2017 was selected because it was the last wave of the OPN survey to include detailed questions on alcohol consumption.

2. Alcohol Consumption Measures

Alcohol consumption is measured using two survey questions.

Values	Categories	N	%
-9	Not asked/applicable	0	0.0
-8	Refusal/don't know	0	0.0
1	Yes	5645	79.3
2	No	1470	20.6
8		7	0.1

2.1 Drinking Status

Respondents were asked: "Do you ever drink alcohol nowadays, including drinks that you make or brew at home?"

2.2 Drinking Intensity

Respondents who answered "Yes" were then asked: "I am going to read out a few descriptions about the amount of alcohol people drink. Please select which one fits you best."

Values	Categories	N	%
-9	Not asked/applicable	0	0.0
-8	Refusal/don't know	4	0.1
1	Hardly drink at all	1783	29.5
2	Drink a little	1875	31.0
3	Drink a moderate amount	1972	32.6
4	Drink a lot	363	6.0
5	Drink heavily	28	0.5
8		15	0.2
9		1	0.0
Sysmiss		1081	

3. Sample Construction

To focus specifically on abstainers and moderate drinkers, the sample was restricted to include:

- Respondents who answered “No” to the drinking status question; and
- Respondents who answered “Hardly drink at all”, “Drink a little”, or “Drink a moderate amount” to the drinking intensity question.

By excluding individuals who reported drinking “a lot” or “heavily” the analysis focusses on the effect of moderate drinking.

4. Outcome Variable

The dependent variable is life satisfaction, measured on the standard ONS 0-10 scale and treated as a continuous variable. This variable is chosen as it is the metric used in the Government’s WELLBY calculations, ensuring consistency.

5. Econometric Specification

The association between alcohol consumption and life satisfaction is estimated using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression:

$$\text{Life Satisfaction}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Moderate Drinking}_i + X_i' \beta + u_i$$

where:

- Moderate Drinking is a binary indicator equal to 0 if the individual does not drink and 1 if the individual drinks up to a moderate level;
- X_i is a vector of control variables;
- u_i is an error term.

In this regression, the coefficient β_1 captures the association between moderate drinking and life satisfaction, holding observable characteristics constant.

6. Control Variables

Control variables were selected based on their established relevance for subjective wellbeing and data availability within the OPN survey. In particular, the UK Government’s wellbeing guidance draws on Fujiwara and Campbell (2011), who include a broad set of socio-economic and demographic controls.

While not all variables used by Fujiwara and Campbell are available in the OPN, we include the closest available equivalents:

- Long-term physical or mental health conditions
- Grouped age
- Legal marital status
- Number of dependent children in the household
- Gross annual household income
- Highest educational qualification
- Employment status (paid work in the last 7 days)
- Sex
- Grouped housing tenure

7. Regression Results

Table A1 presents a sequence of regression models, gradually adding control variables to assess the robustness of the estimated association between moderate drinking and life satisfaction.

Across all specifications, moderate drinking is positively and statistically significantly associated with life satisfaction. The estimated coefficient ranges from 0.18 to 0.34 life satisfaction points, depending on the controls included.

The preferred specification includes the full set of controls and yields an estimated coefficient of 0.18 ($p < 0.01$), indicating that moderate drinkers report higher life satisfaction than abstainers, conditional on health, age, marital status, children, income, education, employment status, sex, and housing tenure.

8. Model Fit

The reported R2 values are relatively low, which is typical for regressions using subjective wellbeing outcomes as life satisfaction is influenced by many unobserved factors.

9. Interpretation and Limitations

The results should be interpreted as associations rather than causal effects. While the analysis controls for a wide range of observable characteristics, unobserved confounding and reverse causality cannot be ruled out. Individuals with higher wellbeing may be more likely to engage in moderate social drinking.

	(1) Baseline	(2) + Health	(3) + Age	(4) + Marital Status	(5) + Children	(6) + Income	(7) + Education	(8) + Employment	(9) + Sex	(10) + Tenure
Observations	6,672	6,660	6,660	6,660	6,660	5,860	5,860	5,845	5,845	5,845
Moderate Drinking	0.34***	0.27***	0.28***	0.26***	0.29***	0.24***	0.24***	0.23***	0.23***	0.18***
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Health		0.55***	0.70***	0.69***	0.67***	0.64***	0.64***	0.63***	0.63***	0.61***
		(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Age			0.14***	0.20***	0.25***	0.27***	0.28***	0.29***	0.29***	0.20***
			(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Marital Status				-0.14***	-0.15***	-0.16***	-0.16***	-0.16***	-0.17***	-0.15***
				(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Children					0.15***	0.17***	0.17***	0.17***	0.17***	0.17***
					(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Income						0.02***	0.02***	0.01***	0.02***	0.02***
						(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Education							-0.04*	-0.04*	-0.04	-0.00
							(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Employment								-0.06	-0.06	-0.05
								(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Sex									0.14***	0.13***
									(0.05)	(0.05)
Tenure										-0.22***
										(0.02)
R2	0.006	0.030	0.043	0.051	0.055	0.067	0.067	0.067	0.068	0.082

Note: ***, **, and * show significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels and standard errors are presented in brackets.

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