

The Decline in the Number of Public Houses 2005 to 2024

Anthony Foley

Associate Professor Emeritus of Economics

Dublin City University Business School

July 2025

Commissioned by the Drinks Industry Group of Ireland

Contents	Page
Executive Summary	3
1. Objective	5
2. Data and definitions	5
3. Overview of decline in number of public houses	7
4. Geographic aspects of decline: Dublin and the rest of the country	10
5. Geographic aspects of decline: counties	12
6. National alcohol market and economic context 2005 to 2024	16
7. Possible future decline scenarios	18
8. Conclusions	19

Executive Summary

- The objective of this report, which was commissioned by the Drinks Industry Group of Ireland (DIGI), is to identify and examine the long-term decline in the number of public houses in Ireland over the period 2005 to 2024, at both national and sub-national levels. This report updates previous similar reports on the same topic published by DIGI.
- The data source is the database/register of alcohol licences compiled by the Revenue Commissioners. This individual register has been analysed for several years by the Vintners Federation of Ireland (VFI) to identify county and national trends for public house licences.
- Between 2005 and 2024 the number of publican licences declined from 8,617 to 6,498, a decline of 2,119 or 24.6%. One in four of the public houses in 2005 no longer exist in 2024.
- The decrease between 2005 and 2024 was 2,119 or an average of 112 per year. In the 2005 to 2010 period the average annual decline was 200 public houses per annum. In 2010 to 2015 this decreased to 87 per annum. In 2015 to 2019 the average annual decline was 11. Between 2019 and 2024 the average annual closures rose to 128.
- If we divide the full period into two approximate halves, 2005 to 2015 (ten annual changes) and 2005 to 2024 (nine annual changes) we see that in the first period the total closures were 1,435 or an average annual decline of 144 public houses. In the second period the total decline was 684 or an annual average decline of 76 public houses. The first half of the period had a larger rate of decline than the second half of the period.
- Current (2024) closures are 65 nationally, and 74 outside Dublin. This is lower than previous recent years. Closures nationally were 102 in 2021, 108 in 2022, 117 in 2023 and 65 in 2024. This is relative to the very large figure of 247 closures in 2020.
- The 2024 national decline of 65 indicates that the decline in public house numbers is a current issue.
- Closures exceeded 200 in 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2020.
- Between 2005 and 2024 the number of public houses in Dublin declined by a small number, 13 or 1.7%. The number in the rest of the country declined by 2,106 or 26.9%.

The rest of the country accounted for 98.9% of the national decline in the number of public houses between 2005 and 2023. Dublin accounted for 1.1%.

- Annual declines in the rest of the country were 216 in 2020, 100 in 2021, 115 in 2022, 122 in 2023 and a lower decrease level of 74 in 2024.
- All 26 counties experienced declines in public house numbers over the 2005 to 2024 period. The decreases ranged between 37.2% (Limerick) and 1.7% (Dublin). Eight counties had decreases of 30% or higher. The second ranked county was Offaly 34.1%. The other 30% and higher decreases were Cork, 32.7%, Roscommon 32.3%, Tipperary 32.0%, Laois 30.6%, Longford 30.1% and Westmeath 30.0%. The lowest decrease was in Dublin with 1.7% and this was followed by Meath with a decrease of 9.5%. Wicklow had a decrease of 10.8% and all other counties were 13% or greater.
- In the more recent 2019 to 2024 period, all counties also had decreases.
- In the most recent year 2024, there was a small improvement in the closure performance by county. Five counties had no change in 2024, Carlow, Laois, Mayo, Sligo and Westmeath. Four counties had increases, Clare, Donegal, Dublin and Wexford. The remaining seventeen counties each had a decrease in their number of public house in 2024 compared with 2023.
- The economy experienced very different sub-period performances between 2005 to 2024 including the post-2008 economic collapse and the Covid-related decline. Over the whole period, however, the economy grew substantially including large employment, consumption and adult population increases, which, other things being equal, should have supported the alcohol and public house sectors. However, alcohol consumption declined and pub sales volume declined substantially. In addition, the level of alcohol taxation is very high in Ireland which reduces the commercial viability of public houses.
- It is likely, on the basis of unchanged policies, that pub closures will continue. Even in the absence of additional significant economic shocks an optimistic scenario would expect about 600 additional closures in the next decade. More pessimistic expectations would increase the closure level to 1000.

1. Objective

The objective of this report, which was commissioned by the Drinks Industry Group of Ireland (DIGI), is to identify and examine the long-term decline in the number of public houses in Ireland over the period 2005 to 2024, at both national and sub-national levels. This report updates previous similar reports on the same topic published by DIGI.

The objective of this report is to quantify the decline in the number of public houses in Ireland, at both national and sub-national levels over, and within, the period 2005 to 2024.

Data and definitional issues are discussed in Section 2. An overview of the decline in public house licences is presented in Section 3. Sections 4 and 5 deal with the geographic aspects of the decline. Section 6 outlines the alcohol market context over the 2005 to 2024 period and examines the change in the number of other licensed premises. Section 7 discusses possible future closure levels. Conclusions are presented in Section 8.

2. Data and definitions

The data source is the database/register of alcohol licences compiled by the Revenue Commissioners. This register has been analysed for several years by the Vintners Federation of Ireland (VFI) to identify county and national trends for the number of public house licences. The VFI classification identifies seven- day publican licences which are used for public houses, in so far as interpretation of the register allows. The Revenue Commissioners publish aggregate data which refer to publican licences which also include hotels. Consequently, the classification of “publican licence” is not the same in the two sources. The main difference is that the VFI publican licence is an attempt to identify pubs while the Revenue publican classification includes other enterprises such as hotels which operate with a publican licence

The long term 2005 to 2024 declining trend derived from the two sources is broadly similar with the VFI classification recording an average annual decline of 112 public houses while the published Revenue classification records an average annual decline of 94. As already noted, only the VFI provides regional and county data for their publican classification.

We use the VFI data as it identifies public houses as usually understood while the Revenue publican licence classification goes beyond the public house category.

The VFI data is available for 2005 to 2024 for the national figures and for 2005 and each year between 2011 and 2024 for the geographic breakdown. The report's scope is confined to the use of currently available data and does not allow for primary data collection through for example surveys of publicans who have ceased operation to identify the basis for their decisions. It also does not allow for the identification of geographic location of closures at the sub county level. The latter is an important point. The social impact on a village losing its last public house is likely to be greater than the impact in a village where the number of public houses has decreased from three to two. In both cases the empirical impact is the same with one closure.

The data refer to the numbers of licences in each year. The change between two years is referred to as the closures in that period or the decline in the number of public houses. The resulting figure is the net change. There may be some new public houses opened and the net change is a combination of closures and openings. In practice, the number of newly opened public houses is very small. Individual annual changes in the number of public houses may also be influenced by the timing of licence renewals. In addition, some licences may be retained and renewed for a period of time even after the business has ceased commercial operation.

The decline referred to here is the number of public houses. The decline in the supply of "publican services" is probably higher. Some public houses, especially in rural areas do not operate for the full period allowed by the licence. The inadequate level of demand, and/or the cost of operation sometimes results in late openings or opening for less than seven days per week. To the extent that restricted opening has increased over time the decline in the number of licences understate the negative impact on rural public houses and on the decrease in the level of service provided by the sector.

The number of public houses does not take account of the size of establishment. As it is more likely that small public houses would close than large public houses, the decline in the number of public houses probably overstates the decline in the overall supply of physical public house space. However, the task of this report is to focus on the number of public houses.

3. Overview of decline in numbers of public houses

According to the VFI publican licence database, of the nineteen yearly changes between 2005 and 2024, only one (2019) recorded an increase and the other eighteen years each had decreases.

Table 3.1 contains the national annual data for public house licences for each year 2005 to 2024.

Table 3.1 Publican licences each year 2005 to 2024

Year	Total	Annual absolute change, – minus or decrease, + increase	Closure rate (closures in year as % of previous year's total)
2005	8,617		
2006	8,438	-179	2.1
2007	8,318	-120	1.4
2008	8,091	-227	2.7
2009	7,841	-250	3.1
2010	7,616	-225	2.9
2011	7,509	-107	1.4
2012	7,359	-150	2.0
2013	7,315	-44	0.6
2014	7,295	-20	0.3
2015	7,182	-113	1.5
2016	7,175	-7	0.1
2017	7,140	-35	0.5
2018	7,072	-68	1.0
2019	7,137	+65	0.9 (increase)
2020	6,890	-247	3.5
2021	6,788	-102	1.5
2022	6,680	-108	1.6
2023	6,563	-117	1.8
2024	6,498	-65	1.0
Total decline 05/24	2119		
% decline 2005 to 2024	24.6		
Average annual decline 05/24	112		

Source. VFI database based on Revenue alcohol licences register

The decrease between 2005 and 2024 was 2,119 (24.6%) from 8,617 to 6,498 or an average of 112 per year. This is based on nineteen annual changes in the 2005 to 2024 period. The

first annual change of the period refers to 2006 and is based on the difference between the 2005 and 2006 totals. In the 2005 to 2010 period the average annual decline was 200 per annum. In 2010 to 2015 this decreased to an average annual decline of 87 per annum. In 2015 to 2019 the average annual decline was 11. Between 2019 and 2024 the average annual decrease rose to 128. Between 2019 and 2024 on the VFI classification the number of publican licences decreased from 7,137 to 6,498, a drop of 639 or 9.0%.

If the full period is divided into two approximate halves, 2005 to 2015 (ten annual changes) and 2005 to 2024 (nine annual changes) we see that in the first period the total closures were 1,435 or an average annual decline of 144 public houses. In the second period the total decline was 684 or an annual average decline of 76 public houses. The first half of the period had a larger rate of decline than the second half of the period.

On an annual basis, the annual decline peaked in 2009 with 250 closures. However, this was almost matched by the 2020 performance of a decline of 247. 2008, 2009 and 2010 each had decreases of in excess of 200. 2013, 2014, 2016, 2017, and 2018 each had annual decreases of under 100. Relative to the long term trend, the rate of decline moderated from 2013 to 2019 with only 2015 having a decrease of over 100 and 2019 having an increase. Decreases grew in 2020, 2021 and 2022 compared with the previous few years but the 2021 and 2022 declines were much lower than 2020. The 2022 decline was 108 which is almost the same as 2021 and much lower than the 247 of 2020. The decline continued in 2023 and 2024 with declines of 117 and 65 respectively. The 2023 decline is similar to 2021 and 2022 but a little higher. In terms of actual numbers, the 2023 decline is the largest of the three years 2021 to 2023. In 2024 the rate of decline dropped to 65 closures compared with over 100 in each of 2021 to 2023. The 2024 decline is comparable to those of 2017 and 2018.

The closure rate peaked at 3.5% in 2020 and it was 3.1% and 2.9% in 2009 and 2010. The most recent closure rate of 2024 was 1.0%. After the high rate of 2020 it dropped to 1.5% in 2021 and thereafter increased to 1.8% in 2023 before dropping to 1.0% in 2024.

The Revenue public house licence data show a somewhat different recent annual performance to the VFI database. However, the multi-year average is reasonably comparable between the two sources. The Revenue annual changes for 2020, 2021 and 2022 were -162 (-247 according to the VFI), -90 (-102 according to the VFI) and -373 (-108 according to the

VFI) respectively. However, there was an increase in 2023 of 118 according to Revenue compared to a decrease of 117 according to the VFI. In 2024 according to the Revenue data there was a decline of 47 compared to the decline of 65 according to the VFI. The 2019 to 2024 period had an average decline of 111 in the Revenue statistics and 128 in the VFI statistics. In summary, Revenue shows a very large decrease in 2022 followed by an increase in 2023 while the VFI data show a smaller decrease than Revenue in 2022 and a continuing decrease in 2023. The average annual decline between 2019 and 2024 is relatively similar for the two sources, 111 (Revenue) and 128 (VFI). Over the longer term 2005 to 2024 period, the Revenue average annual decline was 94 and the VFI average annual decline was 112.

The particularly bad years in terms of pub number decreases, defined as years with annual decreases in excess of 200, were 2008 to 2010 which was a particularly poor economic environment and 2020 which was in the midst of Covid. As noted, the 2023 decline, while lower than these “particularly” bad years, was the worst since 2021. The most recent decline of 65 in 2024 is the lowest annual decline since 2020.

4. Geographic aspects of decline: Dublin and the rest of the country

There are substantial geographic variations in the pattern of decline in public house numbers. A full examination of all geographic levels is not possible due to the limited availability of data. As noted above, the geographic analysis is based on the data compiled by the VFI from the Revenue alcohol licences register. This is on a county basis. There are additional geographic sub-county classifications which would be useful in this analysis such as number of public houses in specific rural areas and small towns and villages. But this information is not available. There are issues in confining the analysis to the county level because some counties such as Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford also contain large cities and the pattern of public house decline would be different between the rural and city parts of a county.

Despite its limitations, the available data provides some substantial insights into the geographic pattern of decline in the number of public houses. The difference between Dublin and the rest of the country is examined first (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Publican licences 2005 and 2024 Dublin and rest of country

	2005	2024	% change 05/24	Absolute change 05/24
Dublin	786	773	-1.7%	-13
Rest of country	7,831	5,725	-26.9%	-2,106
Total country	8,617	6,498	-24.6%	-2,119

Source. VFI database based on Revenue alcohol licences register

Between 2005 and 2024 the number of public houses in Dublin declined by a small number, 13 or 1.7%. The number in the rest of the country declined by 2,106, or 26.9%. This compares with a decline of 24.6% in the country as a whole. The decline in the rest of the country was an average annual 111 public houses. The rest of the country accounted for 99.4% of the national decline in the number of public houses between 2005 and 2024. Dublin accounted for 0.6%.

Table 4.2 examines the more recent 2019/2024 Dublin and non-Dublin numbers of public houses. This covers the period between the last year before Covid (2019) and the most recent year of data (2024).

Table 4.2 Publican licences 2019 and 2024 Dublin and rest of country

	2019	2024	% change 19/24	Absolute change 19/24
Dublin	785	773	-1.5%	-12
Rest of country	6,352	5,725	-9.9%	-627
Total country	7,137	6,498	-9.0%	-639

Source. VFI database based on Revenue alcohol licences register

Dublin had a decline of 1.5% or 12 enterprises between 2019 and 2024 while the rest of the country had a decline of 9.9% or 627 enterprises.

In 2024, the national decline was 65. Dublin increased by 9 and the rest of the country declined by 74. The Dublin and non-Dublin performances for each year between 2019 and 2024 are shown in Table 4.3. Dublin had increases in the three most recent years, seven of an increase in 2022, 5 of an increase in 2023 and 9 in 2024. The non-Dublin area had decreases in all five years, 216 in 2020, 100 in 2021, 115 in 2022, 122 in 2023 and 74 in 2024. The non-Dublin annual decreases increased slightly each year from 2021 to 2023 but declined in 2024. The public house closure issue in the country excluding Dublin is still current.

Table 4.3 Publican licences, annual changes 2019 to 2024. Dublin and rest of country

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Dublin, level	785	754	752	759	764	773
Dublin, annual change		-31	-2	+7	+5	+9
Rest of country, level	6,352	6,136	6,036	5,921	5,799	5,725
Rest of country, annual change		-216	-100	-115	-122	-74

Source. VFI database based on Revenue alcohol licences register

5 Geographic aspects of decline: counties

The county pattern of public house numbers is now examined. The basic data are presented in Table 5.1. We focus on three periods, the 2005 to 2024 period, the more recent 2019 to 2024 period and the most recent 2024 performance.

Table 5.1 public house numbers by county 2005 to 2024

County	2005	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2024 No change= NC, Increase= I, Decrease= D	% decline 2019/2024	% decline 2005/2024
Carlow	106	97	95	95	91	91	91	NC	6.2	14.2
Cavan	221	194	189	183	183	176	174	D	10.3	21.3
Clare	373	291	284	281	277	259	265	I	8.9	29.0
Cork	1221	910	892	873	856	838	822	D	9.7	32.7
Donegal	453	367	332	334	334	331	334	I	9.0	26.3
Dublin	786	785	754	752	759	764	773	I	1.5	1.7
Galway	574	472	460	456	452	450	445	D	5.7	22.5
Kerry	503	448	434	426	413	410	404	D	9.8	19.7
Kildare	191	171	167	165	169	168	165	D	3.5	13.6
Kilkenny	226	195	191	185	177	177	169	D	13.3	25.2
Laois	157	122	118	109	110	109	109	NC	10.7	30.6
Leitrim	140	108	104	103	100	101	100	D	7.4	28.6
Limerick	478	358	344	339	325	308	300	D	16.2	37.2
Longford	113	91	85	84	83	82	79	D	13.2	30.1
Louth	227	188	179	181	176	178	169	D	10.1	25.6
Mayo	467	372	355	350	337	332	332	NC	10.8	28.9
Meath	210	204	204	207	201	196	190	D	6.9	9.5
Monaghan	121	99	96	97	92	91	85	D	14.1	29.8
Offaly	164	128	119	115	117	118	108	D	15.6	34.1
Roscommon	254	198	189	182	177	173	172	D	13.1	32.3
Sligo	179	140	137	136	135	134	134	NC	4.3	25.1
Tipperary	525	401	397	387	375	361	357	D	11.0	32.0
Waterford	260	216	205	199	194	194	186	D	13.9	28.5
Westmeath	213	167	159	161	160	149	149	NC	10.8	30.0
Wexford	297	261	254	246	242	229	245	I	6.1	17.5
Wicklow	158	154	147	142	145	144	141	D	8.4	10.8

Source. VFI database based on Revenue alcohol licences register

All 26 counties experienced declines in public house numbers over the 2005 to 2024 period. The decreases ranged between 37.2% (Limerick) and 1.7% (Dublin).

In the more recent 2019 to 2024 period, all counties also had decreases. In the most recent year 2024, there was a small improvement. Five counties had no change in 2024, Carlow, Laois, Mayo, Sligo and Westmeath. Four counties had increases, Clare, Donegal, Dublin and Wexford. In the case of Wexford, the increase was from 229 in 2023 to 245 in 2024. However, the Wexford totals in 2021 and 2022 were 246 and 242 respectively. The 2023 total dropped to 229. The 2024 level has broadly returned the total to the 2021 and 2022 levels. The remaining seventeen counties each had a decrease in their number of public house in 2024 compared with 2023.

The county details of the magnitude of the decreases between 2005 and 2024 are presented in Table 5.4. The counties are presented in order of magnitude of decrease.

Of the 26 counties, the largest decrease was Limerick with 37.2%. Eight counties had decreases of 30% or higher. The second ranked county was Offaly with a decrease of 34.1%. The other 30% and higher decreases were Cork, 32.7%, Roscommon 32.3%, Tipperary 32.0%, Laois 30.6%, Longford 30.1% and Westmeath 30.0%. The lowest decrease was in Dublin with 1.7% and this was followed by Meath with a decrease of 9.5%. Wicklow had a decrease of 10.8% and all other counties were 13% or greater.

Table 5.4 % Decrease in number of public houses 2005 to 2024 by county, in order of magnitude of % decrease

Rank in order of magnitude of % decline 05/24	County in order of % decrease in number of public houses 2005/2024	% decrease
1	Limerick	37.2
2	Offaly	34.1
3	Cork	32.7
4	Roscommon	32.3
5	Tipperary	32.0
6	Laois	30.6
7	Longford	30.1
8	Westmeath	30.0
9	Monaghan	29.8
10	Clare	29.0
11	Mayo	28.9
12	Leitrim	28.6
13	Waterford	28.5
14	Donegal	26.3
15	Louth	25.6
16	Kilkenny	25.2
17	Sligo	25.1
18	Galway	22.5
19	Cavan	21.3
20	Kerry	19.7
21	Wexford	17.5
22	Carlow	14.2
23	Kildare	13.6
24	Wicklow	10.8
25	Meath	9.5
26	Dublin	1.7

Source. VFI database based on Revenue alcohol licences register. As derived by author in text

The summary of the distribution of the individual 2005/2024 county decreases is:

- Under 10% decrease, two counties, Dublin, Meath
- 10% to 14.9%, three counties, Wicklow, Kildare, Carlow
- 15% to 19.9%, two counties Wexford, Kerry
- 20% to 24.9%, two counties, Cavan, Galway
- 25% to 29.9%, nine Sligo, Kilkenny, Louth, Donegal, Waterford, Leitrim, Mayo, Clare, Monaghan

- 30% to 34.9%, seven counties, Westmeath, Longford, Laois, Tipperary, Roscommon, Cork, Offaly
- 35% and over, one county, Limerick

The 2019 to 2024 % decreases ranged from 1.5% in Dublin to 16.2% in Limerick. The distribution of the 2019-2024 decreases is:

- Under 5% decrease, three counties, Dublin, Kildare, Sligo
- 5% to 9.9%, ten counties, Carlow, Clare, Cork, Donegal, Galway, Kerry, Leitrim, Meath, Wexford, Wicklow
- 10% to 14.9%, eleven counties, Cavan, Kilkenny, Laois, Longford, Louth, Mayo, Monaghan, Roscommon, Tipperary, Waterford, Westmeath
- 15% and over, two counties, Limerick, Offaly

6. National alcohol market and economic context 2005-2024

The economy experienced very different sub-period performances between 2005 to 2024 including the post-2008 economic collapse and the Covid related decline. Over the whole period, however, the economy grew substantially which, other things being equal, should have supported the alcohol and public house sectors.

Total employment increased from 2.0027 million people in Quarter 1 2005 to 2.814 million in Quarter 1 2025 (seasonally adjusted), an increase of 40.5%. The volume of personal consumption on goods and services increased by 54.1% between 2005 and 2024. The national population in the 15 years and older age group increased from 3.2804 million in 2005 to 4.370 million in 2024, an increase of 33.2%.

The alcohol market performed badly relative to these macroeconomic performances. Between 2005 and 2024 the volume of alcohol consumption measured by Revenue clearances and pure alcohol content, declined from 44.302 million litres of pure alcohol to 41.454 million litres of pure alcohol, a decline of 6.4%. Average per adult consumption of alcohol decreased from 13.51 litres of pure alcohol in 2005 to 9.49 litres in 2024, a decrease of 29.8%. The 2023 volume of bar sales is at approximately 55% of the 2005 level.

Allied to this, the role of home consumption and off-licence sales in total alcohol sales increased substantially.

While the main objective of the report is to examine the changes in public house numbers we also outline the performance of other elements of the licensed and hospitality sectors. The broad feature is that other alcohol licence types increased over the long –term and in the case of restaurants declined slightly between 2019 and 2024.

This is reflected in the large increase in alcohol off-licences. In 2005 there were 1,070 spirits off-licences. By 2022 this had increased to 2,271, an increase of 112.2%. By 2024 this category had increased again to 2,409. Over the full period of 2005 to 2024, the number of spirits off-licences increased by 125.1%. In 2005 there were 317 special restaurant licences and this increased to 493 in 2022 and 512 in 2023. In 2024 this category decreased to 490.

Wine on-licences were 2,231 in 2005 and increased to 2,333 in 2022. The 2023 number in this category was 2,462. In 2024 there was a decline to 2,434. The more recent performances in the 2019 to 2024 period are summarized in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1 Alcohol licences, various categories, various years 2005 to 2024

	2005	2019	2022	2023	2024
Spirits off-licence	1,070	1,990	2,271	2,383	2,409
Special restaurant on-licence	317	498	493	512	490
Wine on-licence	2,231	2,350	2,333	2,462	2,434

Source. Revenue database

Data collected by the Restaurants Association of Ireland reports 201 closures of food-led businesses in the first five months of 2025 compared with 277 in the equivalent period of 2024.

Tax on alcohol in Ireland is high relative to other EU economies and the UK which negatively affects commercial margins and does not support the public house sector and the overall alcohol sector. Alcohol excise transfers a substantial part of public house revenue to the exchequer and reduces commercial margins to lower than would be the situation with lower alcohol excise.

Relevant features of the Irish alcohol tax situation are:

- Ireland has the third highest beer excise in the EU 27 and UK (using the UK non-draught beer excise) behind Finland and the UK.

- Ireland has the third highest spirits excise in the EU 27 and UK behind Sweden and Finland.
- Ireland has the second highest wine excise after Finland.
- On an overall composite alcohol excise level (measured by the unweighted average of the different beer, spirits and wine excise rates), Ireland is the second highest behind Finland.
- The magnitude of the differences in alcohol excise between Ireland and other EU economies is large. For example, Ireland's beer excise is 11.4 times that of Germany. Irish spirits excise is 4.4 times that of Spain. Germany's composite alcohol excise per HLP is €500 or 14.5% of the Irish level of €3,458.
- In Spain, the excise on an off-licence bottle of whiskey is €2.69 which is €9.23 lower than in Ireland.
- On April 2025 (CSO) average prices (CSO data for stout and whiskey, wine based on own estimates), the Exchequer received in excise and Vat: €1.67 from every pint of stout costing €6.058, or 27.6 % of the price and €1.66 from every measure of whiskey costing €5.666 or 29.3% of the price, consumed in bars; €2.30 or 28.8% from every restaurant glass of wine costing €8.00; €17.01 or 62.4% of the price of a €27.243 off-licence bottle of whiskey; €5.25 or 47.7% of the price of an €11.00 off-licence bottle of wine.
- Excise accounted for €11.92 for an off-licence bottle of whiskey and €3.19 for a bottle of wine. In a public house, excise is 54c per pint, 60c per measure of whiskey and 80c per glass of wine. Vat is charged on the excise.

7. Possible future decline scenarios

As discussed in Foley (2022) there are several determinants of the decline in the number of public houses. Some of these are interlinked, for example, low commercial returns may discourage younger family members from succeeding older publicans on retirement or death. These determinants include low levels of business volume, weak commercial sustainability, non-replacement of pub operators on retirement or death, regulatory changes such as the tighter drink driving laws and enforcement allied with weak or non-existent public transport, population change and distribution, changes in consumer patterns and expectations, alcohol market changes, more attractive alternative economic activities and income opportunities, the general unattractiveness of rural areas for the provision of services and asset prices for pub licences which are used to facilitate

the opening of new off-licences in supermarkets , convenience stores, discounters and petrol stations.

The large majority of rural public houses are relatively small family businesses. There is no reason to expect that, on unchanged policies, the pattern of declining numbers which has been evident for many years will end. This report has noted that decline has continued in the most recent years, albeit at a lower rate than some previous years. The first ten years of the period under review accounted for 1,435 closures nationally or 144 per annum while the second nine years accounted for 684 closures or 76 per annum on average. The rate of closures declined in the second half of the period.

In recent time closures spiked in 2020 due to Covid. The annual increases of the last four years averaged 98 per annum and the most recent 2024 decrease was 65 (or 74 excluding Dublin). We assume there will not be another 2008-type financial and economic collapse and we assume there will not be another Covid-type national economic impact. However, the full effect on public house closures of the dramatically changed commercial model caused by the Ukraine-related cost inflation and other issues, may not yet be fully passed through. Our expectation is that, in the absence of changed policies, closures of public houses will continue nationwide.

Over the next ten years an optimistic expectation, including no significant deep negative economic impacts (such as a house price collapse or significant negative consequences from US trade and industrial policies) is that an additional 60 public houses will close each year, or 600 over the next decade. A more negative scenario is that closures could average 100 per year with another 1,000 public houses lost over the decade. Almost 19% of VFI members were 65 years or older in 2023 (VFI Members Survey). This is equivalent to about 1000 pubs outside Dublin. Were the rate of exit by this cohort to accelerate in the near future, motivated by negative expectations about commercial viability, the rate of future closure would increase beyond the levels referred to above.

8. Conclusions

The decrease in public house numbers between 2005 and 2024 was 2,119 (24.6%) from 8,617 to 6,498 or an average of 112 per year. In the 2005 to 2010 period the average annual decline was 200 per annum. In 2010 to 2015 this decreased to an average annual decline of 87 per annum. In 2015 to 2019 the average annual decline was 11. Between 2019 and 2024 the average annual decrease rose to 128. Between 2019 and 2024 on the VFI classification the number of publican licences decreased from 7,137 to 6,498, a drop of 639 or 9.0%.

If the full period is divided into two approximate halves, 2005 to 2015 (ten annual changes) and 2005 to 2024 (nine annual changes) we see that in the first period the total closures were 1,435 or an average annual decline of 144 public houses. In the second period the total decline was 684 or an annual average decline of 76 public houses. The first half of the period had a larger rate of decline than the second half of the period.

On an annual basis, the annual decline peaked in 2009 with 250 closures. However, this was almost matched by the 2020 performance of a decline of 247. 2008, 2009 and 2010 each had decreases of in excess of 200. 2013, 2014, 2016, 2017, and 2018 each had annual decreases of under 100. Relative to the long term trend, the rate of decline moderated from 2013 to 2019 with only 2015 having a decrease of over 100 and 2019 having an increase. Decreases grew in 2020, 2021 and 2022 compared with the previous few years but the 2021 and 2022 declines were much lower than 2020. The 2022 decline was 108 which is almost the same as 2021 and much lower than the 247 of 2020. The decline continued in 2023 and 2024 with declines of 117 and 65 respectively. The 2023 decline is similar to 2021 and 2022 but a little higher. The 2023 decline is the largest of the three years 2021 to 2023. In 2024 the rate of decline dropped to 65 closures compared with over 100 in each of 2021 to 2023. The 2024 decline is comparable to those of 2017 and 2018.

This decline in pub numbers has occurred against the background of a substantial decrease in average alcohol consumption, a decrease in the volume of alcohol consumed and a good economic environment and performance over the full period, despite the inclusion of economically-weak periods such as post-2008 and Covid. A high level of alcohol taxation compared to other EU countries is also a feature of the period.

There is a substantial difference between the Dublin performance and the rest of the country in public house numbers. Between 2005 and 2024 the number of public houses in Dublin declined by a small number, 13 or 1.7%. The number in the rest of the country declined by 2,106, or 26.9%. This compares with a decline of 24.6% in the country as a whole. The decline in the rest of the country was an average annual 111 public houses. The rest of the country accounted for 99.4% of the national decline in the number of public houses between 2005 and 2024. Dublin accounted for 0.6%.

All 26 counties experienced declines in public house numbers over the 2005 to 2024 period. The decreases ranged between 37.2% (Limerick) and 1.7% (Dublin). Eight counties had decreases of 30% or higher. The second ranked county was Offaly 34.1%. The other 30% and higher decreases were Cork, 32.7%, Roscommon 32.3%, Tipperary 32.0%, Laois 30.6%, Longford 30.1% and Westmeath 30.0%. The lowest decrease was in Dublin with 1.7% and this was followed by Meath with a decrease of 9.5%. Wicklow had a decrease of 10.8% and all other counties were 13% or greater.

In the more recent 2019 to 2024 period, all counties also had decreases. In the most recent year 2024, there was a small improvement. Five counties had no change in 2024, Carlow, Laois, Mayo, Sligo and Westmeath. Four counties had increases, Clare, Donegal, Dublin and Wexford. The remaining seventeen counties each had a decrease in their number of public house in 2024 compared with 2023. The decline in the number of public houses is not only an historical issue, it remains a current issue.

As discussed in Foley (2022) there are several determinants of the decline in the number of public houses. Some of these are interlinked, for example, low commercial returns may discourage younger family members from succeeding older publicans on retirement or death. These determinants include low levels of business volume, weak commercial sustainability, non-replacement of pub operators on retirement or death, regulatory changes such as the tighter drink driving laws and enforcement allied with weak or non-existent public transport, population change and distribution, changes in consumer patterns and expectations, alcohol market changes, more attractive alternative economic activities and income opportunities and asset prices for pub licences which are used to facilitate the opening of new off-licences in supermarkets, convenience stores, discounters and petrol stations.

The majority of rural public houses are relatively small family businesses. There is no reason to expect that, on unchanged policies, the pattern of declining numbers which has been evident for many years will end. This report has noted that decline has continued in the most recent years, albeit at a lower rate than some previous years. The first ten years of the period under review accounted for 1,435 closures or 144 per annum while the second nine years accounted for 684 closures or 76 per annum on average. The rate of closures declined in the second half of the period.

In recent time closures spiked in 2020 due to Covid. The annual increases of the last four years averaged 98 per annum and the most recent 2024 decrease was 65 (or 74 excluding Dublin). We

assume there will not be another 2008-type financial and economic collapse and we assume there will not be another Covid-type national economic impact. However, the full effect on public house closures of the dramatically changed commercial model caused by the Ukraine-related cost inflation and other issues, may not yet be fully passed through. Our expectation is that, in the absence of changed policies, closures of public houses will continue nationwide.

Over the next ten years an optimistic expectation, including no significant deep negative economic impacts (such as a house price collapse or very significant negative consequences from US trade and industrial policies) is that an additional 60 public houses will close each year, or 600 over the next decade. A more negative scenario is that closures could average 100 per year with another 1,000 public houses lost over the decade.

Reference

Foley Anthony. 2024. Analysis of the Decline in the Number of Public Houses. Drinks Industry Group of Ireland.

Foley Anthony. 2023. Analysis of the Decline in the Number of Public Houses. Drinks Industry Group of Ireland.

Foley Anthony. 2022. Analysis of the Decline in the Number of Public Houses. Drinks Industry Group of Ireland.