Modernisation Committee's call for evidence

Alcohol Health Alliance response – December 2024

The Alcohol Health Alliance is a coalition of 65 organisations working together to tackle alcohol harm. Members include charities such as Cancer Research UK, medical royal colleges, treatment providers and research organisations.

- **What topic(s) do you think the Modernisation Committee should prioritise and how do they link to one or more of the strategic aims set out in the Leader's memorandum?**

We believe that better Parliamentary policies around alcohol would support the Modernisation Committee's aims to drive up standards, improve culture and working practices, and make the House of Commons more effective.

Currently, alcohol is largely available (and subsidised) on the Parliamentary estate, with a drinking culture that is engrained into everyday business. Research published in the British Medical Journal (BMJ) found that risky drinking was more likely among MPs compared to the English population, with the likelihood increasing for those who have an additional work role outside Parliament and among those with probable mental ill-health.[1]

A recent Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS), based on 30 investigations between 2021 and 2022, found the consumption of alcohol in Parliament's many bars often led to "intimidating behaviour,"[2] including reports of bullying and sexual harassment. The Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, Daniel Greenberg, has also stated there are "behaviour problems" linked to drinking in Westminster.[3]

This culture massively impacts professional standards, staff wellbeing, and productivity. Ex-Parliamentary staff have reported leaving their jobs in part due to the "toxic" culture driven by alcohol.[4][5] The ICGS report indicates that blurred boundaries between personal and professional life were at the heart of multiple complaints about inappropriate behaviour.[6]

This drinking culture risks Parliamentary activity being brought into disrepute, with several reports of complaints about British MPs drinking and engaging in inappropriate behaviour overseas.[7][8] In the Second Permanent Secretary's investigation into gatherings on Government premises during COVID-19 restrictions, it was reported that there was "excessive alcohol consumption" at several gatherings, described as "not appropriate in a professional workplace at any time."[9] Over the course of 2020, MPs and fellow drinkers spent more than £133,000

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[1] Rao, R. et al. (2020). Alcohol consumption of UK members of parliament: cross-sectional survey. *BMJ*
[2] Francis, S. (2023). Westminster drinking culture blamed for bad behaviour. *BBC,* 18 October 2023.
[3] Francis, S. (2023). Westminster drinking culture blamed for bad behaviour. *BBC,* 18 October 2023.
[4] Francis, S. (2023). Westminster drinking culture blamed for bad behaviour. *BBC,* 18 October 2023.
[5] Kotecha, S. (2023). Westminster: House of Commons culture still 'predatory', say staff. *BBC,* 5 July 2023.
[6] Francis, S. (2023). Westminster drinking culture blamed for bad behaviour. *BBC,* 18 October 2023.
[7] BBC. (2021) Row over 'drunk' MPs on Gibraltar military visit. *BBC,* 11 November 2021
[8] Mason, R. (2022). No 10 'concerned' MPs engaged in 'sex and heavy drinking' on trips abroad. *The Guardian,* 28 December 2022.
[9] Cabinet Office. (2022). Findings of second permanent secretary's investigation into alleged gatherings on government premises during covid restrictions.

ordering alcohol in the numerous taxpayer subsidised bars on the parliamentary estate despite lockdowns closing outlets for most of the year.[10]

The culture of drinking impacts Parliamentary working practices, with MPs reporting that colleagues have missed votes or voted the wrong way because of alcohol.[11] Divisions being held late at night (10pm on Mondays and 7pm on Tuesdays and Wednesdays), when bars and restaurants are often the only places open for MPs to wait, further blurs boundaries between personal and professional life. Not only is it simply unacceptable that MPs are able to vote on legislation under the influence of alcohol, considering how it impacts our capacity to make clear decisions, we have also heard from MPs that this environment makes it difficult to avoid alcohol when they would prefer to have healthier workplace boundaries in place.

As well as reviewing how the availability and affordability of alcohol fosters a negative drinking culture, the Modernisation Committee should also assess the level and reach of support services available for MPs and staff. Research from 2020 found a low level of awareness of the Parliamentary Health and Wellbeing Service,[12] and Commons speaker Sir Lindsay Hoyle has also spoken about the need for more support to MPs suffering from alcohol dependence after high profile incidents drew attention to the culture of late-night drinking.[13]

Finally, this pro-alcohol environment in Westminster has also been linked to a lack of policy progress that would save lives and reduced rates of alcohol harm across the country. Research shows that alcohol industry activities are a major barrier to the development and implementation of public health policies that would be effective in preventing alcohol harm.[14] Our own report, published in collaboration with the Obesity Health Alliance and Action on Smoking and Health, describes how gifts and benefits from heath harming industries such as alcohol, tobacco, and ultra-processed foods are not acts of generosity, but strategic investments aimed at securing influence.[15] The Committee on Standards have also heard evidence regarding the risks associated with accepting significant hospitality from corporations with vested interests.[16]

Addressing this drinking culture would make Parliament a safer, more professional and productive environment for all, and be a more inclusive space for those who may not consume alcohol for cultural, religious, or health reasons, including alcohol dependence.

- **Why would the topic(s) benefit from the attention of the Modernisation Committee?**

As outlined above, there is abundant evidence that Westminster is a highly "alcogenic" environment, with implications for productivity, inclusivity and a safe working culture in Parliament.

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[10] Grylls, G. (2021). Tracey Crouch takes swipe at MPs who vote while reeking of alcohol. *The Times,* 14 September 2021.
[11] Grylls, G. (2021). Tracey Crouch takes swipe at MPs who vote while reeking of alcohol. *The Times,* 14 September 2021.
[12] Rao, R. et al. (2020). Alcohol consumption of UK members of parliament: cross-sectional survey. *BMJ*
[13] Grylls, G. (2021). Tracey Crouch takes swipe at MPs who vote while reeking of alcohol. *The Times,* 14 September 2021.
[14] Hawkins, B. et al (2012). Alcohol industry influence on UK alcohol policy: A new research agenda for public health. *Critical Public Health*.
[15] AHA, OHA, ASH. (2024). Killer tactic: How tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy food and drink industries hold back public health progress.
[16] Parliament live. (2022). Committee on Standards evidence session, 25 January 2022.

While it has been recommended that every Government department employ a clear and robust policy covering the consumption of alcohol in the workplace,[17] the Modernization Committee is well-placed to review how effective this has been, what further action is necessary, and the support on offer to MPs and staff.

- **Are you aware of examples from other Parliaments relevant to the topic(s) which may be interesting for the Modernisation Committee to consider?**

The UK has a very permissive attitude to alcohol compared to our European counterparts. Alcohol control policies in Parliament are also particularly lax compared to other workplaces.

In other areas, UK legislation clearly recognises that alcohol impairs judgement. UK law states that it is illegal, under the influence of alcohol, to:

- Drive
- Ride a bicycle
- Operate heavy machinery
- Sign legal documents (if heavily intoxicated)

On the contrary, current Parliamentary traditions actively facilitate and encourage alcohol consumption, such as the Chancellor of the Exchequer being permitted to drink alcohol as they set out their spending agenda,[18] and late-night Divisions mentioned above.

The lead author of the 2020 BMJ study noted that "other professions with equally high levels of stress and unsociable working hours, such as medicine, do not permit drinking during working hours…alcohol is not a feature of the modern workplace – and this should include the House of Commons."[19]

- **Is there any existing work relevant to the topic(s) which you think the Modernisation Committee can build on?**

The Institute of Alcohol Studies, an AHA member, is conducting research on how alcohol is perceived in the Parliamentary workplace, asking MPs and staffers to share their experiences of the availability of alcohol, if they have ever encountered any harms from a colleague's drinking, if they think that the performance of a colleague has been affected by alcohol, and how the Westminster drinking culture compares with other workplaces, as well as support service available. Surveys and interviews are expected to begin in early 2025.

[17] Cabinet Office. (2022). Findings of second permanent secretary's investigation into alleged gatherings on government premises during covid restrictions.
[18] UK Parliament (Accessed 2024). Frequently asked questions: The Budget
[19] Newkey-Buden, C. (2022). Does Westminster have an alcohol problem? *The Week,* 12 May 2022.