

## Written evidence submitted by British Liver Trust

The British Liver Trust is the UK's leading liver health charity working to improve liver health for all and supporting those affected by liver disease or cancer.

Over 18,000 people die from liver disease and liver cancer each year. Premature mortality due to liver disease is at the highest level in two decades. Liver cancer is now the fastest rising cause of cancer death in the UK.

We face a significant public health challenge around alcohol misuse and obesity in the UK, it impacts people's health, disproportionately affecting our most deprived and marginalised communities and our economic competitiveness and growth - contributing to low labour market participation post Covid. Parliament has a clear role to lead by example. We advocate for the Modernisation Committee to address alcohol and diet in their call to drive up standards and improve culture and working practices in Parliament. This will show leadership, support the need to improve the nation's health and address the significant pressures on our NHS and labour force.

- **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](#)?**

Alcohol is the most common cause of liver disease in the UK. Alcohol-related liver disease accounted for 55% of premature liver disease deaths in 2023<sup>1</sup>.

We believe that better Parliamentary policies around alcohol would support the Modernization 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.<sup>2</sup>

At our annual parliamentary scanning event, we have had conversations with MPs who spoken about the pressures of the work environment and culture on their drinking. Some MPs have shared concerns around their drinking habits.

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,"<sup>3</sup> including reports of bullying and sexual harassment. The

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/liver-disease-profile-december-2024-update/liver-disease-profile-december-2024-update>

<sup>2</sup> Rao, R. et al. (2020). [Alcohol consumption of UK members of parliament: cross-sectional survey](#). *BMJ*

Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, Daniel Greenberg, has also stated there are "behaviour problems" linked to drinking in Westminster.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>56</sup> The ICGS report indicates that blurred boundaries between personal and professional life were at the heart of multiple complaints about inappropriate behaviour.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>89</sup> 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."<sup>10</sup> Over the course of 2020, MPs and fellow drinkers spent more than £133,000 ordering alcohol in the numerous taxpayer subsidised bars on the parliamentary estate despite lockdowns closing outlets for most of the year.<sup>11</sup>

The culture of drinking impacts Parliamentary working practices, with MPs reporting that colleagues have missed votes or voted the wrong way because of alcohol.<sup>12</sup> 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,<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Francis, S. (2023). [Westminster drinking culture blamed for bad behaviour](#). *BBC*, 18 October 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Francis, S. (2023). [Westminster drinking culture blamed for bad behaviour](#). *BBC*, 18 October 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Francis, S. (2023). [Westminster drinking culture blamed for bad behaviour](#). *BBC*, 18 October 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Kotecha, S. (2023). [Westminster: House of Commons culture still 'predatory', say staff](#). *BBC*, 5 July 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Francis, S. (2023). [Westminster drinking culture blamed for bad behaviour](#). *BBC*, 18 October 2023.

<sup>8</sup> BBC. (2021) [Row over 'drunk' MPs on Gibraltar military visit](#). *BBC*, 11 November 2021

<sup>9</sup> Mason, R. (2022). [No 10 'concerned' MPs engaged in 'sex and heavy drinking' on trips abroad](#). *The Guardian*, 28 December 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Cabinet Office. (2022). [Findings of second permanent secretary's investigation into alleged gatherings on government premises during covid restrictions](#).

<sup>11</sup> Grylls, G. (2021). [Tracey Crouch takes swipe at MPs who vote while reeking of alcohol](#). *The Times*, 14 September 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Grylls, G. (2021). [Tracey Crouch takes swipe at MPs who vote while reeking of alcohol](#). *The Times*, 14 September 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Rao, R. et al. (2020). [Alcohol consumption of UK members of parliament: cross-sectional survey](#). *BMJ*

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.<sup>15</sup> A report by the Alcohol Health Alliance (AHA), published in collaboration with the Obesity Health Alliance (OHA) and Action on Smoking and Health, describes how gifts and benefits from health harming industries such as alcohol, tobacco, and ultra-processed foods are not acts of generosity, but strategic investments aimed at securing influence.<sup>16</sup> The Committee on Standards have also heard evidence regarding the risks associated with accepting significant hospitality from corporations with vested interests.<sup>17</sup>

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.

Another major risk factor for developing liver disease is obesity or overweight. Fatty liver disease<sup>18</sup> is the accumulation of fat within the liver that is not caused by alcohol consumption. In the UK, around two-thirds of adults are above a healthy weight, and almost half are living with obesity.

Addressing the availability and pricing of unhealthy foods and fizzy drinks on the Parliamentary Estate, in the cafeteria and bars would also help to create a healthier working environment.

The 2022 cafeteria surveys had comments suggesting there should be more sugar free non-fizzy drink options to expand a healthier range<sup>19</sup> and the 2023 survey noted that changing the price of the fizzy drinks and juice so there was a “noticeable saving” would make the sugar options less tempting<sup>20</sup>. Working in a high stress environment such as Parliament can result in unhealthy food habits since stress has been reported as one of the main contributors to increased consumption of unhealthy food<sup>21</sup>.

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

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<sup>14</sup> Grylls, G. (2021). [Tracey Crouch takes swipe at MPs who vote while reeking of alcohol](#). *The Times*, 14 September 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Hawkins, B. et al (2012). [Alcohol industry influence on UK alcohol policy: A new research agenda for public health](#). *Critical Public Health*.

<sup>16</sup> AHA, OHA, ASH. (2024). Killer tactic: How tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy food and drink industries hold back public health progress.

<sup>17</sup> Parliament live. (2022). [Committee on Standards evidence session](#), 25 January 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Fatty liver disease refers to metabolic associated steatosis liver disease (MASLD). In 2023, the nomenclature changed from non-alcohol related fatty liver disease (NAFLD) to MASLD.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-catering/transparency/2022/cafeteria-customer-surveys/cafeteria-survey-november-2022.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-catering/transparency/2023/cafeteria-customer-surveys/cafeteria-survey-may-2023.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> O'Connor et al. (2008) Effects of daily hassles and eating style on eating behavior *Health Psychology*, 27(1, Suppl), S20–S31 ; Sproesser et al. (2013) [The bright side of stress-induced eating: eating more when stressed but less when pleased](#) *Psychological Science*, 25(1), 58–65.

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.

While it has been recommended that every Government department employ a clear and robust policy covering the consumption of alcohol in the workplace,<sup>22</sup> 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,<sup>23</sup> 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.”<sup>24</sup>

- **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.

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<sup>22</sup> Cabinet Office. (2022). [Findings of second permanent secretary’s investigation into alleged gatherings on government premises during covid restrictions.](#)

<sup>23</sup> UK Parliament (Accessed 2024). [Frequently asked questions: The Budget](#)

<sup>24</sup> Newkey-Buden, C. (2022). [Does Westminster have an alcohol problem?](#) *The Week*, 12 May 2022.

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