

Written evidence submitted by Action on Smoking and Health; the Alcohol Health Alliance; and the obesity Health Alliance

This joint submission is presented by ASH, the Alcohol Health Alliance (AHA), and the obesity Health Alliance (OHA). Together, we represent organisations across the third sector, uniting medical and patient organisations with leading health NGOs. We collaborate closely to advocate for policy and practices that protect people's health from the three big killers of tobacco, alcohol and obesity, creating a more equal and healthier society.

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 would like to see the Modernisation Committee review the policy relating to gifts and hospitality from unhealthy commodity industries to parliamentarians and staffers. This would support the Committee's aim to '*drive up standards*' and improve the reputation of parliament.

This year the Alcohol Health Alliance, Obesity Health Alliance, and Action on Smoking and Health published a report 'Killer Tactics'¹, which detailed how gifts and benefits from industries such as alcohol, tobacco, and ultra-processed foods are not acts of generosity, but strategic investments aimed at securing influence. This sentiment was echoed in a 2022 Committee on Standards inquiry,² where journalists Richard Brookes and Ian Hislop warned against accepting significant hospitality, such as tickets to major sporting events, from corporations with vested interests. The Tobacco Tactics website, developed by the University of Bath, lists the British politicians who have received hospitality and gifts from transnational tobacco companies.³

Since 1974, MPs have been required to transparently disclose financial interests, including gifts and hospitality valued over £300. Accepting these gifts can create the perception of a conflict of interest, particularly when MPs vote on legislation affecting these industries. In addition, many businesses attempt to circumvent transparency rules, such as hosting events in Parliament where free items are distributed without direct attribution to an MP, provide gifts below the £300 threshold (e.g., large chocolate bars), or organise site visits with untracked giveaways. These practices suggest that the register of interests may only reveal a fraction of lobbying activity.

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

¹ <https://ash.org.uk/uploads/Killer-Tactics-2024.pdf?v=1724412577>

² <https://www.parliamentlive.tv/Event/Index/63eb6ee3-6f8a-455c-a188-42f50ab660a0>

³ <https://www.tobaccotactics.org/article/tobacco-industry-hospitality-for-uk-politicians/>

Each year, millions of lives in the UK are impacted or cut short from harm caused by the effects of three modifiable risk factors - tobacco, alcohol and overweight and obesity. Collectively the risk factors are responsible for over 120,000 cases of cancer annually, while also increasing the risk of other preventable conditions including cardiovascular disease, stroke, type-2 diabetes, liver disease and mental health conditions. The impact is felt disproportionately in more deprived groups, where rates of smoking, harmful drinking and obesity are higher, and multiple risk factors are clustered.

Tobacco, alcohol and obesity also share a common driver – highly profitable industries sustained by sales of harmful products. Effective solutions lie in upstream measures that reduce the availability, affordability and marketing of these products, but this policy action is subject to intense lobbying from some parts of industry who want to maintain their profits at all costs. Setting out a clear policy to restrict Parliamentarians from accepting gifts from businesses that profit from unhealthy commodities would limit the ability of harmful commodity industries to lobby policymakers.

Recent polling shows that 75% of people believe the Prime Minister shouldn't accept gifts from businesses⁴ Our own polling shows significantly strong support for protecting government policy from the tobacco industry (78%), the alcohol industry (71%) and unhealthy food and drink industry (78%)⁵

This specific line of inquiry will complement ongoing advocacy efforts to bring in more comprehensive processes and policies to limit conflicts of interest across the Government and policymaking more broadly.

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

The UK Government is a signatory to World Health Organisation Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) Article 5.3. This requires that *“in setting and implementing their public health policies with respect to tobacco control, Parties shall act to protect these policies from commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry in accordance with national law.”* In practice, this means that interactions with the tobacco industry be limited to what is strictly necessary for effective regulation and conducted with extreme transparency.

⁴ <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/keir-starmer-rachel-reeves-prime-minister-mpsgovernment-b1183833.html>

⁵ The survey was carried out online by YouGov Plc for ASH. Total sample size was 13266 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 29/02/2024 - 18/03/2024. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/protocol-for-engagement-with-stakeholderswith-links-to-the-tobacco-industry/guidance-for-government-engagement-with-the-tobaccoindustry>

⁷ <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/698/food-diet-and-obesity-committee/news/203372/the-government-needs-a-plan-to-fix-our-broken-food-system-and-turn-thetide-on-the-public-health-emergency/>

These rules apply to the Government and the UK Government has produced guidance⁶ on how they should be applied. Parliament should adopt a similar approach in line with the government's guidance.

The recent report from the House of Lords Food, Diet and Obesity Committee⁷ recognised the issue of business lobbying and attempts to influence policy making. They recommended that food businesses which derive the majority of sales from less healthy products be excluded from discussions with the government on the formation of policy on food, diet and obesity prevention. This approach provides a rationale for identifying harmful commodity businesses in relation to food and drink businesses which is supported by our three alliances.

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