

Written evidence submitted by Alcohol Change UK

Key points

- The Modernisation Committee should offer a high-standards, high-support approach to the use of alcohol on the Parliamentary estate, based on evidence.
- Our survey of MPs shows that action needs to sit across the Committee's three strategic aims:
- **Driving up standards:** A significant minority of MPs (30%) believe it is acceptable to vote or speak in the House after consuming alcohol. Standards of behaviour need to be more codified and where necessary, enforced - as in any workplace - to restore public support in Parliament.
- **Improving culture and working practices:** However, standards must sit alongside much more support. Just 14% would describe the House of Commons as a 'supportive' workplace. The Committee should look closely at the recommendations of Australia's Human Rights Commission's report into this issue when it comes to alcohol, particularly the need for more training and proactive culture change.
- **Reforming procedures:** Trusted friends and colleagues are the best way of reaching people who may be drinking too much. At present, only 43% say they would know how to support a colleague who was experiencing alcohol issues. Procedures should be amended to reflect this - including advanced training for Whips on how to deal with issues, and create inclusive cultures which avoid potential triggers, such as late night Monday sittings.
- Alcohol Change UK, as specialists in non-judgmental support and cultural change on alcohol, would be very happy to offer a free training session on these issues. Please get in touch if this is of interest.

About Alcohol Change UK

Alcohol Change UK is the leading UK charity working to reduce alcohol harm. Our vision is a society free from serious alcohol harm, delivered through five key changes: improved knowledge, better policies and regulation, shifted cultural norms, improved drinking behaviours, and increasingly better support and treatment options. We're not anti-alcohol, we're anti-alcohol harm. We focus on evidence and compassion. We carry out research, deliver the incredible Dry January® challenge, provide training to public-facing professionals through

our award-winning Blue Light project, and much more. We are members of the Alcohol Health Alliance which has responded separately to this investigation.

Survey of MPs

As part of our response, and overall work to understand and shape alcohol policy, we commissioned Savanta to carry out a survey of MPs' attitudes to alcohol in parliament, carried out in November and December this year. Please see the Appendix for more information.

Response to questions

1. 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 should sit across all three strategic aims set out in the Leader's memorandum, and should be seen through the prism of providing practical, non-judgmental support to people **at all levels** of alcohol consumption.

Driving up standards:

- **A supportive approach is key, but this must sit along clear standards.** Alcohol consumption has been a factor in major breaches of standards which have significantly impacted public faith in politics. For instance, 'partygate' in 2020 (which included some consumption on the parliamentary estate, as well as Whitehall more broadly) and the charging of an MP with assault in 2012.
- **However, alcohol consumption is still normalised for many.** Our survey finds that a significant minority of MPs (30%) believe it is acceptable to vote or speak in the House after consuming alcohol. We believe this poses a risk to public faith in politics.
- **The acceptance of gifts or hospitality** from the alcohol industry **is also a threat to public faith in political standards.**
- **We believe that standards of behaviour** in relation to alcohol need to include:
 - an explicit ban on drinking alcohol before voting, or speaking in the House
 - guidance on engaging with staff when consuming alcohol, with a clear expectation MPs should role model good behaviour

- clear expectations and guidance on how to manage alcohol in the workplace or higher standards on accepting hospitality from, or meeting with, alcohol industry bodies
- through standards on the direct and indirect use of public resources when alcohol is consumed.

Improving culture and working practices:

- **Higher standards must come with a culture of high support.** However, we find just 14% would describe the House of Commons as a ‘supportive’ workplace.
- **Our survey shows that there is a relatively small, but significant, number of MPs (22%) who feel under pressure to drink.** This is higher than the proportion of the UK population (15.6%) who reported feeling an expectation, obligation or pressure to drink when socialising with colleagues in our recent public polling. Tackling this should be a key priority, and it is important it reaches MPs and staff who may be drinking at harmful, but not dependent, levels.
- **Reforms are needed to Parliament’s bars, but suggestions for all these to be closed may be counter productive.** It is important that alcohol served here is not directly or indirectly subsidised by taxpayers. We also know availability is a factor in alcohol harm in other parliaments (see Question Three). We strongly welcome the progress made on the availability of alcohol-free options, in recent years. While some have suggested that Parliament’s bars should be closed, and we recognise the concerns, we believe that this approach brings some significant risks, as [some evidence](#) suggests that pub and bar closures could lead to at-risk individuals drinking more alone. Only 8% of MPs in our survey said the number of bars mean MPs drink more than they would like. A focus on culture change and support, and other ways of reducing availability and setting standards, may be more likely to be successful at providing support than a blanket ban.
- **Alcohol purchased nearby and consumed within the Parliamentary estate is an area that needs more focus.** This was a major factor in the ‘partygate’ scandal’s impact on public confidence (albeit in relation to alcohol bought elsewhere and consumed within Whitehall). This mirrors a wider societal trend away from pubs and bars, and towards more ‘off-trade’ consumption, underpinned by supermarket prices for alcohol becoming relatively cheaper. People in general are also more likely to consume more alone, and more overall, when drinking off-trade. Given MPs are also employers, as well as being subject to standards in public life, it is important that standards apply across the range of MP’s engagements, given the use of public resources, such as office spaces within Parliament and in constituencies.

- **The best way to change the culture is a focus on support, particularly through peers and friends.** At present, only 43% say they would know how to support a colleague who was experiencing alcohol issues. Working practices should be amended to reflect this - including:
 - Specialist support for anyone working on parliament on how to cut down or stop drinking, which is distinct from support given via the Employee Assistance Programme (which can be very generic when it comes to alcohol)
 - A policy that every MP should know how to “be a good mate”: including training to support anyone they’re concerned about, and signpost additional support if needed
 - Advanced training for Whips on how to deal with alcohol issues, and create inclusive cultures which avoid potential triggers, such as late-night sittings.
 - The implementation of a high-support, high-standards approach across Parliament (see Appendix Two)

Reforming Parliamentary procedures to make the House of Commons more effective:

- Any level of alcohol consumption impairs individuals’ effectiveness.
- While we are very clear that support for individuals must be non-judgmental, practices which encourage alcohol consumption should be limited. Alcohol should be completely separated from key duties, for instance, prohibiting MPs voting or speaking after having consumed alcohol. Disciplinary measures for breaching these should be dealt with sensitively, but it is important to establish these as clear boundaries.
- While the Chancellor’s ‘right’ to have a drink at the Despatch Box has not been deployed for some time, removing this would signal a wider culture shift to MPs, staffers and the general public.

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

We believe that a high-standards, high-support approach to reducing alcohol harm would lead to:

- **Increase public faith in standards in public life:** As outlined above, alcohol has been a major factor in a number of major breaches in public confidence in politics, particularly ‘partygate’.
- **Effectiveness:** Alcohol consumption leads to lower overall effectiveness in multiple areas.
- **Improved culture:** Promoting inclusion and higher standards leads to higher levels of support.

- **Modernised procedures:** ensuring that there are always alcohol-free options would reflect a wider societal trend. No-and-low drinks are experiencing very high year-on-year growth. Meanwhile, there is a trend away from alcohol being “centre stage” in workplaces. For instance, two in five (42%) [managers say work parties](#) should be organised around activities that don't involve alcohol, while the public more generally finds alcohol-centred work activities inappropriate, while [fewer than one-in-four](#) employees want to see alcohol in work social events.

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

Following a number of high-profile breaches of public standards, in 2021, [the Australia Human Rights Commission](#) looked in detail at issues around workplace bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault in Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces. It concluded that alcohol was a major factor in all these issues, and made a number of recommendations for action, including:

- the need to develop and implement consistent and comprehensive alcohol policies, with a view to restricting availability in line with work health and safety obligations, and the principle of harm minimisation
- clear expectations and standards around the use of alcohol within respective Codes of Conduct for parliamentarians and Members of Parliament (Staff) Act employees
- the provision of support and a **proactive** focus on wellbeing and safety
- the provision of education, training and awareness raising opportunities
- the provision and encouragement of opportunities for networking and engagement that do not involve alcohol.

These principles represent a sensible set of measures to address similar issues to those faced in the UK. We welcome the progress the UK Parliament has made on many of these issues in recent years, and recognise it is not starting from zero. However, our survey shows much more can be done. In particular, the focus on standards, as well as a **proactive** focus on tailored support – not just referring individuals to Employee Assistance Programmes, but proactively giving **specialist** alcohol support – should be a key focus.

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

A summary of the interim findings of our survey is included below. The underpinning data is attached to the accompanying email. We are happy to supply the final survey results when these come in. We are also potentially surveying the public on this in the coming weeks.

As outlined, we are also happy to provide free training to help address this issue, as an independent charity.

Appendix One

Savanta interviewed 65 Members of Parliament online from 14th November-12th December. Data were weighted by political party, region, length of service, age and gender. These findings are interim and the full analysis of 100 MPs will be shared with the Committee shortly. The survey finds:

- Although 68% of MPs say they don't feel pressure to drink, 22% do feel this pressure. This suggests that there is a significant minority who are in need of a more supportive culture.
- 73% say there's no judgement for choosing an low or no alcohol drink, only 9% disagree. We believe this recognises the good work done to date to include more alcohol-free options.
- Only 43% say they'd feel comfortable supporting a colleague or knowing where to signpost them, 35% wouldn't feel confident.
- Only 14% agree the House of Commons is a supportive workplace, while 21% disagree with this statement, and 37% neither agree nor disagree. Alcohol Change UK believes that this highlights the need for more *proactive* support.
- 30% think it's acceptable to vote or speak after having consumed alcohol – this is higher among Conservative MPs (53%).

Appendix Two

The below table indicates what a high-support, high-standards approach could look like, with appropriate levels of escalation.

	Who is this for?	High-support	High-standards
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<p><i>Prevention tier</i></p>	<p>Everyone</p>	<p>Training for all MPs</p> <p>Specialist training for Whips and others on dealing with issues</p> <p>Ensuring there's a 'tell a mate' policy across all MPs</p> <p>All bars, receptions, etc must include alcohol-free options</p>	<p>Expectation that this training is compulsory</p> <p>Hospitality from alcohol industry to be registered (alongside tobacco and junk food)</p>
<p><i>Tier one: informal support</i></p>	<p>people concerned about their drinking or others'</p> <p>people for whom alcohol is affecting functioning and performance, but has not yet reached a serious threshold - dealt with informally by Whips and/or peers, or MPs or line managers (for staff)</p>	<p>Referral to online support and Employee Assistance Programme</p>	<p>Expectations made clear around drinking before voting or speaking</p> <p>Expectations made clear around impact on standards in public life, ability to perform duties</p>
<p><i>Tier two: formal</i></p>	<p>people concerned about their drinking or others', including anyone concerned about drinking at dependency level</p> <p>people for whom alcohol consumption is at consistently high levels, including potentially dependency</p> <p>situations in which public/employment</p>	<p>Referral to peer-based support and treatment</p> <p>Right to time-off for treatment, e.g. doctor's appointments, including pairing for key votes, etc</p>	<p>Expectations made clear around drinking before voting or speaking</p> <p>Expectations made clear around impact on standards in public life, ability to perform duties, including enforcement where necessary</p>

	<p>standards may have been breached, or there risks being a breach, but not in a way that has led to harm to another</p> <p>Whips (MPs) or employers/line managers (staff) as employers continue to deal, albeit formally, with support from central party and House of Commons</p>		
<i>Tier three: serious breach</i>	<p>situations in which there is a serious breach of public standards, including any incident of harm to others</p> <p>people for whom alcohol may or may not be at dependency levels, or may be one-off</p> <p>dealt with formally by parties, Commons authorities and others as appropriate, e.g. police</p>	<p>Referral to specialist alcohol and drug treatment services, attendance of which can be monitored</p>	<p>Disciplinary measures where necessary, following appropriate procedures.</p> <p>Where harm to others has not taken place, this should be dealt with as sympathetically as possible, still.</p>