

Modernisation Committee call for evidence

Institute of Alcohol Studies response – December 2024

The Institute of Alcohol Studies (IAS) is an independent institute bringing together evidence, policy and practice from home and abroad to promote an informed debate on alcohol's impact on society. Our purpose is to advance the use of the best available evidence in public policy decisions on alcohol.

Our reason for submitting evidence to the Modernisation Committee is to highlight the issue of alcohol use in parliament, the effect it has on working practices, staff health and wellbeing, parliamentary culture, and the reputation of parliament. We are also interested in how the normalisation of alcohol consumption in the parliamentary workplace may impact attitudes towards alcohol harm reduction policies, and the access it inadvertently provides alcohol industry lobbyists to influence parliamentarians.

Response

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 (which has 3 aims and initial workstreams)?

IAS thinks that the Modernisation Committee should focus on tackling the excessive availability of alcohol on the parliamentary estate, as well as the culturally engrained normalisation of drinking during the working day in parliament. This links to all three of the strategic aims set out by the Leader of the House in her memorandum. There are three pieces of work IAS thinks the Committee should prioritise:

1. Review the availability and promotion of alcohol in parliament.
2. Review the adequacy of alcohol and other drug support services available to those working on the parliamentary estate.
3. Review the policy relating to gifts and hospitality from unhealthy commodity industries to parliamentarians and staffers.

In order to **'drive up standards'** and improve the reputation of parliament, IAS believes there should be a review of the availability and promotion of alcohol on the parliamentary estate, as well as a review of the policy relating to gifts and hospitality from all unhealthy commodity industries. Tackling alcohol use, particularly heavy and more frequent drinking, would also increase the prospects of the Committee achieving its aim of **'improving culture and working practices'**. Further changes are clearly needed to address bullying, harassment, and sexual harassment, **"to make this place more compatible with family life"**, as the memorandum states.

In recent years, there have been numerous incidents relating to inappropriate behaviour, bullying, and harassment – including sexual harassment – that have involved alcohol use. Although alcohol should never be used as an excuse for such behaviour, there is an

abundance of evidence that shows alcohol use contributes to such behaviour. Some recent examples include:

- May 2022: [Sue Gray's report on gatherings during COVID restrictions](#) shows that almost all of the events involved alcohol consumption. One gathering involved "excessive alcohol consumption by some individuals. One individual was sick. There was a minor altercation between two other individuals." At another event, a No 10 official "sent a message on internal No 10 systems referring to 'drunkenness' and advising staff to leave No 10 via the back exit...in order to avoid staff being photographed by the press outside".
- 2022: A whip [tells Business Insider](#) that excess drinking was one of the "top problems" his team dealt with, and that "the sheer number of bars close to the voting lobby in the chamber makes it a big temptation". Although, perversely, the piece also highlighted that whips would use alcohol problems against MPs, with a former minister stating that: "The whips are openly trawling the bars — not for the welfare aspect, but because they think 'let's get Joe Bloggs, let's get the dirt on his behaviour'."
- One former staffer [told the BBC](#) that the drinking culture "is a symptom of a much, much larger problem of the lack of professionalism from MPs and staff. That's what leads to an abuse of power and ultimately a poor use of taxpayers' money in the bars of Parliament".
- July 2023: the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, Daniel Greenberg, [said](#) there had been "behaviour problems" linked to drinking in Westminster.
- October 2023: the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS) [found](#) that drinking in parliament often led to "intimidating behaviour like shouting and swearing".
- [A 2020 study in the British Medical Journal](#) surveyed the drinking practices of MPs and found that they are more likely to engage in risky drinking compared to the English population, as well as feel guilty about drinking. The former MP Dan Poulter, who co-authored the study, [said earlier this year](#) that: "Drinking culture in parliament doesn't just extend to MPs...it can become endemic amongst staff". He highlighted the antisocial hours of parliament and abuse from members of the public as contributory factors to risky drinking among MPs and staffers.

As the Leader's memorandum to this call for evidence states, parliament should be **"open and accessible to people from all walks of life"**. Not only is there a significant number of people who do not consume alcohol – including for cultural, health, and religious reasons – there will be MPs and staffers who are in recovery for alcohol problems, some of whom have spoken publicly about the issue, but some will remain private. A working environment that is saturated with alcohol does not create a safe space for these people to work in, and it also increases the risk of people developing an alcohol problem in the first place.

IAS has heard from several MPs, both from the new intake and longer-serving MPs, who say they go back to their offices and keep working well into the evening to avoid drinking alcohol before voting. They explained that alcohol is so pervasive in parliament that it's almost impossible to avoid. Many referred to this as 'hiding from alcohol'. Another recently spoke of how they are offered an alcoholic drink when entering almost every parliamentary

reception, which could be at any time of the day. He said that by the evening you could easily have had several drinks throughout the day unintentionally. Furthermore, MPs have reported that the pro-alcohol environment in Westminster creates resistance to change regarding public policies to reduce alcohol harm. This issue relates to the third strategic aim of making the House of Commons more effective by ***‘reforming procedures’*** to improve the scrutiny of government business. Parliament should be set up to maximise the opportunities to learn, understand, and scrutinise legislation, while providing a space for colleagues to interact and learn from one another. The Modernisation Committee should consider what the physical environment of parliament could look like to maximise this that doesn’t excessively promote drinking alcohol in the workplace.

A review of the availability and promotion of alcohol as soon as possible in this parliament is crucial. Alongside this, there should be a review of support services for those experiencing alcohol or other drug problems on the parliamentary estate, to ensure there is adequate support and to reduce the stigma of seeking help.

Alcohol industry influence

As mentioned, the pro-alcohol environment in Westminster has been linked to a lack of policy progress in tackling alcohol harm. Alcohol industry activities have also been [evidenced as a major barrier to the development and implementation of public health measures to prevent alcohol harm](#). The high prevalence of corporate hospitality and entertainment sponsored by the alcohol industry both on and off the parliamentary estate provides industry access to decisionmakers which in some cases may create conflicts of interest. This year the Alcohol Health Alliance, Obesity Health Alliance, and Action on Smoking and Health published a report ***‘Killer Tactics’***, 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: “There is no such thing as a free lunch. Businesses are spending money because they believe it will be in their financial interests.” This sentiment was echoed in [a 2022 Committee on Standards inquiry](#), where journalists Richard Brookes and Ian Hislop warned against accepting significant hospitality, such as tickets to major sporting events, from corporations with vested interests.

IAS calls on the Modernisation Committee to conduct a review of the policy relating to gifts and hospitality from unhealthy commodity industries to parliamentarians and staffers to drive up standards, improve culture and working practices, and reform procedures to make the House of Commons more effective.

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

As explained above, alcohol consumption has significantly contributed to poor health and wellbeing among parliamentarians and staff members, many of the incidents of inappropriate and harassing behaviour in parliament in recent years, as well as contributing to damaging the reputation of parliament. The Modernisation Committee is well-placed to review and tackle this issue.

3. 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 parliament is known for its alcohol-centric culture. Although alcohol is available to varying degrees in several European parliaments, none are as permissive as the UK. More broadly, the alcohol culture in parliament compared to other workplaces is exceptional. As the editor of Times Radio [has noted](#): “Most people’s work canteen doesn’t sell small bottles of wine. Nor have two pubs which are open and well used for those who fancy a quick pint in the afternoon.” The lead author of the 2020 BMJ study noted something similar in 2022, [writing 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”. The Committee should review whether scrutinising legislation and voting in parliament after consuming a psychoactive substance should be considered acceptable by today’s standards.

IAS fully endorses [the recent call from eight Labour MPs](#) to restrict alcohol’s availability in parliament.

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

IAS is conducting a survey of MPs and House of Commons staffers in early 2025, which will investigate how alcohol is perceived in the parliamentary workplace. The survey questions will include how often they are offered alcohol at work meetings and events, if they have ever experienced 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. Respondents will also be asked about what support services are available to people with alcohol problems and if they would like to see any changes to how alcohol is dealt with in the parliamentary workplace. Following the survey, interviews will be conducted with MPs and members of staff to explore some of these topics in more depth. We would be happy to meet with the Committee to discuss this project in more detail.