



IAS

Institute of
Alcohol Studies

Under the influence?

Perspectives of alcohol in
the parliamentary workplace
among UK MPs and staff

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*Foreword by
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About IAS

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 discussions on alcohol. The IAS is a company limited by guarantee (no. 05661538) and a registered charity (no. 1112671).

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Foreword

Parliament has changed considerably in recent years. It is more diverse, more representative and more aware than ever of the need to create a workplace that is safe, professional and inclusive. These changes are welcome, but this report shows there is still further to go if we are to build a modern parliamentary workplace that genuinely supports the health, wellbeing and success of everyone who works here, and in doing so enables us to better represent and serve the public.



This important research provides a rare insight into how MPs and staff experience alcohol in the parliamentary workplace, revealing that Westminster remains a highly unusual working environment in which alcohol is deeply embedded in the culture and readily available throughout the working day.

Two findings stood out to me. Almost one in ten respondents reported a negative experience because of someone else's drinking at work, and 70% either didn't know, or weren't sure, how to raise a concern about a colleague's drinking. That combination - real, measurable harm, and no clear route to address it - is exactly the kind of gap we need to address. While social and networking elements are important in a healthy workplace, colleagues describing how the drinking culture plays a distinct role in career progression raises significant concerns about wellbeing, inclusion, and professionalism.

If we, as legislators, work somewhere that treats alcohol as a normal and constant feature of daily life, it becomes harder to credibly ask the public to think differently about their own drinking, or to take seriously the harm alcohol causes in communities like mine.

As a public health doctor, my ambition is simple: to help people stay well. When I entered Parliament in 2024, I was keen to see evidence on healthy workplaces be applied to Westminster. A formal workplace policy on alcohol would be a key component in that process. As Parliament continues its programme of modernisation, this report offers a timely opportunity to reflect on how we can create a healthier, more inclusive and more supportive environment for MPs and staff alike. The encouraging message is that change

is already underway. By working together, listening to lived experience and acting on the evidence, we can continue that progress and build a Parliament that is fit for the future.



Dr Beccy Cooper
Member of Parliament
Worthing West

Executive summary

The drinking culture in Westminster has long made headlines, with reports that alcohol blurs personal and professional boundaries on the parliamentary estate and fuels inappropriate behaviour.¹ Alcohol has been cited as a frequent factor in several high-profile investigations into misconduct by MPs,² yet the prevalence of alcohol harm in the Westminster workplace is unknown.

This report looks behind the curtain to explore the prevalence, perceptions, and impact of alcohol-related harm among MPs and staff working both in Westminster and constituency offices. It also looks at what support is available in the parliamentary workplace for people experiencing challenges related to alcohol. Through a survey (with 191 responses) and 22 interviews with MPs and parliamentary staff, we found that:

“If I wouldn’t operate heavy machinery or drive a car, why should I legislate the laws of the land?” – MP

- **Westminster is a unique workplace** where alcohol is woven into the working environment. Staff members based in constituency offices were far less likely to report being offered alcohol at work meetings or events compared to staff based in Westminster and MPs, and participants also drew stark comparisons with the presence of alcohol in other workplaces.
- **Alcohol harm is common**, with almost one in ten (8%) survey respondents reporting a negative experience due to someone else’s drinking at work. This varied according to occupation and location, with a higher proportion of respondents based in Westminster (13% of staff members, and 9% of MPs) reporting a negative experience compared to constituency staff (6%).
- **MPs and staff expressed concerns** about the impact of alcohol on workplace safety, health and wellbeing, productivity and behaviour. It was reported that younger staff face additional risks due to ingrained power dynamics and increased peer pressure to drink alcohol.
- Despite broad recognition of the harmful effects of alcohol use and the wider drinking culture, some respondents acknowledged or even emphasised the **positive aspects of alcohol**, particularly in the context of its role in the social fabric of parliamentary life.
- **Drivers of alcohol use** on the parliamentary estate include the commercialisation of Westminster as an events venue, and the broad

1. Francis, S. (18 October 2023) [Westminster drinking culture blamed for bad behaviour](#). BBC. Grylls, G. (14 September 2021). [Tracey Crouch takes swipe at MPs who vote while reeking of alcohol](#). The Times.
2. Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (2025) [Annual Report 2024-25](#)

availability of alcohol throughout the working day at various events, as well as the on-site bars and pubs. This availability contributes to a casual attitude to drinking, where individuals are responsible for self-regulating their alcohol consumption at work, and contending with factors such as high stress and long working hours, as well as loneliness when working away from home. Alcohol was also linked to a networking culture that was deemed essential to career progression and social inclusion.

- The majority of survey respondents were **unsure about whether there were sufficient support services** available to people with alcohol problems in the parliamentary workplace and **70% either did not know or were unsure how to report concerns about a colleague's drinking**.
- Interviewees suggested the **level of support on offer had increased and improved in recent years, but that there was more to be done**. There was concern about how much support would be accessed due to the shame and stigma surrounding alcohol problems, fears of jeopardising career opportunities, and the normalised drinking culture.
- The **unique structure of the parliamentary workplace** also introduces complexities around who is responsible for welfare.

**"No other workplace I've had produces its own wine."
- Staffer**

Based on the views and recommendations provided by MPs and parliamentary staff, this report recommends the following should be incorporated in a formal parliamentary workplace policy on alcohol:

- Promote a healthier working environment by **limiting the free provision of alcohol to evening events only**.
- Use existing parliamentary bodies such as the Modernisation Committee to develop and **implement changes to address factors associated with alcohol consumption such as high stress, loneliness and long working hours**. This could include changes to late-night voting practices, increasing alcohol-free social spaces and activities, and incorporating alcohol-related support into existing mental health and wellbeing services.
- Increase the uptake of support by **improving signposting and addressing stigma around alcohol**. This can be supported by encouraging those with lived experiences to share their insights, champion the issue, and shape services. Support should be clearly advertised as confidential and not limited to 'recovery' or abstinence. Practical changes could include holding AA meetings at peak times, such as Monday evenings when MPs are waiting around for votes, and making SMART Recovery meetings available as an alternative.
- **Greater communication to ensure the parliamentary workforce is equipped with knowledge of how to protect and support both themselves and colleagues from alcohol harm**, including promoting awareness of the Chief Medical Officers' low-risk drinking guidelines.

Introduction

Alcohol has been cited as a driver of harmful behaviours and poor conduct among politicians in Westminster by journalists and authors.^{3,4}

Previous research found that risky drinking was more likely among MPs compared to the general English population, with MPs more likely to drink four or more times a week, consume 10 or more drinks on a typical drinking day, or feel guilty because of drinking.⁵ Between April 2023 and March 2025, alcohol was a factor in almost one in five complaints investigated by the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS) in Parliament, and especially notable in complaints made under the sexual misconduct policy.⁶ Earlier this year, newly elected MP Hannah Spencer made headlines for her comments about the drinking culture in Westminster, which she described as “unprofessional and worrying,” and unlike the vast majority of workplaces.⁷ The public supports this sentiment, with over three-quarters (76%) deeming it to be unacceptable for MPs to drink alcohol on evenings before late-night votes in Parliament.⁸ In recent

3. Hardman, Isabelle. Why we get the wrong politicians. Atlantic Books. 2018
4. Wright, Ben. Order, Order! The Rise and Fall of Political Drinking. Gerald Duckworth and Co. Ltd. 2016
5. Rao, R. et al. (2020) [Alcohol consumption of UK members of parliament: cross-sectional survey](#). BMJ Open.
6. Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (2025) [Annual Report 2024-25](#)
7. [PoliticsJOE interview with Hannah Spencer MP](#). (26 April 2026) YouTube
8. YouGov (27 April 2026) [Do you think it is acceptable or unacceptable for MPs to drink alcohol on evenings where later on they will have late-night votes in Parliament?](#)

years, there have been efforts to modernise parliamentary procedures,⁹ after the 2024 general election saw the formation of the most diverse UK Parliament to date. Yet public perceptions of an outdated drinking culture persist.

This study is the first of its kind to invite all working United Kingdom (UK) members of Parliament (MPs) and their staff to detail their experiences of alcohol in the workplace, including the availability, culture, and the impact of colleagues' drinking.

With no formal parliamentary policy in place to address the use of alcohol in the workplace, evidence from this study may be valuable in informing the development of guidance that could improve the safety and wellbeing of people who work in the parliamentary workplace. Any steps to improve the working conditions and reduce the impact of alcohol in the UK Parliament will likely enhance the productivity and decision-making abilities of the nation's legislature.

This research set out to explore:

- How MPs and their staff perceive the availability of alcohol in the parliamentary workplace compared to other professional settings.
- How prevalent adverse consequences linked to alcohol use are in the workplace setting for MPs and their staff.
- Whether experiences of alcohol harm in the workplace vary between MPs and their staff.
- How MPs and their staff perceive the availability of support services for people with alcohol problems working in Parliament.
- If there is support for change to how alcohol is dealt with in the workplace among MPs and their staff, and what these recommendations might be.

9. UK Parliament (2024) [The work of the Modernisation Committee](#)

Methods

We invited all working UK members of Parliament (n=650) and staff members (n=3,622¹⁰) to participate anonymously in a survey in April 2025. Survey data was analysed descriptively, with the responses from different staff groups compared (e.g. MPs, support staff in Westminster, support staff in constituency offices).

We then carried out online semi-structured interviews to further explore issues and experiences surrounding alcohol in the parliamentary workplace between June and October 2025. Interviewees were initially recruited via the survey, and subsequently through existing professional networks (e.g., All-Party Parliamentary Groups) and all-member email invitations.

Transcripts were read and re-read for familiarity by the lead researcher. Descriptive free-text coding was then carried out to inform an initial overarching coding framework, which was developed iteratively through the coding of subsequent transcripts. To enhance the rigour and dependability of the thematic framework, a second analyst performed a blind review of two transcripts to independently identify themes and ensure conceptual alignment. A second round of blind coding of two additional transcripts to cross-check against the primary framework was then carried out to assess consistency. The framework was collaboratively refined through this process, and the coding of the remainder of the transcripts was checked by a third member of the research team. We received ethics approval for this research from the Observational/Interventions Research Ethics Committee at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (Ref: 30957).

10. Speaker's Conference on the employment conditions of Member's staff: Second Report July 2023. Available at <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmspeak/1714/online.pdf>. Accessed 23/04/2024

Results

1. Survey

A total of 191 respondents completed the survey (giving a response rate of 4.5%). Over half of the participants (57%, n=108) reported their occupation as a member of staff working in a constituency office, with 30% (n=58) working as a member of staff in Westminster. 13% were MPs (n=24). One respondent who did not specify their occupation was removed from the analysis, leaving the total at 190.

Responses to questions about exposure to alcohol and experiences of alcohol harm in the workplace differed according to occupation. Constituency-based staff were far less likely to report being offered alcohol at work meetings or events compared to staff based in Westminster and MPs. For example, 42% of MPs and 30% of staff based in Westminster reported being offered an alcoholic drink at a work meeting or event on a weekly basis compared to 1% of staff members based in constituencies.

In the past 6 months how often have you been offered an alcoholic drink at a work meeting or event?

Role	% (n)				
	Never	Occasionally	Monthly	Weekly	Daily
Member of Parliament (n=24)	17% (4)	17% (4)	13% (3)	42% (10)	13% (3)
Member of Staff, Westminster (n=58)	10% (6)	38% (22)	19% (11)	29% (17)	3% (2)
Member of Staff, Constituency Office (n=108)	47% (51)	44% (47)	8% (9)	1% (1)	0% (0)
Total (n=190)	32% (61)	38% (73)	12% (23)	15% (29)	3% (5)

Table 1: Reported frequency of being offered an alcoholic drink at a work event or meeting in the past six months

Additionally, a majority of survey respondents reported that alcohol was either much more available (39%) or somewhat more available (19%) in Westminster compared to other workplaces, whereas almost a third (32%)

reported that alcohol is much less available in constituency offices compared to other workplaces. (See *table 2 in the [appendix](#)*).

Overall, almost 1 in 10 respondents (8%) reported a negative experience at work over the past six months due to someone else's drinking. This varied according to occupation, with 13% of staff members based in Westminster reporting a negative experience, compared with 9% of MPs and 6% of constituency staff members. The most commonly reported negative experiences were having had unwanted sexual attention (4%) and having been harassed, insulted or humiliated (4%), followed by feeling threatened (3%). (See *table 3 in the [appendix](#)*).

A higher proportion of MPs (35%) and Westminster staff members (39%) reported they suspected one or more of their colleagues may have been hungover or under the influence of alcohol at work compared to constituency staff members (23%). (See *table 4 in the [appendix](#)*). Approximately 17% of all respondents reported that their work had been negatively impacted due to a colleague being hungover or under the influence of alcohol. The most commonly cited impact was reduced team productivity (11%) followed by a negative effect on team morale (8%). (See *table 5 in the [appendix](#)*).

The majority of respondents (85%) did not report having concerns about a colleague's drinking. However, a greater proportion of MPs reported having concerns (22%) than Westminster staff members (11%) or constituency staff members (12%) (Table 2).

In the past 6 months have you been concerned about a colleague's drinking?

Role	% (n)			
	Yes	No	Not sure	Prefer not to say
Member of Parliament (n=23)	22% (5)	70% (16)	9% (2)	0% (0)
Member of Staff, Westminster (n=56)	11% (6)	89% (50)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Member of Staff, Constituency Office (n=108)	12% (13)	85% (92)	1% (1)	2% (2)
Total (n=187)	13% (24)	85% (158)	2% (3)	2% (3)

Table 2: *Reported concerns about a colleague's drinking over the past six months*

When asked about whether there are sufficient support services available in Westminster or the constituency offices for people to seek help for alcohol problems, the most common response reported was 'not sure'. Out of 79 MPs and Westminster-based staff, 71% answered either 'no' or 'not sure.' However, these responses varied according to occupation, with the majority of MPs (52%) reporting there were sufficient support services available in Westminster, compared to a minority of Westminster (20%) staff members. Table 3 presents participants' views on the availability of support services for people to seek help for alcohol problems.

Do you think there are sufficient support services available in Westminster or the constituency office for people to seek help for alcohol problems?

Role	Westminster % (n)			Constituency office % (n)			Prefer not to say
	Yes	No	Not sure	Yes	No	Not sure	
Member of Parliament (n=23)	52% (12)	9% (2)	39% (9)	39% (9)	13% (3)	22% (5)	0% (0)
Member of Staff, Westminster (n=56)	20% (11)	29% (16)	52% (29)	4% (2)	11% (6)	11% (6)	0% (0)
Member of Staff, Constituency Office (n=108)	9% (10)	9% (10)	30% (32)	31% (33)	18% (19)	50% (54)	2% (2)

Table 3: Reported views on whether there are sufficient support services for alcohol problems in Westminster and constituency offices.

When asked if they were aware of how to report any concerns about a colleague's drinking, 50% of respondents said 'no', with similar response rates across occupational groups: 52% MPs, 54% Westminster staff and 47% constituency staff respectively. 20% were not sure. A slightly higher proportion of MPs (35%) reported they were aware of how to report concerns about a colleague's drinking compared with constituency staff (30%) and Westminster staff (29%). (See table 8 in the [appendix](#)).

Respondents were asked whether they believed Westminster and the constituency offices had a healthy or an unhealthy relationship with alcohol in the workplace. The most common responses were that Westminster has an unhealthy relationship (38%) and the constituency offices have a healthy relationship (41%). However, these responses differed according to occupation, with a higher proportion of MPs (22%) reporting that Westminster has a healthy relationship with alcohol in the workplace

compared to staff in Westminster (7%) and constituency offices (4%). (See table 9 in the [appendix](#)).

We also asked what changes were needed regarding how alcohol was dealt with. Almost half of respondents (48%) said either some or major changes would improve the workplace environment in Westminster. In contrast, only 6% said some changes were needed in the constituency office. (See table 10 in the [appendix](#)).

2. Interviews

Through semi-structured interviews with MPs and their staff, we explored their experiences of alcohol in the parliamentary workplace in more detail. A total of 22 interviews were conducted, with 9 MPs, 7 staff members based predominantly in the constituency office, and 6 staff members based predominantly in Westminster. Each interview participant has been assigned a numbered code to identify their role, e.g., **MP1** for Member of Parliament 1, **S-C1** for staff predominantly based in the constituency, and **S-W1** for staff predominantly based in Westminster.

Westminster as a unique workplace

Across the interviews, MPs and staff noted a considerably different drinking culture in the constituency offices compared with Westminster. By and large, alcohol was simply not present in constituency offices, which were seen as professional environments where drinking plays a minimal role. The only time alcohol appeared in constituency contexts was in social settings, typically outside of the office and working hours, in a celebratory role or at party-political events. Staff mentioned daytime casework, family responsibilities and rural travel constraints as reasons why it wouldn't be suitable, possible or appropriate to drink.

“You just get on with the job.”
- S-C7

“Day to day, alcohol doesn't play any part in the work of the constituency office.”
- MP4

This was described in contrast to the drinking culture in Westminster. Participants outlined the range of venues on the parliamentary estate, including the infamous Strangers' Bar, the more exclusive Pugin Room, and The Woolsack. Alcohol is also served at various events and receptions, restaurants and cafes. Staff based in constituency offices expressed shock at how normalised drinking appeared on their visits to Westminster:

“I never thought about it before I went down to Westminster, but when I actually just saw it firsthand, I just couldn't believe it... I was just a bit flabbergasted.”
- S-C2

Similarly, many participants said that in their previous workplaces, drinking only took place outside of working hours, was optional, and social. They described it as unusual to have alcohol in the workplace, notably during the daytime. Even in other workplaces where there may have been a drinking culture, it still didn't feel as all-encompassing as in the parliamentary workplace.

“...going to a meeting at noon and alcohol's available. Of course, I'm not used to that in my old job.”
- MP9

“I mean, where else in a work environment would you go, unless it was the Christmas work's do, and there was free alcohol there for you. It just wouldn't happen in real life.”
- MP5

Many participants described the parliamentary estate as a 'village' which offers a whole host of facilities, including social spaces, which was especially important for those based outside of London. This social dynamic and sense of community in Westminster was also described by some as a hub of gossip. Westminster-based interviewees noted that on-site socialising was important due to the need for privacy and security in politics, although people were divided in whether this provided more safety, or meant there were fewer guardrails in place.

In some respects, participants felt that Westminster was like its own world, while others referenced how the drinking culture on the parliamentary

estate reflected how alcohol is “embedded in society” more broadly (S-C3), albeit a more exaggerated version.

“...in many ways, it’s a microcosm of the country, and we’re still a country which socialises and handles stress through alcohol, and Parliament is just the country, but in miniature.”
- S-W5

“[P]eople, you know, they’ll have a drink and they might be a little bit merry, but no more so than you would see in any public house during the week in London or anywhere.”
- MP6

There was a general sense that the culture was improving and modernising, but that elements of an old establishment were still present, playing out in entrenched power dynamics and drinking traditions.

“...there is a sort of feeling of hierarchy sometimes in Westminster. I think it’s changing quite quickly. And I’d like to think that it won’t be around for much longer but there is still a bit of irreverence around MPs and Peers.”
- MP3

“I first started working in Parliament in [the late 2000’s], and there very much was sort of a boys’ club, even still then, sort of drinking culture. And over time that does seem to have changed slightly... parliament is more diverse, people tend to have other interests, socialising in slightly different ways, but there is still that element of it, that that is what is expected of you.”
- S-W4

The parliamentary estate as a workplace is also unusual in that it doubles up as a commercial enterprise that serves as a tourist attraction and venue. MPs in particular noted that for guests visiting Westminster, it was considered a special occasion, where having a drink on the Terrace was

part of the “glamorous” appeal (MP8). This commercialisation also involves the production of branded Houses of Parliament alcohol products, tied into profitable catering packages and contributing to the exclusive, luxury branding of the venue.

“No other workplace I’ve had produces its own wine.”
– S-W1

Participants were astutely aware of the importance of Westminster’s public reputation. Even though some felt that the public assumptions about the drinking culture may be exaggerated, participants acknowledged that addressing and managing alcohol on the estate would help to improve how people perceive politics. In particular, if the government is interested in implementing laws to reduce alcohol harm and improve public health, it needs to be seen to be setting a good example.

“I suppose we’ve seen a good bit of that within the latest round of politics where MPs have been caught out on maybe dictating a certain kind of etiquette that public have to [abide] by but not doing the same themselves, so like I say it’s that element of... hypocrisy or how you present yourself and the image that, what you represent.”
– S-C6

“The culture within Westminster specifically is something we need to bear in mind more because we need to be setting the best example that we can.”
– MP3

Unspoken rules in an unregulated environment

Interview participants reported that Westminster differs from other workplaces in part due to the overwhelming, all-day availability of alcohol throughout the estate. Participants noted that “you’re never more than two feet away from it” (MP1), with alcohol on offer at the various on-site bars and a regular feature of events and receptions that run throughout the day and evening. One member of staff based in Westminster recalled attending a breakfast event where alcohol was served before midday.

“ I don’t think it’s appropriate during the day for that to be the case. Now, obviously, if people meet up after work and go for a drink, I do that, it’s a normal part of life. But there’s not many walks of life where at lunchtime you’ll be offered a free glass of wine, or even at breakfast, potentially, a free glass of wine. It just, doesn’t feel comfortable for me, for a number of reasons. ”
- S-W3

The presence of alcohol at events links back to the commercial offering of Parliament as a venue, as room bookings require a minimum catering spend on food and drink. Staff mentioned that event organisers might hope that the “provision of alcohol will be a significant draw” to encourage attendance (S-W6), with the success of events seemingly measured by how full the room is.

At many parliamentary events where alcohol is served, it is provided as the default option, with wine being the assumed option at dinners and receptions, and a traditional top-up service nudging people to drink more.

“ I quite often find there’s a glass of wine shoved in your hand at the door. But if you want a soft drink, you are required to go through the event to the back of the room to find something. ”
- MP7

This availability contributes to creating a “casual attitude to drinking” (MP3) where individuals are responsible for self-regulating their alcohol consumption at work, while attending events described by one MP as a “legitimised opportunity to drink alcohol” (MP1). Both members of Parliament and staff referenced their own personal rule books that helped them to maintain a level of professionalism, get their work done and define a boundary between working and socialising.

“ For me, I wouldn’t drive a car if I’d had a drink of alcohol, so why am I voting on legislation if I’ve had alcohol? That’s just my own personal, and I would never subject it to anybody else, but that’s my approach. If I wouldn’t operate heavy machinery or drive a car, why should I legislate the laws of the land? That seems quite important to me. ”
- MP1

“So you have to actively decide, I’m not drinking today and stick to it.”
- MP5

“I’ve had a drink, you know, I’m finished for the day, I’m done ... for me personally, I’m always very mindful of, I am technically still at work, so if I was to do something silly like, make a fool of myself, or you know, any drunken antics...”
- S-W3

Party political conferences emerged as a significant event where this drinking culture was magnified:

“The drink culture there is absolutely astonishing. And I am apprehensive about going to conference... where I try to make myself scarce in the evenings because it’s endemic.”
- MP7

“When you go to party conference, which for many is sort of they’re off the leash for two or three days. When you go through the diary, ‘alcohol is provided,’ is one of the things that people are most likely to ring, before whether they’ve got an interest in the event, to be honest.”
- S-C1

Drinking as both work expectation and relief from work

Nonetheless, the line between work and play is often difficult to navigate. Socialising and networking – where alcohol plays a key role – was often identified as crucial to doing the job and advancing careers. One MP described a scenario where he had found himself sitting with a Secretary of State in one of the parliamentary bars, where over the course of 90 minutes he was able to raise constituency issues, and start building a relationship that he described would be critical in future opportunities for promotions and appointments.

“Your friendships and the relationships you build with colleagues are absolutely vital for your personal advancement if you’re an ambitious politician. And you develop those friendships in the bars...[With] backbenchers you’re trying to establish yourself in the eyes of your colleagues as somebody who convenes people, and leads people. And alcohol is integral to all of that.”

- MP2

“If you want to like influence a minister, it helps if you kind of know them on a personal level, or if you want to work with colleagues on a particular issue that you’ve got a shared interest on, those sort of ... soft touch personal relationships are very important, and obviously, having a drink and having a chat over a drink can be a big part of that.”

- MP3

“I have found that in particular when I first started this role it was made slightly easier by the fact that you could feel like you were maybe just in the pub with these stakeholders, and get to know them a little bit more.”

- S-W1

As well as the ‘social lubricant’ role, participants reported that alcohol also plays a role in helping people switch off from a very stressful and high-pressured role, in both Westminster and the constituency office:

“It breaks down some barriers, it relaxes you, and it eases conversation, and in the end, Parliament is all about networking and bringing people together, so that has nothing to do with Parliament, it’s just we humans like to drink alcohol to relax ourselves.”

- MP8

“...and it can be pleasurable to have a drink. There’s obviously, if you’ve had a tough day, you might think, that, you know, having a drink will... take some of the pressure off and be social.”
- MP4

“...because the job we all have in the constituency offices is pretty stressful and can be very upsetting, I think people sometimes think they just need to go out for a drink after work.”
- S-C4

Using alcohol to mark the end of a stressful period was encapsulated in one staff member’s recollection that they’d never seen Strangers’ Bar busier than after the second reading of the Universal Credit Bill:

“Like it was heaving and heaving. Obviously it’d been an incredibly stressful couple of weeks for pretty much all MPs.”
- S-W2

For those travelling from constituencies out of London, the parliamentary social life fills an important hole when away from home. Participants said Westminster could be a lonely place, where people are often working away from their families and friends, so don’t have their usual support networks to deal with the stress, or simply work in a small office with few direct colleagues.

“My instinct is that people are unhappy, and it’s not a normal job. I think you see it a little bit in like, so like in the armed forces if you’re deployed overseas, that when you’re off duty, you tend to drink a lot, and I think MPs are kind of a bit similar in that we’re away from home, we’re away from our support networks.”
- MP1

“And so, you know, to counteract loneliness, I think particularly that’s something people feel they can go into a bar and have a drink on their own. Well, they might not do other things on their own, but people do that.”
- MP6

With very few formalised expectations of exactly what constitutes a working day, the conditions of long and unusual working hours also nudge MPs to attend bars or events on the parliamentary estate to network or pass the time while they wait for votes. MPs explained that they remained in the workplace when most people would be out socialising after working hours.

“But because we are so so busy with our schedules in Parliament, we are doing a lot of socialising in the workspace itself, when other organisations or businesses would then go outside.”

- MP8

“You’re sat around a lot, so waiting to vote sometimes, as a backbencher. So it’s so easy to go and get a drink, especially when it’s summer, and you can sit outside on the terrace and before you know it, you’ve spent a fortune in Strangers’ Bar, and you’re quite drunk when you’re going through the lobbies following all your mates.”

- MP5

Despite the way alcohol is ingrained into the working day, some staff members and MPs viewed drinking as at odds with their professional role and responsibilities - hence why some made the decision not to drink on the job.

Staff and MP responses suggested that how staff engaged in the drinking culture was influenced by the MP heading up each office, and so varied from office to office across the estate, and between constituency offices across the country.

Impact on health, wellbeing, personal safety, behaviour and productivity

During interviews, MPs and staff were asked how they viewed the impact of alcohol in the parliamentary workplace. Some referenced effects on productivity, which was linked to an emphasis on people needing to self-regulate their alcohol use:

“So, I know that alcohol does slow you down and does affect what you are doing, which is why I think a lot of people don’t have alcohol now, at lunchtime.”

- MP4

“But you have to actively decide that, you know, I’m not having a drink and that’s, you know, and I can’t function if I’ve had a drink because I get stupid and I want to go to sleep.”
- MP5

“You know, I’ve just come back from 5 days on holiday. I’ve had a glass of wine at lunch most days. I’m not doing that now I’m back at my desk today because I plan on being productive until the end of the day. Like you just know that if you have a drink in the day, you’re not going to be as on it afterwards.”
- S-W5

For some parliamentary staff, other people’s drinking affected their own workload, as they were left to pick up the slack, or struggled to manage their MPs’ diaries:

“There are certainly days where, and not just my boss, you know, a lot of people’s bosses, they’ll misplace themselves for a few hours and, you don’t know if they’ve gone to this event or if they’ve sent that email they said they were going to send because you’re not entirely sure where they are, but, you can kind of guess.”
- S-C7

Some staff believed the normalisation of alcohol during the working day wasn’t good for MPs or their constituents; “[T]hey can’t be achieving all the things that they want to achieve.” (S-W5), whilst one MP shared the story of a former colleague who felt his years in Parliament were held back by his alcohol use:

“He could have done so much more politically if he’d not been tired, foggy headed, or just been too hungover to turn up to work on those occasions, how much more he could have done, and he really regrets it. I think that’s really sad.”
- MP1

Alcohol was linked to poor behaviour and a lack of professionalism. While MPs generally didn't think this would affect actual voting choices, it could easily impede their ability to make sound judgment in how they interacted with others.

“People do drink between debates and divisions. I don't think it generally has an effect of people wandering into the wrong lobby, but it does have an effect in discourse between people in the lobbies, so it can aggravate the situation, yeah.”
- S-W6

Others mentioned personal safety concerns due to others' drinking.

“Some MPs really overstep the line, and I feel that some staffers, particularly female staffers are quite wary of being around MPs, particularly in those settings where there's lots of drinking going on in the bars and stuff, and so you tend to find a bit of natural segregation between MPs and staffers and that's probably a good thing. Because I don't want anyone to feel uncomfortable and actually, you need to maintain that level of professionalism, even in that sort of social setting.”
- MP3

As one MP noted, certain age and gender groups are more at risk of harm from others, due to power imbalances, susceptibility to peer pressure and the need to progress in their career. These observations were also reported by staff:

“Yeah, because obviously it is, it is a workplace where alcohol is, sort of, readily available, and you've also got lots of 20-somethings. ... Who have moved from, sort of, out of London, to work in London, and don't have no social networks so are likely to be drinking in Parliament.”
- S-C1

“ I think also young staffers starting out, definitely are under pressure and feel like an obligation to go along and sort of drink into the night to excess and feel uncomfortable, you know, honestly feel uncomfortable, but just don’t like to not be a part of the gang.... And also, I must say... I’m pleased that my daughter didn’t go to work in Parliament, not just because of alcohol-related issues, but because of other behaviours as well. Which are obviously exacerbated by alcohol in some instances. ”

- S-W6

The availability of alcohol was seen to encourage unhealthy behaviour in general, from affecting colleagues’ sleep and stress levels to potentially normalising high-risk drinking, with one MP referring to colleagues having had their stomachs pumped in hospital and going back into Westminster the following day. A staff member warned of the temporary sense of relaxation alcohol provided from the daily stresses of the job without addressing the underlying issues:

“ It’s very high pressured. And then, if one goes to a reception after working hours and has a glass of wine, it suddenly feels really relaxed. They’re just delaying that stress. It’s just going to come back. ”

- S-W1

It was widely recognised among participants that the Westminster workplace would be a particularly challenging environment for those with difficult relationships with alcohol, or might even nudge people towards developing alcohol problems.

“ If you were coming to this place and having a problem with your relationship with alcohol, it’s probably... you’d probably have to work harder to avoid it in our workplace than when compared to other places at work. ”

- MP9

“...the temptation to drink, you could very quickly, if you had problems with alcohol, get into deep trouble. Because you can start drinking here from 12 o'clock onwards and go around and consume large amounts of alcohol, and it's relatively freely available ...So a glass of white wine, a glass of red wine, and before you know it, you could drink beyond what is safe for you very, very quickly, and none of that is being addressed.”

- MP8

“If you are somebody who is inclined to want to be abusing alcohol, and under all of that stress and that pressure or whatnot, you don't even have to think about it, do you, you're just basically doing your job. You turn up at one event, have a drink, talk to the people, have your photo taken, go to the next one and repeat. You've not taken your wallet out and before you know you've had five drinks before 5:00 PM without even thinking about it.”

- S-W5

On the other hand, some suggested that having on-site venues might prevent people from drinking more behind closed doors:

“So, you know, but it might save people drinking more, being in a public bar, than going back to a flat with a bottle of vodka or something, you know?”

- MP6

The normalisation and integration of alcohol in the parliamentary workplace was reported to lead to the social and cultural exclusion of colleagues that may not engage in the drinking culture.

“I can see that that would be exclusive if you had someone who was trying not to drink. And indeed, one girl left ... our social WhatsApp groups for the team because she was like “I love you guys, but trying to like, you know, give up the booze and this isn't helping me so I'm gonna just...” She doesn't come out so much now because evidently for...

...her, she's had to draw a line. So I guess she isn't socialising anymore...I can see there is a negative in that, you know, perhaps, if you don't want to be drinking or not so comfortable for whatever reason, it's probably not such a helpful place to be, I can imagine that. ”

- S-W5

“ I dread to think how Muslim friends and colleagues have felt in the past now, when I realised that they have waded through this for years, you know, trying to find a soft drink. That's the side that there's still a bit more of a need to focus on, I think. ”

- MP7

Finding and accessing support in the parliamentary workplace

As was reported in the survey findings, interview participants had varied opinions on the level of support available for alcohol issues in Parliament. Mostly, there was a sense that there was a good level of support for health and wellbeing issues, which had improved in recent years, and while interviewees assumed this should cover alcohol, they weren't sure.

“ The staff support services we have for a range of things, you know, we have access to a nurse on site, for you know, even sort of normal medical issues which obviously I assume if you went in regards to alcohol, they'd support you, but there are lots of sort of mental health support, peer groups, all sorts of different things, and I've not looked into it for alcohol. ”

- S-W3

In terms of signposting, some participants mentioned information on mental health support being shared on the Parliamentary intranet, and occasionally at in-person stalls e.g., during 'Westminster week,' while others thought that there could be more physical signage or literature about alcohol-specific issues to raise awareness. For example, knowledge of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings was said to travel by 'word of mouth' rather than actual signposting.

Participants also identified uncertainty about whether people would choose to access support, or indeed, if they would do so before reaching crisis point.

“I think if you hit crisis, there’s plenty of support. The problem is you shouldn’t have to be in crisis before you can access support.”
- MP7

“The nature of this job... you’re a public figure, I think a lot of people would find it quite difficult to open up and say well I’ve got a problem here or even just feel too busy to because of the hours that they work. So yeah ... they appear to have a lot of things that they’ll support you with, I think it includes counselling and so on, but I don’t know that it’s well accessed.”
- MP2

The public nature of the role, and fears around a ‘gossip’ culture might put politicians off taking up support. For staff, reluctance could stem from concerns that seeking help might impact their career:

“So even though there might be support available, I would think more often than not, unfortunately, staffers in particular wouldn’t take that support up, because of what the consequences on their future careers is the reality.”
- S-C7

Another question concerned who was responsible for ensuring all MPs and staff are supported with alcohol problems. The unusual structure of the parliamentary workplace means a lack of guardrails for MPs’ wellbeing:

“MPs, when they go off the rails, or be that with addiction to alcohol or drugs or mental health crisis, other than the party whip system, and that assumes that the MP in question is a member of the party of course, there isn’t, there’s not really anything to catch you.”
- MP1

“ I think because, I think MPs are, you know, it’s a crazy system, and we’re all treated as these individual businesses, and that actually fragments the means of challenging or monitoring, and that’s part of the problem. ”
- MP7

Whips were seen to have some responsibility for pastoral care, with one MP recalling a time they’d been asked by the whip to speak to a colleague about reducing alcohol intake. However, their disciplinary role meant some participants would feel reluctant to raise things they were struggling with, underlining the need for confidential support. While peer support was highlighted as an important element, some negative aspects of the parliamentary social environment were also reported.

“ There’s lots of people having quiet conversations if they notice that somebody is maybe overdoing it, or is struggling, and I think that plays quite an important role. But in the reverse, there can also be that peer pressure and actually quite an unhealthy peer-to-peer relationship too sometimes. ”
- MP3

Suggestions for improvement

MPs and staff identified several ways to make Parliament a healthier workplace. First, improving the signposting to and provision of support related to alcohol – and more professional support altogether. One MP suggested introducing a more formal appraisal system with the Whips’ Office. Another agreed, in tandem with a system to monitor behaviour and alcohol consumption:

“ So now we have a tap-in system in bars, it should be relayed if someone is, even if it’s not, you may not be drinking vast amounts, but if you’re drinking every night it adds up, and that can be damaging to your health and your ability to do your job. So people being aware, and then actually having, you know, in many fields you have a, well certainly in the public sector you have the one-to-ones and review things, actually having that with the whips would be quite useful... if there were more routine points where somebody says, you know, in a formal context, ‘is everyone alright?’ ”
- MP7

Others recommended more open conversations about the negative effects of alcohol and the drinking culture on the estate to challenge the normalisation:

“When you’re around everybody else that’s behaving in a similar way people can kinda get carried away a little bit and not get that perspective on actually what a workplace should be like.”
- MP3

While most participants accepted that there would be alcohol present on the parliamentary estate, especially in the on-site bars, there was a general consensus that alcohol did not need to be freely available at all hours.

“Something that I have always thought is a very peculiar thing is having the free alcohol available in the day. That is one thing that I think really should change, and I would be very happy to articulate that, you know, the bar should be available, if people want to have a glass of wine with their lunchtime dinner at the restaurant, that’s fine, they can go ahead and buy it. I don’t want to stop that. Alcohol will still be available ... but the idea of, during work meetings, work events, alcohol being freely available, there should be a cut-off at a certain time. So maybe that’s 4 or 4.30pm... where Parliament says we don’t do alcohol events before these times.”
- S-W3

“I personally feel that we shouldn’t be having alcohol at like daytime events. I don’t really see why we do. It doesn’t make any sense to me. It’s not really done anywhere else outside of Parliament. It doesn’t give Parliament a very good name.”
- MP3

Similarly, participants mentioned changing the ‘top-up’ culture that made it hard to self-monitor consumption. Increasing the range of non-alcoholic options was another suggestion:

“I do think that there needs to be a bit of a culture change around non-alcoholic options, because, you know, I’m not alone like I’ve got Muslim colleagues who don’t drink... or there’s even people that don’t want to, right, they recognise that it’s not healthy and it would be nice if there were a few more options. Labour conference is even worse for that phenomenon...I actually hate Labour conference in terms of like, oh right yeah some warm water for those who don’t drink, the er, sparkling wine you know.”
- MP2

“We have, like beer taps in the on-site pub and on-site bar, and I think that the non-alcoholic options should be every other option. So that the societal, or like the pressure of being in public and going over to the, you know, 4 draught lines where we know that the non-alcoholic drinks are, and it feeling very obvious that that’s what you’re consuming. I think that would help as well.”
- S-W1

Shifting the general culture around networking and lobbying in Parliament was also mentioned, as were wider societal attitudes to drinking.

“You can’t fix Westminster without also addressing the wider societal issues around alcohol. The fact that every time something good happens, let’s celebrate, cheers. Every time something bad happens, let’s commiserate. Every time there’s a birthday, it’s a day of the week that ends in y. It seems like everything’s an excuse to have a drink, isn’t it?”
- MP1

“...there is a thing that when you go out in the evening, or when you go out to socialise, you do that with alcohol. That is a general societal thing, or problem, if you see it as a problem, that includes Parliament in the same way as it is for the rest of society. It’s just as I say, Parliament itself is a workplace, but it’s also a bit of a village.”
- MP8

Discussion

Discussion

The interview findings reflected a range of experiences but consistently suggested that the high stress and social nature of the work, combined with the wide availability of alcohol, feeds into a Westminster drinking culture where alcohol is viewed as a form of stress relief, and as a means to network with colleagues, visitors and peers.

This aligns with extensive research that indicates a clear association between poor mental wellbeing and harmful drinking, with 'coping' being a significant motivation to drink for many with low mental wellbeing.¹¹ Chronic or extreme stress is a key predictor in the development of depression and anxiety,¹² which are in turn linked to the prevalence of alcohol use disorders (AUD): people with common mental disorders are twice as likely to report AUD than people without.¹³

Our survey found that experiences of alcohol harm varied by occupation, with reports of alcohol exposure and negative effects of colleagues' drinking notably higher in Westminster compared to constituency offices. Despite both constituency and Westminster-based roles being described as high-pressure and stressful working environments, alcohol being present during the day was far more normalised on the parliamentary estate. The availability at events and long working hours seems to contribute to this difference, as well as being away from support networks, meaning socialising that might have happened after work instead took place on the estate, blurring the lines between work and play.

A divergence in views on the impact of alcohol on younger staff members emerged in the interviews. While a prominent social life involving alcohol might be alluring to younger employees, reminiscent of university campus culture, these groups were also seen as being the most at risk, due to ingrained power dynamics that put young staff (female staff in particular) starting out in their careers at the bottom of the parliamentary pecking order. Indeed, the most disclosures to the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme in 2024-25 came from MPs' staff, followed by House of Commons administrative staff.¹⁴ This is reflected in the survey finding that

11. Appleton, A. et al. (2018) [The association between mental wellbeing, levels of harmful drinking and drinking motivations: A cross-sectional study of the UK adult population](#). International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health.
12. Malykhin, N. et al. (2025) [Effects of duration and intensity of psychological stressors on mental health](#). Journal of Psychiatric Research.
13. Puddephatt, J-A. et al. (2021) [Associations of common mental disorder with alcohol use in the adult general population: a systematic review and meta-analysis](#). Addiction
14. Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (23 June 2025) [Annual report 2024-2025](#)

Westminster-based staff were more likely to report a negative experience due to someone else's drinking, compared to MPs and constituency-based staff.

The benefits of having a social element where alcohol featured in Westminster was one area of difference between interview participants. Some people felt that aspects of the drinking culture were fun and enjoyable, allowing people to socialise and form bonds that improved their wellbeing. Nonetheless, it is notable that a minority of survey respondents would describe the current relationship Westminster has with alcohol as healthy. As such, some interview participants described it as inappropriate for alcohol to be so freely available on the estate, citing concerns about others' behaviour. In this sense, drinking could be seen as both good and bad for staff morale. Other participants recognised the various tensions and trade-offs between the positive and negative aspects of alcohol in these spaces.

There was a general consensus between interviewees that it would be a very challenging environment for individuals who struggled with their alcohol use, with some suggesting that it would be difficult to do your job as an MP if you avoided alcohol completely. While participants acknowledged there needed to be support on offer, and that the general culture was moving towards a more diverse, supportive environment, there was some resistance to overhauling parliamentary traditions for what was presumed to be a minority of people. Nonetheless, there was wide agreement that the provision of free alcohol from midday was unnecessary.

Participants' suggestions that Westminster was becoming a more inclusive workplace are important considering that the Parliament elected in 2024 was touted to be the most diverse yet in terms of ethnicity and gender, with women making up more than 40% of those elected, and the proportion of MPs from ethnic-minority backgrounds at 14%.¹⁵ After the election, the incoming government created the Commons Modernisation Committee, tasked with the key aims of driving up standards, improving culture and working practices and reforming procedures to make the Commons more effective. One of the Committee's priorities was to ensure everyone in the parliamentary community feels safe and supported.¹⁶

The idea of alcohol problems being concentrated among a few is a widespread issue in the public perception of alcohol harm. An 'us' and 'them' dichotomy of the 'responsible drinker' versus the 'problem drinker' feeds into perceived, anticipated and self-stigma, which are well-

15. Morton, B. (9 July 2024) [Starmer proud of 'most diverse' Parliament ever](#). BBC News

16. UK Parliament (12 September 2024) [Commons Modernisation Committee publishes key strategic aims for reform](#).

established barriers to seeking help and engaging in treatment.¹⁷ Rather, it is estimated that almost one third (29%) of the adult population are drinking at a level that could harm their health,¹⁸ and the availability of alcohol on the parliamentary estate could nudge many to drink more than they initially intended, not just affecting those considered to be at the sharp end of the spectrum.

There were a range of views on the level of support on offer, generally depending on participants' own experience of seeking help for various work and wellbeing issues. The survey finding that a majority of respondents were either not aware or not sure how to report concerns or seek help suggests that better parliamentary communications could raise awareness across the workforce, detailing confidential support for a variety of issues including alcohol use.

Encouraging people to actually access help was another matter, linking back to issues of how shame and stigma might block people from seeking support. A double-edged sword of peer pressure to join in with the social aspect of parliamentary life paired with the 'othering' of those viewed as 'problem drinkers' creates a difficult path to navigate, with limited support in all directions.

The support for changes for how alcohol was dealt with in the Westminster workplace that emerged in the survey was reflected in numerous suggestions from interviewees for what these improvements might look like, outlined in the next section.

17. Morris, J. and Schomerus, G. (2023) [Why stigma matters in addressing alcohol harm](#). NHS Addictions Provider Alliance. (Accessed 31 March 2026) [Lived experience case study report](#).

18. Buss, V. et al. (16 March 2026) [Latest trends in alcohol consumption in England from the Alcohol Toolkit Study](#).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study is the first of its kind to invite all working MPs and their staff to detail their experiences of alcohol in the workplace, including the availability, culture, and the impact of colleagues' drinking. This is especially important as, to our knowledge, there is no current policy on alcohol in the parliamentary workplace.

These findings have been developed from a relatively small sample size compared to the whole Parliamentary workforce, and individuals may have been more likely to volunteer for involvement due to an existing personal interest in the area. Nonetheless, they have highlighted important points to consider.

The survey and interview responses suggest Westminster is a distinctive environment where alcohol is highly visible and readily available across the working day. While many participants described some social and networking benefits, the data also indicated risks to professionalism, health and wellbeing, workplace safety and inclusion. Almost one in ten respondents reported a negative experience linked to someone else's drinking at work, with higher reports among MPs and Westminster-based staff than constituency staff.

Accounts pointed to blurred work-social boundaries, expectations to attend events where alcohol plays a key role, and structural pressures including high stress, long hours, loneliness and the routine provision of alcohol. This featured alongside uncertainty about support: most respondents did not know how to raise concerns, and stigma and reputational fears may deter early help-seeking.

Recommendations

Based on our findings, the following recommendations should be included in a formal parliamentary workplace policy on alcohol to aid an inclusive and healthy working environment culture, supported by insight from staff and parliamentarians:



Promote a healthier working environment by limiting the free provision of alcohol to evening events only. Alcohol-free options and spaces should be the default at events and venues, reducing routine exposure during the working day. Additional time-based service limits could also be used in specific settings.



Use existing parliamentary bodies such as the Modernisation Committee to develop and implement changes to address factors associated with alcohol consumption such as high stress, loneliness and long working hours. This could include changes to late-night voting practices, increasing alcohol-free social spaces and activities, and incorporating support for alcohol consumption into existing mental health and wellbeing services.



Increase the uptake of support by improving signposting and addressing stigma around alcohol. This can be supported by encouraging those with lived experiences to share their insights, champion the issue, and shape services. Support should be clearly advertised as confidential and not limited to 'recovery' or abstinence. Practical changes could include holding AA meetings at peak times, such as Monday evenings when MPs are waiting around for votes, and making SMART Recovery meetings available as an important alternative.



Greater communication to ensure the parliamentary workforce is equipped with knowledge of how to protect and support both themselves and colleagues from alcohol harm. This could include promoting awareness of the UK Chief Medical Officers' low-risk drinking guidelines through signage around Parliament and digital campaigns.