

Review of the Health Survey for England Drinking Module

Introduction

The Health Survey for England (HSE) has asked about and reported on alcohol consumption since it began.

Currently the HSE covers two large modules of questions which ask about:

1. the usual amount drunk on a single day, the type and frequency of drinking in the last 12- months (usual drinking – used to calculate Average Weekly Consumption) and
2. the maximum amount of alcohol consumed on any day in the previous week (Heaviest Drinking Day).

The purpose of this consultation is in response to a review of government survey questions relating to alcohol consumption undertaken by the English Health Statistics Steering Group (EHSSG) alcohol theme group which concluded there is a need to update the current alcohol product list that questions ask about, review current alcohol unit conversion factors, and consider whether new questions are needed to reflect current policy (N.B. due to participation burden the overall length of the survey cannot be increased, therefore any requirement for new questions would need some existing questions to be dropped).

We are asking users for input on the following proposals:

- Update the alcohol product list used in HSE
- Review the alcohol unit conversion factors used in HSE
- Consider the usefulness of questions on heaviest drinking day (HDD)
- Consider introducing new questions to identify alcohol dependence (AUDIT)
- Consider introducing new questions to capture special occasion drinking.

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For which type of organisation are you responding

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| Academic Research | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Academic Teaching | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Charity or voluntary organisation | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| Media | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Member of the public | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Private sector | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Public sector - Department of Health & Social Care | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Public sector - Public Health England | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Public sector - NHS England | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Public sector - Other NHS organisation | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Public sector - Local Authority | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Public sector - other | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Are you answering on behalf of your organisation or providing a personal view?

Organisation Personal

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Alcohol Product List

The current product list used in the HSE includes:

Normal strength
beer/lager/stout/cider/shandy Strong
beer/lager/stout/cider
Spirits or
liqueurs Sherry
or martini
Wine (including sparkling)
Alcopops/pre-mixed alcoholic
drinks
Other alcoholic drinks (only for Heaviest Drinking Day)

Following a review of the HSE product list and the changes in popularity of different alcohol brands, views are requested on the proposal to introduce the following changes.

QUESTION 1: Separate **cider** from the Normal strength beer/lager/stout/shandy category and the Strong beer/lager/stout category and include as two separate categories; **Normal strength cider** and **Strong cider**.

Do you **agree** or **disagree** with this proposal?

I Agree I Disagree I don't use this information, so I don't mind

Please let us have any comments, or if you disagree with this proposal please tell us why (comment box)

Separating beer and cider would give us more nuanced information about the consumption of particularly high strength/low cost products, such as 'white cider', which are likely to cause more alcohol harm. Strong cider is favoured by heavy drinkers (who are often vulnerable and more susceptible to health harms) because of its affordability per unit. Homelessness charity Thames Reach attribute 78% of deaths in their hostels to such high strength alcohol.¹ Separating both beer and cider and high and normal strengths will allow us to better understand consumption of these most harmful products.

Understanding the differences between strong ciders and strong beers will especially help to inform the policy debate around alcohol pricing, namely in the areas of taxation and minimum unit pricing (MUP). Decreasing the affordability of high strength products is one of the most effective interventions to reduce alcohol harm.²

¹ Thames Reach (2017), Calls for high-strength cider duty increase. Available from: <http://www.thamesreach.org.uk/news-and-views/calls-for-high-strength-cider-duty-increase/>

² World Health Organisation. 'Best Buys' and other recommended interventions for the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases. Available at: https://www.who.int/ncds/management/WHO_Appendix_BestBuys_LS.pdf

Cider is taxed in a different way to beer, so having separate consumption data will be useful. The current system of beer duty encourages manufacturers to produce weaker products as beer is taxed according to alcohol content.³ In contrast, cider is taxed according to volume, which gives rise to white ciders often being the cheapest option on the market when looking at price per unit.

Compared to strong beers, strong ciders in England and Northern Ireland tend to be priced well below the MUP set in Scotland and Wales of 50p per unit. We have seen significant changes to these products in Scotland and Wales. In the year following the introduction of MUP in Scotland, cider saw the greatest average price increase and the largest decline in sales of all drink types; a fall of 18.6%, compared to a decrease of 3.8% for spirits, and smaller drops for all other drink types.⁴ In the same time period, sales of cider rose in England and Wales where there was no minimum unit price.

MUP was introduced in March 2020 in Wales so it is too early to see the effects on consumption. However, an initial survey of products has seen changes in marketing practices in the off-trade, for example the disappearance of most multi-buy deals.⁵ Separating out strong ciders from strong beers would allow comparison of consumption in England to Scotland and Wales, which would inform future policy discussions around alcohol pricing.

QUESTION 2: Currently there is a separate question that captures information for **sherry or martini**. However less than 1% of alcohol sales are for fortified wines, therefore we are proposing to stop collecting this information as a separate category. The heaviest drinking day module includes a category for Other Alcoholic drinks therefore information for sherry or martini will be captured here (subject to the continuation of this module). This is not the case for the usual drinking module and the information for sherry or martini will not be captured elsewhere.

Do you **agree** or **disagree** with this proposal?

I Agree

I Disagree

I don't use this information, so I don't mind

Please let us have any comments, or if you disagree with this proposal please tell us why (comment box)

We suggest including a 'fortified wines' category to encompass such products as sherry, vermouth and port. Although a small part of the market overall, these products are typically consumed in greater quantities around special occasions, such as Christmas. Including questions on special occasion drinking as well as keeping this category will allow us to better understand how consumption levels and drink choice change throughout the year. This category is also experiencing a surge in popularity, with sales predicted to grow by 18% between 2017 and 2021.⁶ If this trend continues, not including fortified wines would leave a greater and greater proportion of total consumption uncounted in future surveys.

³ Social Market Foundation (2019). *Pour decisions? The case for reforming alcohol duty*. Available at: <http://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Pour-decisions-.pdf.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.healthscotland.scot/media/2954/c-users-kims-desktop-sales-based-consumption-descriptive-analysis-of-one-year-post-mup-off-trade-alcohol-sales-data.pdf>

⁵ Unpublished survey by Alcohol Change UK, 2020.

⁶ The Drinks Business (2017). *Premium sherry tipped to grow 18% by 2021*. Available at: <https://www.thedrinksbusiness.com/2017/03/premium-sherry-sales-tipped-to-grow-18-by-2021/>

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Alcohol Unit Conversion Factors

In both modules of HSE questions, respondents who drink alcohol are asked about a range of alcohol products and drink sizes which are then converted into units of alcohol using a standard conversion table (shown below) whereby one unit of alcohol is classed as 10ml by volume of pure alcohol or ABV.

Type of drink	Measure	Units of alcohol
Normal strength beer, lager, stout, cider, shandy (less than 6% ABV)	Pint	2
	Can or bottle	2.5
	Small cans (size unknown)	1.5
	Large cans or bottles (size unknown)	2
Strong beer, lager, stout, cider (6% ABV or more)	Pint	4
	Can or bottle	4
	Small cans (size unknown)	2
	Large cans or bottles (size unknown)	3
Wine (12% ABV)	Small glass (125ml)	1.5
	Medium glass (175ml)	2
	Large glass (250ml)	3
	Bottle	9
Spirits and liqueurs	Glass (single measure)	1
Sherry, martini and other fortified wines	Small Glass	1
Alcopops	Small can or bottle	1.5

Following a review of the average ABV for popular alcohol brands of lager, beer, cider and wine consideration is being given to revising the conversion factors used for HSE for:-

- **Normal Strength** beer/lager/stout/cider/shandy
- **Strong** beer/lager/stout/cider
- **Wine** (including Sparkling Wine)

Notes

1. Any change to conversion factors will disrupt current time series data. Users are asked to consider whether the risk of discontinuity to time series data is worthwhile to enable the collection of accurate, robust and relevant data.
2. It is important that we use an appropriate %ABV as this will impact on the estimated weekly consumption of alcohol e.g. someone drinking lager with an ABV of 5.5% would currently be converted based on the normal strength conversion, which may then underestimate the weekly consumption if this lager is actually considered to be strong
3. Currently, the distinction between 'normal strength' and 'strong' beer/lager/cider is made at 6% ABV. However, the average ABV for all beer/lager/cider sales is 4.6% (range 0.5 to 10.5%).

4. Only 2.6% of beer/lager sales and 14.3% of cider sales are for products with an ABV of 6% or more. Furthermore popular brands previously considered strong (Stella Artois, Budweiser, Becks and Carlsberg Export) have an ABV of 4.8%.

QUESTION 3:

What percentage ABV (alcohol by volume) do you consider **Strong beer/lager** to start from:

1. 4.5% and above
2. 5.0% and above
3. **5.5% and above**
4. 6.0% and above
5. 6.5% and above
6. 7.0% and above
7. 7.5% and above
8. 8.0% and above

What percentage ABV (alcohol by volume) do you consider **Strong cider** to start from:

1. 4.5% and above
2. 5.0% and above
3. **5.5% and above**
4. 6.0% and above
5. 6.5% and above
6. 7.0% and above
7. 7.5% and above
8. 8.0% and above

A 5.5% start for a 'strong' category for beer and cider would reflect the fact that the average strength for these products is around 4-5% and that the majority of products fall in this range.⁷ Therefore 5.5% is higher than average and considered relatively strong. Understanding the levels of consumption above and below this threshold will also contribute to and inform policy debate in the area of taxation. Taxing alcohol according to its strength is beneficial to public health as it encourages both consumption and production of lower strength products and reduces the burden of alcohol on the health of the population.⁸

We are proposing that beer/lager/cider use the same cut off point between Normal Strength and Strong. Based on your answers to the above, do you **agree or disagree** with this proposal?

I Agree I Disagree I don't use this information, so I don't mind

Please let us have any comments, or if you disagree with this proposal please tell us why (comment box).

Beer and cider should have the same cut off point between normal and strong. Despite ciders typically having a greater range of strength than beer, especially at the high strength end, both cider and beer are consumed in the same ways (i.e. in pint/half pint glasses or in similar sized

⁷ The European Cider and Fruit Wine Association (2019). *European Cider Trends 2019*. Available at: https://aicv.org/files/attachments/74/AICV_Cider_Trends_2019.pdf

Live Science (2010). *How much alcohol is in my drink?* Available at: <https://www.livescience.com/32735-how-much-alcohol-is-in-my-drink.html>

⁸ Burton, R. et al. (2016). *The public health burden of alcohol and the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of alcohol control policies: an evidence review*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/733108/alcohol_public_health_burden_evidence_review_update_2018.pdf

bottles and cans). Therefore, since the amount of alcohol consumed per serving is similar, what is considered 'strong' for this type of alcohol should also be similar. This is in contrast with, for example, a spirit, for which a 'normal' strength is much higher than beer or cider, however it is consumed in a different way, so that the amount of alcohol per serving is less than or similar to beer and cider.

Currently the ABV used for Wine is 12.5%. This is a combined estimate for red, white, rosé wine and sparkling wine. Separately the average ABV for red wine is 12.9%, white wine 12.0%, rosé wine 10.5% and sparkling wine 9.5%.

QUESTION 5: We propose to retain the current combined ABV conversion factor of 12.5% for red/white/rose and sparkling wine. Note that we can't identify consumption of red/white/rose/sparkling wine separately in the data therefore need to use a combined factor.

Do you **agree** or **disagree** with this proposal?

I Agree I Disagree I don't use this information, so I don't mind

Please let us have any comments, or if you disagree with this proposal please tell us why and what %ABV you propose should be used (comment box)

QUESTION 6: Currently analysis of alcohol consumption data uses the method of rounding units for all alcohol consumption data to the nearest 0.5unit. We propose to calculate unit data rounded to one decimal point rather than to the nearest 0.5 unit. This may have an effect on time series data but could present a more detailed picture of alcohol consumption. Whilst there may be an impact on the time series it is measurable; the old and new conversion factors can be used and any differences compared.

Wine (12.5% ABV)	Current method	Proposed method
125ml glass	1.5 units	1.6 units
175ml glass	2.0 units	2.2 units
250ml glass	3.0 units	3.2 units
750ml bottle	9.0 units	9.4 units

Do you **agree** or **disagree** with this proposal?

I Agree I Disagree I don't use this information, so I don't mind

Please let us have any comments, or if you disagree with this proposal please tell us why (comment box)

Getting a more detailed picture of alcohol consumption is more valuable than retaining the time series data.

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Do Current HSE Alcohol Questions Meet Current Policy Need

Views are requested on the usefulness of the module of questions collecting the maximum amount of alcohol consumed on any day in the previous week (Heaviest Drinking Day) and the information these questions provide.

The recommendation from the EHSSG alcohol theme group is to consider whether the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) Questionnaire (a screening tool used to

identify hazardous or harmful alcohol use and indicate alcohol dependence) will provide more accurate and robust data, and better reflect current policy need, than the current Heaviest Drinking Day in the previous week (HDD) module. The AUDIT module is used in other surveys, including the Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey and The Scottish Health Survey.

Notes

1. AUDIT Questionnaire: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/alcohol-use-screening-tests>
2. Heaviest Drinking Day Module P66 <https://files.digital.nhs.uk/7E/19016E/HSE18-Survey-Documentation-rep.pdf>
3. The change from HDD to AUDIT will disrupt the current time series data. Users are asked to consider whether the risk of discontinuity to time series data is worthwhile to enable the collection of robust and relevant data.
4. Due to the burden to participants, it is not possible to include both the HDD and AUDIT questionnaires.

QUESTION 7: We are proposing to replace the **heaviest drinking day** in the previous week (HDD) module of questions with the **AUDIT Questionnaire**

Do you **agree** or **disagree** with this proposal?

I Agree I Disagree I don't use this information, so I don't mind

Please let us have any comments, or if you disagree with this proposal please tell us why (comment box)

The AUDIT questionnaire will give us a lot more detailed information on the drinking behaviours of the population. As the AUDIT is a widely-used and globally-recognised tool it will allow comparisons with other sources of data and as well as between countries. The AUDIT takes into account heavy episodic drinking, and so, if HSE are able to publish the breakdown of data gathered by AUDIT question, we will still be able to get a sense of heavy drinking days.

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We are proposing to introduce new questions to capture the occurrence of special occasion drinking. These questions would follow the usual drinking questions and provide some evidence on the extent of underreported alcohol consumption. Please note we are not proposing quantifying alcohol consumption on these special occasion days just the fact that they occur.

1. Usual Drinking Day Module P70 <https://files.digital.nhs.uk/7E/19016E/HSE18-Survey-Documentation-rep.pdf>

Proposed Special Occasion Drinking Questions

These proposed questions are adapted from a national alcohol survey conducted by the Centre for Public Health, Liverpool John Moores University.

Q1: In the last 12 months, did you have days when you drank **a bit more** than a typical day, for example at weekends or when you were on holiday?

1. Yes
2. No

Q2: How many days would you say you drank **a bit more** than a typical day (in the last 12 months)? ENTER NUMBER (options for days per week/per month/per year)

Q3: In the last 12 months, did you have days when you drank **a lot more** than a typical day, for example at parties, weddings, or on New Year's Eve?

1. Yes
2. No

Q4: How many days would you say you drank **a lot more** than a typical day (in the last 12 months)? ENTER NUMBER (options for days per week/per month/per year)

QUESTION 8: Do you **agree or disagree** with the proposal to include the new questions on special occasion drinking?

I Agree I Disagree I don't use this information, so I don't mind

Please let us have any comments, or if you disagree with this proposal please tell us why (comment box)

Questions on special occasion drinking would be a welcome addition to the survey. We suggest also asking with more specificity about the volume of alcohol consumed or converting the answers into units. For example, in the study from Liverpool John Moores University, conversion criteria were used by survey respondents to convert their subjective answers (e.g. 'a lot more') into units.⁹

QUESTION 9: Finally is there anything else you would like to tell us about? (Comment box)
Thank you for your help

Surveys team

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