FactCheck Q&A: The truth about boozed-up Britain

With George Osborne rumoured to be unveiling plans for an “alcohol unit price control” in next week’s Budget, FactCheck calls time on the row in the cabinet over boozed-up Britain.

How much do we drink in Britain?

Not as much as you might think. Average alcohol consumption in the UK is comfortably below the recommended weekly limit of 21 units for men and 14 for women (one unit amounts to a third of a pint of beer or half a standard glass of wine).

The average adult drank 11.5 units a week in 2010 - and that’s a fall of 20 per cent in five years, down from 14.3 units a week in 2005, according to the General Lifestyle Survey published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) last week.

Across the board, in every age group and for both sexes, average alcohol consumption has fallen - as shown in the graphic below.
It may also come as a surprise that 87 per cent of adults averaged at least three alcohol-free days a week (in line with government recommendations).

The ONS figures are based on a survey, but alcohol tax returns released by HM Revenue and Customs also show that alcohol consumption per head fell by 2.2 per cent last year - a 13 per cent drop since 2004.

**Are we any worse than other countries?**

The [OECD’s latest figures](#) show that alcohol consumption in the UK is at its lowest since 1999 - at 10.2 litres per capita in 2009.

We tend to drink more than the Americans and the Canadians for example (8.8 litres and 8.2 litres a head respectively), though we’re largely in line with the Australians, Spanish, Finnish, Swiss, Polish and the Danes (all between 10 and 10.2 litres per capita).

Brits however consume less than those at the top of the league - namely the French, Austrians and Czechs (12.3, 12.2 and 12.1 litres per capita respectively).

**What about binge drinkers?**

Binge drinking is defined in the UK as knocking back more than 8 units in one day for men, and more than 6 units in any one day for women.
Official figures show that binge drinking is down across all age groups - except for those over 65 (up 1 per cent to 7 per cent of all men over 65; and unchanged at 2 per cent for all women over 65).

Meanwhile, binge drinking among young men and women between the ages of 16-24 has dropped the most - down 8 per cent and 10 per cent respectively since 2005.

Currently 3.8m or 19 per cent of all men and 2.9m or 13 per cent of all women are categorised as binge drinkers; down from 23 per cent and 15 per cent respectively.

So we can’t blame drunken students?

Apparently not - the ONS’s report found the “most pronounced changes” to drinking levels among 16 to 24 year olds.

Among young men, the proportion drinking more than four units (just over a pint) on their heaviest drinking day has fallen by 12 per cent since 2005 - to 34 per cent in 2010. And the proportion drinking more than eight units (two and a half pints) on their big night out is down from 32 per cent to 24 per cent over the same period.

A similar pattern can be seen among young women too; with the proportion drinking more than three units on their heaviest drinking day down by 10 per cent, to 31 per cent in 2010. Meanwhile, the proportion drinking more than six units is also down 10 per cent, to 17 per cent.

Average consumption was 11.1 units a week in the 16 to 24 age group - lower than 25-44 year olds at an average of 12.2 units and 45-65 year olds - who drink an average 13.1 units a week.
Not even for the NHS’s bill?

David Cameron waged war last month on the “scandal” of boozed-up Britain landing the NHS with a £2.7bn annual bill (and that’s based on figures from 2008).

From 1990 the number of alcohol-related deaths has been steadily rising and the average amount drunk each year increased from 9.8 litres a head to a peak of 11.6 litres in 2004 - though it has since declined to 10.2 litres.

Much of the NHS’s bill can be blamed on long-term increase in the amount of alcohol drunk in this country. In 2009/10 there were just over a million alcohol related admissions to hospital - up 12 per cent on the previous year and twice as many as in 2002/03.

There were also 6,584 deaths in 2009 directly linked to alcohol - that’s down 3 per cent on the year before, but up 20 per cent from 2001. More than 4,000 of these deaths were due to liver disease.

Would it help to impose minimum pricing?

Since 1980 the affordability of alcohol has soared by 44 per cent. Over the same period, the proportion of household expenditure spent on alcohol has fallen from 10 per cent to 5 per cent.

Concerns over the impact of cheap booze have seen the government agree to ban the sale of alcohol below cost price from April - despite the evidence that consumption overall, including binge drinking, has been falling for more than five years now.

Plus, a recent study by Newcastle University has claimed that banning the sale of alcohol below cost price would have a limited impact on pricing.
“Setting the minimum alcohol price at below cost price will not deter binge drinkers, as very little alcohol on sale will actually have to increase in price,” Dr Jean Adams, who led the study, told the BBC.

Another option then could be to set a minimum price per unit of alcohol, as proposed by the Scottish government.

As leader of the opposition in 2009 Mr Cameron wasn’t keen on this. He said: “It seems to me that what we should do is what we suggested before the last budget, which is to try to target the problem drinkers and the problem drinks.”

Yet last week the Scottish Tories dropped their opposition to the idea, and it has been reported that the Chancellor is warming up to announce plans for a minimum price per unit in next week’s budget which would kick in by April 2015 - a month before the next General Election is due.

The problem is; no one quite knows if the idea will work. A government-funded report by the University of Sheffield in 2008 suggested that a minimum price of 45 pence per unit could cut hospital admissions by 1,600 a year initially, rising to 6,630 after ten years.

However, the Home Office noted in 2010 that this has led the whole debate to be “limited to findings from one small scale study”.

The Home Office added: “On balance the evidence shows that increases in alcohol prices are linked to decreases in harms related to alcohol consumption. However, alcohol price is only one factor affecting levels of alcohol consumption with individual, cultural, situational and social factors also influential”.

Which is perhaps why the support of the Scottish Conservative party rests on the agreement of a “sunset clause” - which will reassess the success of the move in five years.
But with drinking in the UK down by 20 per cent overall between 2005 and 2010 - and heavy drinkers a shrinking minority - how will the Scottish government measure “success” FactCheck wonders?

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