

Research report

YouGov / Portman Group survey on UK alcohol consumption during COVID-19 and looking toward the reopening of UK hospitality

April 2021



Overview

- As the UK begins the slow process of loosening restrictions designed to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic, the Portman Group continues to track the impact on the UK's drinking behaviour.
- Our initial survey with YouGov was the first UK-wide survey¹ to measure weekly unit intake prior to and since COVID-19 in May 2020, whilst our second poll² further explored how UK drinking habits may have changed upon the reopening of pubs and bars last Summer.
- Our third study with research from YouGov combines the insights gained from our previous polls to reflect on how the UK public drank alcohol over the past year and their intentions regarding the reopening of UK hospitality.
- YouGov surveyed 2,303 adults from across the UK online between 31 March and 1 April. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+). All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc.

The survey results found overall:

- The moderate majority remains: 78% of UK adults either do not drink or drink within the CMO guidelines – echoing the results consistently seen in official Government data.
- Furthermore, 73% of UK drinkers say they drank either the same or less since the beginning of the pandemic compared to previous years - close to a third (32%) of UK drinkers said they have cut down.
- Despite the statistics, there is a myth that COVID-19 and lockdown has led to increased drinking: A large majority (69%) of UK adults believe that the UK population has increased alcohol consumption over the last year, with only 6% correctly stating that we have overall drank less.
- The results signal an orderly return to pubs and bars: Half (50%) of previous UK pubgoers said they intended to visit pubs and bars about the same frequency as before, with around 14% intending to visit more and 22% visiting less.
- Pubgoers seek friends, family and normality. Previous UK pubgoers said that they are most looking forward to being able to be able to socialise with friends and family (cited by 68% of respondents) and regaining a sense of normality (57%).
- 86% of UK drinkers said they intend to drink the same (71%) or less (15%) compared to before the pandemic as the hospitality sector begins to reopen.
- Our latest poll results fit into a much broader picture – backed by 33 polls and Government studies – that the UK population, on the whole, drank the same or less alcohol than they usually would over the past year. The overall alcohol consumption declined. This dispels the stubbornly held belief among many that Britain turned to the bottle during the crisis.
- However, our latest findings also echo previous concerns that increases have been fuelled by those already drinking at heavier and more harmful rates. As we emerge from lockdown our shared efforts need to focus on tackling hazardous drinking and helping those struggling with alcohol dependence or those on the brink of dependence.

¹ [Portman Group-YouGov survey on alcohol consumption during the COVID-19 lockdown](#), June 2020

² [Portman Group-YouGov survey on UK alcohol consumption post the COVID-19 lockdown](#), Sept 2020

- Our survey also indicates that pubgoers from across the UK are planning a cautious and sensible return as UK hospitality begins to reopen – potentially allaying fears of a summer blowout and increase in binge drinking.

Across the UK at a glance

England



- 78% of English adults say they either do not drink or remain below the Chief Medical Officers' drinking guidelines.
- 73% of English drinkers say they drank the same or less over the last year compared to before the pandemic.
- 69% of English adults think that the UK population has increased alcohol consumption over the past year.
- 50% of previous English pubgoers intend to visit the same frequency as before the pandemic once they reopen, whilst 14% plan to visit more and 22.5% visit less.
- Previous English pubgoers are most looking forward to reuniting with friends and family at the pub (69%) and a sense of a return to normality (57%) when UK hospitality reopens.

Scotland



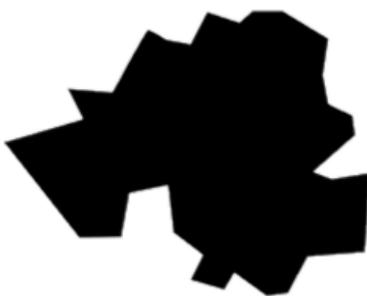
- 75% of Scottish adults say they either do not drink or remain below the Chief Medical Officers' drinking guidelines.
- 74% of Scottish drinkers say they drank the same or less over the last year compared to before the pandemic.
- 73% of Scottish adults think that the UK population has increased alcohol consumption over the past year.
- 49% of previous Scottish pubgoers intend to visit the same frequency as before the pandemic once they reopen, whilst 11% plan to visit more and 27% to visit less.
- Previous Scottish pubgoers are most looking forward to reuniting with friends and family at the pub (72%) and a sense of a return to normality (61%) when UK hospitality reopens.

Wales



- 77% of Welsh adults say they either do not drink or remain below the Chief Medical Officers' drinking guidelines.
- 76% of Welsh drinkers say they drank the same or less over the last year compared to before the pandemic.
- 62% of Welsh adults think that the UK population has increased alcohol consumption over the past year.
- 47.5% of previous Welsh pubgoers intend to visit the same frequency as before the pandemic once they reopen, whilst 11% plan to visit more and 20% to visit less.
- Previous Welsh pubgoers are most looking forward to reuniting with friends and family at the pub (52%) and a sense of a return to normality (53%) when UK hospitality reopens.

Northern Ireland



- 74% of Northern Irish adults say they either do not drink or remain below the Chief Medical Officers' drinking guidelines.
- 72% of Northern Irish adults think that the UK population has increased alcohol consumption over the past year.
- Half (49%) of previous Northern Irish pubgoers intend to visit the same frequency as before the pandemic once they reopen, whilst 16% plan to visit more and 20% to visit less.

Survey Results

1. The moderate majority prevails, as most UK adults continue to drink within UK Government lower-risk guidelines

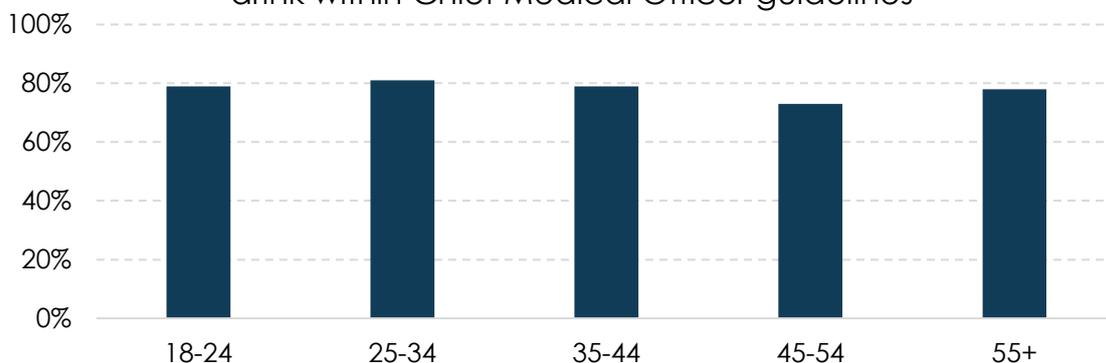
When asked about their average weekly alcohol intake, 78% of UK adults said that they either did not drink or drank within the UK Chief Medical Officers' (CMO) lower-risk weekly guidelines of 14 units. This finding echoes the latest official Government statistics from across the UK taken before the pandemic, which suggests that 77% of UK adults either do not drink or drink within 14 units per week³.

78% of UK adults either do not drink or drink within the Chief Medical Officer weekly guidelines



There is a clear gender divide when breaking down the results, with 85% of women saying they either did not drink or drank within the CMO guidelines compared to 71% of men. Moderation is fairly evenly distributed across the age groups, from the younger to the older adults. The exception to this is the 45-54 age group, who are most likely to exceed the CMO guidelines, and most likely to drink within 14-28 units per week.

Across all age groups, the majority either do not drink or drink within Chief Medical Officer guidelines



All UK adults (n=2,303)
YouGov, 31 March - 1 April 2021

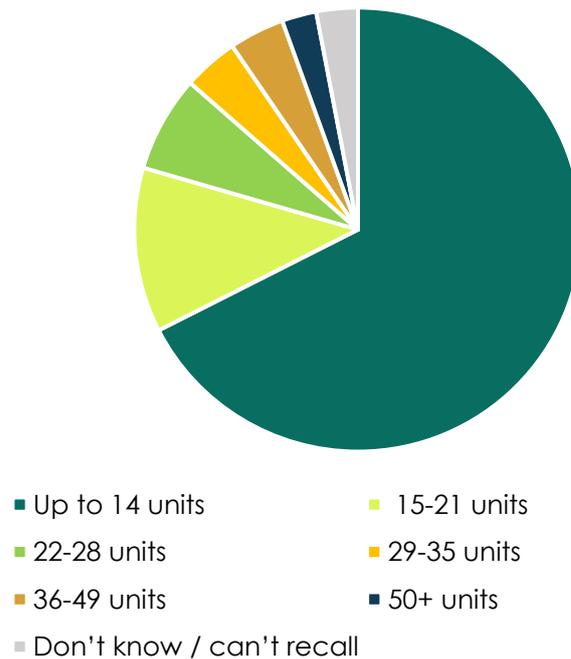
³ Based on 77% in England / 77% in Scotland and 81% in Wales and 80% in Northern Ireland - [NHS England](#), December 2020 / [Scottish Health Survey](#), September 2020 / [National Survey for Wales](#), September 2020 / [Health Survey Northern Ireland](#), December 2020

Finally, across the UK, English respondents were the most likely to report either not drinking or drinking within the CMO guidelines (78%) compared to Wales (77%), Scotland (75%), and Northern Ireland (74%).

Focusing on UK drinkers

If we just focus on UK drinkers alone, a moderate majority (67.5%) still drink within the CMO guidelines, with most of the remaining respondents drinking just over the guidelines.

The moderate majority of UK drinkers remain within the recommended lower-risk weekly guidelines

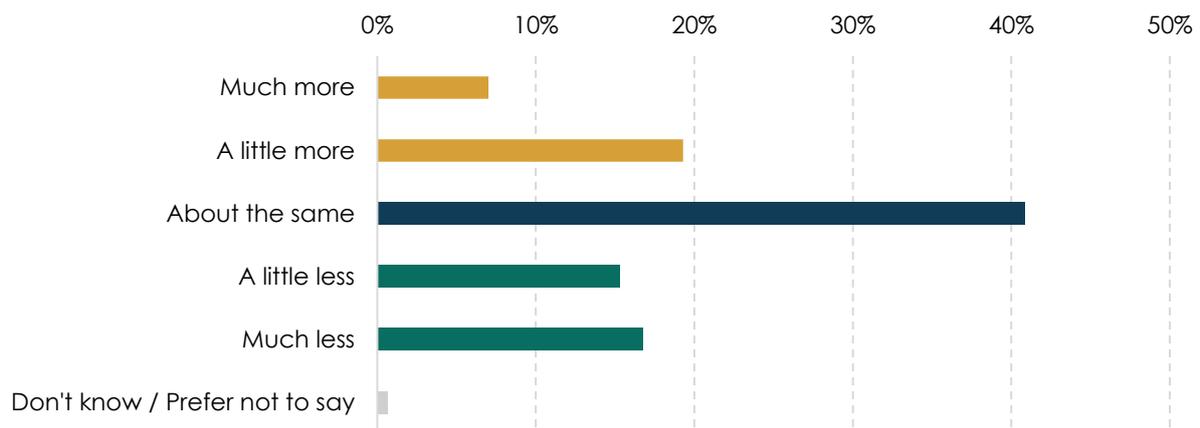


2. Most UK drinkers drank the same or less over the past year

Like previous surveys from the past year, the majority (73%) of UK drinkers said that they drank either the same or less amount of alcohol since the beginning of the pandemic compared to previous years.

Furthermore, whilst 41% drank about the same, close to a third (32%) of UK drinkers said they have cut down their alcohol intake compared to before the pandemic.

Almost three quarters of UK drinkers drank the same or less than they usually would over the past year



All UK adults who drink alcohol (n=1,450)
YouGov, 31 March - 1 April 2021

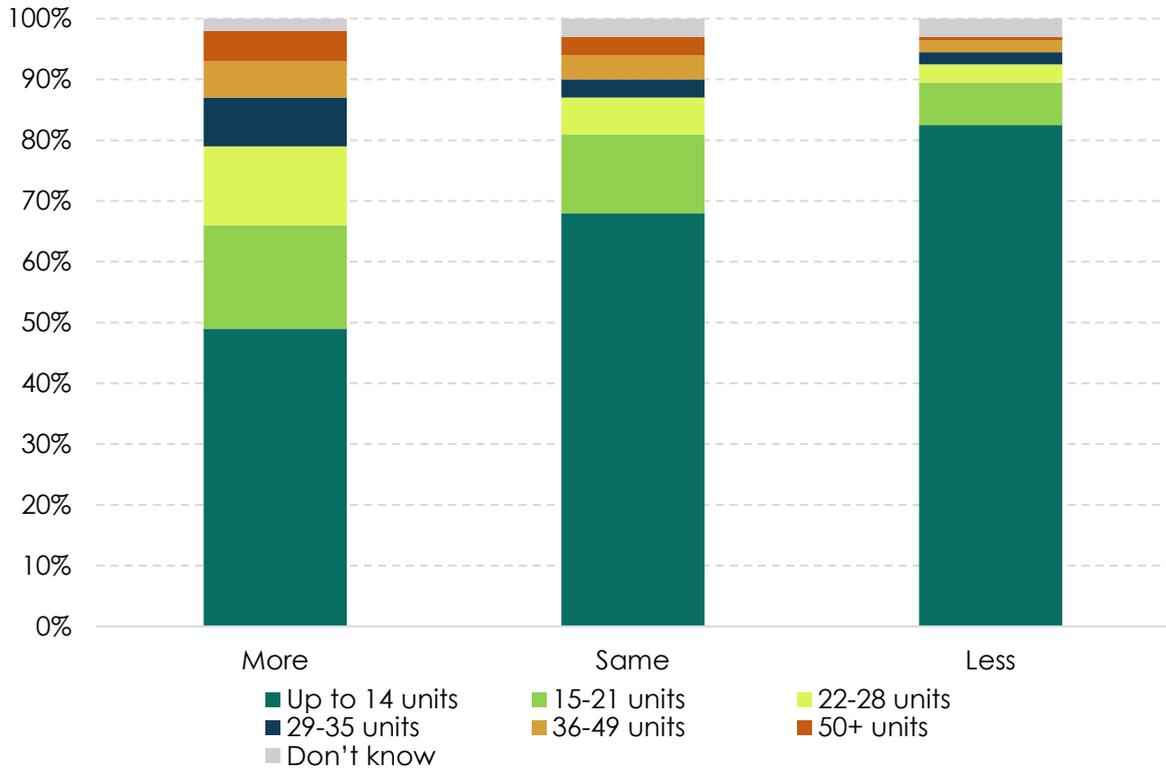
Just over a quarter (26%) of UK drinkers said that they had increased their alcohol consumption over the past year – 19% a little more and 7% much more. Whilst at first glance this finding may seem like a cause for concern, the findings echo previous Portman Group research that close to half (49%) of those who have increased their drinking remain within the lower risk guidelines.

The results also show that the overwhelming majority (82.5%) of those cutting their intake were already drinking within CMO guidelines, although there is also some evidence of cutting down amongst those drinking at higher rates. However, the research also fuels previous concerns that increases in intake witnessed over the past year have been fuelled by those who were already drinking at heavier and more harmful rates.

Men were more likely to have cut back their intake compared to women (34% vs 30%), whilst women were marginally more likely to have increased their intake (26% vs 27%).

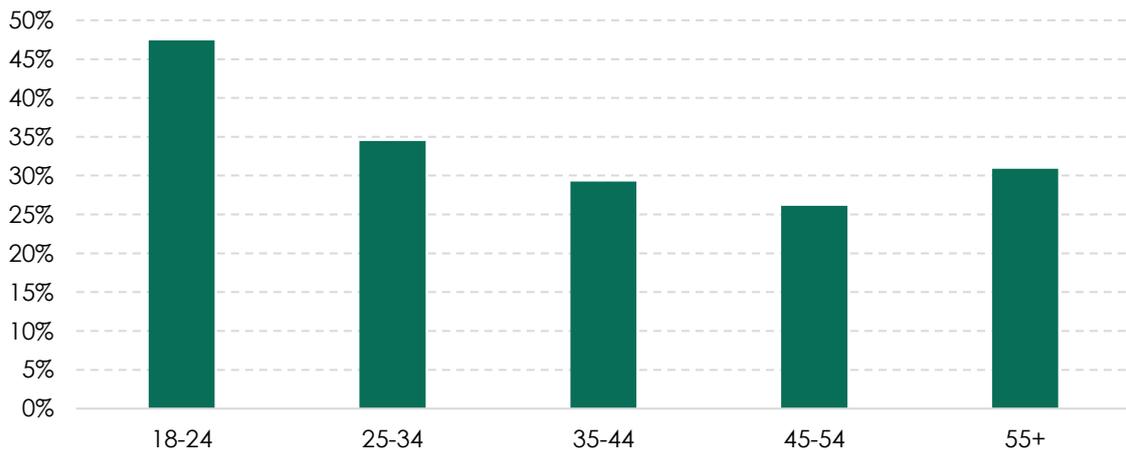
Young adults have led the way in cutting back alcohol, with close to half (47%) of 18-24 year old drinkers cutting down their alcohol intake. This could be due to this age group being disproportionately impacted by the closure of UK hospitality, with younger adults more likely to drink out and work in the hospitality trade. In contrast, over a third (34%) of those aged 35-44 increased their intake.

Around half of those drinking 'more' and fourth fifths of those drinking 'less' are drinking within CMO guidelines



All UK adults who drink alcohol (n=1,450)
YouGov, 31 March - 1 April 2021

Close to half of 18-24 year old drinkers have cut back the amount of alcohol they usually drink



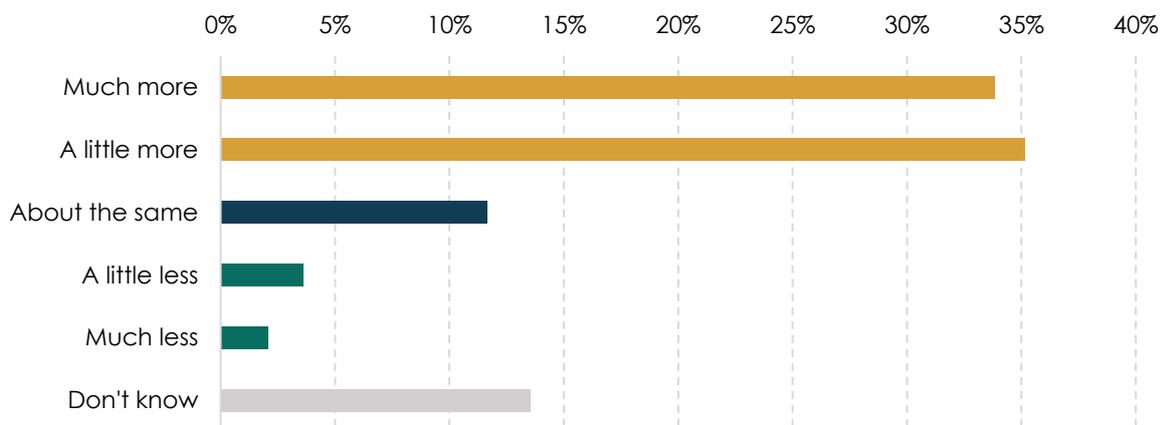
All UK adults who drink alcohol (n=1,450)
YouGov, 31 March - 1 April 2021

3. There is a myth that UK alcohol consumption increased

Despite consistent evidence over the past year that the majority of UK drinkers have drunk the same or less amount of alcohol compared to before the pandemic, there is a myth that the UK consumers increased their drinking during the crisis.

The survey findings show that a large majority (69%) of UK adults believe that the UK population has increased alcohol consumption over the last year, with only 6% believing we drank less.

69% of UK adults believe that the UK population increased its alcohol consumption over the last year



All UK adults (n=2,303)
YouGov, 31 March - 1 April 2021

This myth goes across the UK, with 69% of respondents in England saying the UK population drank more, compared to 62% in Wales, 72% in Northern Ireland, and 73% in Scotland.

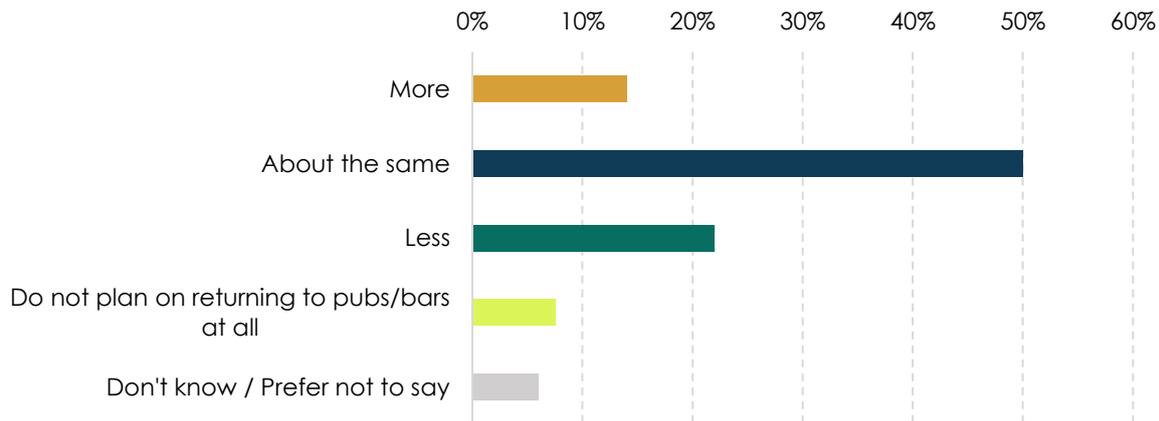
Women are more likely to say that the UK population has drunk more compared to men (72% vs 66%), though a similar small proportion of women (5%) and men (6%) believe that the UK population drank less over the past year,

Reflecting that anecdotal experience has a profound effect on reflection about alcohol, we saw this most when looking at the age groups. Those who are most likely to have increased their intake (35-44 year olds) are most likely to believe that alcohol consumption has increased (78%), whilst the age group most likely to have cut down (18-24 year olds) are the least likely to believe this (57%).

4. Pubgoers plan an orderly return to UK hospitality

Our survey results suggest that the UK public plan a cautious and orderly return to pubs and bars as UK hospitality begins to reopen its doors. Half (50%) of previous UK pubgoers said that they intend to visit about the same as before, with around 14% intending to visit more, 22% visiting less and 7.5% have no plans to return at all.

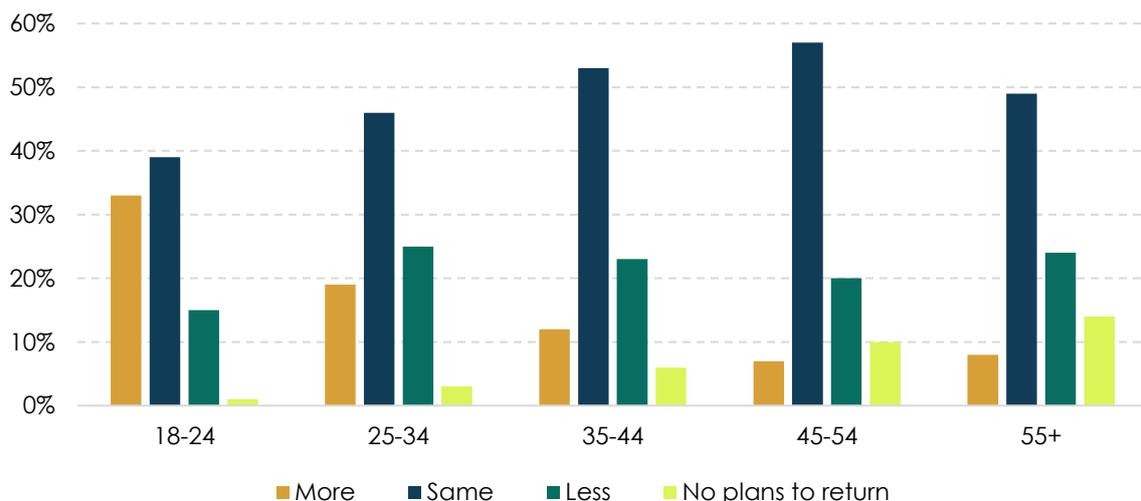
Close to a third of previous pubgoers will either go less or not return at all when pubs reopen



All previous UK pubgoers or did not indicate a preference (n=1,848)
YouGov, 31 March-1 April 2021

However, there is a clear age divide amongst previous pubgoers, with younger adults more likely to increase their visits to their local pub and bar – with a third (33%) of 18-24 year olds planning to visit more. This compares to older drinkers with around a third of 45-54 year olds (30%) and over 55s (38%) either planning to visit less or have no plans to return at all.

Younger adults are more likely to increase visits to the pub, whereas older adults are likely to visit less or stay away

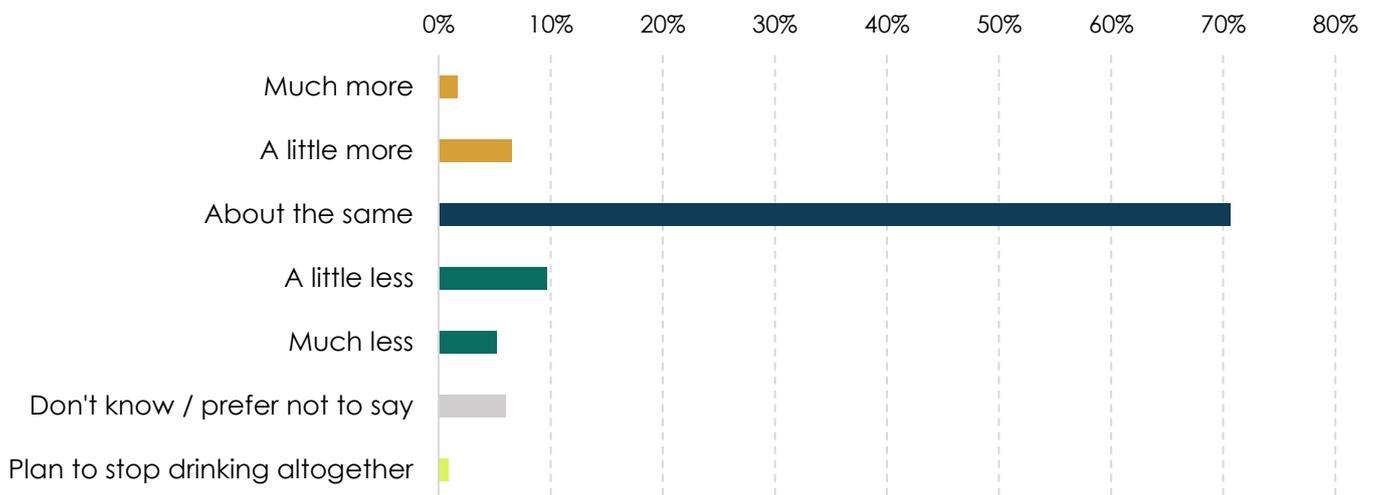


All previous UK pubgoers (n=1,848) -Don't know / prefer not to say not shown
YouGov, 31 March-1 April 2021

Alcohol consumption upon return

The results also suggest that the moderate majority is set to continue as UK hospitality reopens. 86% of UK drinkers said that they intend to drink the same (71%) or less (15%) compared to before the pandemic as the hospitality sector begins to reopen.

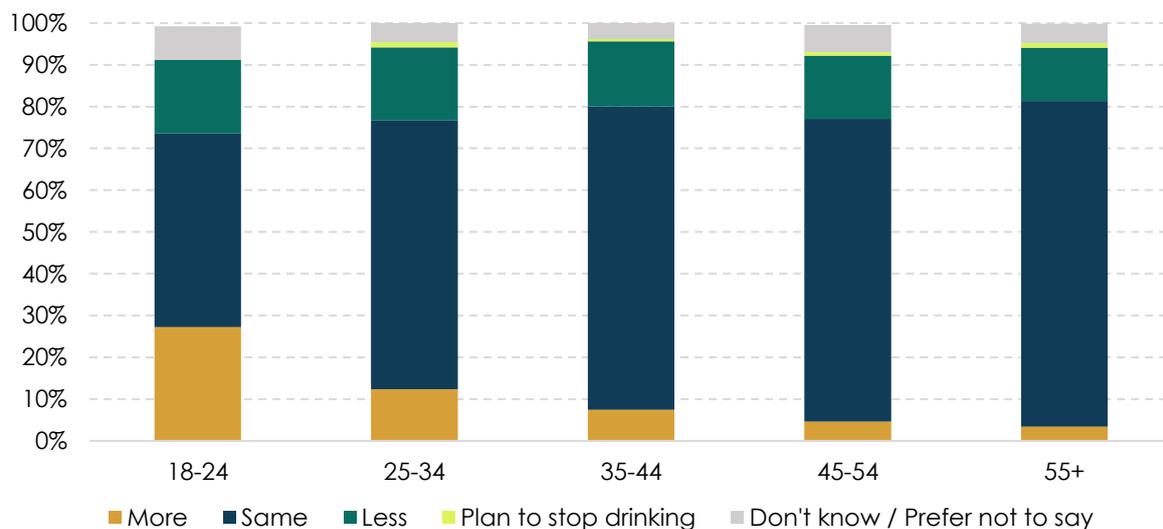
Moderate majority plan to drink same or less upon hospitality reopening



All UK adults who drink alcohol (n=1,450)
YouGov, 31 March-1 April 2021

Men were slightly more likely to say they intend to drink less (16% compared to 13% of women), though a similar minority (9% men and 8% women) intend to drink more. Across all age groups, respondents are most likely to intend to drink the same compared to before the pandemic, though the youngest age group (18-24) are by far most likely to drink more (27%) upon the reopening of UK hospitality.

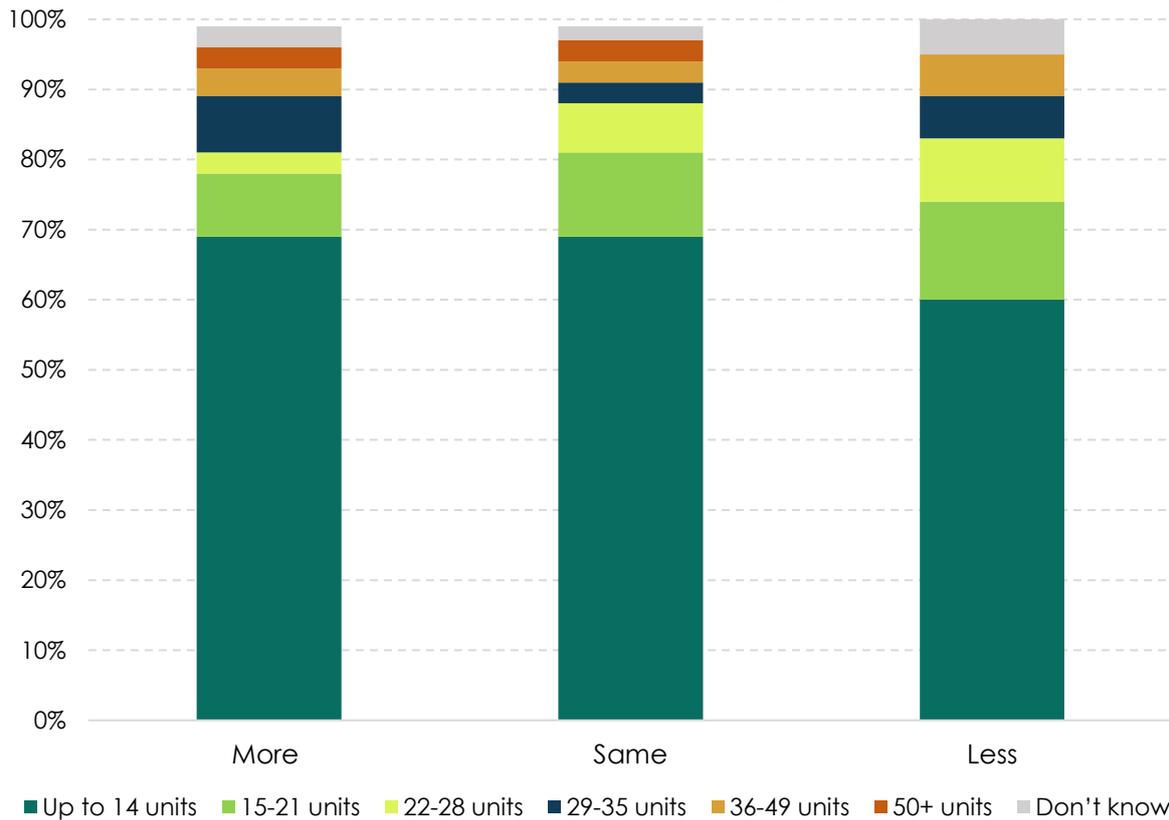
Across all age groups, UK drinkers intend to drink the same or less once hospitality reopens



All UK adults who drink alcohol (n=1,450)
YouGov, 31 March-1 April 2021

However, it is also useful to place the above responses in the context of current alcohol consumption. As the majority of those who intend to drink more already within Chief Medical Officer weekly guidelines, our previous results suggest they could very well continue to remain within these guidelines. That said, we should be mindful those who are currently drinking at heavier and more harmful rates and have said they intend to drink more. This small minority should receive targeted support to help tackle the often complex and interrelated issues underlying their drinking.

Majority who intend to drink more already within Chief Medical Officer weekly guidelines



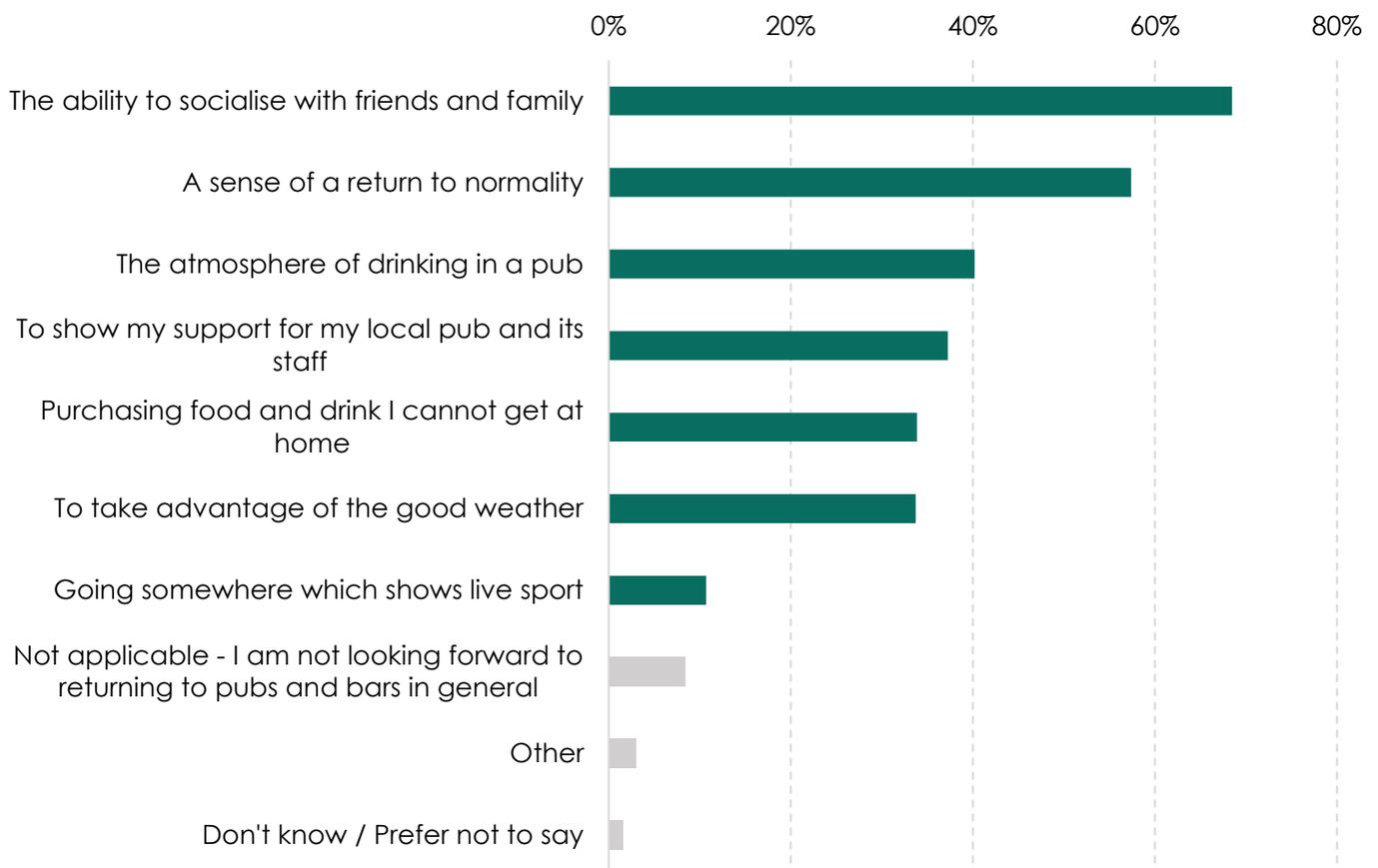
All UK adults who drink alcohol (n=1,450)
YouGov, 31 March-1 April 2021

5. UK pubgoers seek friends, family and normality

When asked what they are most looking forward to about returning to pubs and bars, over two-thirds (68%) of previous UK pubgoers cited being able to socialise with friends and family, and over half (57%) cited regaining a sense of normality. The third most popular reason was a return to the atmosphere of drinking in a pub.

Being able to see friends and family and regaining a sense of normality were the most commonly cited reasons across gender, age, and nation across the UK.

Previous UK pubgoers most looking forward to friends, family and normality



All UK adults who will visit pubs more/same/less (n=1,577)
YouGov, 31 March - 1 April 2021

6. How do these results fit in to the wider picture of alcohol in the UK over the past year?

Our latest poll results fit into a much broader picture that the UK population, on the whole, drank the same or less alcohol than they usually would over the past year, dispelling the myth that Britain turned to the bottle during the crisis.

The moderate majority persists

An analysis of 33 publicly available polls taken since the start of the pandemic and separately commissioned by the Portman Group, Public Health England, Drinkaware and Alcohol Change UK show that just over half (51%) have drunk the same as compared to before the pandemic and just over a quarter (26%) have either cut back or cut out alcohol altogether. This analysis also suggests that around 23% of drinkers have increased their consumption, though our previous and current polls suggest that many who are drinking more still remain within the Chief Medical Officer lower-risk guidelines.

These survey findings are backed by further emerging evidence that overall alcohol consumption and sales have decreased. In February 2021, Public Health Scotland published the findings of two studies it commissioned which “suggest that at a population level people were drinking at reduced levels in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic”. The research suggests that during the first lockdowns there was a 6% reduction in the total volume of pure alcohol sold per adult in Scotland, England and Wales, and a decline in average weekly intake in Scotland of 0.8 units and a decline of 1.5 units in England⁴. Separate data from Nielsen suggests that in the 17-week period covering the first lockdowns to 11 July 2020 UK drinkers consumed almost 1.3bn litres of alcohol, almost half the 2bn litres consumed in the same period last year⁵.

However, our latest findings also echo previous concerns that increases have been fuelled by those already drinking at heavier and more harmful rates. The reasons for this increase are likely multifaceted and potentially exacerbated by continued lockdown restrictions cutting off social and professional support or deterring people from seeking help in the first instance. As we emerge from lockdown our shared efforts need to focus on tackling hazardous drinking and helping those struggling with alcohol dependence or those on the brink of dependence. We would encourage all those concerned about their drinking, or about the drinking of someone around them, to seek help from a health professional or visit Drinkaware.co.uk for free support and practical advice.

A cautious return to pubs and bars

Our survey indicates that pubgoers from across the UK are planning a cautious and sensible return as UK hospitality begins to reopen, with around half planning to return to old habits and visit with the frequency as before. However, the shadow of the pandemic continues to loom large over the sector as over a quarter (29.5%) plan to either visit less or stay away completely.

For those that return, our survey indicates that it is not pints on their mind but having a chance to reconnect with friends, family and a sense of normality. The vast majority are expecting to drink the same or less compared to before the pandemic which potentially allays fears of a summer blowout and increase in binge drinking.

For more information please contact – comms@portmangroup.org.uk

⁴ [Public Health Scotland: Alcohol sales and consumption in Scotland during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic – briefing paper](#), February 2021

⁵ [Talking Retail: Brits almost halve their alcohol intake in lockdown](#), July 2020

33 UK studies since the pandemic started show that the moderate majority drank the same or less

