

Cross-Party Group on Scotch Whisky

Tuesday 28th January 2025, 18:00-19:00, via Teams

Minutes

Present

MSPs

Gordon MacDonald MSP (Chairing)
Murdo Fraser MSP
Colin Smyth MSP
Douglas Ross MSP
Emma Harper MSP

Non-MSP Group Members

Blair Bowman
Susanne Cameron-Nielsen (Scotch Whisky Association)
Ellie Carrington (Scotch Whisky Association – Secretariat)
Prof Annie Hall (Heriot-Watt)
Orchid Ly (Chinese Times)
Michael Taylor (Solmaris)

External Speakers:

Victor Brierley
Amanda Burke, Diageo

Apologies

Rachael Hamilton MSP
Rhoda Grant MSP

Agenda item 1

Welcome, introduction and apologies

Gordon MacDonald MSP welcomed members and noted apologies from Rachael Hamilton MSP and Rhoda Grant MSP.

Agenda item 2

The minutes of previous meeting and AGM on 26th September 2024 were approved.

Agenda item 3

Presentation from Victor Brierley on Scotch Whisky Tourism Strategy

Victor presented on his question as to why Scotland didn't have a Scotch Whisky tourism strategy and associated budget to promote Scotch Whisky. Murdo Fraser MSP asked about previous efforts on creating a Scotch Whisky tourism strategy and budget. Victor mentioned a previous appearance in parliament, saying experts should be used and there should be more cohesion within the industry. Asked by Douglas Ross MSP about what changes he wanted to see in Dufftown, Victor mentioned some of the largest distilleries couldn't be visited and stated he believed Scotland was being outperformed by Ireland and the USA. Blair Bowman highlighted health and safety as core as some of those large distilleries were essentially factories that weren't made for visitors and stressed there were a lot of elements at play. He noted the main brands had large budgets which a government budget could not compete with, noting other categories such as sherry, which had government support, were comparatively smaller.

Agenda item 4

Presentation about robotics in the whisky industry, Amanda Burke, Diageo

Amanda highlighted Diageo had 93% of cask stock in southern operations and 7% of cask stock in norther operations. She talked through the development of warehousing: traditional; racked; palletised and auto shuttle rack. 94% of everything filled into cask bilges was automated filling, with operations after that stage still remaining mainly manual. Palletised operations were 100% automated operations and forklift transfer, with little manual handling.

As part of Diageo's expansion and investment into whisky, it has invested into shuttle warehousing to improve on safety and efficiency – three times as fast as a high racked warehouse. Participants were shown a video of a working shuttle bond. That technology is now live in 37 warehouses – has brought new technology and new skills for the operators. At the filling store and cooperage at Cambus, there has been the most investment in robotics. Operational in March 2024, the sherry line was automated with the benefit being increased filling capacity, more line reliability and reduced manual intervention. The cooperage can rejuvenate 6,000 casks per week, undertake 2,500 minor cask repairs and 150 bespoke cask repairs per week – compared to 3,609 rejuvenated casks per week in 2020.

Participants were taken through the process of robotic and automated cask rejuvenation. Amanda spoke about development for workforce and skills – the challenge of upskilling the workforce, especially new robotic technology for engineers which was an increasing area of investment. Investing in apprentice skill levels was also mentioned. On future projects, there was cast stave thickness measuring, automated mini hardener, AI measurement of char quality and automation to help with cask removal. Amanda also mentioned manual handling improvements to improve the safety of those still doing manual tasks, examples including exoskeletons, iron hand trials, machine guarding and cut resistant gloves. Gordon MacDonald asked about cooper skill with Amanda noting investment in apprentices in addition to coopers deployed in cask inspection and bespoke work. From 2020, now 10 female operators in the cooperage.

Agenda item 6

Ellie Carrington provided a brief update on US tariffs, noting the new administration hadn't announced anything on tariffs beyond a commitment to initiate a review of possible trade actions by 1 April.

Agenda item 5

Any other business

The group discussed the potential membership of Victor Brierley. Members felt there wasn't agreement about the patterns of concern brought forward. The CPG decided not to offer membership in this instance.

Dates of future meetings will be circulated to members as early as possible, with agendas informed by the suggestions made previously. The secretariat is awaiting confirmation for a visit to the Crop Innovation centre at the James Hutton Institute.

Meeting closed.