

Draft Gambling Bill

Gambling laws were last changed over 40 years ago, and have not kept pace with changing technology. Who would have dreamt of being able to gamble through your telephone or television until recently? But the Government's proposals do more than modernise legislation. They provide for a large expansion of gambling opportunities in Britain.

There is concern that the new protections contained in the Draft Bill will not do enough to prevent a serious increase in the number of people who have problems with their gambling. There are an estimated 370,000 problem gamblers in Britain, and each person's compulsive behaviour is estimated to affect another 10 people around them. Problem gamblers can experience broken marriages or family relationships, build up serious levels of debt, lose their jobs or houses, and suffer from mental and physical ill-health. It will be unacceptable if the cost of deregulation is an increase in problem gambling.

Summary of the proposals

- Most gambling will be regulated by a single Gambling Commission
- The Gambling Commission and local licensing authorities will have three objectives: keeping crime out of gambling; ensuring gambling is fair and open; and protecting children and vulnerable people
- Gambling operators will no longer have to prove there is an "unmet demand" for gambling before opening new operations.
- The advertising of gambling will be permitted
- The public will be able to walk off the streets into casinos, rather than become members 24 hours in advance
- Casinos will be able to offer any kind of legal gambling, and provide jackpot machines with unlimited stakes and prizes
- Mega-casinos will be able to have a unlimited number of machines
- Internet gaming will be licensed

The Government has published plans to overhaul gambling in Britain. These will lead to a deregulation of gambling and an increase in gambling opportunities.

93% of the population thinks there are enough opportunities to gamble in Britain at the moment*

This briefing outlines the proposals, along with some of the concerns that have been expressed by the churches.

If you share these concerns, please consider writing to your MP by the end of March 2004.

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Gambling is for adults – not for children

Gambling is exciting. Winning or losing gives you an emotional rush which can draw you in deeper and block out reality. Many adults find this difficult to cope with. Slot-machines can be particularly habit-forming: they are highly interactive and solitary, the games are very fast and there is a temptation to chase your losses. GamCare, a charity which runs a helpline for people with gambling problems, states that half of their calls come from those whose problems relate to gambling on slot-machines. Yet Britain is the only western jurisdiction which allows children - of any age - to play on slot-machines.

One research study of 10,000 12-15 year olds suggested that around 1 in 20 already demonstrates behaviour which classifies them as “problem gamblers” on slot-machines.¹ Their behaviour - which includes lying and stealing, disrupted relationships at home, and distracted behaviour at school – impacts on the children, their families and those around them. Wasted teenage years blights a child’s prospects for life.

The Government proposes to re-classify slot-machines so that Categories A, B and C are “gambling machines” for adults, but Category D machines are “amusement machines” for children. The only difference between the machines is the size of the stake and the prize. You can win £5 on Category D machines - trivial for an adult, but a significant amount of money for a child as young as 8 years old.

Children will still be able to play these machines in unregulated and unsupervised venues, for example in chip shops.

The principle that gambling is not for children needs to be applied across the board. Children should be prohibited from playing on Category D machines immediately. Failing that research should be put in place upon which the Government is prepared to act, and these machines should be removed from any unregulated venue in the interim.



“Hard” gambling shouldn’t be easy

Current legislation makes it more difficult to access the “harder” or more risky forms of gambling. The rules governing the opening of new casinos are very tight, which means there are only 125 in Britain. The new legislation proposes to sweep away these restrictions, which is likely to lead to a big increase of casino gaming. At the moment you have to become a member of a casino 24 hours before you can play, which cuts down on the amount of impulsive gambling. Under these proposals people will be able to walk off the street, perhaps at the end of a night out, and play particularly hard or addictive forms of gambling, both through table

games and slot-machines.

Particularly worrying is the proposal for new Category A machines, jackpot machines with limitless stakes and limitless prizes, which research suggests are highly addictive. Mega-casinos will be allowed an unlimited number of these machines.

Allowing an unlimited amount of the most risky form of gambling in a highly accessible venue seems a reckless approach to deregulation.

The Government should impose a strict limit on the number of jackpot machines in casinos. If monitoring shows that there is no rise in problem gambling after a few years, this limit could be slowly revised upwards. It is more effective to deregulate slowly than to try to put the genie back into the bottle.

Casinos should also be required to operate “membership” schemes, to deter the impulsive gambler, and to allow people who are trying to control an addiction to ban themselves from gambling premises.

82% of the population believes that children under the age of 18 should not be allowed to play fruit-machines*

¹ *Gambling and problem gaming among young people in England and Wales*, Dr Sue Fisher, 1998



Make the gambling industry socially responsible

The Draft Bill will, for the first time, require the gambling industry to take responsibility for the harm that gambling can cause to some people. This protection does not exist at the moment, and is the reason that many of those concerned with the social impact of gambling do not want the Bill to be dropped.

The Government has warned that if the gambling industry does not provide enough money for the treatment and support of problem gamblers through the new Gambling Industry Charitable Trust, then it will impose a levy on the whole industry.

But social responsibility is about more than just corporate giving. The new Gambling Commission will draw up Codes of Social Responsibility by which operators will have to abide if they are to keep their licences. These Codes will not form part of the Bill itself, but the Government needs to make clear that they will cover these areas:

- preventing children's access to gambling – eg requiring positive age checks at the entrance to gambling premises
- making the customer aware of the terms under which they are playing – eg displaying the probabilities of particular games
- reducing risks associated with particular games – eg slot-machines should have to display clocks and counters and include breaks in play to help people keep in touch with reality
- helping those at risk of losing control of their gambling – eg displaying helpline numbers or having trained staff available
- recognising responsibilities towards local residents – consultation with neighbours, or contributions to local projects

Details of these will not be included in the Bill, but the legislation should ensure that these Codes are central to any changes and apply right from the beginning. The new Gambling

Commission will be required to have regard to the integrity, competence and financial circumstances of an applicant before granting a licence. The legislation should be amended so that the applicant's demonstrable commitment to social responsibility should also be a test of suitability. This would ensure that measures to protect children and vulnerable people are at the heart of the Bill.



Other concerns

The Draft Bill raises a range of other concerns which you might wish to raise with your MP.

Debt

There are likely to be more opportunities to gamble on credit. The average household unsecured debt is around £5,000. For problem gamblers it is estimated to be £19,000.

Impact on local communities

Many communities are worried about the impact of gambling expansion on their towns. But local planning authorities are not able to take into account the potential social impact of,

say, a new casino when considering a planning application. Local people, statutory agencies, community groups and caring agencies should be consulted before planning permission or licences are granted, and local authorities should be able to turn down applications if an area is judged to be already saturated or if the premises will have a negative social impact.

94% of the population thinks that allowing people to gamble using credit cards would put people at greater risk of incurring gambling debts*

Research and speed of change

The Government has said that it wants to "make haste slowly". First of all deregulation has to happen at a cautious enough pace that changes which turn out to have a negative effect can be stopped and turned around. Secondly we need to know exactly what are the impact of the changes. This requires a baseline survey of the prevalence of problem gambling before the changes are introduced funded by the Gambling Commission, followed by regular research and monitoring.

* The NOP poll commissioned by The Salvation Army was conducted by telephone between 28-30 November 2003 amongst a nationally representative sample of 973 adults aged 18 and over.

If you share any of these concerns please consider contacting your MP about them before the end of March 2004.



Writing to your MP

You can find out the name of your MP at www.locata.co.uk/commons/ or by ringing 020-7219-4272. They can be contacted either through the House of Commons, Westminster, London SW1A 0AA or 020-7219-3000, or through their constituency office (look in the phonebook).

Be clear about what your concerns are, and if possible link them to your own personal experiences (eg as a parent), or to your constituency (eg figures for the number of people in debt). You do not have to raise all the concerns mentioned in this briefing, instead write about the ones over which you feel most strongly.

Ask your MP to take up your concerns with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Rt Hon Tessa Jowell MP. This means that your concerns will be passed on directly to the Government, and your MP should write back to you. (If not, find out why!)

Write in blue or black ink, don't write in capitals, don't underline, and don't scatter bible quotations through your letter – otherwise it will not be taken seriously.

MPs judge the importance of an issue by the amount of correspondence they receive. So instead of getting a church council to pass a motion or sign a petition, persuade each member to write a short letter to their MP.

The Methodist Church, The Salvation Army, Quaker Action on Alcohol and Drugs and the Evangelical Alliance, supported by the other major denominations, appeared before the parliamentary Joint Committee on the Draft Gambling Bill to give evidence about the impact that the changes will have on individuals and on society. You can read their evidence at http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/jcdgb.cfm Details of the Methodist and Salvation Army submissions can be found on their websites.



If you have any further questions about the Draft Gambling Bill please contact:

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If you or anyone you know has a problem with gambling, ring the confidential GamCare Helpline on 0845-6000-133