



# Have we taken Safer Gambling too far?

Better Change's Engagement Director, **Rob Mabbett**, considers the implications of blanket restrictions if we take the stance that gambling is a public health issue.



In my 12 years in the industry, I have never encountered anyone working in gambling who has wished harm in any way upon any of their customers, not once. Yet currently in the UK we are witnessing a sustained attack on our industry which is almost certainly going to drastically change the landscape in terms of how gambling is regulated but more importantly it is changing the way in which gambling is perceived.

There is a big difference between being averse to gambling harm and being anti-gambling. If we are to accept the stance that gambling is a public health issue, then we are accepting that gambling at all levels brings with it some form of harm or is in some way detrimental to our wellbeing.

There would be no coming back from this.

To classify gambling in this way would lead to ever increasing restrictions and stigmatising of gambling until it reaches a point where it is no longer a viable product for businesses or an enjoyable product for its consumers. I am loath to draw comparisons to other industries, but it is impossible not to look at tobacco (a product which has been unequivocally proven to be detrimental to health at any level) and see a path which I'm sure most within our industry would

like to avoid. We saw widespread campaigns to stigmatise smoking in the 1990's, advertising was banned, graphic pictures of some of the gruesome health impacts were displayed, the product was altered in terms of its strength and how they could be purchased, and the age restriction first raised from 16 to 18 around 2010 is now possibly going to increase each year so that younger people will never be able to smoke legally. Sound familiar? Well, it doesn't stop there!

Due to price increases, the smoking black market flourished. First with smuggled tobacco then dangerous bootleg cigarettes with ingredients even more dangerous than the regulated product was in the first place. There are some startling similarities here with gambling. Advertising has been under the microscope, we are seeing the introduction of increased restrictions for 18-24-year-olds, first with online gambling limits and now as proposed in the gambling act tighter online stake limits for young people playing online slots. Common sense, some would say, and it would be hard to disagree but we need to take heed of the example of tobacco and make sure that we regulate gambling appropriately.

Let's start with the fact that the majority of people who gamble are able to do so without negative consequences and it is an enjoyable activity for millions. There are a huge range of gambling products and activities available each with their own volatility and their own level of risk. For the most part those facilitating gambling be it in casinos, sports betting, lottery or bingo understand their products and recognise the markers of harm that are associated with them that may indicate that a player is in difficulty and may need some support. This has been a huge topic over the past decade with specialist businesses set up to support the gambling industry, to suggest this has not improved the landscape in terms of preventing gambling harm would be pretty disingenuous at best but this is the situation that we find ourselves in.

The implementation of blanket restrictions that affect a large number of people unnecessarily in the hope that it will prevent harm in a small amount of people on the face of it looks like lazy regulation or policy to appease political







pressure. It may be that that is often the case, but I think we would be naïve to think that there is not another agenda at play. There is a rational argument that hitting an affordability check threshold, a mandatory spend limit or time limit is not necessarily a marker of harm and if we treat it as such, we are at risk of massively inflating the numbers of those at risk. It is also fair to assume that those experiencing low levels of harm due to a period of overindulgence may well drop back to safe levels of gambling. I did this myself recently during the Cheltenham festival. I spent a little more than usual and if I am honest chased losses in one race by betting on a race I was not intending to, to try and get my “revenge” on the bookie. This behaviour put me on the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) in fact it gave me a score of “1” when I completed a self-assessment. Nothing to see here and



nothing to worry about I am sure but in a recent survey in the UK there was an outcome that suggested that 10 million people could be at risk of gambling harm. This figure was calculated by taking any score on the PGSI no matter how small and multiplying it by 10 to factor in those affected by another’s gambling.

This for me has two serious connotations, the first being that by overinflating the numbers and talking about millions of people instead of thousands it perpetuates its own rationale for further punitive restrictions which seek to limit, block, ban and stigmatise gambling (remember my comment earlier “there would be no coming back from this”). Gambling in well-regulated environments as opposed to unregulated ones is the best way to promote safer gambling therefore the regulated market has to be competitive with the unregulated market. Secondly, gambling addiction and severe gambling harm is a serious issue, it has devastating consequences for those it affects. We should not be making them harder to find by exaggerating the numbers to prove a political point nor should we be stigmatising gambling to the point that those in need of help are too ashamed to reach out for help.

I appreciate this article applies to all forms of gambling and may not always apply to the casino industry, but I think we need to take heed of what is happening around us and stand up for an industry that I am proud to be a part of and I hope you are too. It reminds me of the very poignant passage “First they came” written by German Pastor Martin Niemöller which is often used in various ways today to warn against apathy and indifference.

*First they came for the online casinos, but I did not speak out because I was not an online casino.*

*Then they came for advertising and marketing, but I did not speak out because I was not a marketer.*

*Then they came for sports betting, but I did not speak out as I was not in sports betting.*

*Then they came for me and there was no-one left to speak out for me.*

Food for thought.

