

Announcement

9 December 2015

**Remarks to the Responsible Gambling Trust Harm Minimisation Conference by
Tracey Crouch MP, Minister for Sport, Tourism and Heritage
(Department for Culture, Media, and Sport)**

Thank you Liz, Neil, ladies and gentlemen. I am grateful for the opportunity to be here.

As many of you know, the issue of gambling addiction is one I have taken a close interest in for some time. It is by all accounts the silent addiction, the one that gets the least amount of interest and funding, compared to drugs and alcohol. And yet the harm to the individual and their family is arguably not much different. Sadly, there is often a link between gambling addictions and other addictions that may not always be identified and therefore as the secondary harm, gambling may well go unnoticed until it is potentially too late.

On gambling harm

I do of course recognize that the vast majority of those who gamble do so without problems and yet the NHS website estimates that there are nearly 600,000 problem gamblers in Great Britain. The anticipation and thrill of gambling creates a natural high that can become addictive. The health service site continues by saying that

“the internet has made gambling more accessible, allowing more and more people to do it from home. This is thought to be one of the reasons for the increase in the number of women gamblers”. They then describe the health impact of this as being that “Problem gamblers are more likely to suffer from low self-esteem, stress, anxiety and depression with gambling addicts more likely to go to prison as a result of criminal activity. This is almost entirely theft and fraud”.

That is why gambling addiction can be so incredibly destructive to the individual but also to their families and loved ones and probably everyone in this room has met that individual. I know I have: Both from a constituency perspective but also through friendships, where entire lives have been shattered. And there is no demographic prejudice. I’ve met wealthy gambling addicts and I have met low income gambling addicts – the outcome is the same for them all – they lose everything.

Wanda Goldwag, who as you know is the Senet chair, recently said during a Guardian debate that “93% of gamblers are OK” which implies 7% are not. However she also said “I

think there are some challenges and they need to be addressed...there is a certain number of people for whom this becomes a disaster and the industry has got to take that very, very seriously”.

Wanda is absolutely right.

The government has been consistent in its approach to gambling legislation in that any liberalisation of the industry must go hand in hand with enhanced player protection and a genuine commitment to social responsibility. To be blunt, if the welfare of the punter is not at the forefront of industry’s business plans then there will be no favourable changes to the legislative framework.

In addition to the moral imperative to reduce the effects of gambling harm we must be mindful of the economic impact. Devastated families and individuals cannot contribute to the wealth of the nation while they are picking up the pieces of ruined lives. Though the number of problem gamblers can appear small when compared to the overall figure of people who gamble, we all know that harm can and does extend to their families and friends and more widely to their employers and communities. I was quite struck by Gamcare’s estimate that, for each problem gambler, there may be 10-15 other people whose lives are adversely impacted by the gambler’s activities.

Furthermore the country does not have infinite resources in which to tackle every perceived cause of gambling harm. We need to know where to focus our finite resources and for that we need evidence and research.

Importance of RGT research

This is why the role of the RGT is central to the direction of preventative measures and provision of treatment for gambling harm. By commissioning research you generate evidence which allows policy makers and health care providers to direct their energy and resources to where it can have the most beneficial impact.

I appreciate that harm is subjective making it difficult to quantify often leading the outcome to interpretation depending on one’s own views on gambling but I do sincerely thank you for the work you do in this area. It is vitally important that we continue to produce first class research so we can protect those at risk of harm in terms of legislation, early identification in the community and of course treatment services when required.

We of course cannot be the only country to face this issue and must look to the experience of other nations. We can learn lessons internationally and I hope that Dr Kelly of Canada’s Responsible Gambling Council, who will speak later, will share some of his country’s experiences.

It is great to see so many of you in the room today, willing to focus on the issues, keep abreast of developments and help work out what more can be done.

I welcome the work RGSB (Responsible Gambling Strategy Board) to renew its strategy, that will help us all to focus our resources towards not just research, but research which will have an immediate impact on policy - be that in determining best practice in preventative measures; effective treatment, how it is provided and by whom; and yes targeted legislative intervention.

No one would of course suggest that the solution to problem gambling is simple. The RGSB strategy will, I hope, draw together the multifaceted nature of this issue.

There have been public concerns about the increased visibility of gambling and the risk of harm from gambling, particularly on FOBT machines. My views on these machines are well known and for the general welfare of my officials in the audience I shall not repeat them here.

However, the Department is currently in the process of evaluating the regulations that came into force in April this year. We are looking at changes in player protection brought about by the requirement of customers in bookmakers to interact either over the counter or via account based play in order to stake over £50. This will inform the timing for the next review of stakes and prizes.

The health implications of problem gambling means that there is a clear overlap with public health policy and practice, especially mental, other health issues and substance misuse problems. I have spoken with my ministerial colleagues in the Department of Health and officials from my Department and the Department of Health have met to discuss what effective treatment looks like.

RGT will no doubt draw upon the experience and advice of other key organisations and institutions such as Gamcare and the Royal College of Psychiatrists in order to generate robust analysis that will lead directly towards meaningful interventions.

Industry Responsibility

I am pleased that the gambling industry has been a willing partner in our combined efforts to limit the harmful effects of problem gambling while ensuring that it remains a fun leisure activity for the overwhelming majority of punters.

A properly funded and resourced RGT paid by industry contributions and fees will also go some way to assuring the public that the industry takes seriously their concerns over tackling problem gambling.

The IGRG (Industry Group for Responsible Gambling), has members from across all parts of the industry, while Senet has delivered an advertising campaign on behalf of the large bookmakers. I look forward to seeing these forums grow to meet their potential. A potential to exchange best practice and share learning experiences good and bad across sectors and across the industry. A potential to push the boundaries of social responsibility un prompted by government or regulator.

This year the IGRG announced a voluntary ban on sign-up offers before the 9pm watershed, following the government's review into gambling advertising. I look forward to seeing the same level of industry commitment in ensuring that young people are protected from gambling advertising on social media. Perhaps this will be raised at the panel discussion on advertising taking place later this morning.

Recently the Secretary of State was able to see the Casino sectors SENSE self exclusion scheme. In my own constituency in Chatham I have seen the bookmaker's pilot self exclusion scheme at work. It was small and it certainly wasn't perfect but it is work in progress that will need time to finesse. Nevertheless it is absolutely what government and the public expect to see from our 'responsible' gambling industry.

Away from the land based sector I look forward to seeing the industry extend the cross sector self exclusion to the remote operators. I know that the industry, supported by the Gambling Commission, has made good progress in this area. The remote sector is growing fast and must not be left behind in its efforts to help people who realize that they have a gambling problem. I look forward to the industry introducing a multi-operator remote scheme as soon as possible.

However, how much better would it be for all of us if a punter was prevented from deteriorating to such an extent that they felt compelled to self-exclude in the first place. I welcome, across all sectors, the enhanced training of staff which has been undertaken to help staff intervene with confidence and in safety.

I don't want to spoil the presentations this afternoon by industry representatives on their own harm minimisation efforts but I am convinced that the consequence of this will be to assure the public that the industry takes its responsibility towards player protection very seriously.

The point is that Industry, along with government and our Commission colleagues, should never feel that there is an end point to social responsibility. Industry owes a duty of care to its customers. Gone are the days when companies could act with impunity and disregard the consequences that the use of their products inflicted on wider society. It is in the country's best interest to have a thriving economic environment in which business is not constrained by red tape, the gambling sector is no exception to this. The government wants and supports a thriving gambling industry in which the well-being of its customers is firmly entrenched at its heart.

Conclusion

In conclusion: There is much that we can feel good about; a united endeavour by industry, regulator and government to work together to build a safe and fun leisure industry.

Good will alone will not get us anywhere fast. The invaluable work of the RGT is needed to steer attention and resources to where it can be of the most benefit in the shortest time as

possible. I therefore wish you a successful conference. I am sorry I cannot stay due to having to respond to a debate in Westminster Hall this morning but I look forward to hearing what the outcomes from today will be and that they see fruition in the near future. Thank you.

Notes

1. These remarks were made on 9 December 2015 at the Responsible Gambling Trust's Third Annual Harm Minimisation Conference, held at the King's Fund, London.