

Jeremy Wright's Oral Statement on Gambling

Mr Speaker, with your permission, I would like to make a statement about today's announcement on support for those affected by problem gambling.

While we all want a healthy gambling industry that makes an important contribution to the economy, we also need one that does all it can to protect those that use it.

Problem gambling can devastate lives, families and communities.

I have met those who have lost more than the UK's annual average salary on credit cards during one night of gambling online.

And parents who are now without a child as a result of gambling addiction.

Over recent months I have also met representatives from the gambling industry and colleagues from all across the House to discuss what more needs to be done.

We can all agree that it's best to prevent harm before it occurs, and to step in early when people are at risk. But we also need to offer the right support for those people who do experience harm.

We have already acted to reduce the minimum stake on Fixed Odds Betting Terminals to 2 pounds, from 100 pounds.

We have also tightened age and identity checks for online gambling websites; an important step to protect children and vulnerable people who may be at risk.

And today five of the biggest gambling companies have agreed a series of measures which will deliver real and meaningful progress on support for problem gamblers.

This announcement has been welcomed by the Gambling Commission, GambleAware and Gamban.

These are companies which, together, represent around half of the British commercial gambling industry.

At the heart of this package is a very significant increase in their financial contribution to fund support and treatment.

Last year voluntary contributions across the whole industry to problem gambling yielded less than 10 million pounds.

Now five operators:

- William Hill
- Bet365
- GVC – who own Ladbrokes and Coral
- Flutter – formerly known as PaddyPower BetFair
- Sky Betting & Gaming

have said that over the next four years they will increase ten fold the funding they give to treatment and support for problem gamblers.

And in this same period they have committed to spending 100 million pounds on treatment specifically.

The companies will report publicly on progress with these commitments, alongside their annual assurance statements to the Gambling Commission.

Last week NHS England announced it is establishing up to fourteen clinics for those with the most complex and severe gambling problems.

They include where gambling problems coexist with other mental health problems or childhood trauma.

And it has also been announced that the first NHS problem gambling clinic offering specific support for children is set to open.

The funding announced today enables a huge boost for the other treatment services that complement specialist NHS clinics, and it will help us to place an increased focus on early intervention.

I know members across the House have argued for a mandatory, statutory levy to procure funds for treatment and support of problem gambling.

I understand the argument but of course the House knows that legislating for this would take time – in all likelihood more than a year to complete.

The proposal made this morning will deliver substantially increased support for problem gamblers this year.

It may also be said that receipts from a statutory levy are certain, and those from a voluntary approach are not.

But it is important to stress two things. First that these voluntary contributions must and will be transparent, including to the regulator, and if they are not made we will know.

Second, the Government reserves the right to pursue a mandatory route to funding if a voluntary one does not prove effective.

Mr Speaker, this is a clear financial commitment from industry to addressing the harms that can come from gambling.

But this is not solely about spending money. This is a package of measures spanning a number of different areas, to ensure we tackle problem gambling on all possible fronts.

Firstly, a responsible gambling industry is one that works together to reduce harm and wants customers to be safe, whichever platform they use or however they choose to gamble.

The companies already identify customers whose gambling suggests they may be at risk, and they take steps to protect them. Their licences require this. But they will go further.

We have already seen the successful launch of GAMSTOP, the multi-operator self-exclusion scheme.

I am pleased that companies have committed to building on this through the greater sharing of data between them to prevent problem gamblers from experiencing further harm.

Secondly, the five companies will use emerging technology to make sure their online advertising is used responsibly.

Where technology exists that can identify a user showing problem gambling behaviours, and then target gambling adverts away from that person, they have committed to using it.

More generally, industry has already committed to a voluntary ban on advertising around live sport during the daytime, which will come into force next month.

Third, operators have committed to giving greater prominence to services and campaigns that support those in need of help.

They have pledged to increase the volume of their customer safer gambling messaging...

To continue their support for the BetRegret campaign, which is showing promising early results...

And to review the tone and content of their marketing, advertising and sponsorship to ensure it is appropriate.

These are welcome commitments and represent significant progress in terms of the support that operators give for those impacted by problem gambling.

But as technology advances, we will need to be even more sophisticated in how we respond.

The five companies who have proposed these measures today will be working closely with Government, charities and regulators so we can address any new or developing harms.

I commend the leadership of the five companies who have put them forward.

They are proposals from some of the industry's biggest companies.

And I believe it is reasonable for the biggest companies with the largest

reach and the most resources to do more and show leadership.

But the industry as a whole needs to engage in tackling problem gambling, and we want other firms to look at what they can also do to step up.

And I repeat, it will remain open to government to legislate if needed.

So this is not the end of this conversation.

And we will keep working hard as a Government to make sure we protect users, whether online or in the High Street.

Mr Speaker, there is still much more to do, but today's announcement is a significant step forward.

It means substantially more help for problem gamblers, more quickly than other paths we could take.

We must and we will hold the companies that have made these commitments to them and we will expect the rest of the industry to match them.

They will change lives for the better and contribute to the ongoing work we are doing to make gambling safer for everyone.

I commend this statement to the House.