

Speech: Mims Davies speech: Gambling Commission's new strategy

I am delighted to be here today at the launch of the Gambling Commission's new National Strategy to Reduce Gambling Harms.

This event is another milestone in a year of strong policy developments that this Government has led. It provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the progress made to date and to think about our vision for the future.

Protecting people from harm should be at the heart of every gambling business, working with a strong regulator.

It's been three years since the Gambling Commission's advisers published the previous Strategy.

It is right to recognise there have been changes in technology, changes in consumer behaviour and changes in attitudes to gambling.

Some have led to positive developments, such as greater understanding and awareness of gambling-related harm, and innovative new ways to protect people and enforce rules.

However, changes have also increased concern about what the future of the gambling industry may hold – on both sides.

When I took this role, my first words at the GambleAware Conference were that we don't want to stop people having fun, but we need the right balance between freedom and protections.

Government's Gambling Review included strong measures to boost protections across gaming machines, online gambling and gambling advertising. And analysed what support is available for people who experience harm. I'm pleased to see this approach reflected in the new Strategy's two vital pillars of prevention and treatment.

This new Strategy builds on the vision from the last, and this is a good thing. It shows that we are heading in the right direction, and positive progress is being made.

So what has changed? It is our joint ambition about how much can be achieved, and how quickly. Now this overarching strategy is published, we are keen to see swift progress on the implementation plan, to turn words into further action.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Gambling Commission for the engagement I have had with them and the excellent work they do day to day, much of which is reflected in this new Strategy.

As the statutory regulator, the Gambling Commission's role is to ensure

industry is strongly regulated and accountable – and that people recognise this.

The Commission has the key role in preventing harm, through the extensive powers it has to set and enforce licence conditions, its understanding of the industry and its leadership.

I know that there are concerns about online gambling and my honourable friend Richard Graham raised some of these yesterday in the House. I want to assure him and colleagues across the House that I am listening, the industry is listening, the Commission is watching and we understand those concerns.

The growth of the internet and mobile technology has changed every aspect of our lives. It has made many of our transactions smoother, such as banking and online shopping.

This is also true of gambling – it is now available at any time, anywhere, to those with a smartphone. The market has evolved and we see new types of games and bets.

But online also offers an opportunity for strong protections. There is more data available to understand customers, detect vulnerabilities and intervene. People can be reached directly through their devices.

It is important the Gambling Commission ensures its regulation keeps pace with technological change. It has the power to respond to changes in the market. It has taken strong action to tighten rules around identity and age verification – these come into force next month.

For people in need of support, there are also digital tools that make it easier to take control, seek help or stop gambling. Vitally, GAMSTOP helps people self-exclude from all operators. The new identity requirements will make the system much more robust.

I was delighted to meet the innovators, Gamban, whose software has led to a further step change in protections with the ability to block gambling sites and apps. It is available free to all users of GambleAware services. Netline, the webchat service run by GamCare, is easily accessible too.

This is not to diminish the importance of human interaction. Sometimes we all need to talk to somebody about what is going on in our lives.

GamCare's National Gambling Helpline has teams working 8am to midnight – I always like to give the phone number, which is 0808 8020 133. GamCare is working with operators to better link up their customer services teams with advisers at the Helpline, and I welcome this.

Now to focus on the Gambling Act. It gave the Gambling Commission strong powers to change requirements as needed, as gambling evolves. And the pillars of the Act – to keep gambling fair, free from crime, and to protect people from harm – are the key tenements today, as they rightly were when it was written.

So let's turn to now. I am very clear – protecting vulnerable people is a priority.

Government will intervene and act where there are dangerous products and evidence of harm – as we did on B2 machine stakes in betting shops.

The Commission will support this, as it did recently in ensuring the spirit of the new regulations was adhered to. The only industry I want to see is a responsible industry.

To achieve this, collaboration with industry is essential. I am pleased this new strategy identifies collaboration as key to achieving our goals.

Operators are in a unique position to deliver early interventions, before harm occurs, and preventative work will benefit greatly from industry expertise.

I understand that excellent progress has already been made through the Remote Gambling Association on operator-led projects. And I'll say more about our own positive engagement with operators later.

Meanwhile industry must recognise why the debate on gambling has become so divided. Of course we want to see a responsible industry that generates enjoyment, employment and investment.

But problem gambling can destroy the lives of people, their families and even their communities. Industry must mitigate those risks with appropriate protections.

Other businesses engaging has great power to prevent harm, beyond just the gambling industry. The Secretary of State and I met major and challenger banks recently. We recognise the excellent work taking place to develop tools customers can use to block spending on gambling.

The stigma of talking about gambling problems must be removed. We need to explain the potential risks. I want better awareness of where to find help if it is needed. And I want us to talk about what healthy gambling looks like.

I'm pleased to see the Strategy acknowledge the important role for those with lived experience to contribute.

Key partners such as GamCare and GambleAware have also initiated projects to reach out to young people, including programmes for schools. We are working with Ministerial colleagues to see what advice we can give to parents.

I'm pleased GambleAware has launched the 'Bet Regret' advertising campaign, as set out in the Gambling Review. This is a fantastic initiative that resonates with the target audience.

GambleAware has also established partnerships with organisations such as Citizens Advice to try to reach people earlier and intervene before serious harm occurs.

Prevention is crucial, but we must also make sure those with gambling problems can get the right help.

The whole of government is committed to this and I want to use our departmental relationships for good, bringing all our interests together.

In particular, we committed in the Review to working closely with the Department for Health and Social Care, and I will continue to work with the Minister for Suicide Prevention in particular. This is one of her key priorities as well.

I've spoken about stigma. A gambling addiction or compulsion is an addiction like any other. So I am very pleased we are expanding specialist support in the NHS Long Term plan.

Supporting action on gambling-related harm is now a priority for Public Health England. This is a really important step. And their evidence review will help to inform action on prevention and treatment.

I'm keen that future work builds on the strong arrangements already in place for coordinating and commissioning treatment.

We have a national network of counselling services. And GambleAware funds existing NHS gambling services – such as the National Problem Gambling Clinic in London – as well as the GamCare helpline.

I saw first-hand the vital frontline work both carry out, providing support to those who need it.

GambleAware has long held an ambition to expand its treatment services, and I look forward to the formal opening of the new NHS Leeds clinic later this year.

70% of GamCare clients complete their treatment plans successfully, showing significant reduction in harms and improved quality of life.

I've been listening to concerns around funding, and taking action. Just yesterday, Secretary of State and I had a constructive meeting with chief executives of a number of gambling companies yesterday. We set out very clear expectations from Government and consumers. We will meet again very shortly.

As the minister, I want to see further and faster progress on protecting those vulnerable to harm, including by increasing funding for research, education and treatment.

The voluntary system does work and continues to have support from government and industry. GVC has already announced today that it will donate 1% of its gross gambling yield.

We believe the voluntary system is capable of delivering sustainable funding to meet the increased targets that will be set as evidence of needs emerges. I encourage the Gambling Commission to support this and will look forward to the detailed Implementation Plan.

Let me be clear, if it turns out that the voluntary system is not capable of meeting current and future needs, we will look at alternatives. Everything is on the table.

Strong evidence must underpin all action and debate. The Strategy sets out innovative new ways to collect this, some of which are already in progress, such as a data hub and new research partnerships.

I look forward to seeing progress and working with my colleagues, business and others to make sure the good work taking place continues under Gambling Commission's new Strategy.

It is absolutely right that gambling-related harm is recognised as a serious issue and that it is given the same attention as other addictions.

There is a lot of work being done by a range of bodies and it is important that we acknowledge their good will and commitment as well as recognising that more must be done.