

Licensing officers gain an insight to how the industry is investing in innovation with SR, customer care and compliance at the centre

TRADE BODIES

The **Gambling Business Group** hosted the first ever assembly of local authority licensing officials at a gaming and gambling exhibition with 16 officers from councils across London and the south east joining the trade body on its High Street Hub at ICE last week. They were treated to one-to-one sessions with GBG specialists, a gambling licensing update, Q&As and a tour of stands at the world's largest trade show. The perfect stage, and the perfect opportunity to raise awareness of the quality and standards being invested by the high street operators.

It would be fair to say that the GBG High Street Hub was nothing short of a resounding success at ICE 2024 last week. Located in what can only be described as one of the packed epicentres of the consistently packed ICE exhibition halls, the Hub was short of neither footfall nor interest. It was, as chief executive Peter Hannibal noted: "A show that expanded the horizons."

For the Gambling Business Group, one of those horizons was the views of 16 local authority officials from 9 councils around the south of England - all taking up the association's invitation to see how the industry is driving innovation with social responsibility at the heart of that development.

The first time an organised party of local authority licensing officers had attended the exhibition, they were in esteemed regulatory company: the ICE show also played host to the chiefs of scores of the world's regulators from the UKGC to the Ukrainian Commission.

So, what was their reaction? Charlotte Meller, general manager at GBG, answered: "The size and scope of ICE can be a bit overwhelming - so we warned them about how busy it would be - even on the Thursday. But it was still a shock! After the GBG expert session and tour, many of them spent time looking around the rest of the exhibition, before coming back to the High Street Hub quite exhausted!"

For some time, the GBG has been focused on adding to the learning curve of local licensing officials and the licensors assembly at ICE was designed to do just that. And it seemed to work well.

"We wanted to give them an opportunity to raise questions so we established small groups, giving them the best opportunity to speak to our experts about compliance (Boomerang Digital), security (Link Integrated), age verification (Age Check Certification Scheme), machines (RBW Systems) and licensing matters (IOL), rotating between the experts every 20 minutes. It was a kind of gambling industry speed dating."



A licence to thrill

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And with benefits; the licensing officials were given an insight to many of the industry's new innovations and how important they were to SR and compliance. Meller explained: "All of them were really

engaged and asking plenty of questions. For example, some of them had seen the StaffGuard box in premises but didn't know how it operated and who responded when the system was activated.

"They went away from those discussions with a better understanding of how seriously the gaming industry took the need for security and the welfare of their staff and customers in the high street environment. They asked about player time/spend limit setting machines and were given full detail as to how payout limits on machines were tamper proof."

The dialogue was also a two-way street; both the Gambling Business Group and the attending officers from the Institute of Licensing were keen to understand how local authorities were preparing for the land based changes in the White

Paper and the review of their local gambling policy statements, as well as areas where they would like more training and awareness raising.

One important dimension to the licensors assembly was filling the gap in knowledge, not least with gaming machines, self regulation and the development of SR technology. This, said Meller, was where the leading manufacturers came into their own.

"After spending time with the experts we took them on a tour around some of GBG members' stands, to see demonstrations of product developments and evolution. They were interested in the accuracy and efficacy of facial recognition for age estimation on gaming machines and whether AV facial recognition could feature as a condition for machines sited in pubs, and they were also keen to understand

how cashless systems would operate on gaming machines."

It was an exhaustive schedule for the licensing officials - but, did Charlotte Meller find that this type of engagement changed perspectives?

"Yes," she was quick to confirm. "Gambling competes with a raft of other licensing functions within local authorities, so this dedicated practical session was an ideal opportunity to focus their attention. They said it gave them a real insight to what really happens within a land based premises in relation to Age Estimation and Verification, Staff and Customer Safety which they would not typically ask about when undertaking premises inspection.

"For most the technology and compliance recording systems were completely new to them - they were unaware how vital the compliance data available on SmartHub is and they were keen to learn what it all meant. They went away from those discussions feeling more comfortable about the questions they ask operators on visits to high street premises.

And all our experts kindly shared their contact details with the licensing officers in case they had questions after the show, or wanted to visit a premises to see some of the technology and equipment in operation in situ."

So, what next in the advancement plan for the relationship between the industry and licensing authorities?

"Well, we have a partnership with the Institute of Licensing (IOL), the professional body for local authority licensing officers, and already have regular articles in the IOL publications, facilitate visits to gambling premises and speak at their events.

"However last week's session has highlighted that all licensing officers would benefit from the topic specific discussions held at ICE and so we are in discussion with the IOL about how best to disseminate information and build up licensing officers' knowledge bank of the various aspects of land based gambling. There was certainly appetite from those officers present to do more engagement of this kind."