

Charlotte Meller: “When it comes to player protection in gambling venues, it’s the detail that matters and operators understand how important that detail is”

LICENSING

In a recent interview organised by the Institute of Licensing publication IOL Link, Welcome Break’s Head of Commercial Income Nick Jackson and Gambling Business Group General Manager **Charlotte Meller** got together to explain the nuances of the UK’s Motorway Services sector to licensing officers around the country. Here she picks up on the licensing issues impacting a very unique and vibrant part of the industry and explores the direction of travel for gambling and the ever-evolving infrastructure of player protection measures.

It’s always interesting to listen to Nick Jackson talk about Welcome Break and motorway service stations,” Charlotte Meller noted. “It’s one of those unusual ‘sectors’ - we all go there yet never quite appreciate the different environment that businesses like his operate in. And I would imagine that to be the case for many licensing officers who receive less if any training on MSAs and how they function.”

For gaming venues at motorway services, the operational model is very different to that of high street arcades - there’s less of that local community engagement between long standing staff and their regular customers, playing machines while being served with a cup of tea. MSAs are lower staffed and more technologically based with a high rate of drive through customers. As it says on the tin: arcades in Motorway Service areas are very much a Welcome Break.

But don’t be distracted by the difference, says Meller. “MSAs may be unique operations, but when you’re committed to player protection in your arcades and gaming

venues, there’s a practical process that you have to apply. In motorway service areas, social responsibility and player protections might be more nuanced, but they are no less reliant upon the detail. Measures such as intense training programmes for team members, age verification checks, third party testing ... these are considered standard practice and are ever evolving.”

She outlined some of the age verification initiatives in the industry which, judging by recent exhibitions, software designers have been making some staggering developments. “At the moment, motorway service areas centrally monitor Age Verification checks across all sites on a weekly basis, and they run independent third-party testing of sites which share the results quarterly with the Gambling Commission. The main MSAs all have primary authority partnerships for age restricted sales. These are practices that most of your councillors won’t be aware of, so it’s even more important that licensing officers are able to understand this.”

And in training too, Meller has been engaged with many



of her GBG membership on developing this area. “Our members do insist on the best training programmes. Compliance and safer gambling provide the spine of every training session. All relevant staff are fully trained on age verification requirements with regular refresher training including spotting fake IDs. They operate ‘Think 25’ and if a customer is unable to provide proof that

they are over the age of 18, they will be trained how to ask people to leave the gaming area.”

Many AGCs in MSAs are gated, meaning no one can enter the AGC unless a member of staff has checked remotely that they are old enough to enter.

A buzzer sounds when a light beam across the access point is broken to alert staff to

the need to perform a visual check on the person entering the venue.

There is also remote central monitoring in addition to local management of the AGC, and the remote monitoring company will issue recorded alerts and also phone the sites directly if a person thought to be underage has entered the AGC.

Meller confirmed: “Player protection is a very focused process at MSAs and it has sophisticated technology as part of its support - MSAs use the Smart Hub system for recoding a wide range of information, so there’s a continuous programme of analysis.”

The Gambling Business Group hosts quarterly meetings of the main MSA operators (Welcome Break, Roadchef, Moto and Extra) to enable more focused dialogue specific to their needs in operating AGCs. Building on customer interaction processes through training and the use of technology have been high on the agenda so far.

The MSA Group is also looking at more community-led initiatives as Meller explained. “One initiative which the Gambling Business Group has been

keen to drive forward is the Ask for Angela concept which offers a safe space for visitors. It’s used most commonly in hospitality, and is designed to give people who are in a vulnerable position a way to ask for help in businesses.”

One MSA, Roadchef, launched the initiative recently and Meller is keeping close watch on its progress. “With Ask for Angela, a person in a vulnerable position could ask a member of staff to find Angela for them - and that serves as a prompt for staff that a situation needs special care and attention. Obviously, integral to the Ask for Angela initiative is signage and staff training, as visitors need to know that staff will understand the code phrase, and staff need to be receptive to its usage.”

Meller added: “We’re currently monitoring how the Ask for Angela project is working at service stations and hopefully we’ll see it roll out at arcades and other gambling venues. It’s another measure of how the industry is dealing not just with its social and player responsibilities but embracing the wider corporate social responsibility agenda.”

EGBA calls for multi-licensing uniformity across Europe as industry sets opening the market

The European Gaming and Betting Association has called on gambling jurisdictions across Europe with either partial monopolies or product prohibitions to move to a multi-licensing system.

EGBA secretary general Maarten Hajer believes “the time has come for the last



remaining European countries to embrace this optimal form of online regulation”.

The EGBA’s research revealed that 27 of 31 European countries have adopted some form of multi-licensing, “indicating a robust trend towards open, competitive markets.” Finland is among the four countries that do

not have multi-licensing, although the market is transitioning to a multi-licensing model by 2026. Iceland and Norway maintain exclusive rights models, while Luxembourg lacks dedicated regulations for online gambling, the EGBA noted.

“The momentum towards full

multi-licensing for online gambling in Europe is undeniable,” Hajer concluded. “While a few exceptions still exist, governments are concluding that public policy objectives, particularly related to consumer protection and tax generation, are more effectively met through well-regulated online competition.”