

## GSGB's 'unreliable' new data delivers more confusion and misconceptions on gambling

The Gambling Commission put its reputation on the line this week when it launched the Gambling Survey for Great Britain 2023.

Its reputation was at stake because this was the first GSGB using the widely criticised new methodology which the regulator had pushed through with all its might - and against seven "urgent" recommendations lodged by the GC's own appointed independent assessor.

And following Thursday's launch, it's reputation is still very much on the line.

Why? Well, its new process for compiling gambling prevalence figures was not greeted with whoops and cheers. Indeed, for those that matter, it was met more with sighs and disenchantment.

And for the industry, the survey held no surprises - the trade associations had warned the Commission that the data was unreliable - and it was proved right in bucket loads.

It warned that it would inflate problem gambling numbers - a concern backed by the Commission's independent assessor and even acknowledged by GamCom itself - and yet that's exactly what happened.

Although comparatives with previous data has been banned by the Commission - yes, it is reinventing history, or as it prefers to claim, establishing 'a new baseline against which future changes can be compared' - comparisons have still been made in defiance to the regulator's instruction.

That new baseline for problem

GAMBLING SURVEY FOR GREAT BRITAIN

It was a tough day at the office for the **Gambling Commission** on Thursday as it unveiled the first set of official statistics under its controversial and widely criticised new methodology. In its effort to reset the dial and create a new baseline for gambling statistics, the regulator is finding out how trying to wipe out gambling history, controlling the messaging and shaping the narrative around the tiny few rather than the overwhelming majority isn't going to be easy.



gambling is now 2.5 percent - or as the anti-gambling media swiftly reported just a few hours later - 1.3 million people were problem gamblers.

The previous surveys have ranged between 0.2-0.4 percent of the population for the best part of five-seven years, and although the criteria is very, very different, it certainly isn't seen that way out in the big wide world this morning.

The Guardian headline screams "Harm from problem gambling in Britain" may be eight times higher than thought".

In this new world order, a great old saying can be sampled and re-released - there are now 'lies, damned lies and Gambling Commission statistics'.

That might seem a little harsh on the Commission; just one week earlier it had despatched an authoritative - and welcome - Guide on how to use the new statistics - and let's just say the Guardian didn't pay too

much respect to the 2,540 word document.

"We are aware that official statistics on gambling have previously been used in ways that they were not intended and, in some cases, the data was misused," the regulator stated in its Guide. Really.

It's going to be a rough ride for the new GSGB. The Guardian might well be the first to defy the Commission's guidance, but it certainly won't be the last; local planning objections could be fuelled; hypocritical banks might make lending more difficult - the fall-out from this week's unreliable and untrustworthy statistics could be immense.

The Racing Post contacted the government for a response shortly after the statistics were released, and the answer was diplomatic, though not necessarily encouraging.

"The British government has said it will "carefully" consider the find-

ings of a controversial new gambling survey published by the Gambling Commission," it reported, adding the government's response: "The Gambling Commission's new survey helps to show the wider picture of gambling behaviour across Great Britain and we will consider its findings carefully."

These are high stakes regulatory games that will have a crucial bearing on the low stakes gaming and gambling industry. And, after this week's GSGB release, there will be fingers jabbing hard into the chests of Commission seniors for, many say, arrogantly dismissing the concerns from all stakeholders.

Chief among those in the firing line, most likely, will be Tim Miller, executive director of research and policy at the Gambling Commission, who was at least consistent in his disinterest: "One of our aims as a regulator is to ensure we gather the best possible evidence on gambling - and today's publication is the next significant step forward in our journey on creating a robust source of evidence for gambling in Great Britain."

The problem gambling stats were, obviously, the GSGB centrepiece - no fewer than 16 tables dedicated to some incredibly intrusive problem gambling data sets, and funnily enough, not one table dedicated to land based machines. But, there were still a

few industry related figures in the regulator's survey. Phew, who would have expected that?

But these stats were not necessarily new baseline levels. It was a familiar pattern as found in previous surveys: 48 percent of people gambled, although 21 pc of those were solely National Lottery players. Online players beat land based 37-29 percent; men favoured gambling more than women by 52 pc to 44; only one in five gave gambling a negative score; 70 percent gambled for fun and 55 pc because they thought it was exciting.

In total there were 32 key tables in the annual survey - exactly half dedicated to problem gambling and only one quarter focused on player activities, be it in venue or online, lottery or other gambling activities.

For an industry related participation report, we might see one released in the coming weeks as key operators have been compiling their own statistics to cross check the validity of the Gambling Commission's new look statistics baseline. And from what Coinslot understands, there is a fairly wide differentiation between the actual player participation and the online survey conducted by the Commission.

Now that would be a bitter blow to the reputation of the Gambling Survey for Great Britain.

### RESPONSE TO GSGB:

## Gambling Business Group

PETER HANNIBAL, CEO, GAMBLING BUSINESS GROUP

The first GSGB under the new methodology was always going to come under intense scrutiny, and it's important that the Commission views the early responses as constructive input and observations that are designed to help make the survey a gold standard process.



I will say from the first edition, it's some way off achieving that level - and I believe the Commission would agree with that too.

It's fair to say that it is a comprehensive and ambitious programme, but it's one that requires significant refinement. The questions on problem gambling, for example, need a stronger degree of balance. There is a sense of leading in some of the questions and that should be addressed.

One of the stand-out statistics is the number of people who simply are not interested in completing the survey - that is a figure that requires

note and adds an important reference point to the analysis.

That might have something to do with the intrusive nature of the new survey, but it does add weight to the argument that the statistics are unreliable. In truth, we should be very clear, and the Commission to its credit has acknowledged this too; these statistics are not reliable. However, the Commission must ensure that adjustments are made as soon as possible to change that. There are seven recommendations from the independent assessor that are oven ready to improve trust in the survey. We would urge the Commission to implement these immediately, however what they have done is to charge ahead with the 2024 surveys before implementing Sturgis's recommenda-

tions. Therefore, when these next results are published in 2025, they too will be equally flawed.

The lack of comparisons is also a major concern: the Sturgis recommendations will, if implemented honestly, have a (yet to be determined) level of impact on the outcomes of future versions of the GSGB, it is going to be at least two years after that before we will see clear and reliable trends and patterns from the new methodology - and acting on them will take even longer.

We would urge the Commission to continue with the quarterly telephone surveys so that the industry and regulator can maintain consistency and continue to assess movements in the problem gambling levels until the GSGB can relied upon - and attend to them

immediately.

And then there's the use of these new figures: the Commission should be commended for its commitment to control the use and interpretation of the data. But it only took an hour before media were reporting that problem gambling could be eight times higher than previously thought.

That is a gross misinterpretation of statistics that are caveated with an 'unreliable' stamp. The Commission must act vigorously and publicly on this misinformation - we are all waiting to see what is it going to do about this and all future instances?

There is much to work on, but the industry will continue to lend its advice on improving the new methodology.