

## The latest licensing statistics set the scene for further engagement on more consistent inspection procedures says Charlotte Meller

LICENSING

**Licensing inspections** at core gambling venues continue to rise, albeit probably not in line with the proposed rising cost of licensing fees themselves. Charlotte Meller, the Gambling Business Group's general manager, talks us through the data and keeps her focus on how to work with licensing authorities to ensure the inspections and visits have a consistent procedure.

There was an odd mix of results from the annual Licensing Authority Statistics which were released by the Gambling Commission recently.

Visits and inspections at gambling venues across the country through to March 2024 were down 9 percent in total, with the 2,194 tally continuing to level out at circa 1,000 less visits than the number conducted in pre-Covid days.

Before the masses start revolting and claiming the industry is operating unchecked at the local level, this is simply not the case.

A deeper dive into the statistics shows a rise in visits to AGCs, FECs, bingo clubs and LBOs, as the authorities begin to draw their inspection numbers back closer to 2019 levels.

The majority of visits to gambling licensed premises were LBOs (1,219 +105), followed by AGCs (347 +85), bingo clubs (99 +5), FECs (97 +9), casinos (18 - 8) and tracks (17).

So, why the decline in the overall number of inspections through to March 2024? This comes in the 'Other' category - venues such as clubs and pubs - which have seen a fall in visits from 808 to 397.

With high street gaming and gambling operations undergoing a rising number of inspections during the year, what is impressive is the relatively low number enforced through complaints.



For AGCs, only 17 inspections last year were conducted as a result of public complaints - barely 1 in 30 venues. For bingo there was only one inspection resulting from a complaint; FECs only 6, and encouragingly for the bookies, just 15.

Charlotte Meller, General Manager at the Gambling Business Group, is one of the most active figures on the industry's local authority relations; for her, these latest figures were a tough batch to draw conclusions.

"We watch these stats very closely every year, and it's something we discuss regularly with the Institute of Licensing. I will say we were surprised at the number of



authorities who didn't respond to the Commission request for data. This numbered 20 - including many very active and vocal in the

gambling debate," she said.

But Meller was quick to note the more positive side of authority engagement at the local level. "For the land based operators, it's always good to receive the local authority's declaration of approval from their visits - and it's a message that needs to be sent out to a broader audience. The industry is the most regulated and monitored on our high streets, and these stats simply don't support any of the objections lodged in planning applications for gaming and gambling premises at the moment."

It's a somewhat strange position. The data that actually refutes council objections to gambling licence applications is the data that's compiled and collated by the local authorities themselves and it confirms that there are relatively few complaints received about gambling premises.

Meller understands this political conundrum and she sees solutions in building the relationship between the industry and the authorities. "Gambling is just one element on the licensing officers radar and we are working very closely with the Institute of Licensing, the professional body for council licensing officers, to raise awareness of how gambling premises are run through a series of articles and also by offering familiarisation visits to gambling premises. The high street operators are well versed in the licens-

ing requirements - it's their lifeblood. But licensing officers are conducting visits to all types of business from taxi ranks to cafes. Better understanding of gambling legislation would enable better engagement with, and understanding of, gambling licensed premises and the controls and policies in place. This in turn, we expect, would reduce the number of spurious objections to well regulated premises on the high street."

But this closer understanding at operator and high street level, Meller believes, will also serve to build trust in local authority mechanisms. "These are tough times economically, and there is no doubt that authorities themselves, as well as our own operators, need to drive income. It's fair to say that there was disquiet voiced at the recent proposed blanket increase in premises licensing fees. But further engagement and working together on building consistent inspection procedures will be a valuable investment from the additional fees. They will deliver the kind of progressive action that will reassure the local community that the Licensing Authority has checked that local licensed gambling premises (and other venues siting machines) are compliant and meeting the required social responsibility obligations; and that any illegal gambling has been investigated and dealt with."

## InBrief

### Alton Towers closes Wicker Man ride after fire

#### Alton Towers

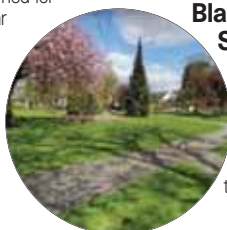
has closed its Wicker Man ride "until further notice," following the sighting of smoke on 26 July. "Operations on Wicker Man were paused after reports of smoke in the ride area," said a spokesperson. "At this stage we believe the cause of the smoke was the result of a foreign object."



Technical teams will now carry out essential maintenance on the ride.

### Barker's Amusements open in Nuneaton after Bedworth park obstruction

Barker's Amusements has not returned for its regular summer residency in Bedworth Miners Welfare Park this year, as construction work takes



place in the area. "Please be advised that while we cannot visit Bedworth this year, we are only a couple of miles away in Nuneaton on the Pingles Field," said a spokesperson. "We are open everyday until Sunday 4 August."

### Teacups added to Blakes Amusements in Silloth

Silloth outdoor fun park Blakes Amusements has added Teacups to its range of family rides, offering one lucky winner a free ride on the new attraction. "Fancy tak-



ing our new ride for a spin?" said a spokesperson. "Follow the steps [below] to be in with a chance to win a free ride up to four people. Like or follow our page, tag a friend, and share this post on Facebook or Instagram."

### Wexel installs BingoPlus at LOL Bingo Wallsend

Wexel Gaming has installed its BingoPlus product at LOL Bingo's latest site in Wallsend, following "great success" at the company's first venue in Harpurhey, with a spokesperson adding "we expect the same great results in Wallsend."

The lounge opened on 28 June, and features 38 electronic BingoPlus positions. "Thank you to Mike Smith and his team at LOL Bingo for the continued support of BingoPlus."

