

# A Welcome Break: Perspectives on player protection, compliance, and future plans



By Nick Jackson, Head of Commercial Income at Welcome Break

**M**otorway Service Areas (MSAs) were once described as a high street in a town all of their own. The life-blood of the UK's road network, MSAs may sit outside the town and city centres, but they serve as the gateway to the local communities signposted along the route of every medium-to-long distance car journey made in this country. One of the largest motorway service operators is Welcome Break which has 59 service areas and 31 hotels in key locations across the road system. And they operate to the highest of standards in health, safety, and yes, gaming regulation. As part of their leisure and entertainment offering, Welcome Break operates gaming arcades for all their customers taking a break from their journey - and it's one of their most important services. Not surprisingly, social responsibility is a top priority: they belong to the widely acclaimed trade association the Gambling Business Group, working with the body in broadening the industry's response to compliance and player protection. Nick Jackson, Head of Commercial Income at Welcome Break, talks to IoL LINK about what drives the organisation in terms of delivering quality service and a safe and entertaining environment for its customers, and its philosophy of fostering relationships that generate a mutual understanding. If you thought a motorway service station was just about a quick comfort break - think again. Welcome to the world of Welcome Break.

**You've got motorway service areas across the country, all delivering a top-quality AGC or amusements offering. How do you rate your player protection, social responsibility, and customer care services?**

At Welcome Break, we prioritise player protection, social responsibility and customer care as fundamental pillars of our business.

Our commitment to these aspects is reflected in our comprehensive training programmes for Team Members, stringent age verification processes and third party testing, and regular internal audits to ensure compliance. We also actively engage with customers to gather feedback, allowing us to continuously enhance our services and address any concerns promptly.

**As a member of the Gambling Business Group, you recently took part in a joint compliance initiative with Worcestershire Regulatory Services to explore the application of player safety measures. How did that go?**

Our collaboration with licensing officers from Worcestershire Regulatory Services was a valuable experience.

It provided us with the opportunity to share insights, best practices, and discuss the latest developments in player safety measures. This initiative reinforced our commitment



Warwick Welcome Break motorway services by Steve Fareham

to staying at the forefront of industry standards and working collaboratively with licensing authorities to ensure a safe and responsible gambling environment.

**You work very closely with trade body the Gambling Business Group on legislative and regulation issues. What would you like to see delivered in gambling legislation post-White Paper consultation, and what current ideas being floated worry you?**

Post-consultation, we hope for a regulatory framework that strikes a balance between ensuring player protection and supporting a thriving industry. Clarity and consistency in regulations are crucial for businesses to plan effectively. While we appreciate the ongoing consultations and dialogue, our concern lies in potential regulatory changes that may inadvertently stifle innovation or create unnecessary burdens for businesses.

**By its very nature, the industry is always one step ahead of regulators when it comes to innovation. Would you say that's the same when it comes to compliance, especially given the level that you have taken your AGCs to?**

Innovation and compliance go hand in hand at Welcome Break. We continuously invest in cutting-edge technologies and training programmes to stay ahead of industry trends while ensuring robust compliance.

Our approach is to proactively anticipate regulatory changes and incorporate them into our operations, thereby maintaining a balance between innovation and adherence to compliance standards.

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



By Charlotte Meller, Gambling Business Group

Licensing officers will know Gambling Business Group General Manager Charlotte Meller from her presentations at a number of IoL training events. The woman behind the campaign to forge closer links between gambling operations and licensing departments, Meller has worked for councils, police commissions and the Gambling Commission for over 20 years. Here she picks up with Welcome Break’s Nick Jackson and IoL Link to explore 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 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. And staff will make regular physical visits to the AGC, which are logged on the monitoring system.

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."