

UK licensing officers gain insight to how the gaming industry is stepping up its commitment to advancing SR, customer care and compliance innovations



By Charlotte Meller and Ken Scott, The Gambling Business Group

The Gambling Business Group (GBG) hosted the first ever assembly of local authority licensing officials at a gaming exhibition when 20 officers from councils across the south and south east visited its High Street Hub at the world's largest industry exhibition in London in February. They participated in one-to-one sessions with GBG specialists, Q&As and a tour of stands at the ICE London expo. Described by IOL Vice Chair David Lucas as "an excellent opportunity for practical engagement between the two bodies", the assembly offered the officials a chance to see new customer care protections and to discuss directly issues they face in the licensing process.

This year's ICE London exhibition was the largest gaming and gambling expo the world has ever seen. Almost 50,000 visitors from 168 countries, including 14,000 gambling operators from every jurisdiction in the world, occupied the ExCeL Centre for three days of trading, seminars, conferences and an estimated 1 million meetings.

In the centre of the 20 packed halls was the Gambling Business Group's High Street Hub which provided a forum for UK businesses to seek guidance and advice on licensing, operational and compliance issues in relation to land based gambling premises.

Special guests this year were 20 local authority officials from councils around the south of England - who had all taken up the GBG/IOLs invite to see how the industry is

driving innovation with social responsibility at the heart of that development.

And they were in esteemed company at the expo. Andrew Rhodes, chief executive of the Gambling Commission, was at ICE delivering the keynote speech on regulation at the Consumer Protection Zone; 200+ regulators from around the world attended ICE for the World Regulatory Briefing ranging from North America's Tribal Gaming regulators to those in Ukraine. It was a show not just about business, but also about the industry's social responsibility programmes which featured prominently across the three days, from the conference stage to the exhibition showfloor with new innovations covering age verification software and player protection systems to staff safety measures all on display.

Gambling Business Group chief executive Peter Hannibal described this year's High Street Hub as a resounding success and a "show that expanded the horizons."

One of those horizons was the partnership event with the IOL and the attendance of the local authority licensing officers

So, how did the trade body assess their reaction? Charlotte Meller, general manager at GBG, was enthused: "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 when they were



attending. But it was still a shock! We were able to provide them with sessions with our GBG experts and a tour, and then many of them spent time looking around the rest of the exhibition taking in the innovations."

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

Meller again: "We wanted to give the officers an opportunity to raise questions so we established small groups giving them the best opportunity to speak to our experts about. We aimed for a wide ranging set of subjects, covering compliance using SmartHub (Boomerang Digital); security using StaffGuard (Link Integrated); age verification (Age Check Certification Scheme); machines (RBW Systems) and licensing matters (IOL/GBG). The officers were able to rotate between the experts every 20 minutes. It was a kind of gambling speed dating."

And with significant 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."

One of the experts on hand at the High Street Hub was Craig Murray, Director of Gaming & High Street

National Accounts at Link Integrated Security Solutions, the company behind StaffGuard.

A GBG member, Murray was delighted to take the licensing officers on a journey around the safety protection measures. Fielding questions from the delegates, he was reassuring: "The system, supported by a fully accredited conflict management centre and SIA licensed team, offers 24/7 support to quickly de-escalate conflict situations and threats through real-time high-definition video and crystal-clear audio links.

The solution also works in conjunction with a premises own CCTV and Security Solutions to provide a fully integrated solution that can provide real time evidence and information to the Emergency Services. It is also working in conjunction with other High Street initiatives to provide further support to staff and general public." And it's certainly having an impact as Murray explained: "This technological solution has contributed to a decrease in violent incidents and has been embraced by many high street organisations as a part of their security and safety strategies."

The buzz on the show floor was very much focused on the age verification systems which are becoming more advanced as technology develops. The latest AV currently rolling out in high street AGCs, pubs and bingo clubs is achieving significant accuracy success as evidenced on the GBG Hub which had two machines available to test the system, which a number of officers were able to experience.



Tony Allen, Chief Executive of Age Check Certification Scheme (ACCS) and Co Chair of Government's Expert Panel on Age Restrictions, was on hand to explain how the ACCS plays a pivotal role in aiding land-based gambling operators to adhere to stringent age verification requirements.

"With a focus on responsible gambling, the Scheme provides operators with a confidence that age verification and age estimation solutions actually work and meet international standards," he explained during the show. "The comprehensive framework ensures strict age restrictions are maintained, safeguarding minors from engaging in gambling activities. By implementing this certification, operators gain access to reliable age verification technologies and methodologies, bolstering their ability to accurately confirm the age of patrons."

This process includes robust ID checks, biometric verification, and advanced age estimation techniques, a point Allen was quick to reinforce. "The scheme acts as a proactive measure, assisting operators in preventing underage individuals from accessing gambling establishments or participating in related activities. It mitigates the risk of legal repercussions, financial penalties, and reputational damage associated with non-compliance, reinforcing the industry's commitment to promoting a safe and enjoyable gambling experience for adults while protecting vulnerable populations from the potential harms of gambling."

Rob Wheeler, whose RBW Systems business is expanding rapidly, met with the officers to discuss the way IT is transforming the industry's social responsibility activities. During his Q&A session with the licensing officers, he explained how the introduction of PC based

digital machines has opened opportunities to transform the gaming floor.

"The availability of IT infrastructures that have been used in other commercial environments, allows for the introduction of multiple system related functions that are supplied by different suppliers," he advised the council delegates. "The creation and adoption by all primary games and system suppliers of standard web based protocols has allowed for cost effective delivery of new functions such as ticket and payment card based cashless funds on and off the machines, promotional ticketing, Machine Data Capture including sessional play."

And it's this data that is enabling businesses and the Gambling Commission to work on advancing measures to protect players.

Howard Gant, Managing Director Compliance Operations at Boomerang, spent time explaining the features of SmartHub – a suite of products that both helps operators comply with operator licence conditions whilst at the same time demonstrating their operational commitment to the provision of safer gambling. And there are now over 2,000 land-based UK venues using SmartHub self-exclusion solution including casinos, AGCs, bingo and MSAs.

Gant explained the function: "SmartHUB provides staff with a user friendly and highly intuitive front end tablet, which they use to record a whole raft of information including - customer interactions, self exclusions, age verification checks, complaints as well as to log any in-premises incidence of fraud such as the use of fake notes."

The dialogue at the ICE show 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.

After spending time with the experts, it was on to the showfloor, and a tour of key manufacturers - including global giant Light & Wonder and the pioneering UK tech company making significant progress in the age verification market, Innovative Technology - conducted by the GBG. "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 wanted to understand how cashless systems would operate." Charlotte Meller said the event 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. 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 licencing authorities?

“Well, we have a partnership with the Institute of Licensing with the regular articles in the IOL publications and speak at IOL events.

“However, the ICE expo 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 for more engagement of this kind



And David Lucas, IOL vice chair, agreed. “The Institute of Licensing is pleased to be working with the Gambling Business Group to enhance awareness and develop the relationship between operators of gambling premises and licensing authorities. It is beneficial to the members of both organisations for them to understand the different issues that they each face and how they can work together effectively.

“The event at ICE earlier this year provided an excellent opportunity for practical engagement between the two bodies and other stakeholders. Further opportunities for communication exist through regular articles in the Institute’s publications and attendance at Conferences and other meetings.

“At a time when resources are limited for all concerned, the partnership between the IoL and the GBG is a positive and effective benefit to their members.”

