

Interview

CHARLOTTE MELLER GENERAL MANAGER GAMBLING BUSINESS GROUP

Charlotte Meller: “We must get a workable and progressive GAR over the line and ensure the engagement of the Commission and DCMS in introducing changes that will drive growth”

Coinslot: You're now into your third year as General Manager at the Gambling Business Group, but Charlotte Meller has been around for a while. Looking at your CV, you're no mug! Nine years at the local government group LACORS, two years with the Crime Commissioner's Office at South Wales Police and then, of course, nine years at the Gambling Commission. What's life like on the business side of the industry divide after a lengthy time in regulatory roles?

Charlotte Meller: Same, same but different!

One thing you can never lose sight of is that the legislation, the regulators and consumers are all the same no matter which camp you are working in.

The difference for us is how much of a role we can play in making changes to legislation. From our side of the divide as you put it, it's important to recognise that an industry that works together to present its evidence and views, whilst it won't always achieve what it wants, has a significantly greater chance when it speaks with one voice rather than working in silos.

I think when you have worked on all sides - in my case at the Gambling Commission and the local licensing regulators via LACORS, and now at the Gambling Business Group - there may be differences in

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assumed the role of General Manager at the Gambling Business Group in 2022. She knows more than most about gambling regulation and legislation having navigated her way through the Budd Report during her time at LACORS and the Gambling Commission - the first major change in gambling law for 40 years back in 2005. Always diplomatic, even when challenging the regulator or government departments, Meller has been a major advocate of modernisation for the industry - within a framework of compliance, social responsibility commitments and partnership working. Here she talks to Coinslot about how change is afoot - but there's a lot of work to make sure it's change for the better.

what the two parties want. But you can't lose sight of the fact that we're both working to uphold the same three licensing objectives and putting the customers first.

Coinslot: Interesting you say that, because the mainstream narrative that many people like to portray is that the regulators do, but the industry doesn't?

Charlotte Meller: (laughs): I've heard that a few times! In truth, though, I've had the advantage of working on both sides and I really do believe that we in so many ways have a far better understanding of what the customers want and, most importantly, don't want.

And if I had to highlight the one difference about 'life on the business side', I think it's the fact that the industry does see its customers as real people - no matter how much they play, we're there to serve and look after them. If we don't engage and listen to them - all of them - we lose them.

The regulator, however, tends to focus mainly on the few customers, those with a less positive lived experience. And that tends to shape a more restrictive regulatory mindset which can risk some turning to the illegal markets where there are no protections in place.

Coinslot: Talk to us a little about your vision for the Gambling Business Group and how you want to position its role in industry politics

going forward?

Charlotte Meller: Our focus remains very clear: we want to be the respected voice for the cross-sector land-based gambling industry with social responsibility at the heart of everything we do.

The strategic aims which we set last year remain the vision for the GBG. And the work we undertake this year will contribute to furthering those aims.

Coinslot: We always like to talk achievements and successes, obviously. So, over the last few years, how has the GBG developed and evolved?

Charlotte Meller: Bearing in mind I have spent a lot of my career in authority and regulatory posts, I would say that the GBG's partnership with the Institute of Licensing (IOL) is a stand out.

It was an area that the industry had never really engaged in, which was odd really considering the vital role that licensing authorities play in the land-based arena.

But the GBG saw working jointly with the local regulators as one of its key strategic aims over the past two years and continues to be as we develop and consolidate the relationship via the IOL (the professional body for local authority licensing officers).

And that partnership and closer ties between the IOL and our Members will feature prominently

in our activities over the coming year.

Of course, engagement and a strong working relationship with central government - primarily DCMS and the Gambling Commission - is a must, but for land-based gambling businesses, which is the focus of the GBG, engagement with those local licensing officers is paramount.

Another success has been our High Street Hub which we expanded at ICE last year and proved to be really successful. It involved our Members offering advisory sessions and we also hosted many licensing authorities.

In April, the High Street Hub will be at the ARE Expo where we will be working with our Members again to host a range of workshops for the industry on topical issues and showcasing some of the technology used by land-based operators to meet their licensing obligations.

Additionally, we are engaging with the IOL to develop a programme for licensing authorities especially those in the NW/NE/North Wales/Midlands.

Coinslot: Going back to when you started at GBG - you certainly picked your time to join the trade group - in the midst of a stuttering Gambling Review and an industry only just recovering from the impact of Covid shut downs and supply chain issues. How did that come about?

Charlotte Meller: Well, 2020 was a year of big change in my life - I left London after 22 years and moved back to South Wales.

I left the Gambling Commission after around nine years. And then there was Covid - which had a huge impact on everyone's lives and massively changed the hospitality sector, not least the land-based gambling industry.

Coinslot: They were tough times for high street businesses. But since Covid, the wheels of change are moving, albeit very slowly, and you have been a consistent voice of proactive change and the need to ease regulation. Are we seeing a shift in gear from the regulator?

Charlotte Meller: Before I answer that, it's probably important to get a sense of perspective on how that pace of change slowed.

Over the past four years, the Gambling Commission has also gone through a lot of change - many of my former colleagues took voluntary redundancy at the same time as I did. Then, there was a new interim (and then a fully-fledged) CEO to oversee the Commission's contributions to the Gambling Act Review, deal with the 4th National Lottery contract and to try to build bridges and improve the relationship with industry.

And to be fair, especially with the last point, change was necessary.

Whether it has achieved what we'd like, that's a different matter. There is still a lot of work to be done but we are certainly in a different place in terms of the relationship between the regulator and the industry.

Coinslot: So, how would you describe this 'different place'?

Charlotte Meller: Well, most importantly, the Commission believes we are moving in the right direction. If you chart the public comments of Andrew Rhodes from 2021 through to 2024, we've moved a long way away from his first Advisory Board note that "the gambling industry is below the regulatory standards, and it is too far away for self-regulation" And in the same meeting the papers state: "Andrew noted that we need to find the thing that hurts - for gambling businesses reputation and customer perception does not have as much impact".

Within two years, the wheels were definitely turning in the right direction, with the GC CEO noting: "The industry has made progress and I want to thank the many operators in the room today and your trade bodies for having worked with the Commission to achieve this step forward."

And last year, Andrew Rhodes reported that "all things develop over time and we see a much-changed picture today."

That can be considered progress and a major step towards



us taking control of our situation.

The sentiments in the White Paper are definitely a sign of direction for us to follow.

It said: 'Just because "millions (of us) enjoy gambling every year and most suffer no ill effects industry should never become complacent.'

And that message is cutting through at all levels of the land-based sector, which is a crucial shift.

If we're serious about greater self-regulation, then we must all strive to continually improve standards and meet every increasing consumer expectation and improve the reputation of gambling.

It's not unreasonable to say that we, too, also have to constantly improve our level of engagement with the regulator. We can't let standards slip; we can't loosen our grip on social responsibility commitments, and we have to continue to raise the bar on compliance.

We must keep on evolving. Standing still is effectively going backwards.

Coinslot: 2025 - threats and oppor-

A lot at Stake

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tunities? Technical standards, debit card use, stakes and prizes - what's the Meller perspective going forward this year?

Charlotte Meller: I suppose we have to start with the well documented threats to the industry: they remain many-fold and not just because of the legislative situation, but equally important is the economic position and the very worrying effect the recent budget is going to have on high street operations.

The impact of the delays to the GAR are well known. We've made it very clear that the delay has set the industry back. Change has been five years in the making so far, and there's still another year possibly before the industry can really hit the go button.

That's far too long a time to be in limbo.

And, unfortunately, we should add a caveat to that: we haven't got a definitive steer to work with yet. And what is an increasing concern is the reality of government making changes to the land-based GAR proposals that were published last May. The change to the levy percentages

has set a precedent for this.

Whilst the government has said they would look at all the evidence, the longer the delay, the more the risk that they only listen to the Gambling Survey for Great Britain (GSGB) statistics given that that they are frequently quoted in media and by MPs.

And we all know the problem here: there remains substantial question marks over the GSGB's accuracy - it is, in the words of the Commission's independent assessor unreliable. This is a threat and one the industry needs to continue being rigorous in challenging.

Coinslot: And what about the opportunities?

Charlotte Meller: We're all conscious that we have to keep looking for opportunities and we still have a very small window to guide the GAR back into territory that will enable growth and development for the industry.

I believe this has been forgotten in the current GAR narrative and it's probably our strongest argument at the moment - the government is insisting that regulators seek growth opportunities in the industries they're charged with.

The Gambling Commission - and the DCMS - might be more amenable to change that delivers innovation.

And for operators, if we are looking for real opportunities these have to come in the shape of a stakes and prize uplift. We haven't had one for a decade and that in itself is a ridiculous position.

We must drive that case forward despite the government making it clear that an S&P review is not going to happen until after the GAR proposals are progressed.

It's an unsustainable position to maintain by the government - you cannot generate growth without opening up opportunities.

And then there's the prospects from technology which will have a key role in Gaming Machine Technical Standards and cashless changes if they go ahead.

We have a large number of battles ahead - the timing of the GAR, the Ombudsman, possible licence fee charge hikes, and we haven't even touched on the full impact of employers NI and minimum wage costs.

It's going to be one of the busiest and tumultuous years for the industry, but one that could transform it for the better.

And we will be fighting the land-based industry's corner - our members are one of the important investors on the UK's high streets. If there was ever a time for both sides of the divide to work in partnership, this is it.

There's too much at stake for the economy, the business sector and local communities that need a vibrant high street.

We must get a workable and progressive GAR over the line and ensure the engagement of the Commission and DCMS in introducing changes that will drive growth.