

Coinslot

July 4 - July 10, 2025 • No. 2948 • www.coinslotuk

I N T E R N A T I O N A L



“I still haven’t found what I’m looking for”: Peter Hannibal goes in search of proliferation

GAMBLING PROLIFERATION DEBATE

Gambling Business Group chief executive **Peter Hannibal** hit the north London high streets recently to see exactly what some council leaders mean when they shout proliferation. According to official local authority records and the Gambling Commission, gambling premises on the high streets are down by more than one third over the last 15 years. So what did he find?

When the leader of Brent Council, joined by 37 other authorities, wrote to the government a few months ago expressing outrage at the proliferation of gambling premises on the UK's high streets, it drew in all the media luvvies desperate to sound their own signals of virtue. The preening city mayors, the sanctimonious MPs, the ambulance chasing third sector research charities hoping to make capital on the financial opportunities that may arise out of the debate - febrile certainly feeds funding.

Missing from the discourse which expanded from proliferation to clustering to blight and then to preying on the poor... was, of course, the key facts and evidence: in truth, there are fewer gambling establishments on the UK high streets now than fifteen years ago, and the numbers are not rising.

So how did we get to a situation where the gambling minister found himself traipsing up and down Brent high street looking for gambling venues; the MP for Peterborough knocking on the door of 10 Downing Street to seek change - a somewhat ironic image given that is where the worst incidence of gambling proliferation occurred last year with 15 people, all likely very well paid people, were charged with breaking betting rules at the last general election.

Keeping close watch on all these proceedings was Peter Hannibal, chief executive of the Gambling Business Group, who wrote to Brent council leader Muhammed Butt to correct his narrative with the gambling facts; invited Baroness Twycross to attend some venues to obtain the full picture; and consistently provided a voice of sanity in what had become a mad situation.

So last week, the GBG chief put on his comfy footwear and decided to walk a few miles in the shoes of Cllr Butt and Baroness Twycross up and down the high streets in question in



PETER HANNIBAL ENDS HIS HIGH STREET TOUR WITH GBG MEMBER GAME NATION WHOSE INVESTMENT WAS ONE OF THE STAND-OUTS FROM HIS WALKABOUT

search of the proliferation problem.

"I decided to walk the length of Camden High Street and Kilburn High Road," Hannibal told Coinslot. "They were the kind of north London boroughs similar to those Councillor Butt was referencing. They included a higher density of low income residents, the high streets were key to the local communities and economics and they represented the story of the declining high street ebb and flow resonating around the UK."

Tracing footsteps that the gambling minister would have made a few weeks earlier in nearby Brent, Hannibal made the journey with a slightly different understanding; he knew the statistics and data - AGCs, for example, are 35 percent lower in numbers than in 2019.

"I went to look for proliferation and clustering," he explained. "They have become the buzz words being turned rapidly into so-called facts. But the reality, especially on these two high streets, is simply not supporting this image."

So you ran, climbed and scaled Camden and Kilburn's city walls - did you find what you're looking for?

Hannibal, while not a die-hard U2 fan, got the joke; but no, he didn't find the proliferation, nor the

clustering.

He still hasn't found what he's looking for.

"I saw a number of AGCs and betting shops on the high streets, but not in the way some council leaders and politicians are representing it. They weren't next door or two or three shops away from one another - we are talking hundreds of yards and half a mile away from one another," he explained.

So, no proliferation or clustering? Hannibal was quick to put us back on track.

"We need to start the journey from a premise of fact"

"There is no proliferation of gambling premises in the UK," he stated definitively.

"The land based sector has been in decline for ten to fifteen years and the numbers are still falling.

"There are one third less gambling venues on the UK's high streets than there were in 2011.

"It's ridiculous and a false misrepresentation to say otherwise. The actual figures are an open record: they are published by the Gambling Commission based on the official licences awarded by the councils themselves. Council leaders and MPs should be checking these figures and facts handed to them

before making false statements."

It's clear the facts do not back the narrative being presented by the councillors - and by some margin - but there's still something that's concerning them?

"I found both high streets fighting hard to recover, if I had to be honest. And, I agree, I would also be concerned about the state of many high streets, especially in places like Brent. But it's not the fault of gambling operators," Hannibal hit back.

"When you walk the length of Camden and Kilburn high streets as I did, the gambling operations stood out but not for the reasons claimed.

"They stood out because they are well managed and well presented," he stated with assurance.

"What was noticeable was the actual investment into those streets was coming from the AGCs and betting shops - that was an eye-opener for the visit."

"It wasn't the banks - they have deserted the UK's high streets; it wasn't the big brands, or the quaint little local designer shops. And there was no sense of investment from the local authority - in fact, some people there would rightly feel the councils

have abandoned them. It was the businesses on the high streets, and this a strong shout out to the gambling operations, who were working hard to raise the quality on the high streets."

We hear what you're saying, but in fairness, you would say that wouldn't you? Hannibal responded forcefully. "Yes, I would. But it was and is a fact. And facts matter."

That was a deliberate nod to Councillor Butt in Brent, Baroness Twycross and even Sir Keir Starmer who was drawn into the debate by Peterborough MP Andrew Pakes - facts and evidence do matter.

"I have been the strongest advocate for gambling policy to be based on evidence and facts," Hannibal noted. "And frankly, they seem to be the only things that are currently ignored in the gambling discourse.

"We have the mayors and council leaders talking about proliferation - and yet the number of gambling venues on our high streets are at their lowest levels for more than a decade.

"This is decline not proliferation. And yet our council leaders and mayors simply refuse to acknowledge it."

SO HOW HAS 'PROLIFERATION' BECOME THE BUZZ-WORD? P06

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