

Aim to Permit - the gambling debate is more emotive than ever

By The Gambling Business Group

2026 is going to be a landmark year for the gambling, gaming and amusement sectors as they prepare for new legislation, new regulation and, if the first gambling debate of the year in Parliament is anything to go by, even more push back - and more appeal costs - concerning applications for high street gambling premises. The Gambling Business Group outlines some of the primary issues in the debate.

Key changes on the horizon

Whilst some land-based elements of the Gambling Act Review April 2023 have been implemented, the current Government has yet to decide whether or not to progress matters such as the Ombudsman or changes to the 80:20 machine ratio and increases to licensing fees are tied up with a wider review of council fees.

However, we are expecting some key changes this year:

- The Gambling Commission's response to last year's consultation on Gaming Machines Technical Standards is expected in the first part of the year which will introduce more player protection controls through changes to game features, display notices and general machine operation.
- Later in the year the DCMS will advise on the outcome of its consultations on Category D machines and proposed changes to bingo licensing. The latter could have a real impact on operators and local authorities if premises that have hitherto operated as high street bingo have to apply to both planning and licensing to change to an Adult Gaming Centre, particularly the potential for costly appeals.
- Then there is the Pride of Place's commitment to introduce Cumulative Impact Assessments in gambling licensing when Parliamentary time allows.

These changes will make it the most defining 12 months for more than a quarter of a century, and they will shape not just how the UK's high street and seaside economies will fare - but also, how the balance between growth and innovation and the all-important player protections and third sector charity projects align.

The Aim to Permit debate

Against this backdrop of pending change for the industry and the relevant authorities, is the emotive and often heated debate developing over the fundamental Aim to Permit rule.

The Gambling Business Group has been at the forefront of the campaign to drive regulation and legislation change through an evidential route, and to enhance the provision of factual evidence and address misinformation.

Charlotte Meller, General Manager at GBG, believes that the partnership work with the IoL is slowly helping to address some of the concerns that local councillors have raised with regard to gambling applications. However there still more to be done.

This is especially true when it comes to Members of Parliament who are less informed on the detail of licensing procedures. At the High Street Gambling Reform debate on 8th January 2026, there was considerable discussion about councils needing more control of their high streets; conflated planning and licensing regimes and misused statistics which the Office for Statistics Regulation has previously warned MPs about.

Ian Murray, the Minister for Creative Industries Media and Arts, tried to address their points when he summarised the powers that local authorities have had since the Gambling Act came into force.

"They play a crucial role in the regulation of



gambling up and down the country. They have a wide range of powers - a suite of powers and tools - in relation to gambling premises. Licences are subject to guidance issued by the Gambling Commission and its licensing objectives. Licensing authorities are given broad powers to set conditions that require licensed gambling to be carried out in a way that is consistent with keeping gambling fair and open. During the licensing process, licensing authorities can attach conditions to premises licences to which operators must adhere.

All local authorities should publish a statement of principles on gambling licensing outlining local issues, priorities and risks.

In those statements, licensing authorities can identify high-risk areas and specify local risks.

Operators must take steps to mitigate those risks in their applications. I fully acknowledge and understand what hon. Members have said about the "aim to permit" principle, but we do not believe that the premises licence application process is a foregone conclusion. The "aim to permit" principle is subject to strict conditions, including that the licence application is consistent with the local authority's gambling policy statement. It is worth saying that "aim to permit" is a licensing issue, not a planning issue. Once a licence is granted, licensing authorities have extensive powers of monitoring and enforcement, and I would encourage them to use them.

Planning permission is always required to create gambling premises or for a change of use to gambling premises such as a bingo hall or a betting shop, and the planning system has to be used."

Dawn Butler, MP for Brent East, who secured the debate, did not accept the Minister's position. She responded:

"A lot of the information the Minister talked about basically does not hold water." Adding: "Ultimately, this is about how we protect people locally. The gambling industry will not lose any money if it does not open another couple of shops. We do not have to worry about that. We need to worry about individuals and keeping people safe."

Responding to the debate, Peter Hannibal, GBG Chief Executive, stated:

"The whole regulation of gambling is predicated on three licensing objectives, one of which is the protection of children and young persons. "Keeping people safe" is hard wired into what high street operators do."

And he pointed out how far and deep regulation goes into the gambling business operations:

"The UK's high street gambling industry is the most regulated in the world.

It's governed by extensive regulation from the Gambling Commission, local authorities, the government, and on an individual basis, by the trade bodies that many businesses are members of, not least our own.

The Gambling Business Group has social responsibility at the heart of everything it does and our land-based members who operate thousands of businesses on the UK's high streets have signed up to our Responsibility Gambling Charter, which the IoL has endorsed, and we also have an MoU with UKHospitality and the BBPA which focuses on gambling protections in pubs."

Implications of removing Aim to Permit

Whilst the Minister has set out the Government's position about Aim to Permit, calls to remove it will, one expects, continue to grow louder this year. But what would it mean for player protections and for the high street economy?

Peter Hannibal responded:

"Land based premises are open for inspections, scrutiny from officials, the public, the media and politicians. Protection programmes and policies are constantly reviewed and tested and, in the main, they stand up to that test. And when they don't, businesses are tackled by the Gambling Commission and remedy the problems with immediate effect."

There is a sense of irony that the current debate surrounding Aim to Permit comes at a time when the number of gambling premises on UK high streets has been declining year on year. Currently, there are 8,234 premises according to the latest Gambling Commission statistics - one third less than the 12,307 in 2011.

Industry observers argue that if more premises are forced to close for economic reasons or refused to be allowed to open in the first place, then more consumers will turn to online gambling, if they aren't already.

The Gambling Commission is solely responsible for the regulation of online gambling, where there are extensive player protection requirements that online operators must comply with. However, local

authorities have NO powers or say in how their local communities are protected when playing online.

The bigger concern for local authorities, the Gambling Commission and the regulated industry as a whole, is the growth of the unregulated “black” market, which operates primarily online:

- There are no protections;
- They don’t contribute to the new Gambling Levy;
- The Chief Executive of the Gambling Commission described the illegal online market as “unsafe, unfair and criminal”.

In the face of this growing trend, Charlotte Meller, GBG General Manager, considered the pathway for a unified response: “The challenging issue we must collectively face is that if we get to a position where it’s impossible for gambling businesses to operate on our high streets, then neither the national or local regulator, nor the industry “can keep people safe”.

She added:

“Those players considered at harm, the very ones we are all trying to protect, will migrate to unregulated online offerings and illegal gambling dens, where all our protections are not in place or enforceable.

That puts these players in greater harm’s way and out of reach of the third sector, currently being funded by gambling business payments to the Gambling Levy. The fewer regulated gambling businesses we have on our high streets, the more unprotected players will become.”

But the Aim to Permit reach does not stop at player protection as Peter Hannibal has declared on numerous occasions. There is also the economy and high street footfall to consider he argues.

“We are extremely concerned at the impact changes to Aim to Permit could have on the high street, both economically and socially. The GBG has been very focused on campaigning for joined-up gambling policy in which Aim to Permit plays an important role. We have already lost thousands of general businesses from the high streets with news every week of another national retailer closing down, and last year we also lost one pub every single day. This weakens the high street economy, stalls footfall, creates unemployment and reduces business rate income - it is already a desperately worrying situation for local communities without even touching on the Aim to Permit issue.”

The solution, the GBG presents, isn’t to take land-based gambling retailers off the high street, but for local authorities and industry to work together to ensure that they play their crucial role in protecting local people, the local economy and community. This will ensure continued financial support to the local authorities via business rates, to the Exchequer through tax and the Gambling Levy which has been established to implement protections for vulnerable players to the tune of £100 million per year.

GBG and IoL collaborates at ARE Expo

That much needed collaboration between industry and local authorities continues in Manchester on 28-29 April at the Cotton Sheds in Victoria Warehouse where the Gambling Business Group will host licensing authorities on its “High Street Hub” at the ARE Expo - the popular amusements, gaming and gambling exhibition based in the north west.



28th & 29th April 2026
Cotton Sheds,
Victoria Warehouse, Manchester

Most significantly, both for the IoL and GBG, is that the venue will also stage the IoL’s annual Gambling Conference for licensing officers on Tuesday 28 April. This will include a tour of ARE exhibitors organised by GBG.

Since the Gambling Act was implemented, there has been and continues to be huge progress made in the technological developments to ensure consumer safety. In Manchester, licensing officials will see first-hand the pioneering player protection technologies available, including age verification, facial recognition and data capture and also to discuss and challenge the gambling industry on the measures required to ensure these innovations support their own licensing criteria.

The GBG extends an open invite to licensing officers and licensing councillors to the GBG’s High Street Hub to meet us and our Members and discuss how we can collectively work together to “keep people safe”. We look forward to seeing you there.



The Gambling Business Group (GBG) is a representation of B2C and B2B gambling organisation members from all sectors of the UK Gambling Industry.