

Politics

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The Butt stops here: GBG despatches advisory letter to Brent Council correcting its gambling discourse

LOCAL AUTHORITIES

The **Gambling Business Group** has this week issued a detailed response to Councillor Butt, the Leader of **Brent Council**, addressing a series of arguments he put forward to the Prime Minister in his campaign to end Aim to Permit and restrict gambling premises on the high street.

Give the Gambling Business Group their due, no matter what missiles are thrown at the industry, they always stand resilient in their determination that "local authorities and industry work together to ensure that they each play their crucial role in protecting local people, the local economy and community."

That was the sign off message in an 8-page letter to the anti-gambling advocate and leader of Brent Council, Councillor Butt. And the GBG's contents, corrections and arguments leading up to that conclusion suggest there's a lot of areas both parties will have to work hard on.

The GBG compiled its report in response to a letter Butt wrote to the Prime Minister on 23 July, noting its "concerns about the statements contained therein."

Butt, the author of the first anti-gambling letter sent to the Starmer government and signed by 50 local authorities and mayors, doubled down on his anti-gam-

bling credentials in his latest despatch to 10 Downing Street.

He welcomed the business rates strategy of new PM Andy Burnham - who was one of the signatories to Butt's original letter to end Aim to Permit a few months back.

But the GBG presented the argument that raising business rates for some businesses whilst lowering them for others would effectively "decimate" the high street and, in gambling, drive people away from protected venues and into illegal gambling sites where no protections exist.

It also raised the key point that local authorities already have the powers to determine operations on their high streets. More importantly, it reminded the councillor that Aim to Permit did not override the powers of licensing regulations: it was a reference point that Aim to Permit only applies to applications that meet all the stringent criteria of local authority and Gambling Commission regulations.



It added that the impending inclusion of GIAs to the licensing procedure delivers an additional level of protection for local communities who want to ensure safe environments on their high streets.

On the correction front, the GBG stood firm on the number of gambling venues operated on the high street and admonished the councillor. It wrote: "You state that 'too many operators continue to apply for licences...' And mention

"taking a firm approach towards the further proliferation of these premises".

The GBG responded: "Gambling premises represent a relatively small proportion of licensed high street premises." And the letter then confirmed: "The numbers of land-based gambling premises are dwindling year on year. According to the Gambling Commission's Industry Statistics annual report there were a total of 8,234 AGC, Betting, Bingo, Casino and FECs in

March 2025 (compared to 12,307 in 2011)," adding "The number of premises in Brent is also dropping."

It was a firm letter from the GBG: it outlined the full list of industry contributions to the national, local and third sector purses: MGD, business rates; license fees; NI and wages; CT and VAT; Statutory Levy.

And most powerfully, it highlighted the dangers of driving highly regulated gambling premises off the high street. In terms of lost local revenues, that will hit local jobs, local streets and increase closed shops, a process already underway with over 300 betting venues to close this year.

But most importantly, the Butt engagement focused on the real-life fall-out from having less regulated venues on the high street, and that's the rise in the migration of players to unprotected online sites where there are no regulations, no contributions go to the Gambling Levy fund, and where all revenues go to the black market operators outside of the country.

It pulled no punches in its narrative, stating: "Cllr Butt, you say this is not about stigmatising people who gamble but by continuing your calls for more controls over gambling premises and increases in business rates, it will reach a point where it's impossible for gambling businesses to operate on high streets, then neither the national nor you the local regulator 'can keep your people safe'."

And it closed: "By calling for powers to prevent premises from opening, the players considered at risk of harm, the very constituents you and the industry are all trying to protect, may migrate to unregulated online offerings and illegal gambling dens, where all of our protections are not in place or enforceable."

"And they will be 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."

House of Lords returns to debate on gambling and young people

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The House of Lords returned once again to the debate on gambling harms, this time focusing the discussion on the young people perceived to be at risk from online gaming and targeted advertising.

Citing elements such as loot boxes and esports gambling, the peers - who with all due respect are way out of their intellectual depth on such issues - argued that familiarising players with gambling mechanics from an early age increases the likelihood of gambling harm in later years.

"Speakers raised concerns that the current licensing framework under the 2005 Gambling Act does not adequately reflect today's easy access to online casinos as well as the speed and personalisation of online products," reported focus.gn. "They urged the government to introduce tougher,



stricter age-verification rules and affordability checks as well as tougher rules against game design or marketing that disproportionately appeals to younger users."

"Peers also argued that gambling operators' licence conditions should include clearer requirements to share data with the Gambling Commission and with researchers. They should also be required to show how they identify risky behaviour and how they

intervene when it's identified."

This is all very worrying, not because of the decisions, but definitely the process. Considering their limited technological knowledge, the idea that the House of Lords can bring any value to this debate when the mean age of members is 71-72 and the largest grouping is aged between 71-79 is risible.

The debate was largely backed by members of the House, who stated that DCMS and the Gambling Commission should introduce tighter regulation following the implementation of the 2023 Gambling White Paper.

Given the pace of this Gambling Act reform, most of these Lords will be dead by the time it all gets enacted, which once again raises the crucial political issue - why on earth is UK democracy influenced and determined by crusty old white people who will certainly not see out the time in which their decisions will pass into law.