

Industry

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The half high street debate: Steve Sharp calls for a high street debate shaped by what people do want rather than what they don't want

UK high street economy: the shape of things to come?

For those that know Steve Sharp, he has a milder approach to persuasion; but when that doesn't land, well, meet the brash northerner who will make his view known.

Coinslot got a measure of this recently when the GBG Chairman decided to broaden a discussion on how the betting and high street gaming centres can channel their arguments towards a unified voice on the importance of an industry presence on UK high streets.

"I think all sectors know which way the wind is blowing at the moment: the bookies, AGCs, bingo clubs etc are under no illusion where the government and anti-gambling lobby are heading on this matter. But each sector has a very individual case to present and a strong counter argument to the prohibitive arguments, and collectively it's a force majeure for the whole industry," he said.

"I've always thought a collective, collaborative response is our strongest asset. But so is understanding the people we're facing opposition from. At the moment, and it's been a long moment, all we hear is what people don't want on the high street. What we want to hear should be what people do want, what the high street should have and what is the best balance of offering that caters for all tastes and is both sustainable and economically viable."

And Sharp was blunt in his conclusion: "I'm not hearing any of that from those calling for gambling operations to be driven from the high street."

As the GBG Chair was making that point, news of more closures on the high street were being announced. Included in the latest round of daily despatches on high street departures are 86 Brewers Fayre restaurants, 70 Nationwide Building Society branches and 100 Paddy Power LBOs. In just one day, that means at least 400-500 jobs at Flutter going, with an estimated another 1,000-2,000 people set to lose their jobs at those other two operations.

This is an economic crisis of vast magnitude for local communities - but, in the case of Flutter, it's far more nuanced. The bookmaker has made it very clear that an irresponsible government policy

Amid all the noise and huff 'n puff about the plight of the UK high street, the current discourse delivers little in the way of any solution. But then, how can you revive an ailing high street when the only thing you can offer up is a list of what you don't want on it? This is the view of **Steve Sharp**, Chairman of the Gambling Business Group, who despairs at the lack of vision in the current debate: "all we hear is what people don't want, never what they do want and, most importantly, the balance we need for it to appeal to all people in the community and remain economically viable."



Aim to permit a full high street

Steve Sharp said...
"Take aim to permit away, and you take investment, employment, tax revenues and high street footfall away. And not long after, you'll end up taking the high street away..."

determined to drive gambling off the high street, through taxation, regulation and rhetoric, is a key factor. Worse still, it's doing so without ever considering if there's any businesses out there left to fill the void - just ask Brewers' Fayre and Nationwide.

Sharp was as brutal in his assessment: "The high street business pool is getting very shallow. The banks are leaving in their thousands, and they won't be coming back. Forget the small, independent bakers - Greggs will most probably move in, and where they don't it's because it's not viable. The charity shops are beginning to reduce in number and the notion of small, local clothes and coffee shops etc - they cannot afford the excessive high street costs over a sustained period. And besides, the public can't buy new clothes everyday or home-made jewellery, all of which makes that business model a tough one for a now very

expensive high street presence."

In just these few sentences Sharp has delivered a far broader perspective of the challenges facing the high street than we have heard from any grouping to date.

And he was quick to add the ultimate irony of those calling for less or even no gambling operations on the high street.

"I think it's important we all recognise our role in the demise of the high street. I'm certain many calling for AGCs or bookies to be blocked are using Amazon, Deliveroo and online deliveries services from high street retailers etc. This is why so many buildings are now vacant - it's not the fault of the bingo club or the AGC.

"And let's look at the councilors calling for an end to Aim to Permit: businesses are closing because the business rates are too high and the cost of running a high street operation has moved beyond the affordability of many small, and indeed,

large businesses. Again, you cannot blame a bookie for that. In fact, it's only the AGC, the bookie, the bingo club and the pubs that are collectively investing 8-9 figure sums a year in refurb and rates to keep the high street viable."

And then a Sharp but gentle warning: "Take aim to permit away, and you take investment, employment, tax revenues and high street footfall away. And not long after, you'll end up taking the high street away."

So what is the high street solution?

"Well it's not taking any more operations off the high street, that's for certain," Sharp said firmly. "The arguments the gaming and gambling industry have made are based on facts and evidence, and the innovations in player protections are transforming player safety. Unfortunately, the prohibition arguments are founded on opinion and dogma, and hand-me-down claims which had no basis when they were first aired."

about keeping what you have; attracting smaller more individual businesses and making it affordable for them to take up a high street spot; ensuring footfall businesses like pubs, AGCs, bingo clubs, family entertainment centres and brand names can keep drawing people in; and making sure you service the whole community with the variety of shops that different sections want - and that includes the large number of customers that want to go to an AGC, betting shop, bingo hall and working men's club. These people are loyal customers - they shouldn't be disenfranchised because a politician doesn't like their pastime."

And Sharp wanted this message to reach the people who have become so focused on what we shouldn't allow.

"I want to hear a debate with vision - one that delivers a high street that caters for all people, all classes, and all wishes and wants. We need to stop being a rallying call for business haters and accept and understand the importance of business tolerance."

It's a particularly pertinent point and one shaped by Sharp's roots, as he explained. "I say that as a guy from a working class background. I was born and grew up on a very large council estate in south Manchester. We moved to an old mining town and now I live in the de-industrialised Midlands. And throughout that journey, I have witnessed the devastation of the high streets."

"And this devastation has many complicated causes - but it's clearly not caused by well-regulated and operated LBOs, AGCs, bingo halls, pubs and casinos."

It's Sharp at his best: a mild point of persuasion. But if one was to put that into a translation app and select 'Sharp brash northern speak', it would probably come back with something like: our working class communities never liked to be told what they could and couldn't do in their leisure time 50 years ago. And they certainly wouldn't accept being told what they can and can't do now ... especially when the diktat is coming people who think they're doing what's best for you.

This sounds like real power to local people - all the local people.