

Written evidence submitted by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority

Follow-up response to DCMS Committee inquiry on Gambling Regulation

July 2023

Introduction

In partnership with local and regional stakeholders, Greater Manchester Combined Authority (“GMCA”) is trailblazing the development and delivery of whole system population health approaches to gambling harms across the city-region of Greater Manchester. Our vision is for Greater Manchester to be a place where no-one experiences gambling related harms. More detail about this work can be found at the Greater Manchester Combined Authority website: www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/gambling.

GMCA welcomes the publication of the White Paper “High Stakes: Gambling Reform for the Digital Age” in April 2023 (noting that publication fell within the local government pre-election period, prohibiting some stakeholders from making timely public responses) after multiple delays.

The White Paper outlines many positive changes in response to the best available evidence and calls from campaigners for reform (for example recommending the introduction of a new statutory levy), however there are many areas where proposals fall short of comprehensive action to prevent harm. Many of the commitments outlined in the White Paper present a piecemeal approach addressing ‘blind spots’ in current legislation and regulation whilst continuing to support an industry narrative of ‘individual vulnerability’. Despite the rhetoric, the White Paper represents a missed opportunity for wholesale reform to prevent residents of Greater Manchester from being exposed to the risk of gambling addiction and gambling related harms.

This response addresses questions from the Committee following the publication of the White Paper. The Committee is invited to review this response alongside GMCA’s original response to the Committee. For any further information, please contact Jo Evans (Gambling Harms Lead) by email at harm.reduction@greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk.

1. What are the most welcome proposals in the Gambling White Paper?

There are many positive changes included in the White Paper which will support work in Greater Manchester to prevent and reduce gambling addiction and gambling harms, such as:

- Consultation on increased restrictions on design rules for online products to consider features such as speed of play, illusion of player control and other intensifying features which can increase risk of addiction
- Proposed introduction of standardised affordability checks
- Proposed introduction of stake limits on the most harmful online products and consultation on mandatory deposit limits for customers
- Introduction of a statutory levy to secure funding independent from industry influence for research, education and treatment, including funding for research to be made available via the National Research Bodies
- Consultation on the use of free bets and offers and mechanisms for customers to ‘opt-in’ to receive promotional messages

- Development of informational messaging including on the risks of gambling led by government departments and not the gambling industry
- Introduction of cumulative impact assessments used within alcohol licensing to inform licensing of gambling premises
- Consultation on increasing fees charged for premises licensing permits to support enforcement and compliance activities for licensing gambling premises
- Increased powers for the regulator to request and analyse data from online operators to enable better identification of non-compliance with licensing conditions

Some of the changes described in the White Paper reflect action already being delivered as part of Greater Manchester's groundbreaking gambling harms programme, such as the Against the Odds charter for sports organisations (see: <https://www.againsttheodds.org.uk/>) piloted as part of our Communities Addressing Gambling Harms initiative, delivering the Odds Are: They Win public health campaign to raise awareness of the risk of gambling harms (see: <https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/odds-are-they-win/>), embedding a gambling harms needs assessment in all Greater Manchester licensing statements of principles and the creation of Chapter One, a partnership with Gambling with Lives to provide information, training and support for everyone affected by gambling harms independent of industry influence (see: <https://www.chapter-one.org/>).

2. Are there any significant gaps in the Government's reforms?

GMCA notes the lack of detail in some of the most substantial proposals, leaving significant room for failure to prevent gambling addiction and gambling related harms, for example the lack of clear guiding principles or a framework to determine how the regulator should identify and classify harmful product features in online games.

The most significant omission from the White Paper is the lack of action to restrict the advertising and promotion of gambling products and brands, including sponsorship of sport or other activities which normalise gambling in non-gambling environments. Whilst there is a voluntary commitment from the Premier League to remove gambling logos from the *front* (but not the back, sleeves or side) of shirts by the end of the 2025/26 season, there is no commensurate action for football clubs further down the pyramid, or indeed any action from other sporting bodies. New sponsorship deals between Aston Villa FC and Chelsea FC (since reneged on following a fan protest) and gambling brands ahead of the 2023/24 season suggest that there is no hurry to sever ties with gambling sponsorship even among those signed up to the voluntary commitment. Whilst football is perhaps the most readily associated sport with gambling sponsorship, it is not the only one carrying sponsorship deals, for example, the Rugby League Challenge Cup is currently the "BetFred Challenge Cup". The weakness of the commitment made by the Premier League demonstrates that a voluntary approach to sponsorship of sport will not deliver meaningful impact on exposure to gambling products and brands, especially for children and young people who enjoy watching and participating in sport.

A lack of independent evidence and research on many of the priority focus areas required to prevent and reduce gambling related harm has led to the Government accepting industry sponsored narratives on individual responsibility and vulnerability to harm. This has led to inconsistencies within proposed policies and reforms. For example, rather than opting for a consistent and standardised approach to stake limits on the most harmful products (bringing online slots in alignment with the £2 stake limit on fixed odds betting terminals) the White Paper proposes a range of possible stake limits, some to be determined based on 'individual risk factors' (i.e. a lower stake limit for customers aged 18-24yrs). As another example, proposed limitations on 'free bet and spin offers' appear to be conditional on individual vulnerability, rather than acknowledging the evidence that these offers are intrinsically

harmful as they misrepresent the true nature of gambling and encourage exposure to the most harmful forms of gambling. This does not present a coherent policy in line with rhetoric on reducing exposure to risk from the most harmful gambling products.

Whilst the introduction of a statutory levy is welcomed to establish a sustainable revenue stream independent of industry influence to fund research, prevention and treatment for gambling harms and gambling addiction, it is an anomaly that funding will be collected and distributed by the Gambling Commission under the direction of HM Treasury and Department of Culture, Media and Sport, rather than under the jurisdiction of the NHS and Department of Health and Social Care. Neither of the bodies responsible for overseeing the levy design and administration have sufficient knowledge and expertise of commissioning research, specialist mental health services or public health services, nor is the sufficient guarantee that the design of the levy will be independent from industry influence. There is no discussion of devolving powers to local areas or Integrated Care Systems to support place-based approaches, especially where this relates to the commissioning of specialist mental health treatment services or delivery of population and public health services. The approach outlined in the White Paper is inconsistent with the approach taken to other health harming commodities such as tobacco and alcohol and risks undermining the effectiveness of a statutory levy.

Whilst the White Paper includes rhetoric around supporting local licensing authorities to use broad powers within existing planning and gambling regulation frameworks, the outlined proposals lack clarity as to how these should be used and provided no new powers (for example, by making public health a 'responsible authority' in licensing applications), meaning decisions continue to be bound by an 'aim to permit'. The introduction of cumulative impact assessments is of interest but there is a lack of clarity as to how these can be applied to gambling premises as the policy is designed to address the specific problems associated with a high density of alcohol outlets (namely anti-social behaviour and nuisance complaints), which are not commensurate with the risks of a high density of gambling premises. Contrary to many of the proposals in the White Paper, one area where no further consultation was deemed necessary is in changes to land-based gambling. The White Paper included several worrying extensions to existing licensing arrangements, for example, permitting casinos to offer sports betting, increasing the number of higher value machines in bingo and arcade venues, and permitting licensed bingo premises to offer side bets. These changes will increase the number of the most harmful gambling products in communities and will bring a multi-platform offer into existing licensed premises. This makes it possible to readily access and gamble concurrently on multiple products at in-person venues, replicating a key risk of harm associated with the ready availability of multiple online gambling products. These changes will be made in existing licensed premises without any further involvement or consultation with local licensing authorities, noting that many premises are already concentrated in our most deprived areas of Greater Manchester, further targeting those least able to afford gambling losses.

3. What are the potential barriers to the Government and Gambling Commission delivering the White Paper's main measures by summer 2024, the Government's stated aim?

It is of concern that many of the policy proposals outlined in the White Paper are subject to further consultation with no confirmed timetable, putting proposed reforms at significant risk of being watered down and further delaying long overdue action. It is now mid-July and there is no set timetable set to determine when consultations (described in the White Paper as commencing in 'summer 2023') will be published or concluded. Some proposals subject to secondary legislation are due only be completed 'when Parliamentary time permits'. The White Paper fails to outline a firm timetable for changes to be in place; previous delays in

publishing the White Paper itself suggest a worrying precedent of the Government failing to act with the urgency required to prevent future harms.

Furthermore, the drawn-out process leading to the publication of the White Paper has taken a significant toll on many stakeholders, particularly those representing people with lived experience of gambling addiction and gambling related harms. There is a risk that the complexity and multitude of consultations running in parallel will further fatigue stakeholders, leaving only those with more resources (i.e. those representing the gambling industry) able to contribute in any meaningful way to ongoing development of proposals. This risks the balanced approach proposed by the Government may be tipped in favour of those with the greatest resources, rather than protecting those exposed to harmful gambling products and practices.