

5th GambleAware Harm Minimisation Conference Report

London, 6-7 December 2017

GambleAware hosted its fifth annual Harm Minimisation Conference at the King's Fund. Over 300 delegates and 40 speakers attended the two day event. This year's event saw a more diverse audience with only a third of delegates working in the gambling industry.

This year's conference tackled two major issues – the relationships between gambling and young people, and gambling and sport. But before getting into these issues, attendees heard from first the regulator, and then the government minister responsible for the industry.

Tim Miller, Executive Director of the Gambling Commission, made a clear case that problem gambling is a public health concern. Then, despite being limited in what she could say during the current policy consultation, Tracey Crouch MP was forthright in her call to the industry to do more to protect its customers and to fund GambleAware properly. She said: "We want everyone to work together to improve the voluntary system and make sure it provides the support needed, but if it doesn't we won't hesitate to explore alternative avenues including a statutory levy. So this, folks, is really the last chance saloon on this."

This was echoed by Kate Lampard CBE, GambleAware's Chair, who reflected on her first impressions after a full year in the role. She called for a massive change in attitudes, warning it may require some change in personnel: "The testosterone needs to make way for more enlightened women and men who take a long-term view."

Delegates then turned their attention to the first issue of the day – the impact of gambling on young people.

Dr Heather Wardle of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and deputy chair of the Responsible Gambling Strategy Board, gave the opening keynote presentation entitled "Technological change and the health and wellbeing of youth: a case study of gambling".

A key theme of the conference was the rise of internet gambling and its impact on young people. Dr Sally Gainsbury, from the University of Sydney, introduced this topic with a presentation on "Access, awareness, and appeal: How the Internet is changing young people's engagement with gambling".

She was followed by Professor Mark Griffiths of Nottingham Trent University who gave a brief overview of internet gambling in adolescence, pointing out that internet gamblers are significantly more likely than non-internet gamblers to be problem gamblers.

The first wake-up call of the conference came from Vicki Shotbolt, representing Parent Zone. She warned that what parents know about children and gambling wouldn't even fit on a page – 97% had never heard of skins gambling, for example.

The speakers to this point were joined for a discussions panel by a young man from Wales, who had been helped by a GambleAware-funded project run by Newport Citizens Advice. He'd suffered a gambling addiction across a range of products, walking 14 miles to work so he could bet his bus fare instead.

After lunch, attention turned to where and when does gaming become gambling? Luc Delany, from the International Social Games Association, argued that the definition of gambling should not be extended to social games, and the conference was addressing the wrong question. The counter-argument was made by Justyn Larcombe, from EPIC Risk Management, who had found his young pre-teenage son gambling in a virtual casino he'd built within a computer game.

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Dr Mark R Johnson, an expert in such games from the University of Alberta, explained that 'unpredictability mechanics' had featured in them for years, but it was only now becoming noticed outside the gaming world.

A young gamer, Joe, who was 16, joined Simon Thomas from the Hippodrome and the other speakers so far to debate this topic. Joe explained how he could not see a clear distinction between gaming and gambling, whatever the legal definitions may say.

Dr Brett Abarbanel from the University of Nevada gave many attendees their first introduction to a world where tens of thousands of spectators attend sell-out stadium events to watch their heroes play computer games - Esports. Ian Smith of the Esports Integrity Coalition warned that this virtual world had to deal with all the same ethical issues that the real world has experienced, including doping and match fixing. To discuss these issues, the speakers were joined by Alexander Källman, himself a dedicated gamer, with many in the room struggling to keep up with the new terminology of loot-boxes and skins.

At the Regulus Reception, Micky Swindale, a senior partner from KPMG's Isle of Man practice, challenged the industry to address the lack of diversity evident at all levels. It was revealed that next year's GambleAware conference would ask the question "Where are the women?"

Day 2

Rosena Allin-Khan MP, Shadow Minister in the DCMS team, opened the second day. She announced the next Labour government would review gambling legislation.

The first session then followed on lotteries: focusing on their accessibility to the young and their increasing online activities. Anne Pattberg of the World Lottery Association opened the debate, with Richard Bateson from Camelot Group then describing the efforts made within the National Lottery to protect its players.

For the panel session, James Holdaway, who leads on the lotteries for the Gambling Commission was joined again by the same recent victim of gambling addiction who'd spoken the previous day. It emerged that his gambling began with National Lottery Scratchcards. It quickly progressed to trouble with online gambling and visits to the bookmakers, leading eventually to a thankfully unsuccessful attempt to take his own life.

The next theme was gambling and professional sport. Three questions were addressed: what is the relationship, where is the harm and what is the response? This section of the conference was chaired by Professor Chris Brady, University of Salford, Director of the Centre for Sports Business.

It opened with a provocative presentation on football and the normalisation of gambling by Professor Carwyn Jones, of Cardiff Metropolitan University. Professor Jones was clear that he disapproved of gambling per se, and that its ever close association with sport was of great concern.

To debate this contentious issue he was joined by Richard Flint of SkyBet, Andrew Taylor, Committee of Advertising Practice and Duncan East, from Sky Sports.

Duncan made the welcome announcement that Sky would in future be making its viewers aware of the BeGambleAware.org website's support and advice whenever their presenters discussed odds or other gambling-related content.

Andy announced new guidance from the Committee of Advertising Practice would be published early in 2018 to address the content and style of gambling ads and explained that this was only the first set of changes with more to come.

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The audience heard again from Professor Mark Griffiths, who sought to answer the question, "Where is the harm?" His lecture was titled "Sports-related gambling advertising and marketing: What do we know?"

There then followed a moving account of the impact gambling addiction had on Mark Potter, a former rugby professional, under the title "An almost dead cert..." Mark now works with EPIC Risk Management, an organisation that works with across sport, prisons, financial services and the military, to help them manage the risk to their organisations of gambling-related harm.

Paul Buck, who runs EPIC, and Gary Bloom, from the treatment organisation Cognacity and a regular presenter of Talk Sport Radio, joined the speakers for a lively panel discussion.

Dr Phil Hopley, of Cognacity, then offered an answer to the question of what is the clinical response. He told the story of an anonymous 19 year old professional player, and how his problems emerged, were treated before he relapsed and eventually was helped back into playing with a combination of therapy and the drug Naltrexone.

A panel discussion followed on professional sports' response. This included Dr Hopley, Jack Francis from Chelsea Football Club Academy, who looks after the welfare of youth academy players, and Jenni Kennedy from the FA Group. Representing those on the frontline were Richard Bevan, League Managers Association and Simon Barker of the Professional Footballers Association

The finale of the conference was the launch of Professional Players' Federation gambling education and training programme. This was presented by Brendon Batson, Chair of the Professional Players Federation. There were also contributions from Lynsey Williams, Professional Cricketers Association and Colin Bland of Sporting Chance Clinic. Scott Davies, himself a professional footballer with Chelmsford City, was able to explain first-hand the challenge of dealing with gambling in the dressing room.

The conference addressed some of the newest issues facing not only the gambling industry, but gaming and professional sport as well. While there is plenty still to do about the risks already widely known, it was clear that technology and the normalisation of gambling in society will require everyone involved to be agile and respond to new emerging challenges adeptly, adopting a precautionary approach until evidence is available to provide reassurance that we are not developing a public health storm of gambling-related harm.