

Carolyn Harris, MP
Chair of the Gambling Related Harm All Party Parliamentary Group
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

1 May 2020

By email: jo.lloyd@parliament.uk

Dear Carolyn,

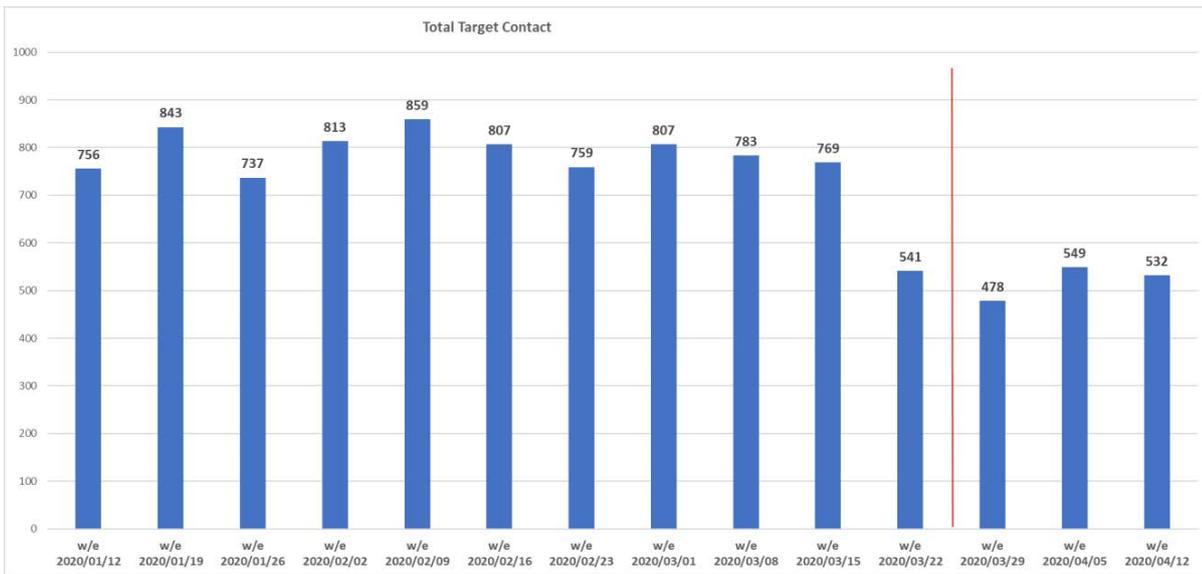
Re: The National Gambling Treatment Service during the COVID-19 pandemic

Thank you for your letter of 22 April. GambleAware shares the concern of the APPG that people may be more vulnerable to gambling harms as a result of COVID-19. To help make everyone aware of the potential impact of gambling on their own health and wellbeing, and on that of family, friends, or those they may meet in a professional capacity at this time, we have published a [short document](#) with information and resources.

Together with the treatment providers in the National Gambling Treatment Service and the other organisations which we commission, we have moved quickly to ensure that services respond to the pattern of need as it evolves. This is a dynamic situation, and this letter sets out the current position. It may of course change further in response to external factors, in which case I will be pleased to keep the APPG and others updated.

We are tracking closely what is known from a number of sources about changes to gambling behaviour during the pandemic in order to inform the response of the National Gambling Treatment Service. We are looking at how GambleAware's commissioned activity on research and evaluation can further support the development of our understanding of how COVID-19 is impacting on gambling and gambling harms. For example, we are commissioning YouGov to run in the near future an adapted version of a survey that they first carried out for us in October 2019. The October survey was carried out for the Treatment Needs and Gap Analysis research which we are publishing this month (May). Repeating the survey now will provide a 'before and after' analysis of the impact of the lockdown on gambling behaviour and gambling harm at a general population level and amongst 'problem gamblers' (PGSI 8+) and Affected Others. We will publish the results of the additional fieldwork and share with the APPG as soon as we are in a position to do so.

Citizens Advice has already published [information](#) about the spike in activity that they experienced at the outset of lockdown, as people were concerned about employment and finances. At the same time, there was a dip in calls to the National Gambling Helpline as shown by provisional data used for management purposes. This suggests that people were focusing during this period on those issues where organisations such as Citizens Advice could help. GamCare has undertaken an analysis of activity by week (incoming voice calls and chats, plus call-backs), which is shown in the following graph where the red line marks the start of formal lockdown.

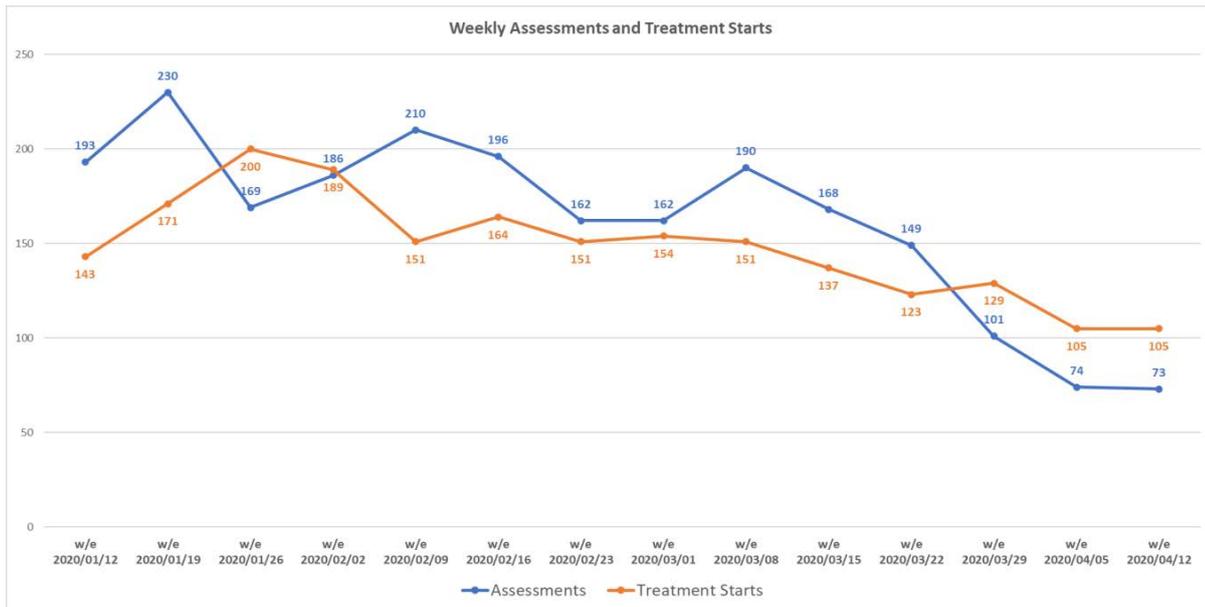


GamCare is finding increased demand for online chat rooms, and has increased the number available. Participants in the chat rooms are frequently talking about broader COVID-19 concerns rather than being limited to gambling, suggesting that the group chats fulfil a wider function of reducing the sense of isolation some gamblers may be feeling.

As regards the provision of treatment, the pattern varies between sectors and providers. Almost all treatment is being delivered via telephone and on-line rather than face-to-face.

The whole of British society is aware of the pressures that COVID-19 is placing on the NHS. These pressures naturally extend to the Central & North West London NHS Foundation Trust (CNWL) and the Leeds & York Partnership Foundation Trust which are commissioned by GambleAware to provide gambling treatment. Some staff have had to be redeployed on other NHS work, leaving a core of staff to treat a reduced caseload made up of people with the most complex cases of gambling disorder.

GamCare and its partner network are finding that, as with calls to the Helpline, fewer people are presenting for assessment for treatment. The number of people starting treatment is also declining but there is naturally a slight time-lag before fewer assessments feed through to fewer treatment starts. This trend mirrors the pattern seen in other health settings where reductions in the numbers of people seeking treatment for conditions other than COVID-19 are causing concern to the Chief Medical Officer and front-line clinicians. As with Helpline activity, GamCare has undertaken a weekly analysis of provisional data used for management purposes, which is shown the following graph:



Demand for GameChange, which is the computerised Cognitive Behavioural Therapy element of the National Gambling Treatment Service, remains consistent. GambleAware and GamCare are in discussion about increasing the capacity of this service.

Gordon Moody Association (GMA) continues to provide residential rehabilitation but is finding that a proportion of people who would otherwise seek this service are understandably preferring to remain with their families at this time. They are in the process of developing protocols for new entrants to residential rehabilitation to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 between service users. GMA has moved to an on-line model for its Retreat & Counselling modules. GMA reports heightened levels of anxiety and distress among ex-residents, and has put additional support in place for them. They also report higher than usual levels of distress among people self-referring to the service.

The differentiation of the roles of the various providers and what they offer to people needing treatment is summarised on the [page](#) on our website to which you made reference in your letter.

GambleAware remains committed to ensuring that waiting times for treatment remain low and we will continue to work with treatment providers so that this is the case. Since the current Grant Agreement between GambleAware and GamCare was signed in June 2018, we have increased the grants both for treatment and the Helpline to expand capacity, including enabling the Helpline to operate 24/7. We have also increased funding for CNWL and GMA since those Grant Agreements were initially signed.

You will have seen the announcement by the Gambling Commission on 29 April of regulatory settlements received by GambleAware to help ensure treatment and support services can continue to operate effectively and withstand additional pressures on their services caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. We will shortly be publishing clarification of what this means for the services that we currently commission and those new partners that we are planning to work with.

We are continuing with our social media campaign to promote awareness of the treatment, advice and support available through the National Gambling Treatment Service, and expect that once the initial impact of lockdown has been felt, the rising trend of treatment activity will resume.

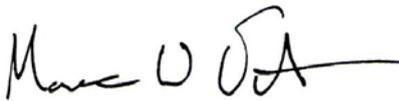
The activity data for the National Gambling Treatment Service for 2019/20 will be published in the autumn once the information has undergone validation and analysis by ViewItUK. I will be able to let you know closer to the time when to expect the statistical release. GamCare will be undertaking a similar process, to a similar timeline, for the Helpline data.

Please note however that a number of Helpline callers are not ready to commence treatment and prefer instead to reflect on the information that the Helpline gives to them before making a decision to come forward for assessment. As a result of this period of contemplation, they will present as self-referrals to the treatment provider, rather than as a referral from the Helpline. Please also note that while Helpline advisers are able to use screening tools to gauge gambling behaviour and the level of gambling harms, this is not a full-scale clinical assessment: that takes place when someone feels ready to start treatment, and is undertaken by the treatment provider. If at that stage, or later, it becomes apparent to the treatment provider that the individual needs a different or additional treatment intervention, within or beyond the National Gambling Treatment Service, the treatment provider can put in motion the necessary arrangements.

As you may be aware, the National Gambling Helpline is accredited by the Helplines Partnership in recognition of the standards to which it operates and the quality of the staff and their training. 95% of callers would recommend the service to someone else.

I hope that you find this information helpful. And on a personal note, congratulations on your appointment as PPS to the Leader of the Opposition.

With kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Marc OJA', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Marc Etches
Chief Executive