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Treat betting firms like Big Tobacco, says think-tank

Betting firms should be treated like Big Tobacco, because of the harm their products do to the public, says a leading Westminster based think-tank.

The think-tank, ResPublica, which successfully campaigned for lowering the maximum stake to £2 for Fixed Odds Betting Terminals (FOBTs), says that the Government needs to go much further than this “one off action” if it is serious about tackling Britain’s gambling epidemic, which has seen numbers of problem gamblers surge from 280,000 in 2012 to 430,000 in 2015.

In the report *Watershed: Closing the loopholes in Gambling Advertising* which was submitted to the Gambling Commission and is backed by the Campaign for Fairer Gambling, ResPublica recommends that gambling be treated like other major health crises and that betting firms should be treated like tobacco companies.

Phillip Blond, Director of ResPublica, commented: “The Government has rightly capped the maximum FOBT stake to £2 and we applaud this, but this one off action will not solve the public health crisis associated with gambling, or the annual societal cost of between [£1.2 billion](#) to [£3.6 billion](#). ResPublica believes that only by treating gambling in the same way we treat smoking and other public health emergencies will we start to cut the numbers of problem and at risk gamblers.”

The report, which is supported by a cross party group of MPs, including Labour’s deputy leader Tom Watson and former Conservative Minister John Hayes, set out a series of recommendations aimed at reducing problem gambling including large uniform health warnings, ending loop holes that allow betting firms to circumvent the rules on advertising, curbing ubiquitous sports sponsorship, beefing up the powers of regulators and ending unfair introductory offers that hook individuals into

a minimum amount of time and or money spent habituating them to high risk gaming before being able to get their funds back.

“A television watershed holds little value when 43% of gamblers use tablets or smartphones online,” the report says, “The exemptions to the voluntary industry code which allow daytime advertising around live sports events on television are diminished by the fact that exposure has become ubiquitous in all areas of these events, from billboards at the side of pitches and logos on football shirts to TV breaks dominated by ads directed at all viewers and hence all ages to “bet-in-play”. As an illustration of this, 9 out of the 20 Premier League football clubs and 12 out of the 24 EFL Championship clubs in the 2017-2018 football season are sponsored by betting sites – nearly 50 per cent of clubs in the top two tiers. ^[1]_[SEP]

“Similarly, the frequently-used slogan designed to act as a warning on these adverts – “When the Fun Stops, Stop” – is typically designed in such a way that the letters of the warning are obscured: the script is often too small, or is hidden in plain view by being presented in the same colour scheme and general design format as the company advert or logo. In fact, the use of the word “Fun” itself is problematic when considered in terms of a public health warning “Fun” normalises the idea of gambling as a leisure pursuit rather than as a potential addiction. This is in stark contrast to the warnings given on other addictive products such as cigarette packets, which are presented in a neutral black and white script that covers the majority of the packet and are clearly understood in terms of harm rather than “fun”.

“There needs to be a paradigm shift away from a normalised narrative of “fun” towards one of public health and public harm. This view is echoed by other organisations, including the Local Government Association.” ^[1]_[SEP]

Phillip continued: “Part of the challenge regulators face is the dramatic change to how people gamble. Much of the industry is based solely online, with little or no physical footprint exploiting the latest online operant marketing techniques to draw people on to their websites. This type of advanced physiological profiling is especially effective on the young and vulnerable.

“Rules designed in the early 2000s are no longer fit for purpose, while the aim of putting social responsibility at the heart of the industry has failed to materialise. Worryingly evidence suggests that the numbers of problem gamblers and those at risk are significantly higher than previously estimated. The latest figures suggest there are up to two million at risk gamblers on top of the 430,000 problem gamblers.”

^[1]_[SEP]

Previously the think-tank has called for a mandatory levy, set at one per cent of profits, to help pay for dealing with gambling addicts. This would raise around £135 million a year and bring funding for treatment into line with the treatment of drug addicts and alcoholics.

Phillip concluded: “What we are proposing is a radical change of direction in terms of Government policy. No longer should gambling be considered solely as a harmless leisure pursuit with responsibility for its regulation limited to the CMA and DCMS. It has to be recognised and regulated for the addictive and potentially harmful activity that it is.

“Government departments must pull together, just as they did to reduce smoking rates, because it will take concerted action, additional resources and a fundamental rethink of policy if we are going to tackle this growing and insidious problem.”

ENDS

Notes to editors:

About ResPublica

The ResPublica Trust (ResPublica) is an independent non-partisan think tank. Through our research, policy innovation and programmes, we seek to establish a new economic, social and cultural settlement. In order to heal the long-term rifts in our country, we aim to combat the concentration of wealth and power by distributing ownership and agency to all, and by re-instilling culture and virtue across our economy and society.

About the Campaign for Fairer Gambling

The Campaign for Fairer Gambling is a not-for-profit organisation that aims to ensure delivery and enforcement of the licensing objectives of the 2005 Gambling Act, including preventing gambling from being a source of disorder or crime, ensuring that gambling is conducted in a fair and open way, and protecting children and other vulnerable persons from being harmed or exploited by gambling.

The full report will be published on Monday 28th May and can viewed on the ResPublica website. For an advance copy please contact Sara Gariban on 07432 280805, or Alistair Thompson on 07970 162225.