

Written evidence submitted by Dr Andrew Harris

Gambling Regulation - Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee

- a. This submission focuses on how structural aspects of gambling can affect the majority of gamblers, not just those who struggle to regulate their time and financial investment on gambling platforms and locations. It identifies the growing need to prioritise aspects of gambling behaviour and gambling business practice in Government priorities. Research conducted by Harris and colleagues at Nottingham Trent University, highlights how gambling games with faster play speeds increases people's risk of experiencing gambling related harm and limits their ability to stop gambling whether or not they have a gambling disorder.
- b. This submission responds to aspects of questions relating to the scale of gambling-relating harm and key priorities for the White Paper. It proposes that legislators and industry should acknowledge that any and all individuals who play high-frequency event games are vulnerable to negative impacts, not just those with problem-gambling, and that this must be a priority in White Paper development. Such games include electronic slot machines, typically found in high-street bookmakers, pubs, and other leisure venues.
- c. High-frequency games must include relevant and meaningful pop-up messages to reduce harm. The messaging contained in the now well-utilised pop-up message approach, should contain a more emotive message that highlights the financial, familial, and/or social risks of excessive gambling. Harris et al. (2018) found that messages with emotive content significantly improved self-control and decision making when compared to messages with neutral (non-emotive) content.
- d. Recognising that simple and straightforward formatting changes, such as the position of the 'spin' button can promote better self-control without reducing the number of high-frequency events in a game. This will help to prevent players from playing without deliberate thought ('auto-pilot') within a single gambling session.
- e. This submission is based on Dr Andrew Harris's academic expertise in relation to gambling and behavioural addictions in the UK. Andrew Harris is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Nottingham Trent University and is a member of the International Gaming Research Unit, specialising in behavioural addictions with a focus on gambling and risk-taking behaviour. Andrew has also been commissioned by Paddy Power to review their responsible gambling practices in betting shops and has worked for the Responsible Gambling Trust (now known now as GambleAware). His research has also been previously cited in a variety of UK Parliament discussions dating back to 2015.

2. What is the scale of gambling-related harm in the UK?

- a. It is well established that gambling and problem-gambling (PG – repetitive gambling behaviour that leads to a range of negative effects) is a complex public health issue that has a range of social, emotional, and financial effects on and for individual gamblers, their family, and the public, and poses significant challenges and demand on third sector organisations which provide support for individuals with problem-gambling.
- b. Research conducted by Harris and colleagues (2017;2018;2020) at Nottingham Trent University, highlights how gambling games with faster play speeds increases people’s risk of experiencing gambling related harm and limits their ability to stop gambling. In 2019, the Department of Health and Social Care commissioned PHE to undertake a review of the evidence of gambling harms and acknowledged that gambling harms referred to a range of problems including financial harms (employment issues and bankruptcy), family issues, and physical and mental health harms.
- c. Significantly, the effects identified in the research are independent of a gambling disorder and can be seen across all users. Any and all individuals who use games with faster play speeds are therefore vulnerable to harm. These findings stem from experimental research conducted in the UK, with samples of regular gamblers without a gambling disorder.
- d. Research findings identified that faster playing speeds negatively affected people’s ability to withhold from gambling. Arousal, which was significantly higher at faster speeds, played a significant role in loss of self-control.
- e. The researchers built a Go/No-go task into the slot machine. The Go/No-go task assessed participants’ level of self-control by looking at their ability to stop gambling when a colour cue was present. Each condition had 90 spins. The first 30 spins all had green coloured “go” signals displayed on the slot machine screen. The last 60 were a mix of “go” and red coloured “no-go” signals. Participants were supposed to gamble on “go” signals and to withhold from pressing the gamble (spin) button on “no-go” signals.
- f. The research identified two key issues. Firstly, participants were less able to withhold from gambling when playing the slot machine at faster speeds and reported more arousal and positive emotions during faster playing speeds. The percentage of successfully withheld motor responses when instructed by a colour cue, was just 65% when playing at the fastest speeds, compared to 76% and 87% in the moderate and slow speed conditions respectively.
- g. Secondly, a follow-up study using similar simulations found a statistically significant result for those gambling at speeds without the use of harm-minimisations tools (such as

alterations to the spin button format and presentation of emotive pop-up messages), with users making statistically worse decisions and showing a preference for more immediate rewards over larger delayed rewards immediately following the gambling session. Harm minimisation tools in this research included pop-up messages reminding players of the consequences of excess gambling aimed at inducing better awareness of motor actions.

- h. Therefore, inducing a rapid response style, typical of high-speed gambling, was detrimental for a player's motor control, as well as their cognitive decision making. As previously stated, this negative reaction affects all players, not just individuals with PG. Research by Harris also identified that this effect can be reduced by the use of specific harm-minimisation tools during the gambling session.

3. What should the key priorities be in the White Paper?

- a. Increasing the salience of cues that assist self-control, as opposed to only reducing the speed of play, should be a key priority for legislators and the gambling industry.

Whilst research findings clearly indicate that reducing the maximum speed of electronic slot machines would be less-detrimental to self-control (and there is substantial evidence to demonstrate this), this is often received poorly by industry and potentially threatens to undermine the importance of collaborative action by industry, policymakers, community, and researchers. An alternate solution would be to prioritise the salience of cues that may assist self-control. Improving the salience of cues is aimed at providing players with more meaningful opportunities to reflect and improve their self-control and awareness which, by extension, will reduce harm without reducing the speed of play.

- b. These cues could include making clocks and monetary spend displays more visible to machine users to ensure that they are regularly processed and attended to by gamblers. This would increase their self-awareness and facilitate self-appraisal of their gambling. Similarly, while pop-up messages are now well-utilised in some games, the message included should be more emotive to be fully effective. For example, messages focusing on the familial, monetary, or relational consequences of excessive gambling, things that may provide motivation for self-control.
- c. In addition, findings from research indicate that decision making during gambling can be improved by making simple formatting changes to high-frequency event machines. These changes could improve active monitoring and engagement in motor processes. For example, varying the positioning of 'spin/gamble' buttons to prevent players from following routine play patterns and developing habitual motor responses during play.

4. Recommendations:

- a. White Paper priorities must acknowledge that any and all individuals who play high-frequency event games are vulnerable to negative impacts, not just those with problem-gambling to ensure that legislators and industry officials protect all players, not just targeting those with problem-gambling.
- b. High frequency games must include relevant and meaningful pop-up messages to reduce harm for all players. The messaging contained in the now well-utilised pop-up message approach, should contain more emotive messages that highlight the financial, familial, and/or social risks of excessive gambling.
- c. Recognising that simple and straightforward formatting changes, such as the position of the 'spin' button can promote better self-control without reducing the number of high-frequency events in a game. This will help to prevent players from playing without deliberate thought ('auto-pilot') within a single gambling session.

Dr Andrew Harris is happy to speak to committee members confidentially about aspects of his research; He is also happy to present oral evidence to the committee or individual committee members.

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