

Briefing to the Communities Committee

About the APG

The All Party Group (APG) on Reducing Harm Related to Gambling has been established to address issues associated with gambling harm in our community. The group's chair is Robbie Butler MLA and its vice-chair is Philip McGuigan MLA.

About our Inquiry

Between October 2020 and June 2021 the APG ran an inquiry on the future gambling regulation in Northern Ireland. The inquiry received a substantial body of written and oral evidence from industry figures, academics, public health experts and gambling harm reduction advocates. This has since been condensed into a report, published in November 2021 and available [here](#).

Provisions within the Bill we welcome

- Creation of new offence of inviting, etc, a person under 18 to play a gaming machine
We welcome this, though we believe more information is needed on how this new offence would be enforced.
- Creation of a new power to impose an industry levy
We welcome the creation of a power to impose an industry levy and the assurances by the Minister and her Department that money raised from this will be spent on Research, Education and Treatment. We would encourage the Department to consider rendering the levy a 'Smart Levy' on the polluter pays principle, whereby higher levy rates are charged against industry sectors associated with higher levels of gambling-related harm. We would also encourage the Minister and her successor to introduce a statutory levy on online gambling as soon as is practically possible.
- Creation of powers to issue one or more mandatory Codes of Practice
We support the Bill's provisions of powers to create mandatory codes of practice, which we believe will offer regulatory flexibility and more proportionate mechanisms for enforcement of certain issues. We also welcome the Minister's recent announcement that requirements within the code will address issues such as banning use of credit cards in gambling transactions, the setting of age verification standards and tighter controls on FOBTs. We would, however, welcome more clarity on precisely what is proposed for inclusion within the codes, and on how the codes would be enforced.

Provisions within the Bill we have concerns about

- Enforcement of this legislation's provisions
While we welcome several aspects of this Bill, we have concerns about how new provisions within the Bill will be enforced. We would welcome the creation of an independent regulator to enforce gambling legislation.

Other issues we would like to raise

- Extension of opening hours in Licensed Betting Shops and Bingo Halls
We are aware of concerns that extended opening hours in betting shops and bingo halls may lead to increased rates of gambling harm related to the services these venues offer. We would encourage the Committee to take this, and any other potential avenues for gambling related harm that it is made aware of, seriously during its consideration of the Bill.

- Recommendations on the Code(s) of Practice
We believe the following issues, drawn from our recent report, could be considered for inclusion within the Code of Practice:
 - Creation of affordability measures, such as a £100 monthly ‘soft cap’ on gambling losses
 - Banning of VIP Schemes, Free Bets and other potentially misleading forms of promotion
 - Mandating operators to be part of a multi-venue self-exclusion scheme
 - Controls on gaming machines, such as restrictions on stakes, prizes and speed of play, as well as specific controls on warning labels and on-screen message
- Creation of a regulator
We would encourage the Minister and her Department to take what steps are possible within the time constraints of this mandate towards the establishment of a new gambling regulator, tasked with monitoring gambling activity and rates of harm, as well as ensuring compliance with gambling legislation and regulation.
- Other Recommendations
A much greater range of measures is needed during the next mandate to address the significant issue of gambling related harm in Northern Ireland. A full list of the APG’s recommendations on the future regulation of gambling can be found in our report (which can be accessed [here](#)).