

UK Bookmakers Sidestep Northern Irish PR Drubbing

7TH JAN 2019 | WRITTEN BY: DAVID ALTANER

Major UK bookmakers may have sidestepped another public relations thrashing by agreeing to voluntarily reduce stakes on controversial fixed-odds betting terminals (FOBTs) in Northern Ireland.

On Monday, Belfast City Council is set to debate a motion which would urge British bookmakers to voluntarily reduce FOBT stakes from £100 to £2, in line with a UK government move to cut stakes in April.

The step would be necessary because Northern Ireland does not fall under the jurisdiction of the Gambling Act 2005, which applies to the rest of the UK.

But Ladbrokes, which is owned by GVC Holdings, has already announced its plans to voluntarily reduce the stakes and William Hill and Paddy Power say they plan to follow suit.

The bookmakers may feel that any potential commercial advantage from maintaining higher stakes in Northern Ireland, with a population of 1.9m compared with England's 55m, would be outweighed by the public relations hit, one gambling consultant said.

"What is different about their Northern Ireland clientele?" said David Clifton of Clifton Davies Consultancy. "The PR disadvantage from that would not be worth it."

The proposed [Belfast resolution](#) cites the "enormous damage" which gambling addiction can cause, referencing a 2017 Department for Communities survey which found a problem gambling prevalence rate of 2.3 percent, or four times higher than England.

It notes that Northern Ireland currently lacks both an executive and an assembly, preventing region-wide legislation on gambling. Its devolved government collapsed in January 2017.

The public policy charity CARE in Northern Ireland has also called for other bookmakers to follow Ladbrokes' lead in the stakes cut.

But a William Hill spokesman told Gambling Compliance that it planned to cut the stakes "as soon as possible".

"While gambling regulation in Northern Ireland is distinct from Great Britain, it makes sense for us to offer the same products throughout the UK and we are working with our suppliers in Northern Ireland to implement the £2 stake," said Ciaran O'Brien, a spokesman for William Hill.

A spokesman for Paddy Power Betfair said the company planned to implement the stakes cut in its half a dozen Northern Irish Paddy Power shops in April, in line with the deadline for the rest of the UK.

The voluntary step follows [plans by the Industry Group for Responsible Gambling](#) for a "whistle-to-whistle" ban on sports-betting advertising before a 9pm watershed, due to take effect this summer.

Both steps follow [controversies](#), including a UK government policy u-turn that led to the stakes cut and linked increase in online gambling tax being pulled forward to April from an initial October deadline after former leisure minister Tracey Crouch resigned.

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