Due to the impact Covid-19 is having on operations across the UK we have had to reduce our phoneline opening hours.

Our phonelines are open on Monday, Wednesday and Friday between 10 am and 4 pm.

The contact us service is also available for answers to common questions and we will aim to respond to these enquiries as quickly as possible.

If you have a question about your gambling, or the gambling of someone close to you, our Guidance and FAQs page may provide valuable information. Our what we do page also provides an overview of the types of queries we are able to help consumers with in the first instance.

The National Gambling Helpline is also available 24 hours a day, seven days a week through GamCare. It is there to support those suffering from gambling problems or those concerned about the affect gambling is having on people close to them. You can call them free on 0808 8020 133, or visit gamcare.org.uk.

Risks arising from Covid-19 and our response

The Covid-19 crisis continues to affect everyone across Great Britain. The lockdown has also brought significant consumer behavioural change and major impacts on the gambling industry.

Our responsibility is to protect gambling consumers, and we are focused on understanding how the risks posed to them are changing. To help understand these risks and trends, and to inform public knowledge, we are collecting additional data from operators and a wide range of other sources.

Here we summarise what the changes we see in the data tell us about changes in risks to consumers of gambling-related harm.
Impacts on risk

On the one hand, we have found that:

- **Fewer consumers are gambling.** Operator data indicates that at the end of March the number of active online player accounts was down 3%.[1]
- **The lockdown is not prompting many people to start gambling.** YouGov research shows only 0.2% of adults surveyed had started gambling for the first time during the past four weeks.
- **The majority of those who are gambling are playing at the same rate or less.** For example, the YouGov research shows that three quarters of recent[2] gamblers indicate that they have not increased the time or money they have spent on gambling.

But the risks arise from other observations:

- **Some players are trying new products, some with faster play cycles.** A third of recent gamblers say they have tried one or more gambling activities for the first time during lockdown. Operator data indicates that certain products are seeing active player increases – for example active slots players have increased 25% compared with the same time last year[3].
- **More ‘engaged’ gamblers are spending more time or money.** Two thirds (64%) of more engaged gamblers (those who have participated in 3 or more activities in the past 4 weeks) have increased either the amount of time or money they have spent on one or more types of gambling, including National Lottery products.
- **There has been an increase in the number of sessions over an hour.** The total number of sessions lasting more than 1 hour rose by 23% compared with the same period last year.

Shift to faster products

The market shift to online products such as slots, in the absence of significant sports betting opportunities, exposes players to a more limited product portfolio that can be riskier because of the potential for increased spend in a short space of time.

Increase in engaged player time/spend

Our previous research has indicated that certain demographic groups (such as
young men) and those who gamble on more products have higher at-risk or problem gambling rates. Our data show that two thirds (64%) of engaged gamblers have increased either the amount of time or money they have spent on one or more types of gambling at this time[4], showing that there is a heightened risk for this group.

Session length

Length of time played is a further proxy for potential harm, and evidence from Category B machines suggests that sessions longer than an hour are a particular risk indicator. At an overall level compared with March 2019 the average session length reported by operators has decreased by 4 minutes (down to 22 minutes). Within that, however, the number of sessions which lasted in excess of 1hr increased by 23%. This means that almost one in eight sessions now lasts in excess of 1 hour.

We also need to consider these risks alongside the fact that many consumers are facing either reduced income or increased uncertainty about their employment and income. In addition, they are facing increased isolation from their support networks. Against this backdrop, there is a strong case for acting on a precautionary basis with measures that are geared to the risks we have identified, particularly in relation to engaged players.

Action we are taking

We want to limit the extent to which consumers who show signs of being at risk of harm move towards higher intensity products and play for longer. The following measures, which we are introducing as part of tailored guidance for gambling operators[5], are designed to achieve that. We will review those measures based on changes in the evidence base.

Inducements to Gamble

Research[6] suggests that inducements play a role in impulsive decisions. In the Populus online tracker, free bets and bonuses are the most often cited reason for prompted spend on gambling. We found that 50% of problem gamblers (according to the PGSI) were prompted to spend money on gambling when prompted with a free bet or a bonus, compared with 13% of
non-problem gamblers.

Therefore, while our data shows the increased risk remains, we want operators to stop providing inducements for those players that that are showing signs of harm.

**Reverse withdrawal functionality**

Most online operators offer consumers the facility to reverse a request to withdraw funds in their gambling account. Consumers can use this facility to change their decision to end gambling, and either extend their session without taking a break or spend more than they originally intended. The Commission, supported by academic research, lived experience and expert advice, already considers the use of reverse withdrawals as a flag for potential gambling harms.

We know that there has been a reduction in the use of this facility by approximately 7% compared with March 2019. This could be because there has been a reduction in gambling overall and a small number of larger operators have voluntarily withdrawn the facility. However, we also know that consumers who do use the facility, do so on average 4.7 times per month. Therefore, it is likely to be contributing to the heightened risks of more intensive play for engaged gamblers.

Given this, we are accelerating our plans to take action in this area. We want to remove the ability for consumers to reverse a withdrawal. This would help support consumer decisions for safer gambling and in some cases limit the length of time a player can continue without taking a break.

**Controls on session length**

Introducing controls on the length of time players can play in a session would limit the time they could play with one operator without a break. However, it is easy for consumers to switch to another operator once their time limit has been reached. Consequently, we think that customer interactions would be a more effective way of mitigating the harm from longer sessions.
Operators should already be conducting effective interactions with players at appropriate times, but we want to make sure that they now factor in sessions longer than an hour.

**How we will implement the changes**

We need to introduce these measures quickly to ensure they have the intended effect of protecting consumers during the Covid-19 crisis. We have an existing LCCP requirement for licensees to take account of our guidance on customer interaction. We have enhanced this guidance for remote operators to include the requirements set out above. This approach will allow the measures to come into effect within days.

We will also take forward work to consult on specific measures around reverse withdrawals, inducements and time of play as permanent consumer protections.


[2] Those who have gambled over the past four weeks

[3] Changes in this figure could be due to a variety of factors impacting the market since Mar 2019.


[5] The National Lottery already has similar protections in place but is monitoring the impact of the crisis on player behaviour and updating the Gambling Commission regularly on its approach.