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UK's Voluntary Betting Ad Ban Faces Restart Test

[Regulation / May 6, 2020](#)

The voluntary ban on TV and radio gambling ads instigated by the UK's Betting and Gaming Council members which comes into force this week is raising questions about its efficacy and how the operators will reverse the move in little more than a month from now.

No sooner had the voluntary betting ad ban been announced in late April than an anti-gambling parliamentary lobby group called not only for the ban to be extended to cover all forms of gambling advertising and marketing but also that it be made permanent.

"There will always been alarmist noises from anti-gambling prohibitionists who just want to grab headlines, but it is this serious, constructive and evidence-led approach by the BGC's regulated members that has resulted in this further major change," said Michael Dugher, chief executive at the BGC when [announcing the move](#).

Reversing the "Voluntary" Ban Not So Simple

"The industry's critics in Parliament and the press rather predictably interpreted the ban as recognition that broadcast advertising for gambling is harmful," said Dan Waugh, partner at gambling consultancy Regulus Partners. "They then moved swiftly to claim that targeted online advertising was the real issue."

As Waugh suggested, such claims come directly from the "public health playbook" whereby the gambling sector's critics push for "still more change" in the way in which the [UK sports betting](#) industry is regulated.

David Clifton, partner at gambling and leisure sector legal consultancy Clifton Davies, said that while the BGC had "little alternative" to go down the route of a voluntary ban, the move still posed questions about how the decision will be reversed in the medium-term.

"It's going to be difficult for its members to revert to the *status quo ante* without provoking public, media and parliamentary ire that will do the sector's prospects no good whatsoever in the forthcoming Gambling Act review," he said.

Harry Lang, a marketing expert with Brand Architects, points out that the betting sector's PR profile isn't great even at the best of times with the anti-gambling lobby "rarely shy of kicking a poorly-backed horse when its down".

"Inevitably there will be calls for the voluntary ad cessation to extend beyond the end of lockdown, maybe forever, if zealous opponents like Carolyn Harris MP gets their way."

Advertising Amid Project Restart

The commitment on the part of BGC members is to stop advertising as of **7 May** for an initial period of six weeks or until **5 June** "and will only be reviewed when lockdown restrictions are relaxed."

This will likely coincide with the predicted 'Project Restart' for the English Premier League which is in discussions with the government over potentially finishing off the current season behind closed doors at neutral venues throughout June.

When [football betting](#) resumes, it will do so with the return of prominent shirt sponsorships and likely pitch-side hoardings. The Asian-facing bookies are particularly active in this area and are – potentially significantly – not members of the BGC.

Clifton says he suspects that the return of advertising will be accompanied by a revised Industry Code for Socially Responsible Advertising which will encourage more “safer gambling” messages.

But, as he acknowledges, that will likely be insufficient for the anti-gambling lobby. “It’s likely to be a challenging test of the BGC’s authority to see to what extent it can influence newly cash-starved PFL clubs to reduce the level of pitch-side hoarding gambling adverts by Asian-facing brands.”

There is also the looming restart of British [horseracing betting](#), which is not subject to the current whistle-to-whistle advertising ban, to consider. Nick Rust of the British Horseracing Authority recently told [BBC Sport](#) that the horse racing industry could be [ready to return](#) to action within a week of being given the go-ahead to restart.

A Balance Between Remaining Competitive Without Inviting a Backlash

Lang agrees that the BGC might find itself faced with a backlash about a level of advertising that is actually beyond its control.

"Even though the BGC represents approximately 90% of UK licensed operators, they noted that their members only account for about half of all gambling advertising on UK TV and radio," he points out. "There are plenty of ne'er-do-wells out there, including Asian-facing sites, who will take advantage of the near naked competitive environment."

A big question for those in charge of the marketing efforts from the larger BGC members will be how to juggle the competing instincts to compete in the new environment while hoping not to attract the opprobrium of critics.

As Lang put it, if he was in charge of marketing at one of the larger brands: "I'd be sensitive to the issues and I'd take an appropriately measured view – and then relaunch legally compliant campaigns as soon as possible."

The test on advertising and marketing will come with the restart of German football in late May with other leagues lining up to also play behind closed doors, including the EPL along with Serie A in Italy and La Liga in Spain in June on even later.

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