The National Strategy to Reduce Gambling Harms launched almost 3 years ago, and set the framework for improving prevention, education, and treatment support around gambling harms throughout Great Britain.

Since the launch, a considerable amount of progress has been made. The strategy was always about applying a multi-agency approach to tackling gambling harms in a joined-up way. Simply put, the Gambling Commission doesn’t have the resource, remit or powers to accomplish the objectives set out in the strategy on its own. It requires the combined efforts of a wide range of organisations working together to make the aims set out in the strategy become practical steps for success.

The local authority approach to addressing gambling harms

Even before the strategy was introduced, there had been considerable local authority (LA) interest in gambling harm as a public health matter. LAs in Leeds, Sheffield and Birmingham were keen to look at gambling in a similar way to the approach they already applied for issues like alcohol and drugs. The Commission supported these local authorities in their work, as well as liaising with national bodies including the Local Government Association and the Institute of Licensing. Word quickly spread about how these authorities were applying a public health approach to tackling gambling harms. We began to receive a significant number of enquiries from other LAs who were interested in finding out more about how they could become involved.

Since then, two further projects received regulatory settlement funds from the Gambling Commission, allowing them to make a significant impact in their regions. One of those projects covered the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, and the other covered the Humber and Humber Public Health region. These lead projects are now able to help others in disseminating learning around gambling harms.

Sharing best practice across local authorities

The success of this combined approach for LAs and the Gambling Commission has led us to create a network of LAs, who now meet virtually every three months. The meetings are co-ordinated by the Commission and have 46 members. The second meeting of the group took place in December 2021, with 25 attendees.

The main aim of the group is for members to share their experience of how they have tackled the issue of gambling harms in their area and support other LAs who are trying to get a public health approach to gambling off the ground. Some members are quite new to the topic of gambling harm and public health, whilst others come to the group with a greater understanding of the issue.

We have received feedback from the group who have let us know that they really value the role the meetings play in helping advance the strategy in their locality. Ultimately the delivery of the Strategy requires the support of such individuals. They can obtain buy-in from their elected members and senior decision makers.

It can sometimes be a slow process to change hearts, minds and culture, however our three-monthly sessions do appear to be helping us move towards achieving that ambition by applying a multi-agency approach.

Looking to the future

Understandingly, the Covid-19 pandemic has severely stretched the resource that can be offered by public health officials, so we need to be realistic about how quickly progress can be made in each LA area.

Despite this, the group continues to attract new members as word spreads and interest is generated. This continuing engagement and enthusiasm from members is a really encouraging indicator. We are also pleased with the diversity of the group, with members coming from inner city London boroughs through to seaside resorts.

The Commission’s role will be to continue to act as a facilitator and enabler, disseminating good practice within each LA area. Implementation of the strategy and a public health approach to reducing gambling harms will always be locally specific. Whilst it is too early to say exactly what impact the group will have in terms of implementation, the early signs are very encouraging.

The local authority approach to addressing gambling harms

Gambling Commission and Local Authorities: Applying a public health approach to tackling gambling harms

Posted 11 January 2022 by Rob Burkitt, Policy Manager and Lead – Shared Regulation

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