

**Open letter from UK-based academic scientists to the Secretaries of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and for Health and Social Care regarding the need for independent funding for the prevention and treatment of gambling harms**

To Rt Hon Oliver Dowden and Rt Hon Matthew Hancock,

cc. Rt Hon Nigel Huddleston

Dear Secretaries of State,

As leading academic scientists studying gambling behaviours and its harms, we are writing to express our concern about the continuing support shown for the voluntary system of funding treatment, prevention and research in Great Britain. We feel compelled to write to you following the Betting and Gaming Council's (BGC) recent announcement (17<sup>th</sup> June 2020) that five of its operators will now allocate the long-awaited increase in funding for prevention and treatment, first promised on 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2019, to GambleAware, rather than the charity *Action Against Gambling Harms*. Irrespective of which organisation funds are given to, the BGC's announcement exemplifies the long-standing weakness of a funding system that allows the gambling industry to regulate the availability and distribution of vital funds to address gambling harms across our communities. As we outline below, the continuance of this arrangement produces a number of negative effects that undermine the collective effort to reduce harms from gambling. It is also our belief that funds for research into gambling harms and their reduction should primarily be distributed through recognised independent organisations, such as UK Research and Innovation. We hereby urge you, as the Secretaries of State with responsibilities for addressing gambling harms, to implement a statutory levy to fund effective prevention and treatment of gambling harms which is free both from industry influence and the perception of industry influence.

There is considerable concern that the existing system, whereby the gambling industry voluntarily provides funds for Research, Education and Treatment, creates significant opportunities for them to influence this agenda.<sup>1</sup> Deciding, unilaterally, who to fund is one way of exerting influence. The BGC announcement exemplifies this practice, where money promised to one charity was revoked at will and given to another, for reasons that have not been made public. This provides little assurance that the voluntary system is free from industry influence.

Delivering an effective strategy to reduce gambling harms requires surety and certainty of funding to enable effective planning and delivery of long-term objectives. A voluntary system, reliant on the good-will of the industry, is an inadequate way to develop such a system. Increases in funding first promised by five of the largest gambling operators nearly one year ago have yet to materialise and industry has now demonstrated its ability and

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<sup>1</sup> Orford, J (2019) *The Gambling Establishment: challenging the system of the modern gambling industry and its allies*. Routledge: Oxford. Cassidy et al, (2013) *Fair Game: Producing Gambling Research*. Goldsmiths: London.

willingness to change the direction of funding at short notice. A system that contains such uncertainties is not suited to the long-term development or delivery of a strategic plan to reduce harms.

Reducing harms requires a dual focus on treatment but also preventing harms from occurring in the first place.<sup>2</sup> Prevention is a critical and central tenet of a public-health based approach to harm reduction. Effective prevention requires independent assessment of what works and what doesn't to make recommendations for changes to policy and practice. Trust in the outcomes of such research by the public and policy makers is essential. There have been repeated critiques of studies produced under the existing voluntary system, undermining trust in research, outcomes and expertise.<sup>3</sup> The BGC announcement focuses on funding for treatment and says nothing about prevention. Equal attention needs to be given to preventing people from experiencing harms in the first place.

By offering a voluntary increase in funding, these operators clearly recognise the need for greater resources to tackle the harms they generate. We agree, and believe a statutory levy is needed to address the inadequacies of the voluntary system to ensure that these promised increases in resources are delivered. There are clear benefits to doing so; it provides an opportunity to deliver harm reductions by ensuring a fair, independent and trusted system for developing effective prevention activities; effective prevention in turn delivers societal benefits through reductions in the social costs associated with gambling harms and a levy creates an equitable system by which all members of the industry contribute to addressing the harms they generate. We also believe that the funding for research raised by the statutory levy should be primarily awarded and administered independently through established bodies such as UK Research and Innovation, and the National Institute for Health Research. This will ensure that research on gambling harms is sustainable for universities, attractive to the best researchers, and that policy can be based on the most robust evidence possible.

We urge you, the Secretaries of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and for Health and Social Care, to review current funding arrangements and implement a statutory levy to deliver reductions in gambling harms.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Heather Wardle, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine/University of Glasgow

Dr James Banks, Sheffield Hallam University

Professor Paul Bebbington, University College London

Professor David Best, University of Derby

Dr Lindsay Blank, University of Sheffield

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<sup>2</sup> Wardle et al (2019) Gambling and public health: we need policy action to prevent harm. *BMJ*: 365

<sup>3</sup> C.f. Orford, 2019; Cassidy et al 2013; Cowlshaw S., Thomas S. (2018). Industry interests in gambling research: Lessons learned from other forms of hazardous consumption. *Addictive Behaviors*, 78, 101-106

Professor Henrietta Bowden Jones OBE, University College London /National Problem Gambling Clinic

Dr Stephanie Bramley, Kings College London

Dr Christopher Bunn, University of Glasgow

Dr Margaret Carran, City University

Dr Emma Casey, Northumbria University

Professor Rebecca Cassidy, Goldsmiths, University of London

Dr Sam Chamberlain, University of Cambridge

Dr James Close, University of Plymouth

Professor Alex Copello, University of Birmingham

Dr Nathan Critchlow, University of Stirling

Dr Glen Dighton, Swansea University

Ms. Fiona Dobbie, University of Edinburgh

Dr Carolyn Downs, Lancaster University

Professor Simon Dymond, Swansea University

Professor Alan Emond, University of Bristol

Dr Emanuela Fino, Nottingham Trent University

Mr Matthew Gaskell, NHS Northern Gambling Service

Professor Elizabeth Goyder, University of Sheffield

Professor Cindy Gray, University of Glasgow

Professor Mark Griffiths, Nottingham Trent University

Professor Peter Grindrod CBE, University of Oxford

Professor John Holmes, University of Sheffield

Dr Alice Hoon, Swansea University

Professor Kate Hunt, University of Stirling

Dr Richard James, University of Nottingham

Prof Bev John, University of South Wales

Dr Joanne Lloyd, University of Wolverhampton

Professor Jill Manthorpe, King's College London

Professor Jim McCambridge, University of York

Dr David McDaid, London School of Economics

Professor Martin McKee CBE, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

Ms Sally McManus, City University

Professor Antony Moss, London South Bank University

Ms Caroline Norrie, King's College London

Professor David Nutt, Imperial College London

Professor Jim Orford, University of Birmingham/King's College London

Professor Mark Petticrew, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

Dr Rob Pryce, University of Sheffield

Dr Richard Purves, University of Stirling

Professor Gerda Reith, University of Glasgow

Dr Amanda Roberts, University of Lincoln

Dr Emmert Roberts, King's College London

Prof Gareth Roderique-Davies, University of South Wales

Dr Jim Rogers, University of Lincoln

Professor Robert D. Rogers, Bangor University

Dr Stephen Sharman, University of East London/King's College London

Professor Sir John Strang, Kings College London

Professor John Turner, University of East London

Professor Richard Tunney, Aston University

Professor Robert West, University College London

Dr David Zendle, University of York