

Weaknesses persist in underage gambling controls

Press release

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The latest round of underage gambling test purchasing conducted by local authorities in partnership with the Commission continues to demonstrate that many operators have inadequate controls for preventing underage gambling.

In 20 out of 40 tests^[1] of adult gaming centres and betting shops, a supervised test purchaser under the age of 18 was allowed to play on a gaming machine and leave the premises without being challenged to prove their age. A number of tests were also conducted at licensed family entertainment centres and at bingo premises that had been converted from arcades^[2], with similar weaknesses being found.

Licensees that did not challenge a test purchaser before they played a gaming machine have been warned by local authorities that failure to improve could lead to formal regulatory action being taken, and many licensees have been required to submit action plans to their local authority detailing how the weaknesses in their underage gambling controls will be remedied.

Some licensees have so far introduced a range of measures in response, for example improved training schemes for their employees; the employment of third-parties to conduct quarterly test purchases of their premises; have re-sited CCTV to provide employees with better sight of customers entering the premises; or are introducing physical barriers to age-restricted areas at times where they cannot be monitored.

However, local authorities are reminding the operators that if they fail to voluntarily deliver improvements, or if their gambling premises fail a further test purchase, then they may be subject to a review of their premises licence which could culminate in the imposition of stricter licence conditions or the suspension or revocation of their premises licence.

Reasons for failures

The results from these test purchase exercises also show that the causes of such failures to challenge testers before they gambled are similar to those uncovered by the 2013 exercise. Some staff members appeared to be unaware of the presence of the young person, either being engaged in other duties at the time or simply not paying attention. In one test, there were no staff present on the premises. On other occasions, staff appeared to be unwilling to challenge the tester, either lacking confidence in making a challenge or having little regard for their responsibilities to prevent underage gambling. Local authorities are seeking remedial action from licensees in such instances.

Conversely, early challenges were made in tests where the layout of the premises allowed staff to supervise customers entering the premises, or where staff members were positioned close to the entrance; but only when staff members were also vigilant in executing their responsibilities.

Next steps

The Commission has previously stated that it will consider mandating new measures to improve the level of protection offered to children and young people, and is currently consulting on strengthening its Licence Conditions and Codes of Practice.

These latest test purchase results provide further evidence that controls need to be strengthened, in the key areas covered in the consultation; such as line of sight, premises layout, and staff training. The consultation launched on 7 August 2014 and will close on 31 October 2014.

The Commission will continue to work with local authorities to test gambling operators as part of a rolling programme of testing. Individual operators may be putting their livelihoods at risk if they fail to prevent access to gambling by children and young people and regulatory action is taken by a local authority or the Commission.

[1] The tests took place across a number of local authority areas in England during the Easter and summer holiday periods of 2014.

[2] For tests conducted at family entertainment centres and bingo premises, the young person sought to access the age-restricted gaming area and play a Category C gaming machine.