

Royal Society for Public Health's response to the APPG on Fixed Odds Betting Terminals inquiry 'Fixed Odds Betting Terminals – Assessing the Impact'

The Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) is an independent, multidisciplinary charity dedicated to the improvement of the public's health and wellbeing. We have a membership of over 6000 members working across the breadth of public health, from health promotion and food safety to environmental health and pest control.

Our vision is that everyone has the opportunity to optimise their health and wellbeing, and we seek to achieve this through our qualifications, conference and training programmes and policy and campaign work.

The settings in which we live, work and play are the foundations for a healthy and happy population. A community characterised by a diverse range of local groups, access to green space, as well as having a thriving high street, breeds community spirit and supports healthy lifestyle choices amongst local residents.

Equally, the absence of such local assets, can create an additional hurdle to making healthy choices. This was an issue explored in the RSPH report, [Health on the High Street](#), released in March 2015.

In this report, we explored the impact of high street outlets on the health and wellbeing of communities, including the impact of bookmakers and the availability of fixed odds betting terminals (FOBTs) in terms of both problem gambling and mental wellbeing more generally.

We therefore, welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry on FOBTs and look forward to the report due to be released next year. Below is an overview of the key findings, arguments and recommendations in our report;

- Vibrant and diverse high streets, featuring a wide range of businesses, not only make economic sense for a local area, but are also crucial for supporting the public's health.
- As the centre of a community, a location visited by all sections of society, the high street has a central role to play in supporting healthier lifestyles.
- However, in recent years, we have seen the proliferation of high street outlets that potentially undermine the public's health, encouraging unhealthy lifestyle choices amongst residents.

- Fundamental changes in the retail landscape, namely the rise of internet and out-of-town shopping, and the downfall of once prominent high street names, has left a gap, which in some areas has been filled by the clustering of outlets such as fast food takeaways, payday lenders and bookmakers.
- As part of our Health on the High Street campaign, we sought to map out the high street outlets considered to be the most and least health promoting, scoring them on a Richter scale of health, through the use of an expert panel, public opinion polling^a and a review of the literature.
- This mapping exercise identified bookmakers as one of the least health promoting outlets on the high street (-2), alongside payday lenders (-4) and fast food takeaways (-2), with 54% of the public feeling that bookmakers discourage healthy choices and 52% believing they have a negative impact on mental wellbeing.
- In recent years, we have seen the clustering of bookmakers on our high streets, particularly in areas of high deprivation, with research indicating that increased availability of gambling outlets is associated with an increased number of regular and problem gamblers in an area.¹
- There are roughly 450,000 problem gamblers in the UK, with this number gradually increasing.² Gambling addiction is often co-morbid with other conditions, such as depression, obsessive compulsive behaviours and alcoholism.
- Problem gambling is particularly associated with FOBTs, given the rapid and repetitious way in which these machines are used.
- Legislation stipulates that a betting shop is allowed no more than four FOBTs in each outlet, but with many high streets having multiple bookmakers, often including several of the same chain, FOBTs are still easily accessible.
- Whilst progress has been made in recent years, with planning permission now required to open a betting shop, it is important that local authorities are given further powers to restrict the growing presence of bookmakers on our high streets, such powers could include;
 - Public health to be included as a licensing condition for betting shops.
- Alongside this, there are also changes that need to take place within the bookmakers themselves, including, for example;

^a Opinion polling conducted by Populus – 2000 representative sample of the UK.

- Reducing the maximum stake on FOBTs from £100 to £50, or over the longer term, to £2, in line with the limit placed on digital games found in pubs and bars.
- Train staff within bookmakers to deliver brief health advice, enabling them to signpost to relevant health and wellbeing services.

For more information, please contact Duncan Stephenson, Director of External Affairs, dstephenson@rsph.org.uk.

¹ Ben Cave Associates. Betting, borrowing and health: Health impacts of betting shops and payday loan shops in Southwark. London: Ben Cave Associates, 2014.

² George S, Bowden-Jones H. Gambling: the hidden addiction. Available online at: <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/FR%20AP%2001-for%20websiteApril2014.pdf> (2014, last accessed 27th October 2016)