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BINGO CHIEF WARNS GOVERNMENT OF DANGERS OF MIXING HARD AND SOFT GAMING

Chairman of the Bingo Association, Sir Peter Fry, has claimed that problem gambling will increase and bingo clubs across the country will close if the government pushes ahead with recommended changes to gambling laws.

The Budd Report, which is set to form the basis of new proposed gambling legislation, recommends allowing clubs to mix 'hard' gaming - such as casinos - with 'soft' gaming - like bingo - under the same roof. (Currently, they require separate licenses.)

The Bingo Association believes the Report is flawed and, if implemented, will lead to an increase in problem gambling - similar to that experienced in Australia, New Zealand and the US - and the eventual closure of stand-alone bingo clubs.

Sir Peter Fry explains: "Bingo will simply become a loss-leading product, used by casinos to tempt bingo players into playing harder forms of gambling.

"Overall revenues to the government might increase marginally as a result of shifting spend between gaming activities, but at the cost of significantly higher levels of problem gambling and the loss of bingo - an established and valued sector of the gaming industry. We strongly believe bingo will not continue as a stand-alone activity if it is permitted in casinos. Instead, it will become a loss-leading means of encouraging players to trade up to harder gaming products.

"Budd's assessment of the likely pattern of change in relation to bingo and casinos is flawed. True enough, it envisages an increase in the number of casinos, with new premises incorporating bingo and betting. However, it foresees bingo club numbers will remain static, and assumes that the increase in casino numbers will relate to new premises. In practice, it is far more likely that existing bingo club premises will convert to casinos, with a large number of stand-alone clubs closing as a result."

“Bingo players are very conservative in their playing habits. Research has consistently shown that players are resistant to change, and in many cases demonstrate tremendous loyalty to a particular environment. Players will be alienated by the harder gaming atmosphere, and admissions – and therefore revenue to the Exchequer – will decline further.

“The removal of bingo from the proposed mix in casinos would have little or no impact on the commercial opportunities presented in the Budd Report, but would ensure that a genuinely soft gaming option remained for the playing public.

“The licensed bingo sector could develop along the lines put forward elsewhere in Budd, retaining its separate identity. This will ensure that those interested in a genuinely soft gaming product have the opportunity to play, free from the pressures of a hard gaming environment. It would also ensure a continued revenue stream for the Exchequer, without harming the potential for development in the casino sector.”

He concludes: “There is no reason to change the basic structure of the industry that has worked well to date, and has ensured proper and effective regulation. But Budd's recommendations represent a sea-change in gaming policy, and could be extremely damaging to the licensed bingo sector.

“The changes proposed for bingo are limited, while casinos are given wide-ranging new developments, including the introduction of bingo and betting, along with linked slot machines.”

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