



5 May 2020

Rt Hon Alok Sharma MP
Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

Dear Secretary of State

In advance of the release of Government proposals this week on when, where and how the Retail, Leisure and Hospitality sectors might look to reopen their doors, I wanted to draw to your attention some of the specific issues that apply to the Licenced Bingo Industry and its 700,000 weekly customers. We would be happy to provide more information and perspective on how the Government's proposals will affect our sector.

Licensed Bingo is played in 542 premises in Great Britain across 80 operating premises ranging from larger corporates, such as Buzz and Mecca (with 60% of all Licensed Bingo Clubs), to independent operators and sole traders.

The need for a staged approach

Our primary concern remains the health and well-being of our customers and staff. We are acutely aware that some of our customers fall into higher-risk categories (on grounds of age and health) and it is vital that the process of re-opening prioritises their safety. It is also important that re-opening proceeds in a manner which helps to re-build people's confidence to start re-engaging socially. A carefully managed process of re-opening will help to deliver the reassurance that is so important to our customers.

Commercially, the main challenge for the Licensed Bingo Industry is that social distancing will inevitably restrict the number of customers who can attend Bingo. This means that our capacity to generate sustainable revenue will remain reduced until the transition to full re-opening has been achieved, at the earliest. The Bingo Association believes that the business support currently being provided by the Government and, in particular, Furlough support, should only be reduced in a staged or tapered manner as revenues and visits start to recover and in line with our ability to gradually bring colleagues back to work. It will also be important to ensure that the repayment of taxes deferred during the crisis is phased over a time frame that fully supports the recovery.

The need for a flexible approach

It is crucial that the overall approach to re-opening caters to the specific characteristics of our industry. Some of these characteristics are shared across the sector, such as the fact that playing Bingo is a unique activity which requires customers to arrive at our venues at the same time in order to be able to participate, and also requires clubs to be fully staffed in order to operate safely. However, other characteristics will vary considerably between clubs. Key differences will include venue size (since clubs range from over 1500 seats down to 500), location of the individual premises and also on whether a club operates as part of a wider group or as an independent. The differences will impact the ability of a club to operate under conditions of social distancing, thereby reinforcing the need for a tailored and flexible policy in relation to re-opening.

Wider role of Bingo Clubs in society, within the Lockdown and beyond

Bingo clubs have long been recognised as highly-valued community hubs. The support measures currently being provided by the Government have enabled our members not only to continue supporting their employees, but also to continue supporting their customers and communities.

Operators are making hundreds of daily phone calls to customers and employees, particularly those they believe are isolated or lonely. Bingo Association members are supporting local charities with food delivery and distribution initiatives such as Community Kitchens which have already delivered thousands of meals to vulnerable groups, often with the support of prominent MPs who have helped to coordinate our efforts. Operators are providing employees with Mental Health and Wellbeing strategies such as 'Inside Out', online counselling sessions via Apps, and Facebook Fun engagement sessions with customers. These are activities which we would hope to maintain through the transition to full re-opening.

We also stand ready to further support the recovery programme and contribute to the national effort: the majority of Bingo Clubs are large (up to 30,000 square feet, with significant car parking facilities). These could be made available to support testing regimes. Premises cover a wide geographical area and could be used as distribution and pick up areas. Our members have already made many of their car parks free of charge to NHS front-line workers. Furthermore, with a small degree of flexibility to the terms of the furlough scheme, Bingo employees could make an even greater contribution to supporting the lonely, vulnerable or elderly, through greater out-reach by our well-trained and experienced colleagues.

Building a successful reopening strategy

The Bingo Association looks forward to the plans to be announced shortly by the government and we would welcome the opportunity to contribute further to the detailed development of the reopening strategy for our sector.

A copy of this letter goes by email to: the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Miles Baron".

Miles Baron
Chief Executive