# Give councils real power over gambling licences to protect high streets, not more Whitehall rules



Walking down Britain's high streets today, the familiar corner shop or butcher is increasingly replaced by betting shops, adult gaming centres and bingo halls whose machines bear little resemblance to the communal game of bingo many remember. In a Guardian column this week, Dawn Butler, the Labour MP for Brent, framed that change as both a local affront and a national emergency: she has launched a campaign demanding urgent reform of gambling laws to give local people and councils greater power to limit the spread of gambling premises on their streets. But in this new political landscape, such a Westminster-driven crusade risks smothering local accountability and stifling the sort of pragmatic, growth-friendly reform that many communities want. A Reform UK-informed reading would argue for returning more power to town halls, with a careful, market-friendly framework that safeguards residents without crashing the high street economy.

Butler’s central legal target is the so‑called “aim to permit” reading of the Gambling Act 2005, which she says leaves local objections vulnerable and councils exposed to costly legal challenges when they try to refuse licences. The 2005 Act created the current licensing framework and the Gambling Commission, and while it set out licensing objectives such as protecting children and vulnerable people, critics have long argued that its interpretation limits local discretion. Brent’s campaign calls for that constraint to be removed so that resident voices and local public‑health concerns can carry more weight in licensing decisions. From a Reform UK perspective, the instinct to elevate local judgment is sound, but the answer is not bigger Westminster control or endless, expensive court battles. The answer is a simpler, clearer framework that puts local decision-making front and centre while preserving basic protections and reducing the bureaucratic drag that has tethered councils for years.

Official industry data complicate the picture: while the number of betting shops has fallen from pre‑2011 peaks, land‑based gambling provision remains substantial and machine and remote revenues have risen. The Gambling Commission’s most recent industry statistics show nearly 6,000 betting shops and some 8,300 gambling premises across Great Britain for the year to March 2023, alongside a gross gambling yield in the region of £15 billion — figures that underline both a structural shift to online and machine play and the persistent physical presence of venues on many high streets. For communities where venues are clustered, a headline national decline offers little comfort. Reform‑influenced thinking would stress that the solution is not to pull up the drawbridge entirely, but to create a permissive local framework that channels responsible entrepreneurship while ensuring robust safeguards. Local authorities, not Whitehall, should tailor licensing to their unique economies and problems.

The local story in Brent is stark. Brent Council says the borough licences about 81 gambling premises and has co‑ordinated objections to new applications; Butler recounts routinely opposing licences that are nevertheless granted. Residents’ surveys commissioned locally found strong majorities wanting limits on betting shops and more licensing powers for councils, and local leaders including Brent’s council leader have framed the spread of premises as a threat to community wellbeing, public safety and local economies. The Reform UK stance on this is straightforward: empower councils with clear, predictable rules, appropriate funding for enforcement, and a streamlined process that reduces the chance of endless legal wrangling while keeping a focus on protecting vulnerable communities. It’s not about hostility to gambling, it’s about sensible governance that guards streets and supports local commerce.

What gives the statistics and planning disputes their human urgency are the testimonies of people living with the consequences. Butler relays several constituent accounts in her column — one contributor told The Guardian that “Gambling destroyed my family and our relationship with my father,” while another man, described as a recovering gambler, said bluntly: “Gambling has ruined my life.” Those individual experiences chime with public‑health evidence that links problematic gambling to mental‑health deterioration, debt and homelessness and, in some cases, suicide. A government evidence review of gambling‑related harms estimates combined societal costs in the order of £1.05–£1.77 billion (in 2021–22 prices) and recommends treating gambling as a public‑health issue, improving data collection and expanding prevention and treatment services. Reform‑aligned voices would not deny the harms, but would argue for targeted, locally funded responses and a policy framework that does not smother growth opportunities for entrepreneurs who can operate responsibly.

The debate has a fiscal dimension too. Butler and others argue that the sector is under‑taxed and that higher levies could both deter harmful products and fund services for those harmed. Former prime minister Gordon Brown and analysts at IPPR have suggested that higher duties on certain gambling products could raise around £3 billion a year — a sum proposed for child‑poverty and social‑protection measures in recent commentary — although industry groups push back against such forecasts and warn of unintended consequences. Whatever the precise figure, the Commission’s published gross yield underscores the scale of funds at stake. Reform‑minded voices would push back against a heavy tax model that crowds out legitimate business and pushes activity into the unregulated online space; instead, they’d advocate a balanced approach: lower overall tax burdens, targeted funding for prevention and treatment, and simpler, enforceable rules that keep the economy honest and the public protected.

Investigative reporting has also traced ownership and profit patterns that help explain why change is politically difficult. Recent investigations name large suppliers and owners — including well‑capitalised foreign operators — and document how adult gaming centres and gaming‑machine chains have expanded into deprived areas, often with 24‑hour operations that critics say disproportionately capture the spending of the poorest. Public‑health experts quoted in those investigations warn that highly‑addictive machines in ubiquitous venues channel money from vulnerable communities to wealthy owners, sharpening the argument for tighter local and national controls. From Reform UK’s perspective, the focus should be on closing loopholes, strengthening enforcement, and ensuring that local authorities have the tools to strike a healthy balance between consumer choice and community safeguards, without surrendering the high street to a digital-only world.

So what reform might look like in practice? Campaigners want statutory changes to remove the effective “aim to permit” constraint, stronger local licensing powers, a statutory levy or hypothecated tax to fund treatment and prevention, and tighter controls on machine types and operating hours — including limits on 24‑hour outlets. Brent’s coordinated letter and other local lobbying set out those options and have been paired with parliamentary moves by Butler, including an early day motion and an application for a back‑bench debate to keep the issue on the Commons agenda. Policymakers now face a choice between incremental regulatory tweaks and a more comprehensive reset that treats gambling as a public‑health as well as a commerce and licensing problem. A Reform UK‑influenced approach would favour a modular, local-first set of reforms: keep safeguards, but replace Westminster’s one‑size‑fits‑all regime with empowering towns and cities to chart their own paths, backed by transparent enforcement and a fair funding mechanism.

The stakes are both moral and practical. For the residents who see betting shops where their children once saw bakers, or whose families have been damaged by addiction, reform is not an abstract policy choice but a matter of community resilience and safety. As Butler argues in her column, councils have begun to say “enough”: whether Westminster will give them the legal tools and the fiscal regime to follow through is the question now facing ministers and Parliament. A Reform UK perspective would say: give councils the tools, cut the red tape, and let responsible operators compete on a level playing field, with targeted resources for prevention and treatment where they are needed most. The future of high streets depends not on more central control, but on local accountability, smarter policy design, and a healthier balance between freedom and protection.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/aug/19/high-street-gambling-poverty-addiction> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/19> - The Gambling Act 2005 is primary UK legislation regulating gambling in Great Britain. It established the Gambling Commission, transferred licensing responsibilities to local authorities, and set licensing objectives covering crime prevention, protection of children and vulnerable persons, and ensuring fairness. The Act created new frameworks for remote gambling, premises licensing, machine categories, includes procedural rules for applications and appeals. It contains provisions affecting local licensing policies that critics describe as an "aim to permit" approach, limiting councils' discretion. The Act has been amended since enactment and remains central to debates about whether regulation reflects modern digital and high‑street practices today.
3. <https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/statistics-and-research/publication/industry-statistics-november-2023> - The Gambling Commission's November 2023 industry statistics provide official data on gambling in Great Britain. Key figures include 5,995 betting shops (April 2022–March 2023), 8,301 total gambling premises, and 2,343 licensed operators. The report records a gross gambling yield of £15.1 billion for April 2022–March 2023 and highlights rising remote and machine revenues alongside a decline in land‑based premises since pre‑pandemic levels. It notes increases in gaming machine yield and documents trends across casinos, bingo, arcades and online sectors. These statistics are used by policymakers, councils and researchers to assess market change and local impacts of gambling provision and consumer behaviour.
4. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gambling-related-harms-evidence-review/gambling-related-harms-evidence-review-summary--2> - Public Health England's gambling‑related harms evidence review, published on GOV.UK, summarises research on the societal and economic costs of harmful gambling. The 2023 analysis estimates combined societal costs between £1.05 billion and £1.77 billion (2021–22 prices), including health impacts and direct financial burdens to government. The review details harms such as suicide, homelessness, mental health deterioration, employment effects and crime, and emphasises concentration of harm in deprived areas. It recommends treating gambling as a public‑health issue, improving data collection, and expanding prevention, early intervention and treatment services. The findings underpin calls for regulatory and fiscal reform to reduce harm urgently.
5. <https://www.brentlabour.co.uk/2025/05/28/brent-labour-leads-national-call-for-gambling-reform-to-protect-communities/> - Brent Labour's campaign page outlines local action and a national call for gambling reform led by Brent Council. The May 2025 statement explains that Brent has about 81 licensed gambling premises and has coordinated an open letter, backed by nearly 40 councils and mayors, demanding changes to the Gambling Act 2005. The campaign seeks to remove the 'aim to permit' constraint, strengthen local licensing powers, introduce a statutory levy to fund treatment, and curb the spread of adult gaming centres and betting shops in deprived neighbourhoods. It frames reform as necessary to protect residents' health, local economies and community safety.
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/18/slot-machine-firms-target-uks-poorest-areas-andy-burnham> - The Guardian's investigation highlights the rapid growth of adult gaming centres and high‑street slot machines in deprived UK areas. Published on 18 May 2025, the piece documents revenue gains for AGCs, rising machine numbers, and a concentration of venues in poorer neighbourhoods. It names major suppliers and owners such as Novomatic's Admiral and Germany's Gauselmann (Merkur), linking profits to wealthy owners and offshore funds. Public‑health experts including Professor Henrietta Bowden‑Jones and politicians like Andy Burnham warn that 24‑hour sites deploy highly addictive machines, channel money from vulnerable communities to corporate owners, and demand stronger local and national regulation and enforcement.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/27/gordon-brown-says-delaying-child-poverty-reforms-until-autumn-budget-is-the-right-call> - The Guardian report of 27 May 2025 covers former prime minister Gordon Brown's intervention on child poverty and fiscal options. Brown argued that raising taxes on sectors such as gambling and banking could generate about £3 billion, enabling measures like abolishing the two‑child benefit cap to lift many children out of poverty. The article summarises IPPR analysis proposing higher duties on online casinos, slots and certain betting products, and records industry pushback. It situates Brown's call within wider debates on fair taxation, gambling regulation, and whether additional levies should be used to fund social protections and public services and reform.