“Problem gambling is a public health concern”

Let’s just pause on that…. “Problem gambling is a public health concern”.

This was the editorial headline from the Lancet on 2 September this year. Seven little words…but an important moment in tackling gambling-related harm. A significant voice from within the healthcare world so publicly and so boldly recognising this issue for what it is.

I believe passionately that the harm that can arise from gambling is a public health concern. And like all public health concerns it needs proper understanding, attention and yes, resourcing, to reduce and even prevent that harm from arising in the first place.

And this is why “preventing harm to consumers and the public” is one of five priorities in our recently published three-year strategy. And it should come as no surprise that this is a priority for the Gambling Commission.

Many of you will have heard these figures before but they cannot be repeated enough. In Britain 430,000 adults are problem gamblers. In addition, more than 2 million others are at risk of developing a problem. If it helps to picture the scale of the issue then that is the equivalent of everyone in Birmingham, Glasgow and Cardiff combined being at risk of or having a problem with gambling.

And of course those figures overlook people who are impacted by the gambling of others—people who may never have gambled in their lives. Family members, friends, communities and businesses all potentially feel the effects of problem gambling. As Chair of a large Citizens Advice I’ve seen first-hand how widespread the aftershocks from gambling-related harm are felt.

Today, at this conference, our particular focus is on children. As a regulator we have a keen focus on addressing underage gambling: through age verification requirements, prosecuting illegal gambling aimed at children or working in partnership with local authorities. The risks to children are changing and developing with technology clouding the boundaries between gambling and computer game play. That is why we are looking at our existing controls, such as age verification, and how we can strengthen them; adapting to meet the changing threats that young people face.
But keeping children safe from the impact of gambling also means addressing the harm that those around them face. I’ve spoken before about the young girl, a previously high performing student, who was excluded from school due to a significant deterioration in her behaviour. As you dug into the circumstances behind that, one thing became clear, her behaviour at school coincided with disruption in her home life, which was due to a fractious relationship between her parents, caused by the consequences of her father’s gambling.

Making gambling safer does not just benefit the gambler, it benefits all of us.

We’re under no illusions that this is an enormous challenge but it is one that we are determined to make progress on. And there are three areas of focus, all referenced in our strategy, that could move us in the right direction.

Firstly, if we are to successfully tackle gambling-related harm then we need to properly understand it. This is an area where there is a risk that good intentions, taken in the absence of a comprehensive view of harm, will not have the impact they need and could have unpredicted and unintended consequences.

That is why we will work with partners to more fully understand the wider impacts on society. When problem gambling occurs, how wide is the circle of harm? What are the social and economic consequences? What is the true scale and cost of gambling-related harm in Britain?

GambleAware has got the ball rolling here. Their work with the Institute for Public Policy Research took some of the first steps in calculating the cost to Government associated with problem gambling. Considering six different interactions with the State it estimated that the costs could be in excess of £1bn a year. I think that is a conservative estimate and we need to continue to build upon the research. Because by understanding the impacts we can focus our interventions; by understanding the costs of harm we may more strongly justify further investment in harm prevention.

The second area we have highlighted for attention is the way that research, education and treatment is resourced. We have called, for some time, for industry to increase funding to prevent gambling-related harm and support education and treatment. However, the response has been slow and insufficient and we are yet to see whether operators will meet the modest targets set for 2017. Continued failure in this would be unsustainable and unacceptable for the future.

In our strategy we have been very clear that a statutory levy, the power for which is already enshrined in legislation, would be a fair and credible way of addressing some of the weaknesses that result from the current voluntary arrangements. Over the last few months we have heard more and more people across the industry, businesses and trade bodies alike, voicing their support for a levy.

Last week’s announcement from the National Casino Forum that their members will guarantee they will give 0.1% of GGY to GambleAware is welcomed. And I hope is a further indicator that the need to place funding on a more sustainable footing is now seen as unarguable.

But a focus on resourcing is not solely about ensuring that the money matches the need. It is also about having the most effective approach to targeting funding, along with supervising and evaluating progress against the National Responsible Gambling Strategy.
If there is to be a step change over the next three years, then we see the need for a new approach to better co-ordinate funding and evaluation, and to supervise delivery across those operators and agencies concerned with limiting and treating gambling-related harm.

As the Executive level sponsor for this aspect of our work I certainly plan to be visible and active in driving forward the delivery of the National Responsible Gambling Strategy.

The third area of focus is on action.

The lack of progress in delivering the National Responsible Gambling Strategy should be a cause for concern for all of us. The Responsible Gambling Strategy Board’s progress report, showing a sea of amber and red ratings, is a visible demonstration that further action is needed.

For our part we have been asking ourselves what more we need to do to bring energy and impetus to the delivery of that national strategy. This means being much more active in driving forward delivery; working ever more closely with RGSB, our expert advisers; supporting and yes challenging GambleAware to continue the progress they have made under Kate’s chairmanship. To strengthen the partnerships that deliver the priorities that support safer gambling.

It also means not hesitating to take precautionary action, to pull on our considerable regulatory levers, where risks of harm are indicated. Our strategy signals the Commission’s readiness to intervene to raise standards, a message clearly echoed by both our Chair and Chief Executive at our recent Raising Standards Conference. A paucity of evidence cannot be an excuse for doing nothing where there are indicators that consumers may be at risk of harm.

Now it would be wrong for me to talk about action without recognising what is already being done by some parts of the industry. Yet it is always a risk for a regulator to been seen to be giving a seal of approval to someone under their jurisdiction and my comments should not be seen as an endorsement. But it is right to highlight positive action, albeit with the caveat that many of these still need proper evaluation to measure their impact.

Mr Green has developed a predictive tool that gives players an individual dashboard with a personalised risk rating based upon their play and attitude towards gambling. Interestingly the company is integrating this into their marketing, seeing safer gambling as part of their consumer offer.

Skybet launched a new high profile advertising campaign based around “When the fun stops, stop”. It actually explains what ‘gambling responsibly’ means by giving more of a profile to specific tools (and not just self-exclusion). Rather a small message at the end of the advert safer gambling is the advert.

The Industry Group for Responsible Gambling, led by John Hagan who is never afraid to speak truth to power, continues to show real leadership in this industry through their customer interaction project. An example of a cross sectoral partnership focussed upon delivering safer gambling. This is what we want to see more of. This is the type of action that I want us all talking about.

So yes, there are examples of industry taking problem gambling seriously. And for those operators showing commitment in this area, here is our commitment to you.
The Commission will encourage innovation in safer gambling, we will support a culture of trialling and evaluation and we will help corral expertise from across industry, academia, consumers and expert agencies so that Britain can be home to a world-leading approach to tackling gambling-related harm.

But with that offer of support comes a very clear message. More needs to be done to build upon the modest successes that we have seen to date. Over the last year, in the context of the gambling review, I have seen most passion from industry voices being focussed upon throwing stones at commercial rivals. This review could have provided an opportunity for operators across sectors to act in unison, to grasp the nettle of gambling harm, and to respond with a big and bold proposal to make gambling safer. That hasn't been forthcoming but the opportunity hasn't quite slipped through your fingers yet.

So if you are a trade body, industry representative or an operator: stop battling each other and start tackling harm; stop looking over the fence and start looking at your own back yard; stop acting in a spirit of frustration and start acting in a spirit of collaboration. Use the passion that has been so evident during the gambling review and turn it into a relentless mission to make gambling safer.

And our call for action doesn't stop there. Because if we are to truly make progress in reducing harm and make gambling safer neither the regulator nor the industry can do this alone. We need your help:

If you’re a researcher help us better understand the effects of gambling-related harm and support the evaluation of interventions so we know what works.

If you’re a policy maker consider how your policy approaches in other areas could support or hinder the reduction of gambling-related harm.

If you are a health professional help us to ensure that gambling is given equal recognition in services and treatment as other addictions.

In short there is not one of us in this room today who cannot and should not play a part in making gambling safer.

So to close, we are often reminded that gambling is a leisure activity. But for too many people gambling ceases to be fun and becomes damaging, becomes harmful. Gambling may see itself as being in the same company as the cinema, the restaurant or the bowling alley. But you only have to open an newspaper, look on social media or listen to debate in Parliament to see that people increasingly see gambling’s natural bed fellows as the cigarette, the super strength alcohol or the narcotic.

Which really brings me back to where I started...problem gambling is a public health concern.