



**Commission on Crime and Problem Gambling  
Minutes of the sixth oral evidence session  
Andrea Albutt and Lisa Ustok**

**Tuesday 23 February 2021  
Meeting held virtually on Zoom, 2:00- 3:30pm**

**Present:** Peter Goldsmith (**Chair**), Jamie Bennett, Andrew Black, Henrietta Bowden-Jones, John Chisholm, Jon Collins, Frances Crook, Andrew Neilson, Neil Platt, Sarah Ramanauskas, Norma Stephenson, Sue Wade

**Apologies:** Matt Burton, Elizabeth Morony, Gerda Reith

**In attendance:** Gemma Buckland, Helen Churcher, Robert Preece, Catryn Yousefi

**Witnesses:** Andrea Albutt, President, Prison Governors Association; and Lisa Ustok, Probation Officer, South West Probation

**Agenda:**

**1. Chair's introduction**

The Chair welcomed Commissioners and gave apologies of those unable to attend.

**2. Briefing session**

The Chair thanked Jamie Bennett for his help in organising the session. The Chair informed Commissioners of changes to the planned session - witness Andrea Albutt would not give evidence formally and would attend for a shorter period (20 minutes). The Chair would lead a discussion, rather than the usual presentation and questions format. The Commission would then hear evidence from witness Lisa Ustok who would answer pre-allocated questions.

Jamie Bennett provided some background information about the work of HMPPS regarding gambling:

- At a national level, limited focus - no national gambling strategy
- Screening, treatment and signposting occurs locally
- Individuals are assessed by offender managers on characteristics such as impulsivity - gambling may be picked up here
- There is no mechanism with specific questions to screen for problem gambling.

The Commission would make formal contact (e.g. written question and response) with senior HMPPS staff at a later date. This could involve questioning about a national strategy, it's lack thereof or implementation. A successful outcome for the

Commission would be a commitment by HMPPS to consider problem gambling. It was suggested that another avenue of communication with HMPPS could take the form of a round table hosted by the Howard League. Contact with HMPPS should be inclusive and engaged to foster a forward-thinking approach.

### **3. Evidence session**

The Chair welcomed witnesses Andrea Albutt and Lisa Ustok and thanked them for attending. The Chair informed the meeting that the session was being recorded for internal purposes.

#### ***Andrea Albutt, President, Prison Governors Association*** **Awareness of problem gambling amongst prison staff**

Andrea Albutt stated that colleagues surveyed said that there was no provision in their prisons for problem gambling. It is not screened for upon entry to prison. Prison staff were unaware of the scale of the problem, or of what the need might be. If a need was present, there was nothing in place to address it. Staff would be concerned if problem gambling as an issue was raised upon entry to custody.

#### **Culture of gambling in prison**

Andrea Albutt agreed that it would be foolish to deny that gambling occurs in prison. People in prison play cards for rewards such as tobacco. However there is not a sense of whether gambling is a problem or whether it drives any kind of worrying behaviour. This cannot be ruled out, but it does not appear to be a major issue in prisons. There does not seem to be any anecdotal evidence about gambling in prison. It is not something that is monitored.

#### **Perception of gambling among prison staff**

Andrea Albutt stated that whilst some staff may gamble socially, there is not a culture of gambling amongst staff. If an individual had a problematic relationship with gambling, this would be addressed by their line manager.

#### **Concluding remarks**

The Chair summarised that some gambling occurs in prison (such as card playing), but that this does not cause alarm, and that there is no empirical evidence about the extent. The Chair outlined the Commission's remit, that it has developed an awareness about the connection for some people between gambling and crime and resulting in custodial sentences. The Chair noted that the Commission would like to gain further empirical insight into what happens in prison with regard to gambling and would seek a contact for this.

The Chair invited Commissioner's to share their thoughts. The following points were noted:

- There is no specific guidance at a national level about either the relationship between problem gambling and offending, or the impact of problem gambling in prisons
- It is unlikely that gambling does not occur in prisons
- Problem gambling may be something that is identified more frequently at more therapeutic prisons, e.g. in more open discourse between prisoners and staff. Whilst problem gambling appears to not be raised often as a specific issue, it

could be an element of someone's lifestyle, a range of problematic behaviours- a symptom of a chaotic environment as opposed to a direct trigger to offending

- Commissioners shared anecdotal evidence about prisoner-led Gamblers Anonymous groups, and prison debt associated with problematic gambling
- Screening is important in ascertaining the scale of the problem (e.g. as experienced in a study on homelessness and gambling)

The Chair thanked the Andrea Albutt for attending.

***Lisa Ustok, Probation Officer, South West Probation***

The Chair informed Commissioners that Lisa Ustok would give evidence in a question-and-answer style format, with Commissioners asking pre-allocated questions

**Lord Goldsmith asked the following question:**

*How is crime related to problem gambling in your experience?*

The witness noted that she did not have empirical information about prevalence, or a route to access this. As an experienced probation officer, her awareness stemmed from identifying links between problem gambling and offending through her caseload. Gambling can be part of a negative lifestyle which leads to involvement with the criminal justice system. In her experience, gambling was not the specific driver of an offence, but part of a problematic lifestyle linked to offending. Problem gambling can exist alongside other addictions, and even persist following drugs or alcohol treatment. Gambling may be identified as an issue tangentially e.g. through investigation into an unrelated offence.

Probation officers might identify problem gambling on a questionnaire undertaken by all at the start of their sentence (this influences the sentence plan, and thus problem gambling would be addressed in a sentence where identified). Problem gambling is more likely to be identified in Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC) services for lower risk offences. It does not always present a high risk of harm to public. CRCs are more likely to manage lower-level acquisitive crimes, but these do not present the same risk to public as similar offences driven by drug addictions.

**Lord Goldsmith asked the following question:**

*How is the information collected used by HMPs?*

The information is used to guide the probation officer and offender supervisor in writing the sentence plan. For example, someone might be directed to a generic programme e.g. thinking skills. If a specific problem is identified, practitioners will make use of specific services e.g. local GA or NHS services. Practitioners meet clients weekly, encouraging them and providing accountability.

**Neil Platt asked the following question:**

*Please would you give us a brief description about what probation services would do currently if a person is engaged in problem gambling, whether or not it is related to an offence? Is there a formal assessment process? How would you recognise that somebody had a gambling issue? What would you do if they did?*

Lisa Ustok explained that prior to 2014, probation practitioners had a mixed case load of clients. Practitioners would prepare a court report and fill out a questionnaire with the offender (e.g. what led them to be in court, what other issues are problematic in their lives). At this point, practitioners would write what was recommended to the court. If someone is given a community service, the probation officer determines the most risk-laden issues to signpost and deal with these first.

Lisa Ustok informed Commissioners that a practitioner's handbook was developed last year about people with gambling addiction - this gives guidance about how to assess whether someone has a gambling addiction, what types of things would work with them, and a self-assessment questionnaire. Practitioners then tailor the programme to the individual. Lisa Ustok also developed a briefing paper on what to look out for, how it affects others, debt, and mental health.

Lisa Ustok explained that probation approaches were locally driven. There is no national programme. The probation service is in the process of renationalisation and so it is unclear where gambling will fit in this. The process will combine aspects from CRCs and the NPS. Lisa Ustok agreed that to an extent, a probation officer's response to problem gambling would be individually driven, but there is guidance available centrally about what to look for and about possible avenues for support.

**Lord Goldsmith asked the following question:**

*You stated in your paper that you are an area gambling specialist and that your current job is a Probation and NHS jointly funded role as a Personality Disorder Probation Officer. What do each of these roles entail and what geographical area do you cover? Are there gambling specialists/personality disorder specialists in every probation area?*

Lisa Ustok explained that her a Personality Disorder Probation Officer functions as a link between the NHS psychiatric teams and the probation service, providing knowledge about prison, sentencing, and parole. Her interest in problem gambling stemmed from working with addictions for a long time and having a personal interest.

**Jon Collins asked the following question:**

*What information is made available to sentencers to enable sentences to be tailored to the needs of people with gambling addictions or who conduct gambling related-harms? Would it be helpful if PSRs screened for gambling more systematically and sentencers were aware of it?*

Lisa Ustok explained that gambling is mentioned on the screening tool filled out with the probation officer at court. She was unsure as to where it would be seen as a priority over other factors in court unless it was specifically highlighted as a significant issue that led to the offence. The key consideration in PSRs is about risk management.

**Sue Wade asked the following question:**

*You said that you had developed a 6-session programme for people with gambling addiction which could be used with a Specified Activity Requirement ordered by the court. To what extent has this been used in i) your area and ii) other areas?*

Lisa Ustok stated the programme comprised of six sessions encouraging the client to become their own personal scientist exploring their gambling, looking at triggers etc. It is a similar programme to those designed for drug and alcohol addictions or sexual offences. It looks at decision chains. Lisa Ustok noted that as soon as someone stops gambling, there is a big gap to be filled, emphasising the importance of education and employment. To Lisa's knowledge, the programme has been shared with another local area as a resource. 'Targets for change' are old but still used - these are being re-written and include gambling. These made need further amendments to account for changes in the gambling industry (e.g. readily available online access)

**Sue Wade asked the following question:**

*What is the likelihood of an offender mentioning a gambling problem in the quick pre-court process?*

It may not be raised unless it is directly related to an offence. A key variable is the relationship between the probation officer and service user. It also depends on how honest the service user is and how much a problem they think it is. Sometimes it can be raised casually e.g. when talking about money worries, expenditure, or lifestyle. Lisa Ustok does not currently write court reports in her role so could not provide a detailed account of the pre-court process. However, she did state that time constraints and caseloads are important variables.

**Sarah Ramanauskas asked the following question:**

*You both mentioned that generic offending behaviour/thinking skills programmes and addiction-related programme are widely available within prison and probation services. What is your assessment of how suitable such programmes are for dealing with gambling-related crime? What additional benefits, if any, would dedicated programmes have?*

Generic thinking skills programmes are bolstered by signposting to gambling treatment specialists. The same would presumably apply in prisons. The group-based nature of probation programmes may not fit with the secluded nature of gambling.

**John Chisholm asked the following question:**

*Generic community-based groups such as GamCare or Gamblers Anonymous can also be utilised by people in touch with criminal justice agencies. What is your assessment of the levels of awareness of probation practitioners of such approaches to enable signposting to occur?*

Lisa Ustok noted that experience in a local area would lead to an awareness of specialist services in that locality. A practitioner would also work to seek out services, and this signposting and encouragement is a key part of probation work. Probation officers actively seek out the information that would help their service users to progress. A barrier may be the hidden nature of gambling.

**John Chisholm asked the following question:**

*How is CJS data collected about problem gambling?*

An OASYS assessment is done for every person in prison. The list of questions includes relationships, mental health etc, and also gambling.

**Henrietta Bowden-Jones asked the following question:**

*What, if any, current or forthcoming opportunities are there to change probation practice towards problem gambling related crime?*

Problem gambling could be highlighted more centrally and become part of ongoing conversation about re-nationalisation. A practitioner handbook and briefing have been written. Sometimes the best work is grassroots work done in a local area to make small but meaningful changes.

**Norma Stephenson asked the following question:**

*You noted that there is no national probation intervention which addresses gambling and that a panel is looking at available interventions across community rehabilitation companies and will then see what can be used and what will need to be developed in future. Is a gambling-related intervention something that this panel is explicitly considering?*

There is an ongoing discussion about what will be kept in or removed, and the panel are interested in this evidence session.

**Closing remarks**

Lisa Ustok agreed to share the handbook and briefing she had developed. She expressed concern that the impact of COVID-19 and of austerity may lead to an increase in problem gambling, at the same time as a reduction in services available to support people.

The Chair thanked Lisa Ustok for attending

**4. Debrief**

The Chair opened the floor for a debrief discussion.

Commissioners expressed surprise at the lack of empirical information and awareness from HMPPS. Commissioners agreed that this rendered the evidence session doubly important - it could function as an awareness-raising tool itself. Commissioners highlighted academic research that explores problematic gambling in prison, and anecdotal awareness of this behaviour (for example, as shared with the Commission in the fourth evidence session).

**5. Any other business**

None. The Chair thanked all for attending and closed the meeting.

Agreed by the Chair, Tuesday 16 March 2021