

Review of Northern Ireland Gambling Legislation

October 2009



On 23 September 2009 Margaret Ritchie, the Minister for Social Development announced her plans to commence a review of Northern Ireland's gambling laws.

Currently in Northern Ireland any gambling (excluding the National Lottery) is regulated by the Betting, Gaming, Lotteries and Amusements (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. The Minister considers this legislation to be "old, inflexible and hard to understand" and recognises that new methods of gambling are available now that were not foreseen in 1985.

The three main objectives of gambling legislation are:-

1. to keep crime out of gambling;
2. to protect the young and vulnerable; and
3. to ensure fairness for consumers.

Maintaining public safety is the main driving force behind the review and the Minister will have engage in a delicate "balancing act" to both meet the above mentioned objectives, whilst ensuring personal freedom is not hampered.

The Minister has stated that she will adopt a "phased approach" to the review process. The first phase will involve conducting research, gathering information and engaging with the community. In particular, the Minister has expressed her desire to find out more about:-

- local people's attitude to gambling;
- the size and shape of the gambling market; and
- the wider social and economic impact of gambling.

It is hoped that the research results gathered from the first phase will form the basis of a published discussion document. The second phase will then involve analysing responses received to the discussion document and it is anticipated that a policy report will then be produced for the Minister based on these responses.

Some issues already identified by the Minister for review are:-

- Whether we should have formal licensing objectives written into NI law;
- Whether the courts are the appropriate licensing authority and whether the licensing period should be extended;
- Whether the current enforcement powers in NI are satisfactory (i.e. the law here is currently enforced by the police but not by an Independent Regulator as is the case in GB);
- Whether stronger protections should be introduced for vulnerable people i.e. under 18s, problem gamblers;
- Whether the law should allow commercial gaming clubs (casinos) to operate in Northern Ireland; and
- Whether 'higher stake, higher prize' machines be permitted to the same level as they are in GB.

The Minister welcomes responses from those organisations likely to be affected by any changes to gambling laws as well as private individuals. While there is no set time limit for response, the Minister has encouraged that responses be sent by the end of 2009.

Please note: The content of this article is for information purposes only and further advice should be sought from a professional advisor before any action is taken.