



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Communities

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Betting, Gaming, Lotteries and  
Amusements (Amendment) Bill:  
Northern Ireland Amusement Caterers  
Trade Association

9 December 2021

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Ms Kellie Armstrong (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Andy Allen  
Mr Stephen Dunne  
Mr Mark Durkan  
Ms Ciara Ferguson  
Mr Paul Frew  
Ms Aine Murphy  
Miss Aisling Reilly

**Witnesses:**

Mr Brendan McAreavey	Northern Ireland Amusement Caterers Trade Association
Mr Gerald Steinberg	Northern Ireland Amusement Caterers Trade Association

**The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Armstrong):** Members, we will bring in Brendan McAreavey and Gerald Steinberg, who are appearing together via StarLeaf. Gentleman, we are a little tight for time. We appreciate the information from you about the Bill. I will give you 10 minutes in which to make your presentation, and I will give you a warning a minute before the end of the 10 minutes. Members will then ask questions.

**Mr Gerald Steinberg (Northern Ireland Amusement Caterers Trade Association):** Thank you for inviting us. I am the chairman of the Northern Ireland Amusement Caterers Trade Association (NIACTA). I am accompanied by Brendan McAreavey, the president of NIACTA. I own Oasis Retail Services, and Brendan is the owner and managing director of Clearhill, which is a supplier of equipment for shopping centres. My company has been in the business for 53 years. I started it in 1968, and I am just about getting the hang of it now. I am mindful of the fact that time is an issue. We have provided our submission and a synopsis in writing to you. Rather than taking time to read that, may I assume that the Committee is in possession of that documentation?

**The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Armstrong):** We are; it is in our packs. Thank you for that.

**Mr Steinberg:** On that basis and mindful as I am of the time constraints, I am happy to take questions based on our submission.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Armstrong):** Thank you so much. As you say, your submission has been provided to us. I will start off the questions, and then I will go out to members, if I have not already asked what they want to ask.

Your submission states that any proposed levy must be achievable and fair and you have concerns that a levy is being discussed in the absence of online gambling or offshore operators being part of the Bill. In that context, what would you consider to be fair?

**Mr Steinberg:** Our sector feels that a levy that is based on the number of premises that each operator has would be fair and appropriate. Based on the statistics that have been compiled for the purpose of the Bill, we are about 10% of the business. On that basis, we feel that the other participants — the National Lottery, local lotteries and online business in particular — should also contribute because, proportionately, that would seem fair. We are perfectly happy and willing to contribute, but we think that it should be equitable.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Armstrong):** Thank you so much. Your submission also states that a mandatory code of practice is to be welcomed, but it must be pragmatic and led by best practice. Can you explain what you mean by pragmatic and how that can be achieved? Do you have any examples of best practice that you would like to draw to the Committee's attention?

**Mr Steinberg:** I will begin by saying that we have our own social responsibility document — we provided it to the Committee a while ago — which sets that out quite clearly. We would be very happy if that were, in fact, a mandatory code. I trust that you and your colleagues will understand that it is difficult to agree to something without knowing what it is. We think that our framework, as set out in our document, and to which all our members have signed up, is a reasonable basis for moving forward. I hope that that makes the position clear.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Armstrong):** Yes, thank you so much. We will, perhaps, have a look at that mandatory code and ask the Department to do so. You have called for a level playing field between land-based and online operators. Can you explain what you mean by that and how it can be achieved?

**Mr Steinberg:** We have touched on the question of the code and the levy. I accept that a code for online businesses and the lottery would be rather different than that for land-based businesses. That said, as far as a levy is concerned, it touches on that. When it comes to operating principles, stakes and prizes have not been reviewed in Northern Ireland for our sector since 2003. We are proposing that stakes and prizes, which can be changed by a statutory rule, should be brought into line with those of GB and that similar stakes and prizes considerations would apply to the online business.

**Mr Frew:** Thank you very much for your submission, which was clear and concise, as was your oral evidence. You assumed that we had read the submission, which is really refreshing, so thank you very much, because we have.

When it comes to the Department or a regulatory body knowing how many gaming machines are in operation and their location, are you open to the suggestion that there should be some sort of registration for all gaming machines?

**Mr Steinberg:** It is a legal requirement that individuals or companies that provide gaming machines for play by members of the public register with Revenue and Customs. It should certainly have information as to what premises are registered, if not what machines are registered. Those are the machines from which it should be collecting machine games duty (MGD). As always, we will be happy to cooperate with the Department in any way that we can, insofar as our members are concerned, when it comes to numbers of machines. That would not be an issue.

**Mr Frew:** Why does Revenue and Customs have that information? Is there a duty placed on each machine that you have to pay?

**Mr Steinberg:** Yes. There is MGD, which is payable on the net cash takings from each machine, and it does not matter whether that machine is in a pub, a club, a gaming centre or a bingo club. They are all subject to a rate of duty in the order of about 20%.

**Mr Frew:** Do you mean 20% of the revenue of every machine?

**Mr Steinberg:** Yes. It is referred to as the gross general yield, which effectively means the net money or stakes after the winnings have been paid out.

**Mr Frew:** Do you have to declare that for each individual machine, or is there some sort of computerised internet link?

**Mr Steinberg:** There is not a legal requirement for that to be done. Operators account for it in different ways. It is up to the operator to satisfy Revenue and Customs as to how much revenue it produces. Obviously, the information is commercially sensitive, and our members would not wish to share it. With the number of machines, again, there are commercially sensitive aspects there. Revenue and Customs certainly has no difficulty with that.

**Mr Frew:** OK. Of course, I understand the privacy issues around that. How do you feel about a ban on credit card use?

**Mr Steinberg:** I have no issue with that whatsoever. We do not accept credit cards; when I say "we", I am speaking on behalf of our association. The machines do not take credit cards and we do not take them. A ban such as that would not be an issue.

**Mr Frew:** Thank you. How do you feel, then, about a ceiling or limit on debit card payments?

**Mr Steinberg:** It is very difficult. A debit card, unlike a credit card, as you know, takes money out of a bank account, which suggests that it is money that a person has in the bank. It is very difficult for us to means-test our customers in that context, so I think that a limit would be difficult.

**Mr Frew:** OK. Thanks very much.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Armstrong):** I want to come back to something that you said in your response to the Committee's consultation. You said that penalties should be proportionate to the size of the companies in Northern Ireland. I want to tease out the subject of penalties, for future legislation. A company that has one premises in Northern Ireland could be one that is not based in Northern Ireland but has multiple premises. What are your thoughts on the penalty in that case?

**Mr Steinberg:** At the moment, in our sector specifically and in Northern Ireland generally, I am not aware of any businesses that are owned by an individual or organisation outside Northern Ireland. As it is today, in the context of penalties, it would be a Northern Ireland business. I realise that, in future, that could change. Today, however, the people in the industry all have proprietorial businesses that are owned and managed in Northern Ireland.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Armstrong):** Thank you.

**Mr Durkan:** Thanks to the gents for coming in. Yet again, Chair, you beat me to it with most of the questions. I sympathise with the concerns expressed about the levy being applied to people who are established here and not to where the biggest problem is. I am not saying that there are no problems associated with your business model. I made the same point to the Turf Guardians' Association last week, and I am sympathetic to those points. When the bookies were in, we asked them how the fixed-odds betting terminal (FOBT) machines are set. Do you have any of those in your facilities?

**Mr Steinberg:** No. Fixed-odds betting terminals exist only in licensed betting offices. My company and others in the industry supply the machines to bookmakers, but they are not permitted or operated in gaming centres or bingo clubs.

**Mr Durkan:** Are you aligned to them in the setting of stakes and prizes on your machines? What are your limits and thresholds?

**Mr Steinberg:** Quite simply, our limits and thresholds were voluntarily changed when they changed in GB. There is, dare I say, a public misconception about FOBTs. Historically, FOBTs were high-stake gaming machines for which the stake was £100, and the maximum prize was £500. Legislation in GB reduced that maximum stake to £2. In Northern Ireland, my company and our members followed suit and voluntarily reduced the maximum stake to £2, with a maximum prize of £500. I am not saying that there are not some machines supplied by non-members of our association, and I think that a small number of those do not comply with those limits. That is why we would be happy to see a mandatory code that restricted the maximum stakes to £2, as proposed, I understand, by the bookmakers.

**Mr Durkan:** That is good to hear. That is fine, Gerald. Thank you.

**Mr Steinberg:** Thank you very much.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Armstrong):** Before we go on, I will just look at StarLeaf to see whether anyone is indicating that they want to ask a question.

Gentlemen, because you provided such a detailed written presentation, you have clarified quite a bit about your organisation. Thank you for your detailed presentation, which has been well received by the Committee. Thank you so much for your time.

**Mr Steinberg:** I am most grateful. Thank you for your courtesy and understanding. Should you require any further information or support from us at any time throughout the process, it would be our pleasure to provide it.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Armstrong):** That would be most welcome. Thank you so much.

**Mr Steinberg:** Thank you very much indeed. Good afternoon.