

# Exploring alternatives to safer gambling messages

## Executive summary

There are questions about the effectiveness of 'safer gambling' messages - such as the long-running strapline 'when the fun stops, stop' - particularly when the gambling industry spends more than £1.5 billion a year on paid-for advertising to promote its products. By comparison, campaign spend for the 'Bet Regret' safer gambling campaign was just £3.3 million in 2019 – or roughly 0.22% of total industry advertising spend.

Our research looked at the efficacy of existing 'safer gambling' messages seen in Britain; and designed and tested possible alternative messages to gauge their potential effectiveness. It contributes new evidence that can help inform alternative approaches to 'safer gambling' communications, for example as part of public health campaigns to prevent or reduce the harms from gambling that affect individuals and communities across Britain.

### Six key findings:

- Existing 'safer gambling' messages do not change the behaviour of people who gamble
- Messages should have an appropriate tone and be authentic, relatable and engaging
- Messages must be tailored to their target audiences
- Messages should aim to produce a positive emotional response and avoid evoking negative emotions such as shame
- For those at risk of harms, message should signal ways to identify signs of harmful gambling
- Messages are needed for people affected by someone else's gambling.

### Three calls to action:

- Gambling advertising is a focus of the government's review of the 2005 Gambling Act. Equal attention should be given to the development and testing of effective messages that can help prevent and reduce gambling harms across Britain.
- Well-funded, long-term social marketing campaigns have been shown to reduce stigma and harm. A similar campaign is required to prevent and reduce gambling harms.
- Key audiences for harm prevention and reduction messages must include people who gamble regularly but do not recognise they may be at risk of harm; and people affected by someone else's gambling.

These findings and calls to action are based on a comprehensive study that:

- **Examined the existing evidence** about the efficacy of 'safer gambling' messages, including for different socio-demographic groups.
- **Engaged 45 people in group discussions** who took part in betting or gambling, to explore their views about existing 'safer gambling' messages and get their input on new alternative messages designed by the research team that could be pilot tested.
- **Conducted an online pilot test with a nationally representative sample of 987 people** of existing messages and novel alternatives to generate quantitative insights around the kind of messages that might resonate most with adults in Britain.




## Key findings

### Existing 'safer gambling' messages do not change behaviour

In theory, 'safer gambling' messages engage players with information about 'safer gambling' behaviours and strategies, with the aim of increasing their awareness and knowledge, shifting their attitudes towards gambling and ultimately changing what they do in ways that prevent or reduce gambling harms. The existing evidence about the effectiveness of these messages is limited, but generally indicates they are ineffective at changing behaviour although they can raise awareness.

### Messages should have an appropriate tone and be authentic, relatable and engaging

Messages that have an appropriate tone; are authentic and relatable; and have engaging help are likely to be more effective at preventing or reducing gambling harms. Getting the tone of a message right is likely to make it more relatable, as will engaging content.

	<b>Appropriate tone.</b> Emotion and positivity are important and linked elements in getting the tone of messages right, combined with a clear and simple call to action.
	<b>Authentic and relatable.</b> Being 'authentic' can increase people's receptiveness to public health messages; people also need to be able to relate to the language and imagery used in a message.
	<b>Engaging content.</b> Dynamic content (such as animated videos) is more effective than 'static' information. Studies have shown there may be value in giving impartial information about the likelihood of winning; highlighting the signs of harmful gambling; and counter-marketing messages showing industry as the 'bad actor'.

### Messages must be tailored to their target audiences

Messages should be tailored or personalised to appeal to specific target groups, because different messages resonate with different types of people and in different ways. The pilot study found that respondents' reactions to the different messages were strongly shaped by their age and levels of gambling engagement; and less so by their sex and ethnicity. Younger people generally had stronger emotional responses to the messages than older respondents.

This applies equally to the channel through which messages are delivered. We know from research on gambling advertising that online and social media particularly attract younger audiences and the same is likely to be true for messages aimed at preventing or reducing gambling harms.

### Messages should evoke positive emotional resonance

Messages to prevent or reduce gambling harms must resonate with the emotional drivers of gambling in a way that will produce a positive and active response, and not evoke emotions that may be counterproductive.

Survey respondents in our pilot test who gambled regularly generally had much stronger emotional responses to messages; were significantly more likely to feel that the messages were personally relevant to them; yet had a lower likelihood of acting on them. One possible explanation is that the

messages provoked negative emotions like shame, which has been shown to reduce people's tendency to behave in socially constructive ways.

## **For those at risk of harms, messages should signal ways to identify signs of harmful gambling**

We designed and pilot tested new messages that were intended to encourage reflective thinking among people who may be at risk of gambling harms but don't recognise their gambling could be harmful – an area where there has been little research to date. For example, one such message was 'Is gambling taking over your life? It might be time to make a change' with a call to action of contacting a gambling helpline.

While respondents who gambled regularly found these messages highly personally relevant, they reported little intention to follow the call to action of contacting a gambling helpline. This suggests that 'contemplative' messages may need to focus more strongly on signalling ways in which people can identify signs of potential harmful gambling in their own play.

## **Messages are needed for people affected by someone else's gambling**

Around 4.5 million adults and children in Britain are negatively affected by someone else's gambling, and, statistically, women are more likely to experience the full range of negative impacts of being an affected other (e.g. impacts to health and wellbeing, personal relationships, financial impacts). Yet we found only one existing message directly addressed to affected others and their support needs (an Australian public health video).

Our research provides valuable new insights into this woefully under-researched topic. In our discussion groups, people affected by someone else's gambling reacted negatively to messaging that used patronising or condescending language, highlighting the need for authentic and sincere narrative. They also felt that affected others needed strong reassurances of confidentiality when responding to a call to action such as phoning a helpline. In our pilot study, messages targeted at affected others evoked much stronger emotions than the other messages, across the whole spectrum of emotions asked about.

# Calls to action

## #1 Develop and test effective messages to help prevent and reduce gambling harms

Gambling advertising is a focus of the government's review of the 2005 Gambling Act. **Equal attention should be given to the development and testing of effective messages that can help prevent and reduce gambling harms across Britain.** In general, funding for gambling harms research lags very far behind that for alcohol, smoking and substance abuse. For example, there have been nearly 700 alcohol studies funded by Research Councils UK and the National Institute for Health Research, but only 23 gambling research studies.<sup>1</sup>

## #2 Fund long-term social marketing campaigns to help reduce stigma and harm

Evaluation of the Time to Change campaign (to reduce stigma and discrimination regarding people with mental illness) shows that **well-funded, long-term social marketing campaigns can help reduce stigma and harm.** This is a useful model for new communication campaigns to prevent and reduce gambling harms, building on the insights from this and other research.

## #3 Target key at-risk audiences

Key audiences for harm prevention and reduction messages must include people who gamble regularly but do not recognise they may be at risk of harm; and people affected by someone else's gambling. Tailored and personalised messaging is required for these and other groups at risk of harm, including understanding the most effective communication channels.

### Authors:

Sara Davies, Sharon Collard  
University of Bristol, Personal Finance Research Centre  
Simon McNair, Lauren Leak-Smith  
The Behavioural Insights Team

University of  
**BRISTOL**



abrdn  
Financial Fairness Trust



THE  
**BEHAVIOURAL  
INSIGHTS  
TEAM**

<sup>1</sup> [Advisory Board for Safer Gambling: Advice to the Gambling Commission on a statutory levy \(2020\).](#)