

Stop Violence in Betting Shops Campaign

A proposal for a cross-government
summit

Community Union &
Rt. Hon. Ian McCartney MP

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There are an estimated 8,500 licensed betting offices in the UK with more than 30,000 people employed as managers and cashiers, the majority being women. With the rise of internet gambling in the mid-late 1990s a number of operators began to rationalise and close poorer performing licensed betting offices. However, the introduction of high staking Fixed Odds Betting Terminals has resulted in a rapid and sustained increase in the number of betting shops with bookmakers themselves predicting a further 1,500 set to open before the end of next year.

Community Union has a growing membership in betting shops, despite the fact that many members of the Association of British Bookmakers are hostile to the union and to staff members who join or attempt to help others to join the union.

The increased interest amongst betting industry staff to join the union has coincided with firstly a steady decline in terms of conditions shop staff operate in, increased unsocial working hours, deterioration in safe working conditions and an upsurge in anti-social behaviour in and around betting shops. There is a great deal of resentment among staff, particularly with the large chains that have seen profits in under a decade grow six-fold and more. As a consequence private equity operators have moved into the sector with what the union claims to be a very hostile attitude towards employee engagement.

Over the past decade the entire retail sector, excluding the betting shop industry, has increasingly introduced new health and safety procedures within the working environment; including CCTV, safe mechanisms for cash transit, staff training to deal with conflict resolution, the provision of security guards and risk assessments done in cooperation with local councils and police and fire authorities. Although this has not eradicated anti-social behaviour totally, it has undeniably reduced considerably acts of robbery and theft using physical violence and weapons including guns and knives.

Betting shops have now become the target of choice for both organised armed gangs and localised anti-social behaviour. The introduction of Fixed Odds Betting Terminals has seen a rise in problem gambling which manifests itself in physical attacks on betting shop staff.

Figures from the Metropolitan Police show a 40% increase in robberies of betting shops in the past 2 years alone. The Strathclyde Police report a 200% increase in robberies and reported physical and/or verbal assaults are becoming a daily occurrence. Local newspapers are increasingly reporting horrific acts of violence against staff. In one tragic incident the staff member committed suicide due to the level of abuse towards him.

For more than a year the union, John Park MSP and I have been attempting to get the employers to meet with Community. Many have politely refused to cooperate; some have demonstrated outright hostility. For example, in Scotland employers are refusing to display a simple safety poster produced by the Scottish Executive under the "Safer Scotland" initiative. Members of the Metropolitan Police have informed me that they are finding a lack of cooperation with employers in helping them support staff in developing an initiative to reduce robberies.

The union has been running a significant campaign involving staff, police, local authorities, community organisations, MPs, MSPs and representatives of the security industry. John Park MSP has successfully organised a range of events in and outside of the Scottish Parliament to publicise the campaign.

The union and I have had a range of meetings with government departments and ministers, all of whom have been extremely sympathetic and supportive. Gerry Sutcliffe spoke at our campaign meeting at party conference.

The departments we have met are as follows:

1. DWP on Health & Safety
2. DCMS on Gambling Commission
3. BERR on employment relations
4. Home Office on crime and ASBOs
5. DCLG on local council involvement

This week we launched in the House of Commons the next phase of the campaign. In attendance and supporting the initiative were James Purnell, Secretary of State for DWP; Gerry Sutcliffe, DCMS; Pat McFadden, BERR; Vernon Coaker, Home Office; and some 30 or so MPs.

Following the meeting at party conference it was felt by the departments and the ministers that it would be best if No. 10 would coordinate a cross-departmental response to see if between now and the next party conference we could agree a way forward with the union and the industry, particularly around a charter for minimal standards in betting shops. Some of the issues the union would like considered are listed below:

- No lone person working under any circumstances
- Safe mechanisms for banking and cash in transit
- Thorough reporting of assaults, theft and anti-social behaviour in and around the premises.
- CCTV and panic alarms in every shop
- Posters warning against anti-social behaviour
- Rigorous training of staff to deal with conflict resolution
- New, tighter risk assessments now that shops are open until 10pm in the winter
- More power for local councils to intervene and act against unscrupulous operators and those not addressing anti-social behaviour

- An independent review of the impact of Fixed Odds Betting Terminals on problem and anti-social behaviour

I spoke briefly with Joe Irvin and he seemed sympathetic but advised me that you were the betting shop guru in government (my phrase)!

We could hold a first meeting with the union and assess what each department has in terms of responsibility and what work they are currently engaged in, in trying to assist the union, police or local government in this growing area of concern. This could be followed up with a meeting of representatives from the key companies in the sector.

Can you please advise me whether you are prepared to take on this initiative and organise an "anti-violence summit"?

I think this is an issue which would help us build confidence in the Government and see us delivering in local communities up and down the country.

I look forward to hearing from you as soon as possible.

Best wishes,

Ian McCartney

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