

Perspectives of local public health and licensing staff on public health approaches for addressing gambling harms in London, United Kingdom

What this research is about

Gambling is regulated under a hybrid governance model in England. The Gambling Commission is the national regulator, while local authorities issue licensing premises for land-based gambling. This study explored how public health and licensing staff in local governments in London understand gambling harms and what helps or hinders the use of public health approaches to address these harms.

What the researchers did

The researchers purposively recruited participants to capture a variety of professional perspectives on gambling regulation and harms within London local governments. They interviewed 19 professionals working in 25 boroughs across London, including 14 senior and mid-level officers from local public health teams and 5 licensing officers.

Public health teams generally focus on population health, health inequalities, and the wider effects of policies on communities. Licensing teams focus more on the day-to-day rules and enforcement under the Gambling Act 2005. These two groups therefore brought different but complementary perspectives. This helped the researchers understand both high-level policy issues and the day-to-day regulatory decision making.

Before the interview, participants were emailed a summary of results from a survey of London public health teams' interest and involvement in gambling policy, as well as data on gambling premises in their borough and across London. The purpose was to

What you need to know

This study explored how public health and licensing staff in London local governments understand gambling harms. It also looked at the factors that help or hinder the use of public health approaches. The researchers interviewed 19 participants and identified five main themes. These themes included: gambling takes many forms and all can be harmful; limited power and resources; gaps in knowledge; the role of public health teams; and differences between boroughs. Public health and licensing staff generally shared similar concerns. However, staff differed in their views on involving the gambling industry in local policy development.

prompt reflection and support more informed discussion during the interview. All interviews occurred online using Microsoft Teams.

What the researchers found

The researchers identified five main themes.

Gambling can take many forms and all can be harmful:

This theme captures the idea that gambling is not just one single activity that happens in one setting. Instead, gambling takes multiple forms, which differ in their acceptability and availability. Participants discussed all types of gambling, mostly in terms of the harm that people experience from them. Betting shops were discussed in terms of their concentration in lower socio-economic areas.

Public health participants were concerned about the possible harms from online gambling, but none of the licensing participants discussed online gambling. This may be because licensing officers are responsible for licensing physical gambling premises, rather than online gambling. Similarly, while public health participants discussed the National Lottery, highlighting its wide availability and acceptability, licensing participants did not mention it. None of the participants discussed benefits of gambling for people or society.

Feeling of helplessness: Participants expressed helplessness due to a lack of money and power. Specifically, a lack of money was a concern at the individual level (e.g., rising poverty and people getting desperate), as well as at the council level (e.g., not enough financial resources for public health and licensing teams). Participants discussed feeling as if they had inadequate power, granted by national legislation, to address gambling harms.

Lack of knowledge: Participants sometimes showed a lack of knowledge about several aspects of gambling legislation, local policy, and enforcement powers. For example, one participant was unsure about whether a proposed new legislation had been published. Some participants admitted that they lacked a full understanding of the scale and nature of gambling harms, and the availability of local supports. Many were unfamiliar with the data on gambling premises in their borough.

What public health teams do: Public health participants talked about different work-related activities, many of which involved working with other departments within the council. While some participants felt that other local government teams may not be fully aware of what they do, they described being proactive about addressing this. Public health participants tended to be more critical and cautious of consulting with the gambling industry in local policy development. But those from licensing teams tended to see the industry as a key stakeholder to consult.

Differences between boroughs: Participants described differences between boroughs, with each local area having different structures, resources, and priorities.

How you can use this research

This research can inform policy makers in the development of public health approaches to gambling harms. For example, policy makers may wish to strengthen cross-departmental collaboration and improve knowledge and data use. Because public health teams already have experience using population-based public health approaches for alcohol, some of these strategies may also be helpful for preventing and reducing gambling harms.

About the researchers

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Citation

Blythe, J., McKee, M., & Petticrew, M. (2026). Barriers to adopting public health strategies to address gambling harms in London, United Kingdom, local government: A reflexive thematic analysis. *Critical Public Health*, 36(1), 2680725.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09581596.2026.2680725>

Study Funding

This study was part of a research project funded by the National Institute for Health Research ARC North Thames.

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