

Evidence to the Casino Advisory Panel why Blackpool is not the most suitable place to trial the regional casino concept in the UK.

By Councillor Steven Bate B.A. [Hon's]

On behalf of :-

- **Blackpool Seasonal Traders Association**
- **Campaign Against Supercasino Expansion**
- **The approx 60% of the local population who would vote against allowing a supercasino in the area, if allowed a postal ballot**

Opening remarks for most of the past 12 months senior council officers and those linked to ReGen have been saying to selected groups of local business and “community representatives” that they have had the nod from “the government” that Blackpool “will get the supercasino”. Either this is true and the whole process is a sham, as many people suspect. Or it is not true and Blackpool council have been lying to the local community. Whichever is the case, it sets the scene for the panel to understand, how arrogant the casino promoters are in Blackpool. They will say anything in order to force this supercasino on our community. You should take anything they say with not a pinch but a large bag of salt.

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1. The Council has refused to debate, or dispute research evidence that indicates, that between 30% and 55% of casino slot machine revenue comes from money lost by local/regional problem gamblers. They also fail to offer any alternative percentage estimate. As there are so many local residents, who are time rich but income poor, the negative social impact on the residents of central Blackpool is expected to be considerable. However after six years of trying, we have been unable to obtain any co-operation or even a hint of concern or responsible attitude from any Council Officer or Councillor [except Cllr Jon Bamborough] on problem gambling issues. Therefore the Council is not suitable to manage the trial of a supercasino in Blackpool.
2. The Council has refused to allow even one single public debate on any casino related issues. There have been rigged meetings, but not one where the public could hear, say 20 mins of the case for a supercasino, then 20 mins against, then questions from the public to both sides of the argument. As a Councillor and twice Parliamentary candidate for Blackpool North Cleveleys and Fleetwood, I have had communications by letter, email, telephone, doorstep and face to face from hundreds of residents, all concerned at the lack of any public debate opportunities. They and I have over six years become increasingly disgusted at the heavy

handed, arrogant attitude of Blackpool Council on all casino related issues. Therefore Blackpool Council is unsuitable to manage the trial of the first supercasino in the UK.

3. Blackpool Council has for six years promoted the false story that the only way to obtain a new conference facility was to have it next to and funded by a supercasino. No economic evidence has ever been offered to back up their false claim. A great deal of the political and hotel industry support for the supercasino masterplan is based on the agreed need for a new conference facility. The linking of the two has been vital in maintaining support for the supercasino. The Council's policy has been to repeat the lie until most people believe it eventually. Four years ago a then hotelier Alan Duxbury Campbell, investigated the economics of the Harrogate Conference facilities. It consistently generates over £120 million a year of extra business for local hotels, restaurants etc. It was built with various funds and loans and is said to just make enough gross profit [about £1 million a year] to service the loans. For about 15 years Blackpool Council has given over £1 million a year to subsidise conference facilities at the Winter Gardens. That money could have part funded much better new conference facilities. The site in question is the best available tourist site in the UK second to only the Pleasure Beach. Over 6 million tourists walk past it or through it every year. If the council had promoted its availability, and talked up the potential many attractions would have sought to be based there. Some would have been built and be operating by now. Instead they have talked down Blackpool and the Golden Mile area, promoting the false perception that no other developer wanted to come. Therefore Blackpool Council is unsuitable to manage the trial of the first supercasino in the UK.
4. In a recently published study by NERA they conclude that the number of extra [Blackpool resident] problem gamblers, created by the imposition of a supercasino in Blackpool [1,320 to 1,680] could exceed the number of extra jobs created by the supercasino [750 to 1,531]. I would urge the CAP to take into consideration that Blackpool council itself admits that only 40% of the jobs will go to Blackpool residents. The number of local EXTRA problem gamblers created is therefore expected to be two or three times as great, as the number of Blackpool residents that may obtain jobs in the proposed supercasino. I respectfully suggest that if the general public in Blackpool were made fully aware of this evidence, public support for the supercasino would crumble to around 20%, making Blackpool unsuitable under government guidelines to the CAP.
5. The disgraceful absence of any alternative strategy for the future of Blackpool indicates that Blackpool Council is both irresponsible and grossly negligent. Such a council cannot be trusted

to manage the planning of, licensing of, and measuring the social impact of, the first trial supercasino in the UK.

6. In the small print in the original [Budd report] on the gambling expansion proposals, they estimated it would be nationally jobs neutral. Since then job creation claims have been progressively increased and in the case of Blackpool, exaggerated above even the most vivid imagination. While the Blackpool Council bid document estimates the supercasino will create 2,500 to 3,400 jobs they continued to tell the public on Granada TV in August and in this weeks Gazette that 20,000 jobs are involved. Using more realistic research and being honest about the displacement effect of a supercasino in central Blackpool, NERA estimates from 750 to 1,531 extra jobs may be created. The public are used to exaggerated job claims, linked to controversial large supermarket planning applications. With those, councils always remain neutral until planning permission is decided. Rather than being neutral as Blackpool Council should have been, regarding supercasino claims, they have been complicit in hiding the true job situation for some years; they have proved themselves unsuitable to be trusted to manage the trial of a supercasino in Blackpool.
7. There is only one organisation that has any detailed knowledge about and experience of, the existing problem gambling situation in Blackpool. That is the local Gamblers Anonymous. For six years the council has used vast amounts of public money and many tens of thousands of hours of Council Officers time. Used to run rigged meetings with selected invitees, that they could later describe as community consultations. However not once have they had any official meetings or sought research evidence from the local [or national] Gamblers Anonymous group. Instead they discouraged a local reformed problem gambler from establishing an awareness program to warn teenagers of the potentially addictive nature of slot machines. Despite the Council putting every brick wall possible to stop him [Paul Isherwood], continued in his determination, to seek to warn teenagers of the gambling problems, he got in to, living near so many slot machines in central Blackpool. He now speaks to Round Table and Rotary Clubs across the North West. Another indication of the lengths Blackpool Council has gone to in order to hide the true situation from the Blackpool public. They are not suitable to be trusted to manage such an important trial project. All the indications are, they have failed to measure the existing situation, and will fail to measure the true situation one, two and three years after the opening of a supercasino.
8. As a Liberal Democrat Councillor and twice parliamentary candidate, I am comfortable with people from the EU moving to live in Blackpool. However in the last couple of years the ease with which about four thousand to eight thousand Polish people have obtained jobs, mostly in

Blackpool's leisure sector is worthy of note. The sad fact is that managers at any supercasino in 2010 would be the same as managers at leisure outlets this year in Blackpool. They will prefer to offer jobs to smart young Polish applicants, to many of those within Blackpool's British born transient jobseekers. I am sure local public support for the supercasino is much lower than the council claim. From hundreds of conversations I am also sure that a large percentage of support is based on the false perception, that people with problems relating to drink, drugs, low or no educational qualifications etc will be able to obtain jobs in the supercasino. If the public were aware of the true job creation numbers and of how many of them would be taken by people with no Blackpool links, public support would crumble to lower than 20%. This would make Blackpool an unsuitable town to trial the first UK supercasino.

9. There is overwhelming evidence that many of the people with the problems in point 8 are transient and are attracted to Blackpool as a side effect of the image Blackpool has obtained over the years. There is a need for much more research, however there is a strong case to suggest that the presence of a supercasino will increase the magnetic effect of central Blackpool, to transient people with issues relating to low education, drink, drugs, prostitution and financial crime. It is therefore not suitable to be the trial site for the first supercasino in the UK.
10. Most of the public, political and business support for the supercasino trial is based on the false perception that nothing else is on offer. For most of the past six years all Liberal Democrats, some Conservatives and most hoteliers have said there should be a plan B, just in case. At every opportunity we have said, put all the council owned development opportunity land out for expressions of interest. "Let us discover who wants to run leisure, entertainment or tourist attractions on land walked past by six to twelve million people a year". The Council has refused to do this, in the knowledge that it would throw up alternatives to a supercasino. In 2001 the Seasonal Traders Association conducted a random survey indicating over 95% of residents would prefer an alternative to a resort casino to help regenerate central Blackpool, if a practical alternative was on offer. Information provided by the Noble organisation, NERA, Storm City, and advance information we have received about a major environmental based attraction on offer, all confirm that the perception was false, that there is major regeneration underway now, more soon and even more is on offer. The Noble group is correct when they say that six years of blight on central Blackpool has delayed regeneration. It has caused hundreds of hotel and leisure business's to sell up and go or just close down. The conspiracy of casino spin between Leisure Parcs and the council has caused considerable damage to the Blackpool economy, making Blackpool council unsuitable to be trusted to manage the trial of the first UK supercasino.

11. Blackpool Council claims that promoting information about problem gambling services, such as the Gamcare helpline, will offset any increase in problem gambling caused by the introduction of a supercasino in central Blackpool. First a number of Problem Gamblers have spoken to me and described the Gamcare helpline as totally useless. Second if a problem gambler were to obtain some of the very rare treatment services that exist in the UK, that will have a tiny effect. Research in Australia explodes the myth that treatment facilities will be of much help in addressing problem gambling. Only 28% of respondents accredited their decrease in gambling to their treatment. To this should be added the point that 72% were not seeking treatment at all. I would add that these are only the problem gamblers who have been identified. Thus, any argument that problem gambling will be fixed by setting up treatment facilities is very flawed. At best, only one in four problem gamblers will seek treatment and, of those, only a little over one in four will benefit – on simple arithmetic, only about one in fifteen problem gamblers will benefit from the provision of treatment facilities. Blackpool Councils lack of ability to understand this reality, makes it unsuitable to manage the trial of a supercasino in Blackpool.

12. In mature casino slot machine markets and the similar “pokie” market in Australia, 48% of problem gamblers report a decrease in their gambling problem due to lack of money. Given casino slot machine revenues are maintained or still increasing, this confirms what one would expect and that is the slot machine problem gamblers are not a fixed population, but that new problem gamblers are continually being added and tapped out. The revenue figures do not represent a continuing income stream from a percentage of the population (as one gets with retail sales) but they are made up of a series of parabolas as people become regular slot gamblers, then problem gamblers, spend increasing amounts, then run out of money and crash and burn. I have seen statistics indicating this has effected over 10% of those that live near three large casinos in the centre of Detroit. Blackpool Council fails to understand this will affect a far wider spectrum of the local population, than they estimate. Confirming that Blackpool Council is unsuitable to manage the trial of a supercasino.

13. If Blackpool Council was serious about preparing to “mitigate any problems caused by the regional casino”, then I believe Liberal Democrat Councillors would have heard about the “projects”. I am Chairman of the Adults and Community Safety Overview and Scrutiny Committee. It deals with social services, crime and disorder, homeless issues etc and scrutiny of anything relating to problem gambling is kept well away from my Committee. I am a member

of the Health Scrutiny Committee and the Royal College of Psychiatrists considers problem gambling a serious public mental health issue. The council has kept scrutiny of plans to “mitigate” problem gambling off their agenda. I am a member of the Licensing Committee and the Public Protection Sub Committee. It has agreed a standard Gambling Policy document, which basically says the council will do exactly what the Government says it must do and no more. The Council claims to be years ahead of other bidding venues on casino issues. It has spent those years sweeping problems under the carpet and is now behind the city bidders in doing anything regarding “projects to mitigate any problems caused by the regional casino”.

14. In recent days Rainforest Ventures Ltd has provided Blackpool Council with significant detail of a £75 million proposal for an “Eden Centre of the North”. An attraction estimated to attract over 800,000 genuine tourists a year to central Blackpool. This could be on a site offered by the Council or on the central station site if the casino plan was sensibly rejected by the residents in a referendum. On either site it could have a large venue nearby, suitable for pop concerts, major star shows, exhibitions and conferences. Therefore the council’s bogus claim that nothing else is on offer to regenerate central Blackpool is now destroyed. However the fact that they were willing to lie to the CAP, the government and the people of Blackpool makes them even more unsuitable to manage the trial of a regional casino.

15. Also in recent days the results of a major public opinion survey have been released. The CAP should understand this is a survey by the local Gazette newspaper that has effectively run extensive casino promotion propaganda almost every day for the past six years. However of the 627 resident or visitor reader respondents 43% still believe a regional casino would not “turn around Blackpool’s fortunes”. Slightly more 45% believe it would, but after six years of coverage 12% still do not know. This is very similar to the result of a Gazette survey five years ago, opinion has hardly changed. Less than half local residents do not buy the Gazette, our research continues to indicate that if asked to allow a regional casino, the general population would vote about 60% against. The Gazette asked visitors If Blackpool won the casino licence, would you visit more often? A large 59% said no, only half that 30% said yes, with 11% undecided. Our unofficial research conducted by hoteliers who mostly have elderly or family guests indicates about 90% of those type of paying/staying holidaymakers are not interested in or attracted by the prospect of thousands of casino slot machines. This new evidence provides more reasons to not impose a regional casino on central Blackpool.

ENDS

with thanks for your consideration of this evidence