Views and experiences of gambling support services

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9% of problem gamblers sought help from a gambling support service

“around 1 in 4 problem gamblers had sought help for an emotional or mental health problem”

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Briefing summary

From previous research, we know that formal support can help those in debt by reducing feelings of stress, anxiety and depression. However, similar formal support mechanisms for people with gambling problems have a low take-up rate, as suggested by the British Gambling Prevalence Survey 2010. This briefing paper draws on the Managing Money, Debt and Gambling Study to explore gamblers' views and experiences of gambling support services.

Barriers to taking up formal support
- Lack of awareness of support services
- Perceived inaccessibility of services
- Doubt about the effectiveness of formal support services
- Preference for alternative forms of support, such as family and friends
- Concerns about confidentiality
- Concerns about the approach that support agencies take
- Self-denial

Experience of using formal support
- Meeting others with similar experiences seen as positive
- Learning practical skills to cope with problems is seen as valuable
- Some approaches described as leaving people feeling powerless

Suggestions for improving the nature of support available
- On-site support in gambling venues
- Pro-active awareness raising
- Improved links with generic support services
- Improving service provision for families and friends

The study

The Managing Money, Debt and Gambling study was funded by the ESRC and carried out by researchers from NatCen Social Research, the University of Birmingham and the University of Glasgow.

From previous research, we know that formal support, such as information, advice and practical skills, helps those in debt by reducing feelings of stress, anxiety and depression. This suggests that support may also help people who struggle with the resultant debt of gambling. However, evidence suggests that there are low levels of take up of any type of formal support among people who experience problems with their gambling.

According to the British Gambling Prevalence Survey 2010 around two thirds (64%) of those who experienced gambling problems did not seek help from either formal or informal sources. Among those who did seek some kind of help, contacting formal support services was less popular than seeking help from families and friends. For example, 24 per cent of those who felt they had gambling problems had spoken to a family or friend, whereas only 9 per cent had spoken to a dedicated gambling support service.

Evidence from the 2007 Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey also showed that around 1 in 4 (26%) problem gamblers had sought help for an emotional or mental health problem. This briefing paper presents data from the Managing Money, Debt and Gambling Study about the obstacles in accessing support services, the experiences of those accessing formal support and participants' recommendations about how these services may be improved. This study was an in-depth exploration of gambling behaviour, money management and debt among a sample of problem and at-risk gamblers, thus providing insight among those with different experiences of gambling.

Awareness of support organisations

Awareness of support services varied considerably. Although participants (both those who had and had not taken up support) had heard of Gambling Anonymous and Gamble Aware, there was minimal awareness of other gambling support organisations. Awareness of services came through leaflets and posters in bookmaker’s, help line numbers printed on the back of lottery tickets and on television and online advertising. However, some participants commented on the fact that they felt information could be hard to find or was kept in inaccessible areas, for example support leaflets being kept out-of-sight in the corner of bookmakers and other venues.

In addition to general lack of awareness of the range of support available, the following barriers to access were mentioned:
Barriers to formal support

- Perceived inaccessibility of services: the money and time spent travelling to venues and in some cases the additional costs of childcare, was a deterrent to accessing services. Equally, there were concerns about support services being situated near gambling venues, presenting temptation.
- Doubt about the effectiveness of formal support services: there was scepticism among some, though not all, about the difference formal support could make. There was particular uncertainty about how formal support would replace the ‘buzz’ of gambling, as participants felt that unlike drug addiction, there was no pharmaceutical substitute that could be used to help them control their gambling. Some participants also felt that someone could only stop gambling if they fundamentally changed their attitude and approach, and they felt that this was not something that formal support could influence.
- Preference for alternative forms of support: for some the support of friends and family was preferred to formal support services, and where participants were able to get support from these sources more formalised support was deemed unnecessary.
- Concerns around confidentiality: though not shared universally by all, some participants expressed concerns about the degree to which their engagement with support services would remain confidential. This was a particular concern for those who lived in small towns where meetings were held locally and it was felt that it was almost impossible to remain anonymous.
- Concerns about the approach that support agencies take: some participants, who recognised they had problems, were reluctant to seek help because they did not want to abstain from gambling entirely and felt that this would be a key part of formal support.
- Self-denial: There were also participants who described having previously been in denial about the degree to which their gambling was problematic. They said that they had not accessed formal support as they believed it was for those in extreme circumstances, though in retrospect, it would have been helpful. Others adopted a fatalistic attitude, saying that they had accepted that gambling was a way of life and it was not possible for them to change.

Experience of support services

Gambling Anonymous (GA) meetings were the only type of formal support that participants in the sample had accessed or reported as making attempts to access. The benefits derived from these meetings were hearing from people who had been through similar experiences. Also seen as useful was learning practical strategies for controlling gambling behaviour, such as handing over some financial control to others, talking to others about their gambling behaviour and occupying their time with alternative activities and stimulation.

However, participants did note some less helpful outcomes of the meetings. The reported feeling ‘powerless’ because other members of the group identified themselves by their gambling problem and lived their lives around this. There were also people who said that they felt unable to identify with other people at meetings because they had very different gambling problems. For example, one participant who gambled heavily on horses said he felt unable to relate to a member of the group who played bingo excessively.

Suggestions for improving the nature of support

Suggestions by participants for making gambling support more accessible and to encourage more take-up were:

- On-site support in gambling venues: onsite support was seen as having the potential to both increase the accessibility of support and raise awareness of the types of support available.
- Awareness raising: participants advocated more advertisement and pro-active communication with problem gamblers and, crucially, their family and friends about what support entails and how support might help, including the opportunity to talk to people who had already accessed support services.
- Improved links with generic support services: improving links with generic support services that are more frequently accessed was seen as good way of directing people to gambling support services.
- Improving service provision for families and friends: it was felt there was a particular gap in services that could help support the families and friends of people experiencing problems with their gambling.
Summary

This evidence highlights some of the broad misconceptions held about the range and type of help services available. For example, GamCare have both NetLine and HelpLine which allow people with concerns about their gambling to speak to someone either online or over the phone. However, for some, awareness of these services was low. Furthermore, this evidence highlights the idea held by some that formal treatment of gambling takes a particular form. Respondents frequently cited attending local groups as key forms of support, apparently unaware of the range of different treatment types available. It is, however, encouraging that suggestions for improvements include initiatives that have been recently implemented. But it is also clear that awareness of these sources of help needs to be improved.

Perhaps low take-up can also be explained by the view held by some that these services are more about formal treatment for a specific problem, rather than simply speaking to someone about concerns. This highlights how ‘treatment’ and ‘support’ may be being confused and that a perceived focus on treatment can act as a barrier to accessing broader information and support. Evidence from both this study and from the BGPS shows that, in the first instance, people feel most comfortable talking to friends and family about these issues. Therefore, it is crucial that both gamblers and their loved ones are made aware of how to access services and the types of information and service they offer in order to ensure that gambling support services are effective for those who need it most.

About the study

- The Managing Money, Debt and Gambling study was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and carried out by researchers from NatCen Social Research, the University of Birmingham and the University of Glasgow.
- The study involved in-depth interviews with 27 participants who were chosen to ensure they had a range of experiences in terms of gambling and debt.
- Participants were drawn from the Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey 2007 and the British Gambling Prevalence Survey 2010.

Further information

NatCen Social Research: www.natcen.ac.uk
ESRC: www.esrc.ac.uk
Gambling Commission: www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk
GamCare: www.gamcare.org.uk/