



2020

The National Gambling Helpline During Lockdown

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Introduction



The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on GamCare's business, necessitating changes to our working practices as well as adjusting demand for our services. This short report summarises those changes and should be read alongside GamCare's Trustees' Annual Report 2019/20, which provides more context on how we have responded to these issues.

Executive Summary

The formal announcement of the COVID-19 lockdown came on March 23rd 2020, shortly after the decision to postpone all sporting competitions and close retail gambling venues (betting shops, arcades, casinos and bingo halls; lottery tickets and scratch cards were still available to purchase from retailers).

GamCare's online and telephone services continued seamlessly through the lockdown period, offering an opportunity to see, in real time, the effect of lockdown on the ways people chose to access support in managing their gambling behaviour, as well as seeking advice if concerned about a loved one.

The headline findings below are an initial response to what our data shows. At this stage it is hard to separate cause and effect with any confidence, however this does provide a sense of what was happening on the ground.

Research carried out by the Gambling Commission suggests that although fewer consumers were gambling during lockdown, those that were already 'engaged gamblers' (i.e. those participating in three or more gambling activities per month) changed their behaviour. These engaged gamblers were more likely to report that they had tried new online and virtual products, and had increased the time or money they spent on gambling. This change in behaviour seems to be most common in young people aged 18-34, especially young men.

GamCare's observations across our services suggests that:

- Lockdown may have exacerbated issues such as isolation and financial worries, which are already widespread among people dealing with gambling-related harms.
- People were initially reluctant to seek help, possibly because of preoccupation with the pandemic and/or concerns about privacy in the home.
- Privacy concerns may have driven a switch from phone to text-based support as the main way of accessing our services following the lockdown announcement.
- Engagement with group chatrooms increased. Anxieties about COVID were key themes of online conversations, alongside gambling-related issues.
- Staff on our helpline flagged increased concern around domestic abuse being experienced by callers.
- Engagement remained high among those already in treatment, however fewer people started treatment during the lockdown period.

Gambling Commission research - the context for gambling during lockdown

The Gambling Commission has tracked changes in gambling behaviour over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹

The Commission's data reflecting the period between March and August, covering in-person and online gambling as well as consumer research, shows that while overall fewer consumers are gambling, lockdown did prompt some people who were gambling already to try new products including online bingo, betting on virtual races or sports, National Lottery online instant wins and online slots. There also seems to have been a significant increase in betting on online poker between March and April.

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According to YouGov research conducted in July, while most past-four-week gamblers indicated that they had not increased their gambling activity, almost seven in ten 'engaged gamblers' reported that they had increased either the time or money spent on at least one gambling activity, including National Lottery products.

Younger people aged 18-34 were more likely than average to report increases in time or money spent on at least one gambling activity, or to have taken up new gambling activities since lockdown started. These increases are particularly associated with young men.

Gambling behaviours continue to evolve as the country responds to challenges posed by COVID-19, and as such the Commission's updated guidance to gambling businesses is still important.

This included guidance to online operators in May - setting out the need for improved affordability checks, the prevention of reverse withdrawals and restrictions on bonus offers - and was reinforced for land-based premises in June when they were allowed to reopen.

¹ <https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/news-action-and-statistics/News/data-shows-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-gambling-behaviour-in-august-2020>



"GamCare were really helpful and understanding to my situation with my partners compulsive [gambling] and gave advice quickly, kindly and in a non-judgemental way. I felt at ease straight away. They very quickly made a referral for support for me and for my partner and I really appreciate it. It's nice to know that even in these crazy COVID times there is still someone out there to help, just a web chat away. Thank you so much."

SERVICE USER

National Gambling Helpline Activity During Lockdown

Overall, GamCare has observed several shifts in activity on our Helpline during the period since lockdown was announced, although we would caveat that this is a short-term shift and that we will continue a watching brief. Feedback from callers and colleagues suggests that a range of issues influenced choices around seeking help. Some general themes are outlined below:

- In common with other health and social care services, we initially saw a reduction in people seeking help during the first weeks of lockdown.
- A lack of privacy was a key concern in making calls to the helpline. People felt inhibited by having family or housemates nearby. This appears to be reflected in the trend towards live chat compared to calls (see fig 2), which is more discreet if privacy is an issue. In response to this we promoted a 'walk and talk' approach, suggesting callers use their daily exercise to seek help.
- A preoccupation with the virus and people feeling in crisis mode was reflected in the issues callers wanted to discuss, and in increased uptake of our online chat rooms, where the impact of the virus was a regular topic of conversation. We increased our chatroom offer during lockdown: almost all chat sessions operated at their capacity of 20 users per session.

- While overall the number of safeguarding concerns relating to the potential abuse of an adult or child did not increase from previous quarters, we noted an increase in significant concerns flagged, including around domestic abuse, which we will continue to monitor.
- At the start of lockdown there was a significant minority of calls asking for self-exclusion via GamStop (an online self-exclusion tool) to be lifted. This trend has subsequently abated. This is not a request the helpline can fulfil, though appropriate advice is offered to callers.
- Some clients reported that they were finding it difficult to remain in treatment because of the lack of confidential space in the household, but overall engagement with treatment has remained consistent.

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#ReadyToTalk Campaign

During lockdown, we were aware that the rapidly changing events in the external environment could be detrimental to our callers' and clients' wellbeing.

Changes such as the resumption of sports events (and therefore betting on those events), the impact of the furlough scheme and the eventual 'unlocking' of the economy all had the potential to influence our service users. We were keen to encourage them to seek our help when they needed it.

In June 2020 we launched the #ReadyToTalk campaign, working with three other national charities (Samaritans, Refuge and Cruse Bereavement Care) to raise awareness of help and support services, and remind people that our helplines were still available.

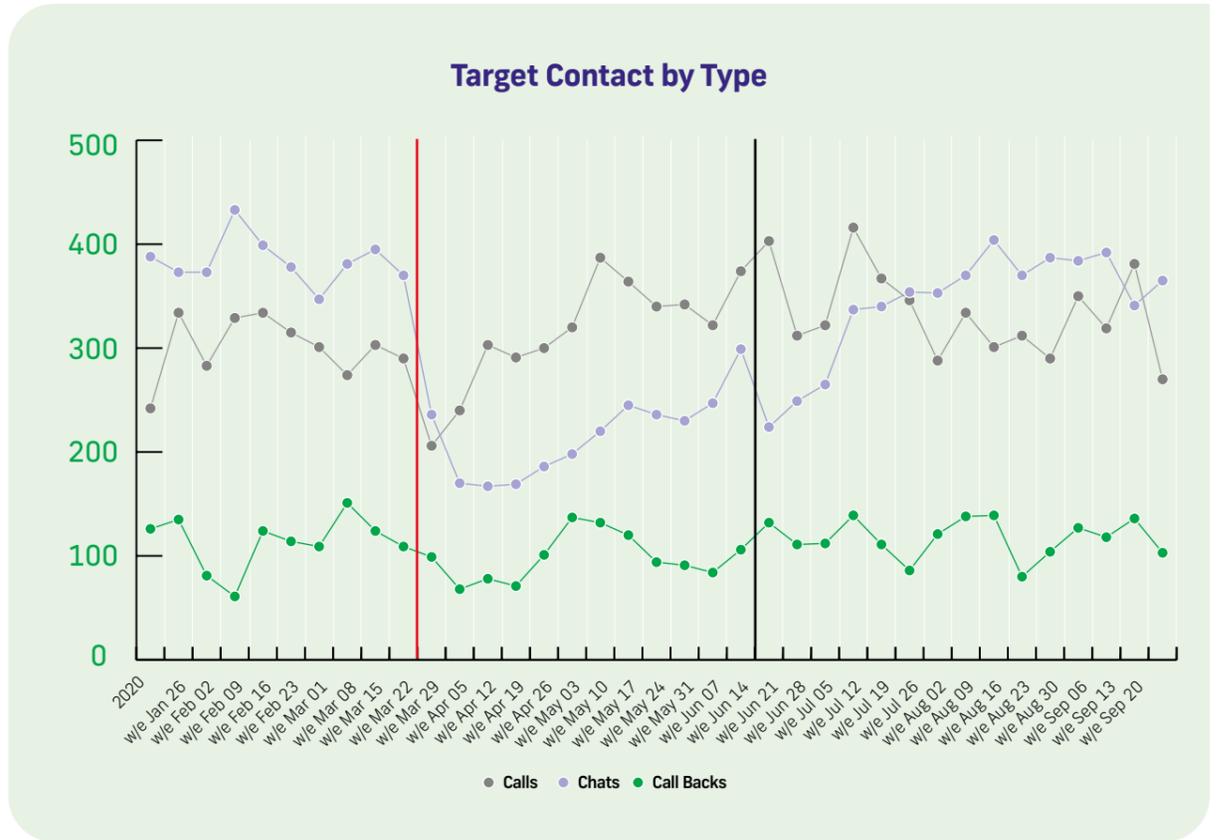
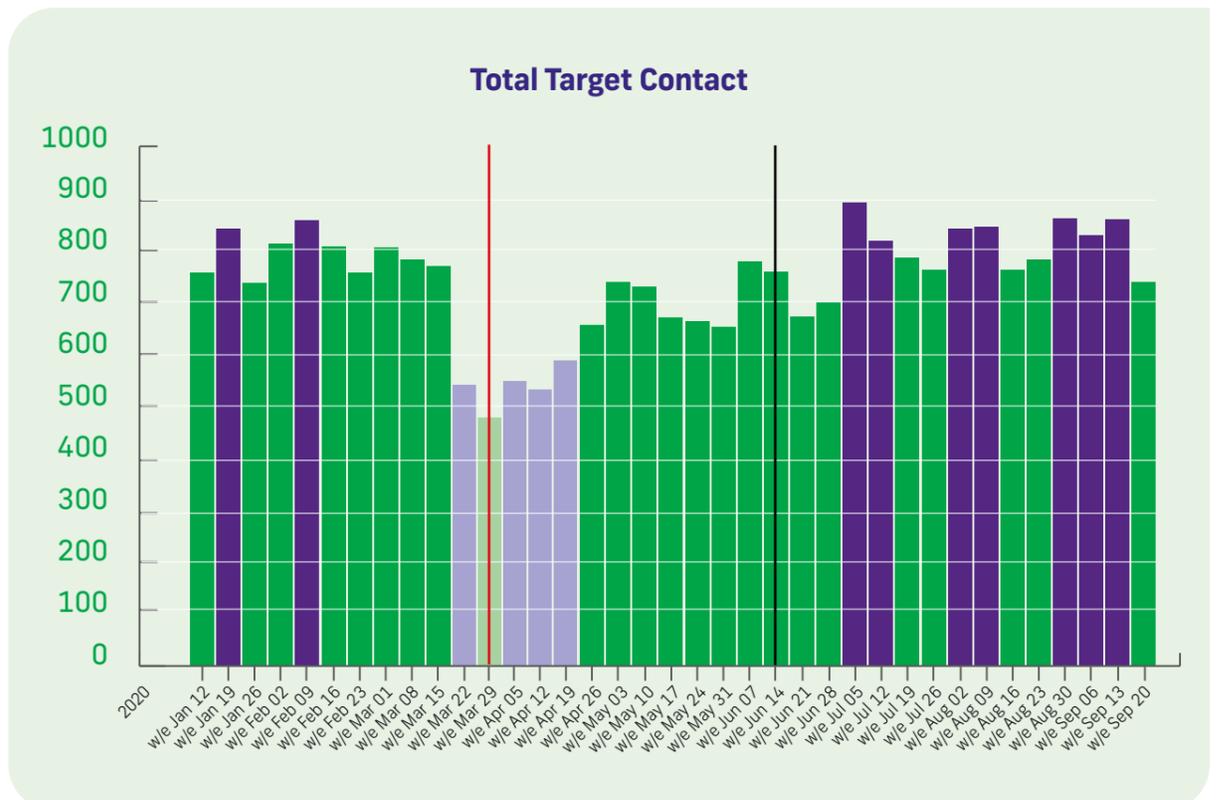
Over the course of the campaign, we reached over 300,000 people via social media engagement, and a further 1 million people via media and stakeholder engagement. Campaign content was shared by MPs and several other prominent public figures, as well as through the Helplines Partnership and other supporters. We perceive that the campaign has had an impact on phone calls to the Helpline over the last few months, as you can see from the following graphs, although there may also be additional factors which need to be taken into account.

Activity via the National Gambling Helpline

The graphs opposite show activity on our helpline during the period January – August 2020. While we can observe trends in activity, more analysis is needed to separate causation and correlation. The data does, however, offer a picture of activity during a unique period.

Target contacts are calls from a gambler or from a person affected by someone else's gambling behaviour.

On the graphs opposite, the red lines show the announcement of lockdown in March, and the black lines show when our #ReadyToTalk campaign was introduced. Lockdown began to ease in mid-May.





8 Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has generated a unique operating environment for all providers of help and support services, whether they are gambling specific or related to general health and wellbeing.

During this time, we have prioritised consistent availability of support around the clock, including our 24 hour Helpline services, along with extended group chatroom hours via our website and additional promotion of our GameChange course (available online with support from our practitioners).

We increased our social media activity and tailored it to the new circumstances that COVID-19 has created, and we also engaged extensively across the sector to share intelligence and tailor our offer accordingly.

There is no blueprint for operating at times like these, and we continue to have ongoing discussions with our dedicated teams and our partners across the sector to consider how we can continue to learn and adapt.

This flexibility will be key to finding ways to thrive despite the challenging circumstances. There is no doubt that gamblers will continue to need support, perhaps increasingly so, and we are working hard to ensure that we can encourage increased engagement and offer effective, timely support in future.

We would continue to encourage our partners and stakeholders to share details of support and treatment services across the National Gambling Treatment Service so that everyone who can benefit from support knows how to access this easily, and as soon as possible.

Additional Information:

The National Gambling Helpline

GamCare operates the National Gambling Helpline, providing information, advice and support for anyone affected by gambling harms. Advisers are available **24 hours** a day on Freephone **0808 8020 133** or via web chat at **gamcare.org.uk**. GamCare also offer a moderated Forum and daily chatrooms to connect users experiencing similar issues. Please visit our website for further information.

GamCare Treatment Services

GamCare offer a range of free, confidential treatment services across Great Britain as part of the **National Gambling Treatment Service**, funded by GambleAware. We, along with our partner agencies, would normally be able to offer face to face services from 120+ locations, as well as providing online and telephone support. If people have complex needs, we can refer them to other NGTS providers. During the pandemic, the majority of our services will be provided online or over the phone. See **gamcare.org.uk/get-support/** for more information.

GameChange - Online CBT Course

GamCare also run GameChange, an online treatment course for those who are concerned about their gambling behaviour, supported by regular contact with a GamCare therapist. The course has been designed so you can work at your own pace, wherever is most convenient for you, over the course of eight weeks. For more information visit **gamcare.org.uk/self-help/gamechange/**

Self-Help Resources

GamCare has a range of self-help resources available via **gamcare.org.uk/self-help/**

Outreach and Engagement

For more information on our outreach, training and engagement work please see **gamcare.org.uk/our-work/**

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