

Gambling rules in Northern Ireland could be brought into line with tighter standards in the rest of the UK following an intervention by the Church of England.

An amendment tabled in the House of Lords by the Bishop of St Albans, Alan Smith, opening the way for possible alignment in gambling regulation between Northern Ireland and mainland Britain has been accepted by the Government.

The amendment adds gambling legislation to a number of areas on which the Government would be required to produce a report by September as part of moves to restore the devolved executive in Northern Ireland.

The Bishop of Newcastle, Christine Hardman, who spoke to the amendment in the House of Lords, told peers that the current inconsistency meant that reforms introduced in mainland Britain - such as the cap on the maximum stake on Fixed Odds Betting Terminals (FOBTs) - do not apply in Northern Ireland.

“The anomalies and confusions abound,” she said.



The amendment was adopted without a vote by the Government after receiving praise from the Leader of the Opposition, Baroness Smith, the Liberal Democrats and a DUP peer.

Welcoming the outcome, Bishop Alan said: "Currently people from Northern Ireland are three times more likely to have a gambling-related problem than in the rest of the country.

"While the rest of the United Kingdom sees progress in reducing stakes on Fixed-Odds Betting Terminals, and has independent regulation from the Gambling Commission, Northern Ireland is dependent on out-of-date legislation.

"Bypassing the 2005 Gambling Act, the Province instead uses an equivalent from 1985 resulting in legal grey-areas existing including on FOBTs.

"Even the advertising watchdog, the ASA, advises gambling companies to seek legal advice in Northern Ireland because the 2005 Act does not apply despite it underpinning the ASA's codes on gambling which do apply there.

"I would encourage the Government to deliver their report into this with speed and I believe it will conclude that harmonisation and alignment on regulation and legislation is necessary."

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