

Gambling Reform APPG Evidence Session: **Gambling in the Armed Forces**

Date: 8 December 2026

Time: 15.00-16.30

Location: Room C, 1 Parliament Street

Chair: Sir Iain Duncan Smith MP

Minutes: Ruby Swales, DGA Group

Members Present:

- Alex Ballinger MP (Co-Chair)
- Sir Iain Duncan Smith MP (Chair)
- Dawn Butler MP
- Dr Beccy Cooper MP (Vice-Chair)
- Jim Dickson MP

External Guests:

- The Rt Revd Dr Alan Smith
- Professor Matt Fossey, Professor of Public Services Research at Anglia Ruskin University
- Dr. Chris Kay, Senior Research Fellow at Anglia Ruskin University
- Feona Veys, Betknowmore UK
- Pete Buckley, Betknowmore UK
- Matt Losing, Betknowmore UK

Sir Iain Duncan Smith MP opened the session by welcoming members, witnesses and observers. He outlined that the session formed part of the APPG's ongoing inquiry into gambling harms, with a specific focus on the impact within the Armed Forces. He noted that the evidence gathered would inform future recommendations to Government, before inviting witnesses to provide opening remarks.

Witnesses opened the session by speaking about the lack of reliable data on gambling harms within the military. They noted that repeated attempts had been made to obtain information from the Ministry of Defence (MOD), including on the prevalence of gambling machines and levels of harm, but that limited data had been forthcoming. Witnesses said that, without a clear evidence base, it is difficult to understand the scale of the problem or design effective interventions, and stressed that improved data collection should be a priority.

Witnesses then spoke about research into the wider impact of gambling harms on veterans and their families. They noted that gambling-related harm extends beyond the individual and can affect partners, family members and wider support networks. Members heard that recent academic work has highlighted the significant and often under-recognised impact of gambling harms on families.

Witnesses discussed the broader social and familial consequences of gambling. Members heard that, on average, around six people may be affected by the harms associated with one individual's gambling. Witnesses also spoke about evidence linking gambling harms to increased levels of alcohol consumption, poor physical health behaviours, and self-harm among affected family

members. They noted that further research is needed, particularly into the wider societal and economic impacts.

Witnesses described the work of the Armed Forces Gambling Support Network (AFGSN), which provides training, awareness and referral pathways across the Armed Forces community. Members heard that thousands of individuals had received training and that conversations had taken place across the Armed Forces community regarding gambling harms. Witnesses spoke about the importance of preventative work and noted that gambling remains normalised within parts of military culture, which can act as a barrier to recognition and support.

Witnesses with lived experience spoke about their experiences of gambling harms during and after military service. Members heard that gambling behaviours could be embedded within military life, including through social activities such as poker nights, gaming machines and other informal gambling practices. Witnesses also spoke about the absence of targeted support or awareness during service, and the stigma associated with disclosing gambling problems, particularly due to concerns around career progression.

Further lived experience evidence was provided from a Royal Navy perspective. Members heard that gambling was often embedded within social and cultural practices, including during deployments. Witnesses spoke about the role of isolation, access to online gambling, and personal circumstances in contributing to harmful behaviours. They also highlighted missed opportunities for early intervention and the lack of clear support pathways within the military.

Members asked about the available evidence base and whether gambling harms are more prevalent among serving personnel or veterans than in the wider population. Witnesses said that some studies suggest veterans may be between six and ten times more likely to experience gambling harms than the general population. However, they noted that data on serving personnel remains limited, making it difficult to draw firm conclusions.

Members asked about the consistency of support and awareness provision within the military. Witnesses said that support is often inconsistent and can depend on individual leadership. They noted that, without mandatory training and formal policy frameworks, provision can remain uneven and reliant on personal initiative.

Members asked questions regarding:

- The impact of online gambling and increased accessibility
- The role of military culture and environment in shaping behaviours
- The availability and effectiveness of support pathways
- The potential for cross-government working between MOD, DHSC and DCMS
- The need for improved data collection and research

Witnesses said that online gambling has significantly increased the ability to conceal harmful behaviour, particularly in single living accommodation. They also noted that the transition from military to civilian life represents a period of heightened exposure to harm, with financial and personal pressures increasing the risk of gambling-related harm.

Members asked about what further action would be helpful from Government and the MOD. Witnesses spoke about the need for a formal MOD policy on gambling harms, alongside mandatory training across all stages of a military career. They noted that while there is some recognition of the issue within parts of the MOD, a more consistent and structured approach is required.

Witnesses also spoke about the importance of cross-government working, particularly between the MOD, DHSC and DCMS. Members heard that stronger coordination would help ensure gambling harms are addressed not only as a welfare issue, but also as a public health, service readiness and operational effectiveness issue.

Members asked about areas for future research. Witnesses said further work is needed to understand the scale of gambling harms among serving personnel, the impact of online gambling, the role of single living accommodation and isolation, the gendered nature of gambling harms, and the risks associated with transition from military to civilian life. Witnesses also noted that any future policy interventions should be evaluated to understand whether they are effective.

Witnesses collectively noted that stigma, lack of awareness, and inconsistent support structures remain key barriers to addressing gambling harms within the Armed Forces.

At this stage, the discussion was opened to the floor.

Key themes that emerged from the discussion are as follows:

- There is a significant lack of reliable data on gambling harms within the military, limiting understanding of the scale of the issue.
- Gambling behaviours can be embedded within military culture and normalised through social practices.
- Online gambling has increased accessibility and made harmful behaviours easier to conceal.
- Veterans may be at higher risk of gambling-related harm compared to the general population, although evidence remains limited.
- The transition from military to civilian life represents a period of heightened exposure to harm.
- Existing support and awareness provision is inconsistent and often dependent on individual leadership.
- Stigma and fear of career impact can act as barriers to disclosure and seeking help.
- Witnesses supported the introduction of formal MOD policy frameworks and mandatory training.
- Greater cross-government coordination and collaboration is required to address the issue effectively.
- Further research is needed to understand prevalence, risk factors and the effectiveness of interventions.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith MP invited witnesses to submit further written evidence to the Secretariat following the session. He closed by thanking members, witnesses and observers for their contributions and emphasised the importance of continuing to build the evidence base on this issue.

SESSION CONCLUDES