Illegal Betting's Growing UK Foothold: Horse Racing Website Traffic and Channelisation, 2021–2026

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Contents

Executive summary 3
Introduction 3
UK betting regulatory developments since October 2024 3
Regulatory changes: H2 2026 – H1 2027 4
Regulatory impact on the UK's legal and illegal online betting markets 5
The UK Government's Illegal Gambling Taskforce 6
Legal and illegal betting website traffic across the UK: 2021-2026 7
Illegal and legal website visits compared 8
Illegal betting website customer interactions 9
Conclusion 9

Executive summary

- New IFHA Council website traffic analysis of a sample of legal and illegal betting websites popular in the UK which offer horse racing found that the sampled **illegal betting websites saw 19 visits from UK users for every 100 seen by legal websites,** compared with approximately one per 100 in late 2021.
- A sharp increase in **enforcement activity against illegal betting undertaken in the UK since 2024 has not yet shown significant impact**. Since 2024, more than 3,100 cease-and-desist and/or disruption notices have been issued by the UK Gambling Commission, which has also recorded the removal of almost 288,000 URLs. This has coincided with illegal websites accounting for around one in five of the combined monthly unique visitors recorded across sampled legal and illegal betting websites in 2025.
- Between 2022 and 2025, illegal betting website traffic increased fourteenfold while licensed website traffic fell by 34%, with annualised January–December 2026 traffic estimates **forecasted to be more than ten times higher than in 2022**.
- **Illegal betting websites are becoming more competitive, not just more visible.** Since late 2024, UK visitors have spent about one third longer on illegal websites and viewed about one third more pages per visit, while engagement with licensed websites has fallen. Licensed operators still lead on every engagement measure, but the visit-duration gap has more than halved.

Introduction

The IFHA Council on Anti-Illegal Betting and Related Crime's February 2025 Bulletin article highlighted rising UK traffic to unlicensed betting websites offering horse racing. This updated review expands the website dataset to 301 websites – 74 legal and 227 illegal – and combines it with earlier findings to assess traffic from August 2021 to July 2026, comparing illegal betting traffic intensity with that of the legal market.

These website traffic trends provide further evidence of continued growing consumer engagement with illegal betting websites, a problem whose scale remains substantial, with annualised 2026 illegal website traffic still more than ten times 2022 illegal betting website traffic levels despite an anticipated easing from its 2025 peak.

The report's findings support calls for coordinated action against, not just online illegal betting operators, but also the providers of illegal betting advertising and marketing, payments, affiliates and the digital infrastructure that binds the illegal betting ecosystem together. Policymakers should also monitor whether the cumulative effect of regulation influences participation in the licensed market.

UK betting regulatory developments since October 2024

Since the IFHA Council's previous analysis was completed in October 2024, the UK has continued implementing the 2023 Gambling Act Review. Since 28 February 2025, regulated operators have been required to conduct a light-touch financial vulnerability checks when a customer's deposits minus withdrawals exceed £150 within a rolling 30-day period. The check uses public-record information to identify significant indicators of financial difficulty, including

bankruptcy orders, County Court judgments, individual voluntary arrangements and debt relief orders. Operators must consider any findings alongside other information held about the customer and take proportionate action where a risk is identified.[1]

The introduction of a statutory gambling levy followed next on 6 April 2025, and replaced voluntary industry contributions for research, prevention and treatment of gambling-related harm. Levy rates vary by sector and licence type, adding a mandatory new cost to licensed operators while illegal operators make no equivalent contribution.[2]

Compulsory online slots stake limits for licensed operators then took effect in April and May 2025. A £5 maximum per game cycle applied to adults aged 25 and over from 9 April, followed by a £2 limit for 18–24-year-olds from 21 May. Although these limits apply to online slots rather than sports betting, they further differentiate the licensed customer offer from illegal websites, which are not bound by comparable product controls.[3]

The Gambling Commission also introduced further consumer-control and transparency requirements. From 31 October 2025, online operators must prompt customers to set a financial limit before their first deposit, make limits easy to review and amend, and remind customers every six months to review their account and transaction information. Operators holding customer funds without insolvency protection must also issue six-monthly reminders of that status.[4]

In July 2026, the Gambling Commission announced that financial risk assessments would be introduced in stages, beginning with the largest operators and, for most customers, applying when net deposits reach £5,000 within a rolling 24-hour period. The Commission had not yet confirmed when the first stage would take effect. The additional requirements will widen the regulatory and operational gap between licensed and illegal operators, making channelisation an important measure of whether the reforms reduce gambling harm overall.[5]

Regulatory changes: H2 2026 – H1 2027

In July 2026, the Gambling Commission also confirmed that financial risk assessments would be introduced in stages. The first stage will apply only to the largest licensed remote operators[6] and will generally cover customers whose net deposits reach £5,000 within a rolling 24-hour period. However, the Commission has not yet announced when this stage will begin or when the requirements will extend to other operators or lower thresholds.[7]

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[1] UK Gambling Commission (2024), 'LCCP Condition 3.4.4 – Financial vulnerability check', Licence Conditions and Codes of Practice, effective 30 August 2024, with the £150 threshold effective from 28 February 2025, available at: https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/licensees-and-businesses/lccp/condition/3-4-4-financial-vulnerability-check (accessed 18 September 2026)

[2] Gambling Commission, 'Statutory Gambling Levy – Introduction' (22 August 2025) <https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/guidance/statutory-gambling-levy/statutory-levy-introduction> accessed 16 September 2026.

[3] Gambling Commission, 'Online Slots Stake Limit Guidance' (16 June 2025) <https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/licensees-and-businesses/guide/online-slots-stake-limit-guidance> accessed 16 September 2026.

[4] Gambling Commission, 'New Rules Empowering Consumers and Boosting Operator Transparency' (4 February 2025) <https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/news/article/new-rules-empowering-consumers-and-boosting-operator-transparency> accessed 16 September 2026.

[5] UK Gambling Commission (2026), 'Commission to introduce Financial Risk Assessments in staged approach', 7 July, available at: https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/news/article/commission-to-introduce-financial-risk-assessments-in-staged-approach (accessed 18 September 2026)

[6] Licensed remote operators are businesses licensed by the Gambling Commission to provide gambling to consumers in Great Britain online, through mobile apps or via other remote channels such as telephone betting

[7] UK Gambling Commission (2026), 'Financial risk assessments update – July 2026', 7 July, available at: https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/blog/post/financial-risk-assessments-update-july-2026 (accessed 18 September 2026)

From 30 September 2026, licensed remote operators must offer customers a gross deposit limit, give it at least equal prominence to other financial limits and reserve the term "deposit limit" for limits based on gross deposits. Once such a limit is reached, further deposits must be prevented until the relevant period restarts or the customer increases the limit, subject to the existing 24-hour cooling-off period.[8]

From 1 April 2027, a new 25% General Betting Duty rate will apply to most remote betting, increased from 15%. Remote bets on UK horse racing will remain at 15%, reflecting operators' separate contributions to the Horserace Betting Levy. Land-based betting, pool betting, spread betting and bets placed through self-service betting terminals are also excluded from the new remote rate.[9]

The 2023 Gambling Act Review required the Gambling Commission to strengthen its capacity to tackle illegal online gambling, including through additional resources, improved intelligence and data-led identification of unlicensed operators.[10] Since October 2024, the Commission has also developed methods combining web-traffic and gambling-behaviour data to identify illegal websites and prioritise enforcement[11] and has adopted a wider disruption approach targeting not only operators but the businesses that support them, including affiliates, advertisers, search and social-media platforms, payment providers, domain registrars and hosting companies. Its activities include cease-and-desist notices, test purchasing, payment tracing, financial investigation, referrals for search-result removal and cooperation with overseas regulators.[12]

Regulatory impact on the UK's legal and illegal online betting markets

The UK's legal online betting market has moved unevenly since the reforms were enacted. In April–June 2025, total online gross gambling yield rose 2% year-on-year, while real-event betting yield fell 9%, bets 7% and average monthly active accounts 16%.[13] Over the first quarter of 2026, real-event betting yield had recovered 1%, but bet numbers and active accounts remained 8% and 5% lower, respectively.[14] This indicates weaker legal online betting activity although it cannot be proven that market regulation caused this weakness.

[8] UK Gambling Commission (2026), 'RTS upcoming changes', Remote Gambling and Software Technical Standards, effective 30 September 2026, available at: https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/licensees-and-businesses/guide/page/rts-upcoming-changes (accessed 18 September 2026)
[9] HM Revenue & Customs (2025), 'Gambling duty changes', 26 November, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/changes-to-gambling-duties/gambling-duty-changes (accessed 18 September 2026
[10] Department for Culture, Media and Sport, High Stakes: Gambling Reform for the Digital Age, CP 835 (27 April 2023), ch 3, especially ss 3.3–3.4, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/high-stakes-gambling-reform-for-the-digital-age/high-stakes-gambling-reform-for-the-digital-age> accessed 21 October 2026
[11] Gambling Commission, 'Unlicensed gambling – Using data to identify unlicensed operators and estimate the scale of this market – October 2024' (21 October 2024), <https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/statistics-and-research/publication/unlicensed-gambling-using-data-to-identify-unlicensed-operators-and-estimate> accessed 21 October 2026
[12] Gambling Commission, Illegal Online Gambling: Disruption of Illegal Online Gambling (21 October 2025), sections 'Introduction', 'Summary of disruption activity' and 'New tactics coming into use', <https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/report/illegal-online-gambling-disruption-of-illegal-online-gambling/introduction-disruption-of-illegal-online-gambling> accessed 21 October 2026
[13] UK Gambling Commission (2025), 'Market impact data on gambling behaviour – operator data to June 2025', 14 August, available at: https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/news/article/market-impact-data-on-gambling-behaviour-operator-data-to-june-2025 (accessed 18 September 2026)
[14] UK Gambling Commission (2026), 'Market overview – operator data to March 2026', 21 May, available at: https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/statistics-and-research/publication/market-overview-operator-data-to-march-2026-published-may-2026 (accessed 18 September 2026

The effects also vary by product. Despite the new stake limits, online slots yield rose 14% year-on-year over Q2 2025,[15] and 12% in Q1 2026.[16] Legal online demand for such betting products therefore remained strong although the published figures do not isolate the effect of the limits from wider market changes.

The statutory levy provides substantially more predictable funding for research, prevention and treatment of gambling-related harm. GambleAware received £49.5 million in voluntary industry donations in 2023–24[17] while the first statutory levy collection in H2 2025 raised just under £120 million – around 2.4 times that amount.[18] While this is not a like-for-like comparison,[19] it nevertheless indicates the scale of the additional cost now borne by licensed operators, while illegal operators make no equivalent contribution.

Financial vulnerability checks also create an additional compliance burden for licensed remote operators. They must screen customers whose deposits minus withdrawals exceed £150 within a rolling 30-day period, assess any indicators of financial difficulty alongside other information held about the customer and take proportionate action where risk is identified.[20] This requires licensed operators to fund screening systems, review results and manage customer interventions,[21] while illegal websites face none of these costs or controls.

The Commission has also significantly expanded its response to illegal betting. Since April 2024, it has issued more than 3,100 cease-and-desist or disruption notices, referred over 447,000 URLs to Google and Bing and recorded the removal of almost 288,000 URLs,[22] and is also researching who uses illegal websites, how they find them and why through web-traffic monitoring, consumer surveys and expert engagement. It is using this evidence to identify priority audiences and considering a targeted campaign to help consumers recognise illegal websites and understand the risks.

The UK Government's Illegal Gambling Taskforce

This evidence feeds into the UK Government's Department for Culture, Media and Sports (DCMS)-led Illegal Gambling Taskforce,[23] which was established in May 2026 and brings together gambling bodies, law enforcement agencies, government departments, regulators,

[15] UK Gambling Commission (2025), 'Market overview – operator data to June 2025', 14 August, available at: https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/statistics-and-research/publication/market-overview-operator-data-to-june-2025-published-august-2025 (accessed 18 September 2026)
[16] UK Gambling Commission (2026), 'Market overview – operator data to March 2026', 21 May, available at: https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/statistics-and-research/publication/market-overview-operator-data-to-march-2026-published-may-2026 (accessed 18 September 2026
[17] GambleAware, Annual Report and Financial Statements for the Year Ended 31 March 2024 (2024), pp 13 and 23, <https://www.gambleaware.org/media/u05llcxr/gambleaware-annual-report-2024-final-v5-signed.pdf> accessed 21 October 2026
[18] Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2026), 'Statutory gambling levy', updated 26 March, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/statutory-gambling-levy (accessed 18 September 2026)
[19] the earlier figure covers donations received by GambleAware, whereas operators could also contribute to other approved organisations; the levy figure covers mandatory payments across all licensed gambling activity.
[20] UK Gambling Commission (2024), 'LCCP Condition 3.4.4 – Financial vulnerability check', Licence Conditions and Codes of Practice, in force from 30 August 2024, with the £150 threshold effective from 28 February 2025, available at: https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/licensees-and-businesses/lccp/condition/3-4-4-financial-vulnerability-check (accessed 18 September 2026)
[21] UK Gambling Commission (2026), 'Financial vulnerability checks: Insights from implementation', 14 May, available at: https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/blog/post/financial-vulnerability-checks-insights-from-implementation (accessed 18 September 2026)
[22] Gambling Commission, 'Illegal Online Gambling: Disruption of Illegal Online Gambling – Summary of Disruption Activity' (21 October 2025, updated 12 March 2026) <https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/report/illegal-online-gambling-disruption-of-illegal-online-gambling/summary-of-disruption-activity-disruption-of-illegal-online-gambling> accessed 16 September 2026.
[23] Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 'Illegal Gambling Taskforce – Terms of Reference' (13 May 2026), <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/illegal-gambling-taskforce-terms-of-reference> accessed 21 October 2026

technology platforms and payment providers. Its work is organised around three priorities: restricting payments to and from illegal operators; tackling online advertising for illegal gambling; and improving cross-agency enforcement against remote and land-based activity.

Separately, the DCMS consulted in July 2026 on legislation that would prohibit operators without a Gambling Commission licence from entering sponsorship or advertising arrangements in Great Britain, including sponsorship of sports clubs, competitions, venues and events.[24]

In conclusion, the Gambling Commission has recognised that illegal betting cannot be eliminated entirely and instead aims to make Great Britain difficult for unlicensed operators to serve at scale.[25] This report assesses progress against that objective by examining whether illegal operators are becoming less visible and competitive relative to the licensed market. As the analysis shows, the overall direction of travel remains concerning, with illegal websites now attracting a substantially larger and a more engaged audience than five years ago.

Legal and illegal betting website traffic across the UK: 2021-2026

UK customer traffic to illegal betting websites has grown exponentially over the five-year period from August 2021 to July 2026. Taking only full years into account, between 2022 and 2025, illegal betting website traffic grew a compounded 141% year-on-year while legal website traffic declined by 13% year-on-year.

Period	Legal websites: sum of monthly unique visitors[26]	Illegal websites: sum of monthly unique visitors[28]
Aug–Dec 2021	50,548	492
2022	143,839	1,790
2023	184,764	4,477
2024	160,277	13,359
2025	94,576	25,134
Jan–Jul 2026	56,870	11,009

Table 1: Sum of monthly unique visitors from UK internet protocol addresses to legal and illegal horse racing betting websites, 2021–2026

Several factors may have supported growing customer preference for illegal betting websites, including increased affiliate promotion, enhanced search and social media visibility, the offering of alternative payment channels as well as the increasing use of technology to reduce customer touch-point frictions. On the flip side, declining legal website traffic was possibly caused by tighter checks and account controls as outlined in the previous section of this report, although the available data cannot establish this relationship statistically.

A simple annualisation of the January-July 2026 website traffic figures[27] results in 2026 end-year figures of 97.5 million legal visits and 18.9 million illegal visits, meaning that full-year

[24] Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2026), 'Consultation on banning unlicensed gambling sponsorship', 15 July, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-on-banning-unlicensed-gambling-sponsorship/consultation-on-banning-unlicensed-gambling-sponsorship (accessed 18 September 2026)
[25] UK Gambling Commission (2025), 'Challenges of estimating the size of the illegal gambling market – Executive summary', 6 November, available at: https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/report/illegal-online-gambling-challenges-of-estimating-the-size-of-the-illegal/executive-summary-challenges-of-estimating-the-size-of-the-illegal-gambling (accessed 18 September 2026)
[26] Rounded to the nearest thousand
[27] Calculated by dividing 2026 YTD figures by 12/7

2026 legal website traffic will remain close to 2025 levels while illegal traffic would still be below its 2025 peak, but still more than ten times its 2022 total. This 2026 decline in illegal website traffic could be a result of the Gambling Commission's enforcement and disruption campaign but could also equally reflect changes in search visibility, domain migration, sporting-event timing or ordinary volatility.

Illegal and legal website visits compared

Raw website traffic figures are useful, but they do not provide a single, readily understood picture of the changing balance between legal and illegal website traffic growth in the UK. Legal website traffic is also much larger in absolute terms, which can make substantial growth in illegal traffic appear less significant than it is.

This segment of the report therefore examines illegal website traffic as the number of visits recorded for every 100 visits to legal betting websites. This follows the established benchmarking practice of comparing website performance against a consistent reference point and expressing traffic on a common scale.[28] It allows the relative position of illegal websites to be tracked directly over time, while also permitting periods of different lengths to be compared because the legal and illegal figures cover the same months.

Period	Illegal website visits per 100 legal website visits[29]
Aug–Dec 2021	1.0
2022	1.2
2023	2.4
2024	8.3
2025	26.6
Jan–Jul 2026	19.4

Table 2: Annual relative illegal website traffic intensity compared with legal betting websites

The findings from this analysis reinforce earlier findings – that customers are increasingly migrating to illegal online betting channels. Illegal website traffic rose from one visit per 100 legal visits in August–December 2021 to 26.6 in 2025, before easing to 19.4 in January–July 2026. Legal operator website visits remain dominant but illegal websites are now attracting a sizeable share of betting-related attention which was barely visible at the start of the assessment period.

Over 2024 and 2025, illegal website visits rose from 8.3 to 26.6, showing that illegal alternatives were reaching a much larger audience relative to licensed websites in 2025 when compared to 2021. This intensity has waned somewhat over the first seven months of 2026 but remains meaningfully higher than any other year over the assessment period.

This is not a conventional measure of market share or channelisation as it does not capture stakes, expenditure, customer accounts or movement by individual bettors between operators. It is a relative website traffic measure, chosen because website activity is what the underlying data can directly and consistently observe.

[28] Similarweb, 'Benchmark Against Your Competitors', Similarweb Knowledge Center <https://support.similarweb.com/hc/en-us/articles/4406846547217-Benchmark-Against-Your-Competitors> accessed 21 October 2026.
[29] Rounded to the nearest decimal point

Illegal betting website customer interactions

Illegal betting websites are not only attracting more visitors – those visitors are also engaging with them more deeply. They are spending longer on illegal websites, viewing more pages and becoming less likely to leave after viewing only one page. Legal websites still perform better across each measure, but the gap is narrowing, suggesting that illegal websites are becoming more competitive with the licensed market.

Table 3 compares how visitors engaged with legal and illegal websites between October 2024 to July 2026.[30] Mean visit duration records the average time a visitor spends on a website; pages per visit records the average number of pages viewed each visit; and bounce rate is the share of visits ending after a single page. Generally, longer visits, more pages viewed, and a lower bounce rate generally indicate deeper customer interaction with a website.

Measure	Segment	Oct–Dec 2024	Jan–Dec 2025	Jan–Jul 2026
Mean visit duration	Legal	11:18	10:52	9:57
	Illegal	5:38	6:55	7:25
Pages per visit	Legal	7.75	7.99	7.66
	Illegal	5.19	6.79	6.98
Bounce rate	Legal	32.4%	31.9%	30.6%
	Illegal	52.7%	46.9%	48.9%

Table 3: Customer engagement with legal and illegal horse racing betting websites, October 2024–July 2026

Legal websites still recorded longer visits, more pages per visit and lower bounce rates over all three periods. However, the gaps between legal and illegal website customer interaction narrowed across all three measures. From late 2024 to July 2026, average illegal website visit duration rose by 1 minute 47 seconds and pages per visit by 34%, while legal website visit durations and pages-per-visit both dropped. Meanwhile, both legal and illegal website bounce rates dropped, but illegal website bounce rates dropped by more (3.8%) compared to legal (1.8%).

Average time spent per webpage, by illegal as well as legal website customers, can also be calculated from this table. The average time spent per webpage for legal website visitors dropped from 1 minute 27 seconds in 2024 to 1 minute 18 seconds in 2026, suggesting, overall, a growing familiarity with website layouts and website design, while, over the same period, illegal website visitors' average time spent per webpage stayed between 1 and 1.05 minute per page, possibly indicating that illegal betting customers are more experienced online bettors compared to their legal counterparts, and that there exists a floor of webpage time of around 1 minute per webpage.

Conclusion

The Gambling Commission aims to make Great Britain difficult for unlicensed operators to serve at scale. Judging by UK betting website traffic analysed in this report, that aim has not yet been met: illegal websites reach a far larger audience than in 2021, hold audiences for longer, and have done so despite a marked increase in enforcement. Four findings support this conclusion.

[30] No betting website interaction metrics were tracked in the Council's earlier analysis

Illegal betting traffic in the UK continues to grow. This updated report shows that illegal traffic intensity continued to grow between 2022 and 2025, with annualised 2026 illegal betting traffic shaping up to still be over 40% higher than 2024 website traffic metrics and more than 10 times higher than 2022.

During 2023 and 2024, illegal traffic surged as licensed traffic fell. Between 2023 and 2024, illegal website visits almost tripled while licensed visits declined by over 10%, potentially reflecting stronger illegal-site promotion and visibility, alternative payments and fewer customer checks, alongside tighter controls in the regulated market.

Illegal websites are competing more effectively for customers. Visitors are spending longer and viewing more pages on illegal websites while engaging less with licensed ones. Licensed operators retain an advantage, but it is narrowing quickly.

Enforcement activity is not yet enforcement success. Notices issued and URLs removed have risen sharply without a sustained fall in illegal traffic. The Commission's expanded disruption work, the creation of the government-led anti-illegal gambling taskforce and the proposed ban on unlicensed sponsorship are necessary steps, but their success should be judged by lasting reductions in traffic, replacement domains, search visibility and access to payments.

The risk to British racing is direct and growing. Illegal operators trade on British racing while contributing nothing to the Horserace Betting Levy, offering no consumer protection and taking no part in the sharing of suspicious betting information. Although racing bets will remain subject to the 15% duty rate, the increase to 25% for most other remote betting may indirectly reduce legal racing turnover as multi-sport bettors move their overall activity offshore, taking their racing bets with them. The phased introduction of financial risk assessments could add to this pressure and therefore, betting market channelisation should be treated as a core measure of the risk to racing's funding and integrity.

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