



Best-in-class venue for entertainment

Richard Noble Chief Operating Officer at Aspers Group Limited chats to Damien Connelly



Mark Dolan (tv personality) alongside our lucky online winner and The Stig

gambling environment. Our approach has always been based on a high footfall, low spend model. Our venues are based on international standards, with quality restaurants, popular bars, large capacity poker tournament zones, community spaces and the latest gaming products.

Increased regulatory requirements have had an impact on all gambling companies but we have risen to the challenge, implemented the required changes, and still have an impressive overall group performance.

When one thinks 'land-based casino' one tends not to think of so many female customers and quite as high a percentage of Aspers' management being women. Has that always been the case?

It has been the case in the past simply because gambling has traditionally been a male-dominated industry and it has been difficult to attract enough women into senior management positions.

It is an issue that we have sought to address and there are already a significant number of women within the management team – General Manager of Stratford, Head of Regulatory Compliance and Audit, Head of Marketing, HR Managers in each of our properties, the Head of Electronic Gaming and the Head of Catering for the Stratford property, and many others.

Thank you for sharing your time and experience with us, Richard. Aspers Group can trace its roots to the creation of legal casinos in the UK in the early 1960s. How is the company performing today?

The whole UK gambling industry is facing unprecedented challenges. Consumer confidence is at all time low, high-profile regulatory action against some operators has been well publicised, several politicians have been outspoken about the industry and there has been a media frenzy of anti-gambling stories.

Despite these challenges, Aspers continue to do what we do best – delighting our guests on every visit in a safe



Fortunately, as the industry continues to evolve the demographics are changing and as more women become guests, we are seeing a corresponding increase in the number prepared to take on more senior management positions.

Aspers Group currently operates four casinos in the UK — two casinos under the 1968 Act and two under the 2005 Act. What’s the difference between a 1968 and a 2005 casino?

To deliver the right balance between entertainment and gambling, and to grow a sustainable business, it is important that a property offers a variety of leisure and gambling products. Our venues in Stratford and Milton Keynes, both 2005 Act Large Licence Casinos, are able to offer this. From bingo to sports betting, from afternoon teas to social events for our slots club players and from comedy nights to weekend DJs, we are meeting the needs of our guests. The variety of entertainment and mixture of popular gaming product gives them a reason to return week after week. We also offer a similar leisure offering in our 1968 Act casinos, however with bingo and sports betting not permitted and limited slot numbers, the overall offering is less appealing.

That means there are three classifications for a land-based casino in the UK. Doesn’t that create confusion?

In our management meetings, I constantly ask the team to look at the business ‘through the eyes of our guests’. They are visiting us to be entertained and have a level of expectation that we need to exceed. Guests do not understand the different classification of land-based casinos. When they visit a casino, they expect to find a safe and friendly environment, quality restaurants, great guest service, and gambling product at the correct price point for their needs. Currently 1968 Act casinos can only have 20 slot machines, 2005 Act casinos can have up to 80 slot machines for a Small Licence and up to 150 slot machines for a Large Licence, so the variety of product differs significantly between venues – our guests do not understand this and are often disappointed when their favourite machines are not available. Aspers opened the first 2005 Act casino at Westfield Stratford City eight years ago, so we have been operating different classifications of licenses for some time. I believe it’s time for Government to consider harmonising the 1968 and 2005 Act licences.

UK casino managers are highly regarded even though British casinos themselves are quite small by



international standards. Is Aspers Group focused on the UK only?

We are currently only focussed on the UK, both with our four land-based properties and our online casino which launched in 2017. We have ambitions to grow our portfolio and are open to looking for new opportunities both inside and outside the UK.

We have a remarkable team of dedicated managers from many disciplines including hospitality, security, guest services and of course gaming. Although UK land-based casinos are generally smaller than some international venues, the UK still offers a number of larger footfall venues. Aspers Westfield Stratford City sits above the busiest shopping mall in Europe and welcomes over 4,000 guests a day.

Benchmarking Westfield from my recent visits and observations, I’d say Aspers’ sweet spot is mass market — high volume, low spend per visit. What defines the success of Westfield?

Westfield Stratford City retail is itself a destination venue with incredible transport links, drawing from a far-reaching catchment area. Our casino benefits from this

reach. We have the largest casino in the UK located in the largest shopping mall in Europe. Since opening our first casino in Newcastle in 2005, our strategy has always been to run high footfall, low spend, ‘mass market’ venues. Aspers Westfield Stratford City has the right location, and the ability to offer the right balance of hospitality and gambling product to deliver on this strategy.

I was very impressed with the live tables area in Aspers Westfield. Some European countries have 5% live tables revenues, other countries have 65% live tables revenues. What split is more common in UK casinos?

There are several different types of UK casinos, from 1968 Act to 2005 Act licensed casinos, from London to regional casinos, and then within London there are also the high-end operations. Aspers Westfield Stratford City operates an extensive live table gaming operation with 60 tables generating approximately half of all revenues.

Las Vegas generates most of its revenues from non-gaming activities. Is non-gaming important to Aspers’ properties?

With the largest of the properties being based within a growing postcode, E20, and with the proliferation of such



a younger, professional market into the area, the focus on the non-gaming / leisure element of our casino is at the forefront of our positioning hence forward.

Reinvestment within the non-gaming areas of the casinos is critical to our pathway forward, opening ourselves to a broader demographic including a more millennial clientele by providing a balanced offering.

What explains Aspers' success?

Having two large licences has been the foundation of our success, entailing a greater footprint of a true casino floor. Having said that our colleagues at each of our sites are the real blueprint to our success, they encapsulate the mantra of a best in class service and experience for each of our visiting guests.

We provide ongoing training and succession programmes for our teams and additionally offer a valuable rewards and recognition programme. We aim to be the first choice in casinos within the industry. We recently won four awards in this year's British Casino Awards (Winners of Best UK Customer Service, Best UK Marketing Programme, Corporate Training Investment Award and Corporate Community Engagement Award) which demonstrates that we are leading the way in the industry.



How is Aspers Southampton progressing?

We have acquired the licence and we will move forward when the timing is right and share our plans at that point.

Does Aspers Group research each property's contribution to their local economies?

We made a firm commitment to contribute to the local economies as part of our bid process for our Stratford and Milton Keynes licenses. However, we pride ourselves on being part of the communities in all the locations we operate in. We endeavour to recruit locally, local jobs for local people. We have strong links with local colleges to provide training. Where possible we use local suppliers.

We also support a variety of causes; for example we have set up the Aspers Good Causes Fund in Stratford where we donate £100,000 to local initiatives; we have currently donated £800,000 to worthy causes of which we are very proud. In addition, all of our casinos contribute to local initiatives in their marketplace, supporting local groups. We also support the Aspinall Foundation (our overarching charity) and CHIPS which is the industry charity of choice.

We also founded an organisation called CARG (Community Action for Responsible Gambling) which



seeks to constructively address problem gambling issues in the community. It is a voluntary, not for profit group, a working partnership between local community based interest groups, designed to facilitate discussion, increasing knowledge and reduce the risks of problem gambling.

When Aspers Southampton opens, Aspers Group will operate three of the eight 2005 large casinos allowed in the UK. From your experience operating both, do 2005 casinos generate the same levels of local economic contributions as 1968 casinos?

As the scale of a 2005 Act casino is naturally larger than a 1968 Act casino, the number of employees, number of guests and level of revenue is higher, which in turn generates more benefit for the local communities.

In addition, both Aspers Westfield Stratford City and The Casino MK have revenue sharing agreements with their respective local authorities.

Our first question focused on the past and the present. As we close our interview, what are your hopes and aims for the future?

The UK gambling industry is facing unprecedented challenges. It is crucial that the whole industry works together to address these issues. Now is not the time to point the finger at different sectors, but rather work together to demonstrate that we are an industry that puts the customer at the heart of all our decision making.

Aspers positions itself as entertainment destinations and everyone's first choice of casinos. We will continue to work closely with the local communities in the market places where our casinos are based and deliver a premium level of service and experience for our guests within each of our sites.

The overall gambling industry is being seriously questioned in the UK as you noted in your Open Letter to the Secretary of State published October 2016. Levels of trust and confidence have been negatively impacted by FOBTs. A re-cent discussion by UK politicians, recorded by Hansard, highlighted business activities by online gambling operators that are neither responsible nor sus-tainable. As a Responsible Gambling operator with an omni-channel presence, do the actions of such 'less good actors' concern you?

We need to work together as an industry. At Aspers, we uphold a high standard of service to ensure a safe, fair, legal and caring experience that protects our colleagues and guests.

