William Hill to pay record £19 million penalty for social responsibility failings

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illiam Hill will pay a record £19.2 million penalty for “widespread and alarming” social responsibility and anti-money laundering failures, as the Gambling Commission said it seriously considered suspending the betting firm’s licence.

The “settlement” is the largest in the Gambling Commission’s history, overtaking a £17.1 million payment made by Entain last year. The watchdog said it gave “serious consideration” to the prospect of suspending William Hill’s licence before settling for a financial penalty instead.

The payment comes as the Government prepares to release a white paper on gambling reform, which has been repeatedly pushed back.

Since the start of 2022, while the white paper was delayed, the Gambling Commission has handed out 26 fines or penalties worth a combined £76 million. Each of the UK’s top listed operators has had to pay a penalty since the Government review began.

The penalty is split into three payments. William Hill’s online business will pay £12.5 million. Sub-brand Mr Green – which boasts of having won eight different industry safer gambling awards and said it put safer gambling “at the forefront of all our marketing activities” – will pay £3.7 million. The firm’s retail arm, which runs 1,344 betting shops, will pay £3 million.

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All three businesses are owned by 888 Holdings, which paid £1.95 billion to acquire William Hill's non-US business last year. The price had initially been £2.2 billion, but was negotiated down because of the impending penalty. At the time, the company put aside £15 million to cover the eventual penalty.

Matt Zarb-Cousin, reform campaigner and director of gambling blocking software company Gamban, said fines are often treated as the "cost of doing business" rather than prompting change.

"People are fed up of seeing these failures time and again: in a cycle of fines getting paid as a cost of doing business and then the harm continuing," he said.

"This sector makes the vast majority of its profit from people addicted or at-risk, it cannot be trusted to self regulate. Stronger affordability rules and sanctions are needed in the forthcoming gambling White Paper to prevent these harms occurring."

Gambling Commission chief executive Andrew Rhodes said: "When we launched this investigation the failings we uncovered were so widespread and alarming serious consideration was given to licence suspension.

"However, because the operator immediately recognised their failings and worked with us to swiftly implement improvements, we instead opted for the largest enforcement payment in our history.”

William Hill allowed one customer to open a new account and spend £23,000 in 20 minutes. Another set up their account and spent £18,000 in 24 hours, while a third spent £32,500 over two days – all without any checks.

Ineffective controls allowed 331 customers to gamble with William Hill Online despite having self-excluded with Mr Green.

Anti-money laundering (AML) failures included allowing customers to deposit large amounts without conducting appropriate checks. One customer was able to spend and lose £70,134 in a month, another to lose £38,000 in five weeks and another to lose £36,000 in four days.

A spokesperson for William Hill owner 888 pointed out that the failings had happened under previous ownership.

“The settlement relates to the period when William Hill was under the previous ownership and management,” a spokesperson said. “After William Hill was acquired, the company quickly addressed the identified issues with the implementation of a rigorous action plan.

“The entire group shares the Gambling Commission’s commitment to improve compliance standards across the industry and we will continue to work collaboratively with the regulator and other stakeholders to achieve this.”