

William Hill places levy feud above terminal danger

William Hill's new chief executive shrugged off government warnings about the addictive nature of lucrative betting terminals, calling instead for ministers to broker the bookmakers' feud over levy contributions with the racing industry.

Ralph Topping, the one-time „Saturday boy“ elevated last week to the top job, said the Gambling Commission had studied the impact of new gaming technology such as fixed-odds betting terminals and found no rise in problem gambling.

Shares in William Hill and Ladbrokes dipped last week after Gerry Sutcliffe, sports minister, asked the commission to look at the risks associated with high-stakes machines, such as the fixed-odds terminals.

Mr Topping said: „If the minister feels he wants to reach an understanding on any problems with these machines, fine. But the commission is pragmatic and we are working with them well.“

William Hill is being sued for alleged negligence by customer Graham Calvert who claims the bookmaker failed to prevent his losing more than GBP 2m despite his efforts to stop the company accepting his bets. Yesterday the greyhound trainer and self-confessed „pathological gambler“ was given permission also to claim personal injury compensation.

The company said its 8,382 machines performed strongly in 2007, with gross win increasing 15 per cent, helping the retail business to expand 2 per cent to GBP 229.8m in a 52-week period.

Group profits before interest and exceptionals fell 2 per cent

to GBP 286.7m. After exceptionals and interest, pre-tax profits were GBP 209.2m (GBP 235.4m) – hit by machine tax and the absence of a big football tournament. The shares rose 11,25p to 413,5p.