

Bingo halls chiefs gamble on 'casino'

Three large Birmingham bingo halls may be trying to use loopholes in the law to turn themselves into "mini-casinos" filled with gambling machines.

Gala Bingo is trying to "artificially split" the Stockland Green, Rubery and Kingsbury Road, Erdington clubs, which would allow them to cram in more machines.

The firm announced the closure of their Great Barr club this week and they will hear if the application to Birmingham City Council is successful on Tuesday.

There is strangely no mention of bingo in the application, which will be a worry for bingo players who have been told that all clubs are struggling to survive because of the smoking ban, increased taxation and the ban on high paying gaming machines.

The city council's licensing committee will give an answer to Gala on Tuesday, but representations from the council's licensing service accuse the company of trying to "circumvent the rules governing the maximum number of gaming machines".

The report added that by applying for four different licences in the one building it could not reasonably be regarded as having four different premises.

It added: "The premises would appear to be one composite whole divided up into four different areas.

"Facilities for the playing of bingo are not shown on the plans that form part of the application. Without such facilities the applicant could not be offering the principal activity for which they are applying and simply separating the

premises artificially to enable them to offer the maximum number of machines, but without being able to comply with the terms of their licence.”

The council is also expected to refer to new guidance from the Gambling Commission, which was only released in March.

A letter to local authorities said: “We are aware that some operators may be considering applying for licences, even though they do not intend to provide the primary activity the licence is intended to authorise.

“Bingo premises should not be making gaming machines available for use without also offering facilities for playing bingo. The operator must provide facilities for the playing of bingo in order to enjoy the machine entitlement.”

The company, which is mainly owned by private equity firms Candover, Cinven and Permira, blamed the smoking ban, increased taxation and the new law banning £500 jackpot machines on the Great Barr closure.

Bingo is one of the UK’s most popular leisure activities with more than 8.5 million people playing and 17,000 people employed in the industry.