

# Three towns fight for right to be casino capital of NW

Three towns are locked in a race to be the „casino capital“ of Merseyside and North Cheshire – offering gamblers a Las Vegas-style 150 slot machines.

Southport, Warrington and St Helens have all told the Government they are interested in securing one of a limited number of money-spinning licences for a so-called „large“ casino.

But Liverpool, once tipped to be home to a much bigger „super-casino“ at Kings Dock, has now opted out of the race altogether.

A city council spokesman said: „Our view is that we do not think one of these larger casinos is appropriate for the city, so we will not be applying for one of the licences.“

Sefton, Warrington and St Helens are among 30 authorities that have put in „expressions of interest“ to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

Those 30 are competing for eight licences for a „large“ casino, with up to 150 gaming machines, or a further eight licences for a „small“ casino, with a maximum of 80.

But it is likely only one of Sefton, Warrington and St Helens will succeed, because the Government is insisting on a „good geographical spread“.

Both large and small casinos will be allowed to invite a major bookmaker to set up inside, an extra attraction outlawed in existing casinos.

The larger facilities can also run bingo games. However, the maximum jackpot offered by the slot machines will remain the

same at GBP 4,000.

Sefton Council is believed to be eager to attract a casino operator to Southport, as part of GBP 4m plans to transform the town centre, although it insists there is no specific proposal.

Similarly, both Warrington and St Helens have no particular location lined up, although one obvious contender in St Helens is the site of the planned new rugby league stadium.

The authority had ambitious plans for a GBP 100m leisure park on the former United Glass site, which would have included a „super“ casino, offering 1,250 slot machines.

That plan was scuppered by a Commons revolt which forced the Government to allow only one so-called „regional“ casino, likely to be in either London or Blackpool.

The restriction also killed off plans for a regional casino at Kings Dock, which had been fought by some MPs because of fears for the future of local businesses.

If Sefton, Warrington and St Helens wish to stay in the race they must turn their expressions of interest into firm applications before March 31.