

Odds improve on Norfolk super casino

Stakes were yesterday raised on a super casino coming to Norfolk after the minister responsible for the number of licences reportedly said he wanted more.

As it stands, Yarmouth is almost certain to miss out on a regional casino featuring up to 1250 slot machines, with only one pilot licence available and Blackpool the firm frontrunner.

That became the situation on the eve of the general election when a Tory and media-led campaign forced the Government to back down on proposals for eight.

But this weekend, sports and gambling minister Richard Caborn indicated via the Guardian that he wanted the number of licences put back to eight before a final decision was made this spring on who wins.

It follows a debate last week in Parliament in which successive Labour backbenchers called on Mr Caborn to up the number of licences awarded.

Yarmouth MP Tony Wright told the debate there was no evidence it would turn more people to gambling in the town.

He said: "I urge the minister not to be the political croupier stopping this, but to share the chips around across the country rather than give them to one player on the board."

Yesterday, the recent moves were welcomed by Yarmouth Borough Council officials, who have been lobbying MPs hard since last year.

Leader of the council Barry Coleman said: „If Mr Caborn is now floating the idea of upping the licences in the national

media, that's news to me – but very welcome news.“

„If the number is put back to eight, one is almost certain to come to the eastern region, which will mean a battle between us and Southend.“

Mr Coleman said the council was lobbying “intensively” behind the scenes to secure backing from the East of England Regional Assembly.

It is helped by having concrete proposals for a casino next to the Pleasure Beach, supported by the Hilton hotel group and a major UK developer.

But Yarmouth has been hindered by the East of England Development Agency coming out in support of Southend.

Mr Caborn did not speak directly to the Guardian, but in comments likely to have been authorised by him, chief executive of casino-owner Rank Group Mike Smith said the minister had privately told him he wanted eight casinos.