

Chips are down for casino bids

Swindon has entered the race to become home to one of the country's new breed of casinos.

The council has formally submitted proposals to introduce slot machines, poker and roulette tables on an unprecedented scale.

Town leaders have applied for permission for a 1,500 square-metre casino with up to 80 gambling machines.

The machines would pay a maximum jackpot of GBP 4,000.

The Government's Casino Advisory Panel revealed that Swindon Council is one of 41 local authorities in the running for one of 16 new casinos to be licensed nationally.

Swindon has applied to the Government for a so-called „small casino“ although it would still be much larger than current gambling centres.

Under the controversial Gambling Act, it would also be allowed to set up a bookmaker inside. However, no site has yet been put forward.

Other councils including Bath and North East Somerset are applying for a second category of „large“ casinos, which would allow developments of up to 5,000 square metres with 150 machines.

There will also be a single Las Vegas-style regional super casino, which the Government has pledged to introduce on a trial basis after a massive outcry by anti-gambling campaigners.

Twenty-seven more local authorities have applied for a regional casino with unlimited jackpots- in their area.

Blackpool and London are regarded as the front-runners.

A Swindon Council spokesman said it was hoped a casino would boost economic growth in the town.

He said: „From our perspective it could be a key driver of regeneration.

„It is not just the casino, there could be other things which could come with it like a hotel, conferencing facilities.

„It’s not just a shed where people are gambling.

„Obviously, in the first instance this is just about getting permission to do this. Operators would have to come forward with proposals.“

But the application appears to have split Swindon councillors.

Coun Nick Martin, lead member for resources, (Con, Shaw and Nine Elms) said he didn’t even know a formal application had been made and has branded the plans „morally wrong“.

He said: „Clearly it hasn’t been debated in full council and I would have thought it should have been.

„People may think they raise the economic benefits of an area. That may be the case with the Las Vegas strip, but if you look at the area surrounding the strip it is pretty down-to-heel.“

Prof Stephen Crow, chairman of the Casino Advisory Panel, said the initial sifting of the applications would take up to two months.

He said: „These proposals represent a lot of hard work by the people that have prepared them, and, very often, a lot of difficult decision making also. They all deserve nothing less than fair and thorough examination.“

Prof Crow said that the panel would be making no more comments until the evaluation process was complete and selected

proposals go forward to a further examination over the summer.