

Casino owners in pre-deadline UK licence rush

Dublin (Reuters) – British casino owners have rushed through 41 applications this week to open new venues before tight new government restrictions come in tonight.

„At the moment we have 62 under consideration, of which 41 were received this week,“ said a Gambling Commission spokeswoman, adding that the numbers were correct at 1630 GMT on Friday, but could rise as new applications arrive by courier.

The figures are keenly awaited by investors who want insight into whether future casino demand will balance supply, with some analysts predicting a possible glut of new venues.

After today, only 17 licences will be available for a new wave of British casino and leisure venues, one of which will be a Las Vegas-style supercasino.

But until midnight on Friday, owners of Britain’s 140 casinos have been free to apply for new licences under the 1968 laws, which the government overhauled this year with a new gaming act.

„We have seen a real upturn in the number of applications for operating licences under the old (1968) Act,“ Gambling Commission Chief Executive Jenny Williams said.

The commission said as well as the 62 applications under consideration, there were 31 that had been granted licences but still await approval by local magistrates courts.

In addition, 26 applications have been approved at both levels but are not yet operating, giving a maximum potential increase of 119.

This compares with the 20 that opened between March 2001 and March 2005.

Long way to go

„Even if all these applicants receive an operating licence from us – which is not certain – they will still require a premises licence from the local magistrates courts,“ Williams said.

The Commission said local courts would judge demand for new casinos as well as the suitability of their locations.

„Recent examples of two applications in Edinburgh and one in Middlesbrough being turned down suggest this may not be easy,“ Williams added.

Casino operator Stanley Leisure said on Friday it had five new licence applications in the pipeline for casinos in the provinces, and three applications for relocating casinos in London, Edinburgh and Southampton.

London Clubs Chief Executive Bill Timmins told Reuters he had one application in the pipeline, and new, approved projects underway in Glasgow, Manchester, Nottingham, Leeds, Blackpool and London's Leicester Square.

Williams said local authorities had the power to prevent casino expansion in their area.

„They can, for example, issue a blanket resolution banning all future casinos in their area,“ she said.