

Casino groups bet on legal challenge

Britain's leading casino operators have hired City solicitors Herbert Smith to launch a legal fight to help them compete with the 17 new casinos announced by the government last week, writes Matthew Goodman.

The British Casino Association, a trade body, has brought in the firm to examine the possibility of a judicial review of a move it says creates unfair competition.

The 17 proposed casinos, including Britain's first Las Vegas-style super-casino, will be free to offer far more slot machines and gaming tables than existing casinos, which operate under the 1968 Gaming Act.

The government has ruled that the country's 138 existing casinos will not be allowed to operate more machines and tables than at present, and it is this diktat that the association wants to challenge.

"We are taking advice on a challenge on competition grounds," said an industry source. "No decision on whether to go ahead has been taken."

Last week, the BCA expressed concern that 11 of the new casinos will be in areas where its members already run gaming operations. It decried the government's lack of "intellectual coherence" and said the deregulation created a "dichotomy".

The main operators in the UK are Rank, Gala, Stanley Leisure and London Clubs International. The latter two are foreign-owned. Despite their worries about unfair competition, they all intend to apply for a majority of the new licences created by the government.

Gaming group 888 Holdings and Rileys, the snooker-club chain,

are teaming up to launch a series of online and face-to-face poker tournaments. They have signed a three-year agreement under which 888 will develop a Rileyspoker.com website and help to launch a series of live poker games at Rileys venues. These will include a national tournament shown on television.

Internet firm 888 sees the partnership as a way of growing its customer base as it comes to terms with a ban on internet gaming in America, which had been its largest market.