

Minister warns against problem gambling rise

Any increase in problem gambling in Britain would be unacceptable, a government minister said on Tuesday in comments reflecting Labour worries that new liberalising laws could erode support for Gordon Brown.

Gerry Sutcliffe, the minister for sport with responsibility for gambling, said officials would be closely studying an imminent report from the industry regulator on the prevalence of gambling.

Asked whether any rise in problem – or addictive – gambling was unacceptable, Mr Sutcliffe said in a BBC interview: “It would be to me. We would have to monitor what would happen.”

He said the government and the Gambling Commission had procedures in place to monitor problem gambling, and if gaming companies were not abiding by their licences, “their licences can be removed”. Most industry observers say the commission’s report – the first on prevalence since 1999 – is bound to show a rise both in the numbers of gamblers and in those addicted.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport later sought to clarify Mr Sutcliffe’s comments, saying he was treating the report as a base line and would regard as unacceptable any subsequent rise in problem gambling. But another minister said the government wanted to get across a hardline message ahead of implementation of the new Gambling Act, which liberalises the activity and comes into force on Saturday.

In particular, ministers are worried that reforms allowing gambling advertising on television will reflect badly on the government. Such advertising will start appearing this weekend.

The prime minister marked his early weeks in office with a series of announcements that distanced him from policies liberalising gambling and drinking and decriminalising the use of cannabis.

Mr Brown has decided to review his predecessor Tony Blair's super-casinos plan, saying regeneration might be a better way of securing economic and social benefits for areas bidding for Las Vegas-style casinos. The policy has been described by government insiders as "dead in the water".