

As a Conservative, I am sceptical of the value to Sunderland of a super casino though it is intriguing to see a Labour Government promoting a get-rich-quick scheme. During the past decade there has been an explosion in gambling, much of it promoted through Internet bets made at home and away from prying eyes but also encouraged by recent changes in the law.

Along with record levels of personal debt and unsustainable mortgage repayments, encouragement of gambling is the last thing hard-working families need. A super casino as a way of regenerating deprived areas also looks a false cure. Gambling did not regenerate Las Vegas (also known as Sin City). That city is mainly a reflection of wealth created elsewhere, and the sight of American casino chiefs arriving with violin cases stuffed with dollar bills would do more to fill the black hole at the Treasury than help people in Sunderland. It is more likely that we would end up with a magnet for the vulnerable, many of whom cannot afford to lose any more money.

We would do better to copy another aspect of Las Vegas' wealth. Establishing Sunderland as a centre for conferences would promote regeneration (as it has in Gateshead) but without the social costs associated with gambling. Throughout the passage of the latest Gambling Bill there has been a suspicion that the Government wanted to extend the number of regional super casinos and I can see pressure to do so coming from the cities that have lost out so far. As a minimum we need time for a proper assessment of the effects of a super casino before any more are suggested, though a better bet would be to provide full funding for a Citizens Advice Bureau to help alleviate rather than promote debt.

Councillor Robert Oliver (St. Chad's Ward).