

Bookies need government backing to get through the winter

A Scottish bookmaker saved from administration last year has warned the independent sector faces a 'make or break' winter without urgent government support.

Scotland's largest independent bookmaker, Scotbet, has urged First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, to step in after the firm was denied support from The Scottish Government with business rates relief or small business grants, despite being closed for over three months from the start of lockdown.

Based in Loanhead in Midlothian, Scotbet was rescued from closure in July 2019 following a management buy out. Almost 130 jobs and 30 shops were saved, and at its peak, the firm owned 75 shops.

Chairman John Heaton, who led the management buy out, has written to Finance Secretary Kate Forbes and the First Minister demanding answers.

He said: "It is simply no way to treat a Scottish business struggling to survive in the grip of a pandemic.

"Due to the Covid restrictions we were forced to close our shops for over three months in March. At the time, small businesses throughout the UK were promised help in the form of small business grants and 12 months of business rates relief.

It allowed many independent operators in England, which would otherwise have failed, to remain in business.

“We have received nothing. For reasons, so far not explained, independent betting shop chains were excluded. We are now receiving threats of court action for non-payment of rates for a period when we were not allowed to open. This is simply unfair.

“We now face a very challenging future. Even now, revenue is significantly below pre-lockdown levels and the coming months could be make or break for many independent bookmakers. On behalf of our loyal and extremely hard working employees, I would urge the Scottish Government to do more to support the independent sector before it is too late.”

Lothian MSP and convener of the Cross Party Group on Horseracing at the Scottish Parliament Miles Briggs said: “It is baffling that the betting industry has not been provided the same support that has been given to businesses in other industries.

“Licensed responsible gambling provides entertainment to people throughout Scotland and the thousands of jobs related to the industry are no less valuable than in any other sector.

“I have written to the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture to ask why support has not yet been provided and I have called on Ministers to act immediately to support local jobs in communities across Scotland.”