

Staff hit the jackpot in Scotland's largest employee takeover

Bingo business is first gaming company in UK to adopt employee ownership.

Employees at a 209-strong Scottish bingo business with a branch in Dalkeith are set to bag a full house – as it becomes the country's largest and latest employee-owned firm.

[Carlton Bingo](#)'s Dalkeith branch has ten employees and is part of the 10-venue chain that has made the move to employee ownership following a positive rebound after the challenges and closures brought about by the pandemic.

The firm also has locations in Inverness, Stirling, Livingston, Dunfermline, Buckie, Elgin, Fraserburgh, East Kilbride and Partick in Glasgow, the company has now put its shares into an Employee Ownership Trust [EOT], which will see its staff given a controlling stake in the business.

The four major shareholders Chris Barr, George Carter, Brian King and Peter Perrins decided to transition the business into employee ownership after considering their succession options and acknowledging their staff's loyalty and commitment.

George Carter said: "It might sound like a cliché but we are very much like a family business here. The sale to an EOT fitted exactly with what we wanted. We have to wait a few years to realise our full value, but we judged that to be a risk worth taking to preserve all that's good about Carlton

for our customers and our staff. A management buyout was a real possibility – our management team are hugely respected within the business – but that really only defers the problem of succession. By transferring the shareholding to an EOT, the future of Carlton Bingo is secure for our loyal staff and customers.”

The four main shareholders have been involved in the bingo industry for most of their careers and were driven to find an exit solution that lessened any disruption to staff and customers.

Managing Director, Mike Watret took what he viewed as a temporary job upon graduating from Stirling University in 1991. Mike then went on to have a successful career with Gala Bingo and returned to Carlton ten years ago.

Mike said: “I didn’t expect to be back here 30 years later. It’s a great job working with a great team of people.”

Finance Director, Leslie Ross, who has worked at Carlton for almost 30 years, highlighted the significant length of service dedicated to Carlton by many of the employees: “The combined company length of service stands at over 1500 years. We recently celebrated a 40 year service anniversary for one employee in Dunfermline. Carlton has a great culture that fosters commitment and long service. “

The company was hit significantly during the Covid crisis, with one club being closed for a total of 400 days.

Mike added: “We have recovered well from what was a challenging time. Eight of our 10 locations exceeded their targets for March and several are outperforming their 2019 results. This is testament to the hard work and loyalty of our staff who have done a sterling job in ensuring a safe and welcoming environment for our customers.

“If I had any doubts that this was the right way forward, they

were banished when we delivered the news to the employees. There are challenges ahead, but with our great team here I'm confident that we'll overcome them."

Carole Leslie of [Ownership Associates](#), who worked with directors on the programme of employee communication, said: "It was a fabulous experience meeting so many employees who are so loyal to their company and genuinely enjoy their jobs.

"The idea of employee ownership was largely unknown by most of the staff, but once explained, was recognised as a generous gesture by the former shareholders."

The transaction was managed by Avondale Corporate and Douglas Roberts and Nimarta Cheema of Edinburgh legal firm Lindsays provided the legal advice.

Douglas Roberts, a partner at Lindsays, said: "We were delighted to assist the team at Carlton Bingo in what is a significant step for EOTs in Scotland. It's encouraging to see a company of the scale of Carlton Bingo adopting employee ownership, proving it's an option that fits with businesses of all sizes."

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