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Open letter to NSW Premier, cc Ministers for Gambling and Health, Leader of the Opposition, Shadow Gambling and Health Ministers
29 September 2021
By email

Dear Premier, Ministers and MPs

In July 2020, the Alliance for Gambling Reform, NCOSS, Wesley Mission and the Western Sydney Community Forum [wrote to your Government](#) urging you to not overlook the significant risks posed by having gambling rooms open when re-opening the state from the first COVID lockdown.

We drew attention to the physical risks of hard surfaces and the compulsive behaviours of people when gambling, which increase the chances of transmission. We noted then that the purpose of relaxing lockdowns was to give people a chance to socialise and rebuild their mental health resources. Additionally, by encouraging people to go out to socialise, their spending on hospitality would boost the economy.

Facilitating a system where stressed people will sit by themselves, exacerbating mental health issues, not socialising, not spending money on job-creating food and beverages, but chasing losses only to enrich publicans is the exact opposite of what NSW needs.

We wrote then because [our email of May 29 2020](#), on the eve of NSW's reopening, urging the NSW Premier to put health and safety ahead of poker machine profits was ignored. We considered then, and continue to hold concerns, that Chief Medical Officers are not fully briefed on the special nature of gambling rooms, which are different from the rest of the pubs or clubs that host them.

The evidence is clear that pent-up stresses associated with COVID lockdowns are fuelling dramatic increases in poker machine losses in every state and territory in Australia. Beyond the losses data, there was a real-time test of the effect of a tapered reintroduction of poker machines when Victoria limited access to gambling rooms in November 2020. The data showed that opening hours, room time and machine limits had a significant impact on reducing losses compared to year-on-year data.

We appreciate there are a significant amount of issues to be dealt with in this current public health crisis, but it is imperative that another public health crisis in the form of spiking levels of gambling harm is considered now. We've never been more acutely aware of how prevention is better than cure, and our communities and local economies deserve to be protected from this otherwise preventable devastation. This is an opportunity to do the right thing in NSW.

I urge you to consider where it's best for people to socialise, where their money is spent effectively to create jobs, where their mental health will be improved, where they face fewer risks of transmission. It is clear there are so many better places than in front of a poker machine.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "T. Costello", written in a cursive style.

Rev Tim Costello, Chief Advocate, Alliance for Gambling Reform