

Stage 2 community feedback of the draft Electronic Gaming Machines (EGM) Policy 2023-2027 and draft Action Plan

Introduction

On 27 March 2022, Council endorsed the draft Darebin Electronic Gaming Machine (EGM) Policy 2023-2027 and draft Action Plan for the purposes of public exhibition to receive community feedback with the following changes:

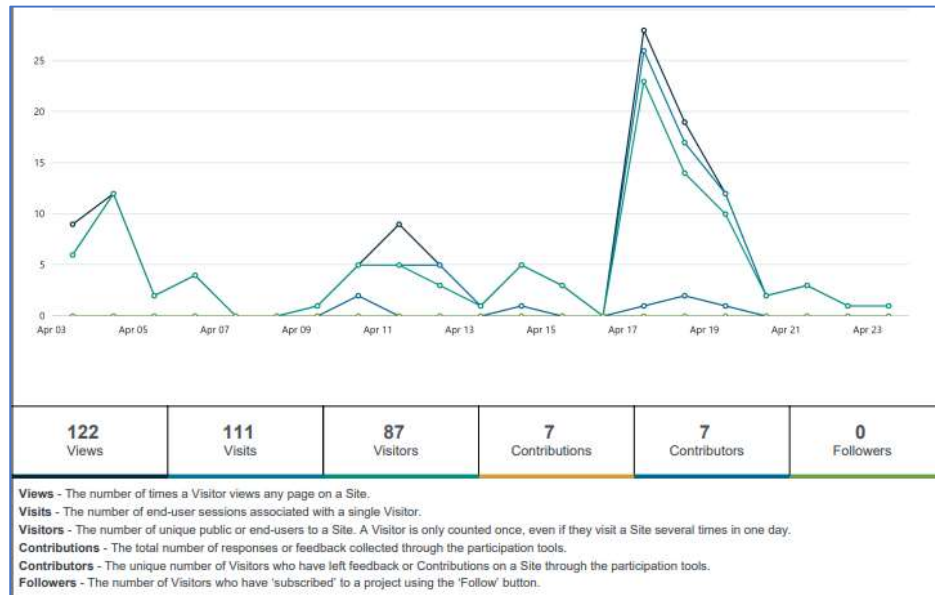
- a) Under the section 'Policy Statements':
 - i. *Amends the following statement to – 'Councillors and Council staff will not attend gambling venues when representing Council in an official capacity subject to policy exceptions identified'.*
 - ii. *Adds an additional dot point that reads – 'Within the first 6 months of implementation of this policy, Council commits to using its best endeavours within business-as-usual resources to supporting all community groups, clubs, organisations, associations and businesses, especially those that are multilingual, to educate and inform them of the new changes included in this policy as well as assist them to fulfil their future obligations, in appropriate languages, through the implementation of the Action Plan.'*
- b) Under the section 'Breach of Policy' amend as follows:
 - i. *The previous policy 2018 - 2022 outlined a four-year developmental approach to supporting groups to become compliant with the Policy. With the review, the draft Policy proposes a move from a graduated policy to one that seeks compliance.*
 - ii. *If there has been a breach, the draft Policy proposes that officers will consider the reason behind the breach and implement with the club or group a diversion plan to support and encourage compliance in a capacity building way.*
 - iii. *Where a club or group continues to intentionally breach the Policy, despite the best efforts of officers to support and encourage compliance in a capacity building way through a diversion plan, this may ultimately result in Council resolving to withdraw funds or hiring of venues, however this will ultimately be a decision for Council.*

Engagement methods

Stage two consultation was conducted through the following engagement methods:

(1) Survey

- A survey commenced from 03 April to 23 April 2023, via Darebin Your Say Page.
- There were 122 views on the page
- Seven community members responded to the survey (see Figure below)



(2) Face to face Focus Group Discussions (FGD)

The following ten (10) senior's clubs participated in the FGD:

- Greek Ex-Service Club of Darebin District
- Batman Elderly Greek Women's Group
- Keon Park Greeks Seniors Citizens Club
- Italian Elderly Citizens Group-Holy Spirit
- Thornbury Italian Senior Citizens Club
- Bigla Senior Citizen Group
- Macedonian Seniors Citizens Club-Pelister
- Australian Macedonians Pensioners Club Reservoir
- Polish Senior Citizens Club of Reservoir
- East Reservoir Senior Citizen's Club

(3) Email contributions

The following three (3) senior's club provided their feedback through email.

- Reskeon Seniors Group
- Roma social club
- Reservoir Probus

A total of 40 members of senior's clubs provided feedback.

Findings

This section will summarise feedback from the community and officer recommendations. Where possible, verbatim quotes from participants have been used. Personal data has been de-identified in order to protect the privacy of the participants.

Two (2) survey respondents thought that Council had not missed any action that would minimise harm from EGM while three (3) people were unsure if we had missed any action:

“I think it is a good policy as a starter, but I would like all pokie machines banned from Darebin”

“An excellent start to stopping the normalisation and harm of gambling in the community”

“Limiting number of pokie venues in Darebin would be the best outcome and have more social for elderly people to enjoy, like dancing and dining also other games for fun would be better for mental and physical outcome. Seniors should be supported”

“Let people decide how they should spend their money, pay \$200 to see a show or go to spend it on the pokies”

Two (2) people thought that Council had missed the following actions:

“Change opening and closing hours. Most venues across Vic are open for 20 hours per day due to council approval, if venues are open for less than that, there is less time for gambling”

“Close all types of gambling, i.e. football, TAB, dogs, etc.etc. and not just the pokie. Government takes heaps from all of these venues, including cigarettes and alcohol, why not ban everything?”

Council is not able to implement the proposed actions given its limited role in regulating the gambling industry. However, Council draft Action Plan outlines key advocacy actions that aims to seek reform to the Gambling Regulation Act to place greater regulation and restrictions on the gambling industry.

Below feedback was received from seniors' clubs in relation to key policy statements that would impact on their social outings and activities.

Policy statement 1:

- Council will support clubs to identify venues with no EGM to hold their outings and activities.

Feedback

All senior groups supported this policy statement noting that it has been challenging to find non-EGM venues that can provide affordable meals, meeting place and entertainment for seniors' clubs:

“That is great if this would happen”

“Good idea, but we don't trust that you will find any venues”

Policy statement 2:

- Community groups, clubs, organisations, associations and businesses that are in a Council owned facility or building (in a capacity of a license or lease agreement) or plan to hire a Council facility or building are prohibited from receiving sponsorship or grants (in-kind or cash) from poker machine operators.

Feedback

All seniors' groups supported this statement because none of them receive financial support from an EGM venue.

Policy statements 3 and 4:

- Council will not support (in-kind or cash) any community groups, clubs, organisations, associations or businesses who hold functions and activities in EGM venues.
- Council will not support (funding or in-kind) any club, community group, association, organisation or business that meet in venues that have EGM.

Feedback

Majority of the seniors' club members did not support these policy statements. Those opposed to the statements argued that it is challenging to find non-EGM venues that can provide meals and drinks that are discounted at the same rates comparable to EGM venues:

"Restaurants charge us minimum \$50 per person, the pokie venues charge us only \$25 per person and we get much more food and drinks"

"We collated a list but it's so expensive to go to a non-EGM venue. We don't have enough money to be able to go out. We are desperately trying to find somewhere for us to go"

"It's not fair, we go there for a cheap meal, and someone may be singing there"

"It is very difficult to find venues without EGM's that provide cheap meals for seniors"

"Why is only Darebin [council] stopping clubs [to go to pokie venues]? We look for cheap food. It is not fair"

"If we can find somewhere else to go, we will go. But other places are too expensive"

Others argued that using poker machines is a personal choice and there is little impact when clubs are prohibited from holding their social outings in an EGM venue:

"Everyone knows we should not play [pokies]...But nobody can stop people using pokies"

"We are all adults. Nobody forces you to gamble"

"It is good to take the club [members] to lunch but not allow them to play pokies, but we cannot stop them"

"We acknowledge the negative effects of gaming. However, to me the people in the [seniors] clubs are more responsible of what we do than people outside of the clubs. To me you're looking at penalising 2000 people in the clubs. You are penalising these 2000 people, and they are not the ones [likely to experience harm from EGM]. People in the clubs have support from the people around them in the clubs. The people that you need to be targeting

are the people not associated with the clubs as they do not have social support. Why pick on the clubs?"

Club members also insisted that Council should not be assuming that everyone who goes to an EGM venue is interested in using poker machines. Some also argued that Council is violating their human rights by prohibiting clubs from attending EGM venues:

"We only go for lunch. We don't play any pokies"

"I don't play pokies; I just go for a meal and to meet friends"

"Not everybody who goes to pokie venues plays"

"You are impeaching on people's right to choose where we go. This is pretty much blackmail"

"If we gamble at the pokies, we lose [our] money, not Council – this should not be up to Council to decide where we go and how we spend our time"

Club members also argued that none of Council money is used in poker machines:

"I don't think we should be prohibited [to go to EGM venues]. We do not put any Council money into the machines. Council money is used to subsidise meals or tea and coffee"

"It's not fair – we aren't using council money on the machines; we are using it on transport and subsidising the food. We are using the money to be able to afford a subsidised meal not for pokies"

"We are pensioners who just want to enjoy our last days happily. We should not be told what to do with our money"

Some also noted that when the social outing involves travelling with a bus there is usually no time for any of their club members to use poker machines:

"When we go for social outing at a pokie venue there is no time for members to go play pokies. Otherwise the bus will leave them"

"If the council can find something like the RSL that provides us with a cheap meal, then that is okay"

Some club members also argued that Council's funds to clubs is too little to justify prohibition of attending EGM venue by seniors' clubs:

"The money [Council Funding] is little. We may wish to use our own funds to hold an activity at a pokie venue"

"Nearly every hotel and RSL in Victoria has pokie machines, so you're banning all these clubs from going to every venue? To me if the council, is going to blackmail people, the clubs are just going to do what we want. We are entitled to do what we want"

Club members provided some suggestions to discourage any people using EGM during social outings:

“We want to be able to have lunch at places that have pokies, as long as we make it clear that they cannot play pokies during the lunch”

“We can make it known at the start, make it clear, that playing EGM is not allowed [during our] lunch”

“Should be written down as a rule, you cannot play the machines when you come out with us”

Policy Exception

ANZAC Day and similar military services held at The Returned and Services League (RSL)

The RSLs will be exempt from the EGM Policy only for ANZAC day and similar military service events. For these occasions the Council resources such as access to the community bus will continue for eligible residents wishing to attend these commemorative events.

Feedback

Majority of seniors' group members did not support the exception statement relation to holding social events at RSLs. Some of the reasons provided include: RSLs provide subsidised meals for seniors, prohibiting access to RSLs in discriminatory and that it is expensive to book a social activity at RSLs on ANZAC day:

“Even if the ANZAC day exemption occurred, the clubs can't book anyway because it's booked out on ANZAC day or it is too expensive the club to afford. Also, meals are not subsidized during public holidays”.

“RSL venues are very affordable, the seniors will feel they are discriminated against if we can't go there to eat a meal”

“It is not fair. We want to go for a good meal at RSL on Mother's Day and Father's Day”

“Anzac Day and RSL should be remembered all the time”

“We do not agree for 1 day an exemption”

“it is not fair to say you are not going to RSL. It is discrimination”

“We want to go 3 or 4 times a year”

“We want to be allowed to out for lunch, not only on ANZAC day [but also] on Mother's Day”

“Exemption should not be ANZAC day [only], but we should be allowed go all the time when we want to go to RSL, because the meals are cheap”

“It’s not fair to say you cannot go to the RSL. It’s discrimination to tell so many people and groups that they cannot go to places with EGM”

Breach of the Policy

The previous policy outlined a four-year developmental approach to supporting groups to become compliant with the Policy. With the review, the draft Policy has moved from a graduated Policy to one that seeks compliance. If there has been a breach, officers will explore the reason behind the breach and provide this information and a recommendation to Council for a decision. Recommendations may include a diversion plan. Where a club or group continues to intentionally breach the Policy, this may ultimately result in Council resolving to withdraw funds or hiring of venues. However, this will ultimately be a decision for Council.

Feedback

Many seniors club members were not supportive of Council’s proposed action to enforce the Policy:

“Withdrawing the funds – is a crime to go for lunch? We will be penalised for going to an EGM venue for lunch. That’s terrible. This goes back to the socialist way of making decisions”

“Council will penalise us for going out for lunch. This is blackmail”

“If we went [to EGM venues] on our own accord and raise our own money as a group, withdrawing funds is unfair as it is our own money. We’ll self-fund, we just want to get out and have a meal”

Discussion and Conclusion

Stage 2 consultation provided an opportunity for community members to provide feedback on the draft EGM Policy 2023-2027 and draft Action Plan. In general, community members were supportive of the draft Policy and draft Action Plan. However, majority members of council-funded seniors' clubs provided feedback on two policy statements and compliance clause, which they argued would disadvantage them. The key policy question is whether council should keep the two policy statements and compliance statement as they are in the draft Policy or provide an exemption for seniors' groups.

Older residents in Darebin, including older people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD), are considered a vulnerable population group at risk of being socially isolated. Individuals who are socially isolated experience poor health and wellbeing outcomes. The 2019 Towards an Aged Friendly Darebin report noted that there was a lack of affordable recreation options for older people in Darebin (other than venues with EGM).

Council's work to promote inclusion opportunities for older people continues to be a priority. Council aims to encourage the use of non-EGM venues as part of the current Policy. The Supported and Connected Living Team within Council work closely with senior members of the community and support them to join in with groups and participate in activities that not only add to their lives, but also contribute to the local community. Through the community grants program, Council also supports social participation of senior club members by providing funding through the community grants program. This work must be taken into consideration when Council makes its final decision in relation to the draft 2023-2027 EGM Policy and Action Plan.