



St Vincent de Paul Society
NATIONAL COUNCIL *good works*

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Submission to the Coalition's Policy Discussion Paper on Gambling Reform (Jan 2012)

The St Vincent de Paul Society is a member of the Australian Churches Gambling Taskforce and has long highlighted the social costs of poker machine addiction. These costs include suicide, depression, relationship breakdown, lower work productivity, job losses, bankruptcy and crime. The Taskforce estimates the social cost to the country is around \$4.7 billion annually¹. The time for government intervention to address Australia's gambling problem in the form of mandatory pre-commitment policy is long overdue.

The Howard Government acknowledged the dangers of problem gambling when it established the first Ministerial Council on Gambling 12 years ago in the year 2000.² Therefore the Society disagrees with the assertion in the Coalition's Policy Discussion Paper on Gambling Reform that the mandatory pre-commitment proposal has been thrust onto the agenda without adequate consultation stakeholders.

An Essential Research Poll conducted in September last year found 67 per cent of Australians support the reforms which include 'pre-commitment' technology.³ The results of this poll reflect widespread community support for mandatory pre-commitment and thus government intervention to address Australia's gambling problem. There are Clubs that receive up to 40 per cent of profits from some of the most vulnerable people in our society.⁴ This fact clearly does not sit well with Australians and it hasn't done so for many years.

¹ Taskforce media release on 26 October, 2011 'Poker machine reform debate needs cold facts not hot air: churches' <http://gamblingreform.org/2011/10/poker-machine-reform-debate-needs-cold-facts-not-hot-air-churches/>

² The Coalition Policy Discussion Paper on Gambling Reform November 2011.

³ Australian Churches Gambling Taskforce media release from September 12, 2011 <http://gamblingreform.org/2011/09/australians-overwhelmingly-back-gambling-reform-essential-poll/>. The Essential Research can be accessed at <http://www.essentialmedia.com.au/essential-report/>

⁴ Taskforce media release on 26 October, 2011 'Poker machine reform debate needs cold facts not hot air: churches' <http://gamblingreform.org/2011/10/poker-machine-reform-debate-needs-cold-facts-not-hot-air-churches/>

Vincentians already help and counsel individuals, families, friends and colleagues deal with the impact of poker machine addiction. The Coalition's proposal to increase counselling and support services for problem gamblers is warranted but only in addition to mandatory pre-commitment. In the Society's opinion voluntary pre-commitment policies do not act as a deterrent to poker machine addicts, or to the Clubs that are currently operating a highly unsustainable business model.

Existing self-exclusion programmes have failed to make a dint in the ongoing social fallout from problem gamblers. More reviews into these programmes will be time-consuming and further delay the introduction of policy. The Society recognises that policies such as mandatory pre-commitment that might be considered a nuisance to players and Clubs at first. We are also confident that the majority people would willing to adjust to mandatory pre- commitment that results in a long lasting, positive impact for not only individual addicts but Australian society in general.

The Coalition's discussion paper addresses the issues of online gambling, credit facilities and the advertisement of gambling products, which is admirable but risks deflecting from the real issue at hand. Our members have given us a clear message that gambling in all forms continues to devastate families but the predominant message is that poker machines especially high intensity poker machines are hurting people the most. The Society believes the Government and Opposition have a rare opportunity to take an increasingly bi-partisan approach to poker machine reforms and further prevent the fracturing of Australian society.