

The Community Advocacy on Gambling Project Six Month Review

Purpose

This paper provides a six month qualitative review on the implementation of the Community Advocacy on Gambling (CAOG) project and its activities.

Background

The project commenced in late March 2006 with the appointment of the Community Advocate on Gambling, Andrew Manning. The staffing capacity of the project was completed with the appointment of Angela Nicholas, the Gambling Research & Support Officer, who commenced in late April 2006.

To confirm, the CAOG project aims;

"to give voice to, support, advocate, and build community capacity to participate in environments of decision making so that a balance of thinking and views can be brought to advancing community views on gambling in Victoria."

In addition to the aim of the project, five funded objectives were determined for the project to address over the two year funding period. These objectives are:

1. Collation and dissemination of information to assist community groups' participation in the Electronic Gaming Machine (EGM) License Review;
2. Contributions to planning and policy development processes in local governments and by the Victorian Government;
3. Participate in and support others advocating responsible gambling measures within Government and industry and on the Responsible Gambling Ministerial Advisory Council;
4. Conduct consultations and develop appropriate materials for the promotion of responsible gambling; &
5. Contribute to increased community ownership in responsible gambling practices and community engagement in addressing gambling related issues.

Governance Structure

The projects generator was the community group 'CAPP', Communities Acting on Pokie Problems. CAPP called for the creation and funding of a community driven advocacy support model on gambling with a governance structure to ensure strong community ownership. It required the structure be consistently informed by community participation and as a result, the governance structure is multi-layered, involving stakeholders from a diverse range of interests.

Project auspicing is provided by the Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA). The VLGA hosting function provides the legal entity that allows the project to be 'operationalised' and the financial capacity to administer project funds allocated by the government through its Department of Justice.

Management of the project is provided by the project Steering Committee, which consists of members from the Department of Justice, the VLGA, CAPP, and one member from the Community Partnership Group. The Steering Committee is ultimately responsible for ensuring that the project is meeting its objectives and funding obligations, and for adjudication of issues that may arise within the partnership group.

A Community Partnership Group has been formed with representatives recruited from stakeholder sectors including churches, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, indigenous communities, peak body for problem gambling counseling services, peak body for social services, local government, the disability sector, young people, older persons and one independent non-aligned community person. The Community Partnership Group forms the 'reference structure' of the project, ensuring that input from a diverse range of communities is fed into the project, as well as communicating information from the project out to those communities. It is this group that provides the mandate for the project activities.

Focus and Activities of the CAOG Project March to September 2006.

Consistent with the funded objectives of the project, a number of activities have been undertaken since its inception. All of the activities have been aimed at facilitating community participation in decision-making on gambling in a number of ways.

Gambling Licensing Review

Beginning with the release of the Gambling Licences Review Issues Papers by the Office of Gaming & Racing, a public consultation process began on March 3, 2006 inviting written submissions from local government, community, industry and concerned individuals outlining their reaction to a number of issues proposed in the Issues Papers. The project commenced after the opening of the submission period (March 20, 2006) and so efforts were immediately focused on either supporting existing consultative efforts arranged by community stakeholders, awareness raising of the review through networks, or employing tasks aimed at facilitating local government and community participation in this process. For example, the Council on Gambler's Help Services (CoGHS) and a number of problem gambling counseling support agencies organized consultative community forums about the review across metropolitan Melbourne and country Victoria. The Advocate took the opportunity to attend many of those meetings with a view to contributing relevant knowledge and hearing community issues.

In the lead up to the closing of the written submission period, the Advocate sought to provide assistance to those groups who wanted help, to make their own written submissions through the provision of information, advice, and support with the closing date for the public submissions being May 4th, 2006.

From late July and throughout August 2006, the review progressed to a public consultation hearings process where those who made a written submission to the review were afforded an opportunity to present a verbal case to a panel appointed by the Steering Committee for the Gambling Licenses Review (GLR). The panel allowed presenters to outline their case, and then to respond to questions stemming from the GLR's terms of reference. Prior to the commencement of the panel hearing, the advocacy project held a forum for presenters from local government and community groups to assist their preparations for the panel process. At the forum, presenters heard process information about the review, received advice about making the best possible presentation, were given opportunities to network with other groups, and to ask questions which were then communicated to the review panel.

Project staff attended 70 out of the 72 panel hearings, and so staff were able to provide advice and information throughout the process back to community and local government presenters. Following each day's hearings, notes on the proceedings and questions asked by the panel were sent to other presenters to the review to assist them in preparation for their own presentations.

Changes to Victoria's Town Planning approach to Gambling Venues

In October 2006, the Victorian Government announced changes to land use planning provisions for local government control over applications regarding local gaming venues. Changes to these provisions mean that local councils will approve or reject permit applications for the development of new gaming venues, and extensions to existing venues. The role of the project in this process so far has been threefold. First, the project has conducted an audit of all Victorian council's land use and organisational policies where gambling is provided for. Second, the project has provided advice to the sector on strengthening its approaches to policy, and finally, the project has made representation to the state on the needs of local governments in interpreting and implementing the changes to the planning system.

Policy Development

A number of Local Governments in Victoria take an active approach to the promotion of responsible gambling in their community. Part of a responsible gambling strategy for a local government often includes writing an organisational policy for addressing problem gambling issues in the local area. The project has been active, through the provision of information and advice, in assisting a number of local governments to develop original responsible gambling policies, or to amend existing policies.

This process has become particularly important in relation to the new planning changes (mentioned above) that have allocated greater power to local councils to enact their gambling policies through planning authorisation. Examples of areas assisted on that level include Geelong, Macedon Ranges, Mornington Peninsula and Mitchell Shires.

Communication with the regulator (VCGR) and industry stakeholders

The project provides a voice for communicating concerns to the Victorian governments gambling regulator as well as industry stakeholders in regard to concerns about gambling practices and/or possible breaches of gambling legislation. Issues raised with the regulator to-date have included advertising, signage regulations, toy poker machines, computer gaming software and registration for and conduct of, hotel-based poker tournaments. The project has communicated these concerns on behalf of community members by formal means, and provided information on actions back to the issue generator.

Media Activity

Media engagement was an area that was recognized early on by the project's Partnership Group as an important means of communicating issues. To assist in achieving a desired approach to media engagement, Globe Communications were retained to develop a project "Communications Plan". Responding to a consultancy brief, the final plan was endorsed for implementation by the governance groups at their September meetings.

To date, the project has been contacted for comment on a variety of gambling issues by the media, and media releases and/or press conferences have been tools used to relay communication issues. The media has been particularly active in the discussion of gambling owing to a number of major occurrences in Victoria. The Gambling Licenses Review has been well publicised, announcements around the planning changes have been made, and a continuation and broadening of regional caps on EGM numbers in vulnerable areas have also been popular discussion areas for media attention. As part of the projects role, media has been referred on to other community stakeholders who have expertise, knowledge or opinion on a matter raised by the media.

Queries, Contacts, Contributions

In addition to the major work undertaken by the project, there is a consistent request for information as community and local government groups undertake their own responsible-gambling activities. The project has received and participated in a number of community meetings or forums and has been requested as a representative on various committees. The project has an 'observer' role on the Responsible Gambling Ministerial Advisory Council (RGMAC) and participates on the RGMAC's 'Product Safety Working Group' and the 'Research Working Group'.

Early Learning and Challenges for the Project

The Community Advocacy on Gambling Project is a new project with bounded resources, and has the challenge of being available on a state-wide basis to serve the community. Therefore it has been important to keep realistic expectations about what is achievable within the resource framework allocated. For these same reasons it is important to keep a focus on the larger goals and impacts the project is trying to achieve, and to not get too deeply involved in micro-management of particular organisational or local issues. Similarly, it has been imperative that the project constantly refer to its terms of reference and continue to act with the objectives of the project in mind. Local Governments and community groups are accessing and referring to the advocacy project as a source of advice and information on gambling issues. However, the project is continually cognisant that its role remain one of 'strengthening community capacity' to respond to gambling issues, and not to replace the grass roots voices of the community. To do so is considered counter productive in potentially reducing the very community capacity sought to be enhanced through an over reliance on the actions of the project to make community concerns on gambling heard.

A clear opportunity is that the project's purview means that it also has a role to engage the gambling industry and its stakeholders in the advancement of responsible gambling which the industry itself has responded to positively since the project began.

The project continues to think carefully as it applies best practice principles and methodologies in community capacity building to its area of work.

Conclusion

This six month review paper on the projects activities has been provided as a qualitative conversation on the major areas of activity undertaken over the initial period of project implementation. The Gambling Licences Review has been the predominant area of work focus which meant a significant effort was made to assist community and local government participation in that process. The other side of that has meant attending to project governance and administration took longer to achieve than was desirable.

Whilst being mindful of all five project objectives, it is suggested that objectives 2 and 5 will form a significant focus over the next six months. Local Government planning and Project ownership by the community is critical to meeting the project's objectives and the expectations set out by CAPP in creating this project were clear. The next period of project operation will therefore be about driving these realms more effectively to achieve those objectives.

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