

# Push for more changing habits as pokies losses halve

BALLARAT gambling losses have almost halved since pokies venues re-opened in November in what anti-gambling advocates say is now a key time to build momentum on changed habits.

There was more than \$2 million combined loss in 14 venues within the City of Ballarat from November 9, when pokies returned, to the month's end, the latest data from Victorian Commission for Gambling and Liquor Regulation shows.

This equates to about half what was lost in a similar time frame on Ballarat pokies within November a

year earlier.

There is a similar losses trend in the Moorabool Shire, which includes figures from two pokies venues in the neighbouring Hepburn Shire.

Gaming rooms were closed statewide on March 16 due to coronavirus pandemic restrictions.

Net losses in Ballarat pokies venues for the past financial year were more than \$43.7 million and this included three full months without gambling.

Ballarat Community Health and Child and Family Services launched a cam-

paign during the pokies suspension encouraging people to try alternative activities and try to break the habit.

City of Ballarat councillor Belinda Coates said while the City had worked closely with the region's anti-gambling bodies, there needed to be greater support from all levels of government for harm minimisation.

Cr Coates said while it was good losses were down, this was an issue with greater social impacts that also needed addressing such as mental health, isolation and links between pokies and family violence.

"To be a compassionate society, and a compassionate Ballarat, we should be taking steps to ensure there are ways to transition from pokies reliance. It's a good thing for the community," Cr Coates said. "We need to help build momentum in changing habits. The state government should help transition people to new habits."

Buninyong MP Michaela Settle has been supporting the Ballarat Community Health and Cafs joint All-In campaign by encouraging people to reach out for help.

"COVID has given people time to reflect on what's im-

portant in life. For some, that has meant finding other ways to spend their time apart from gambling," Ms Settle said. "For others, it's taking that first step and reaching out to someone to talk about gambling. It's always a good time to talk."

Australian National University Professor Nicholas Biddle led a study into the nation's gambling rates during the pandemic. He said there would still be some time before it was known whether gambling rates would return to pre-pandemic levels, with COVID-19 altering the way people gam-

bled their money.

The report found no direct link in people swapping from pokies to online gambling. The report found those with the highest rate of disadvantage in the community had the largest decrease in gambling rates when compared with other socioeconomic groups.

If you or someone you know is experiencing harm from gambling, phone Cafs on 1300 692 237 or email [welcome@cafs.org.au](mailto:welcome@cafs.org.au).

■ Ballarat Community Health: 5338 4500; Gamblers Help: 1800 858 858; Lifeline: 13 11 14