

## Charities abandon Whittlesea's Responsible Gaming Forum citing lack of goodwill

By SUE HEWITT

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**Jemal Ahmet from Whittlesea Community Connections.**

WHITTLESEA council's Responsible Gaming Forum has collapsed with key charities and agencies withdrawing amid claims nothing is being done for problem gamblers.

The non-profit groups claim they can no longer support the partnership with the council and nine local pokie venues - four of which are in the state's top 10 for player losses - because the forum is failing to minimise problem gambling.

Whittlesea Community Connections chief executive Jemal Ahmet (pictured) said the venues refused to even trial reforms or fund agencies that had to "pick up the pieces".

"There was a lack of goodwill and intent on behalf of the venues which did not share our concerns about the problem. It's very disappointing, and it was with reluctance that we walked away from the forum, but we did not want the forum to legitimise the actions of the venues."

Mr Ahmet said the groups had asked venues to limit the number of withdrawals through Eftpos - a scheme introduced after the state government removed ATMs from gaming venues.

"People can make multiple withdrawals until their money runs out or they reach a daily limit and we asked this be restricted to one withdrawal. The venues said it would disadvantage other card users, like diners, which is nonsense."

He said the venues also refused to contribute to a local fund for services for problem gamblers.

"Whittlesea as a community contributes to (the venues') bottom line and community agencies are subsidising their profits. When kids go without food or education, or people become homeless, they end up at the doors of community agencies."

Plenty Valley Community Health, Neami mental health service, Kildonan Child and Family Services and North East Primary Care Partnership confirmed they had withdrawn from the forum. Gamblers' Health Northern group could not be contacted.

A spokesman for ALH group, which runs the Bundoora Hotel, the Plough in Mill Park and the Excelsior in Thomastown said ALH's actions to reduce problem gambling exceeded mandatory standards.

The council did not respond to questions before deadline.