# Sector feedback on the results

## Themes

### The biggest challenge is training a transient low skilled workforce

The turnover rate and low skills of the hospitality workforce was cited as the biggest obstacle to successfully delivering a culture of care in gambling venues. A good example of how the lack of general skills amongst venue staff can directly impact the effectiveness of harm minimisation is the use of log books. One venue manager noted that those staff members with poor writing skills were less likely to make entries into the log books.

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| “We are currently reviewing the effectiveness & assessment of our training – in terms of changed behaviour by frontline staff – and are aware that this is a very challenging area as staff turnover in the Hospitality sector is high.” |

### The results are accurate, the methodology robust, and as such, the assessments valid and objective

Ten societies accepted the premise and results of the mystery shopper exercise. They valued the feedback on what is happening in their venues and accepted that there are areas for improvement. These societies also felt that the scenarios represented realistic situations that occur every day in the gaming venues.

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| “The report gives us solid objective evidence/material to present to our venues which will also be incorporated into our Venue Operators Conference in June… the results of the Mystery Shopper exercise are a very valuable resource for us to absorb and devise appropriate actions going forward.” |

### The results are compromised, methodology flawed, and as such, the assessments misleading

The substance of the critique of the methodology, method and results was very similar to those raised in response to the 2014 mystery shopper:

* a perception that scenarios were flawed; and
* one or two visits did not provide staff with an opportunity to get familiar with a customer’s gambling behaviour over time.

These seven societies tended to view the exercise as ‘doomed to fail’ because the expectations were created in a sterile best case environment and did not take into account the real-life environment in which venues operate, e.g. shift changes, staff churn, workloads, staffing levels, time of day, stress, age, level of confidence, etc.

They also felt that the Department took an auditing approach rather than a collaborative one. The Department’s decision not to accept the invitation of the Class 4 Working Party[[1]](#footnote-1) to advise on the final scenarios and their execution was mentioned to support this view.

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|  “…the Mystery Shopper (MS) exercise, no matter how well planned, is doomed to fail in execution. The current MS exercise was a step up from its predecessor, but was nonetheless compromised on many fronts. Consequently, the results are misleading and a poor indicator of how well venue staff are monitoring for signs of harmful gambling behaviour.” |

### The delivery of the scenarios was compromised

Two different concerns were raised about the actual playing out of the scenarios at the various venues.

The first was about the quality and skill of the actors. The actors failed to adequately enact the gambling harm indicators in the following ways:

* not always engaging in actual continuous play, e.g. they played intermittently spending periods of time looking around the room or using their mobile phones;
* not playing for long hours, i.e. play did not exceed three hours in some cases;
* not maintaining a continuous presence in the gaming rooms, i.e. sessions were broken up by regular breaks; and
* gambling at very low intensities, e.g. infrequent spins and low credit bets.

The second concern was that the scenarios were played out in front of different staff members because there were a number of staff on duty in the larger or busier venues, shift changes throughout the day, or different staff were rostered on each of a multi-day scenario. Therefore, the intended cumulative effect of the observations was lost.

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| “Given the many types of problem gambling behaviours recorded in the incident registers, it raises questions of how effectively the scenarios were acted, and how consistently the same scenario was performed across multiple venues.” |

### Scenario 4 was problematic

Scenario 4 was explicitly called out as having issues with its premise and expectations of staff. The issues mentioned included:

* privacy concerns when staff were asked to display a photo with other people in it when not part of a formal exclusion;
* the absence of verification of the relationship of the family member to the customer;
* the expectation of staff to monitor and provide an intervention for a customer who was not a regular or someone known to the staff, and was not necessarily displaying strong indicators of gambling harm;
* the expectation that staff would give intervention material to the family member; and
* the expectation that staff would provide intervention material to the customer immediately upon their first visit to the venue.

### The scoring was too inflexible and expectations were unreasonable

While several societies raised concerns about the scoring and the expected behaviours, the specific concerns were varied.

* The intervention stage may not be reached for a number of reasons, so it was unfair to give this category equal weight to the other categories.
* Expectations were unreasonable because isolated, low level signs were over-weighted and anything less than a multi-faceted intervention was a fail.
* The Department was creating expectations and controls for a specific mindset and expecting unskilled venue personnel to enforce them amongst all the other duties that their paid employment demands of them.
* The Department was too conservative and inflexible in determining the outcomes of the scenarios.
* A staff member shouldn’t be expected to acknowledge every gambler when they left the venue.

Coupled with these concerns was the sentiment that the Department ignored progress that the societies and venues had made. How the Department assessed the log books was specifically mentioned in this context. The overall quality of the log books was not taken into consideration if staff did not record the incidents with the mystery shopper.

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| Although the scenarios were more realistic than prior scenarios, the evaluation expectations were higher than what we had previously considered to be applicable. |

### Reviewing the CCTV footage was considered an important tool to facilitating learning and training opportunities for venue staff

The delay in the Department release of the dates and times of the mystery shopper visits hindered the societies’ ability to successfully access the CCTV footage. One issue was that CCTV footage cannot be stored indefinitely and is recorded over after two to four weeks, depending on the storage capacity of the system.

## Suggestions

While it was generally agreed that the exercise provided useful information, there were a few specific suggestions on how to improve the mystery shopper exercise in future.

* For venues, it can be challenging to digest detailed reports. Shorter reports or including an executive summary and key messages in longer reports may improve venue engagement with the information.
* Any move to centralise and/or rationalise training packages and available resources would be greatly appreciated. The hospitality sector has a transient workforce and so if they move from one outlet to another aligned to a different society they should not require retraining, unlike at present.
* Problem gambling awareness for customers should focus on web addresses and text numbers for the help providers. A text number is particularly easy to remember, and once the customer has sent that first text, the provider has their number for follow up.
1. A umbrella group that represents the majority of gaming machine societies and a range of other sector stakeholders for example Hospitality New Zealand. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)