

# Services to support family and friends affected by someone else's gambling should be included in strategic commissioning plans

Sharon Collard, Sara Davies and Katie Cross

## About the research

This research briefing coincides with publication of the Government's White Paper on gambling reform in April 2023.

11.8 million adults and children in Britain may be negatively affected by someone who gambles. The risk of harm is likely to be considerably higher for the estimated 3.6 million people who live with a 'problem gambler'.

Qualitative research centring on the family and social dynamics of harmful gambling shows that personal relationship harms, financial harms and emotional harms from gambling problems compound each other in damaging ways within family and friendship networks; and can span several decades or generations. While family and friendship networks can be an important source of support both for people who gamble and affected others, it should not be assumed that families or friends are able or willing to be supportive.

Services already exist in Britain that provide the help and support for affected others that family members and friends identified. But figures for national gambling support services show low take-up of help by adult affected others, who only make up around 14% of their service users. Similarly, in a 2021 online survey of 18,038 GB adults, 78% of affected others said they had not sought any type of advice or support for themselves. In addition, some newer services only serve certain geographical areas or groups, meaning that access is limited despite high needs. The scale of potential harm to family members and friends from an individual's gambling problems, coupled with low levels of help-seeking by affected others, highlights the need for strategic efforts to support this group.

## Policy recommendations

This briefing proposes four key recommendations for those who commission and deliver gambling harm support services, and for public health campaigns to reduce gambling harms:

- **Specific services for affected others should be included in strategic commissioning plans** e.g. [the NHS Long Term Plan](#) and the [National Gambling Treatment Service](#), as well as increased funding for other types of provision.
- **Making sure there is 'no wrong door' for people who seek help**, whether they are someone who gambles or an affected other. Gambling problems often co-occur with other issues such as mental health problems and debt problems offering opportunities for cross-referrals between organisations.
- **Regularly run public health campaigns** about the impact of gambling problems on family members and friends, drawing on real-life, relatable stories and experiences.
- **Clear, targeted messaging about existing services** that can provide the types of help and support family members and friends want and a simple way to find information online about the range of help available.

## Key findings

From our data, family members and friends would value help and support in **three** areas:

- **Understanding what's going on**, e.g. hearing real-life stories from 'people like me' to help recognise early warning signs of gambling problems; understanding more about the motivators and behaviours around gambling.
- **How to talk about what's going on**, e.g. helping family members and friends to talk about gambling problems with the person who gambled; and other family members; and knowing what they could do to help their loved one.
- **Accessing specialist support and advice**, e.g. emotional support through counselling or peer support; and practical support such as help to protect personal finances, or legal advice on access to children post-separation where there were concerns about their exposure to gambling and gambling harms.

Where the person who gambled was still within the close family circle, family members and friends

were primarily interested in 'getting help to help' – in other words, accessing support that in turn could help them support the person who gambled. For ex-partners, the focus was much more on emotional and practical support to deal with the impact of gambling-related harms they personally experienced, particularly once the relationship had ended.

'For me it was difficult to understand, I could see that he had a problem, that he had to gamble, in the end he was stealing money to do it. But I just didn't really know what triggers were in his mind.'

Interview with a woman whose nephew has a gambling problem.

As 'experts by experience', affected family members and friends have invaluable knowledge and experience to input to a new generation of campaigns, messages and services to help prevent and reduce harms from gambling among all those who are negatively impacted.



## Further information

Research report: [The family dynamics of gambling harms](#), by Sharon Collard, Sara Davies and Katie Cross.

## Contact the researchers

For further information about this research, contact [sharon.collard@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:sharon.collard@bristol.ac.uk)