

Cashless welfare card panel 'akin to a star chamber' *Greens senator raises privacy concerns over anonymous panel to which welfare recipients apply for cash payment increase*



Welfare recipients in trial communities receive 80% of payments into restricted cashless debit card or 'indue card'. Photograph: The Guardian

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Anonymous community panels are determining whether individuals who are part of the cashless welfare card trial should be entitled to access a greater proportion of their welfare payments in cash.

It has raised concerns about the privacy of those on welfare, with one-year trials of the card in the small communities of Ceduna in South Australia, and Kununurra and Wyndham in Western Australia, due to finish on 15 March and 25 April respectively. A decision from the government is imminent as to whether the cards will be implemented permanently.

Welfare recipients in the trial communities receive 80% of their welfare payments into the restricted cashless debit card, which cannot be used to withdraw cash or buy alcohol or gambling products. They can access the remaining 20% of their welfare payment as cash. However, individuals can apply to a panel to have the cash portion of their payment increased.

On Thursday night during estimates hearings for the Senate's Community Affairs Legislation Committee, Greens Senator Rachel Siewert and Labor's Senator Patrick Dodson were told by staff from the Department of Social Services that the community panel to which welfare recipients had to apply was anonymous.

Siewert told Guardian Australia on Friday that this was "akin to a star chamber and removes transparency".

"People shouldn't have to appeal to others in their small communities for cash to pay for goods and services," she said.

"Estimates has now revealed that the community panel people have to appeal to across all trial areas are anonymous. That means people are disclosing their personal details and having to ask for an increase in cash to a group they do not know the names of. It could be their neighbour, or someone they have had a dispute with in the past.

"I certainly would not like to appeal to a faceless group."

A spokesman for the department told Guardian Australia the Ceduna panel included "individuals who hold distinct local leadership positions". The Kununurra and Wyndham panels consisted of members with "a good understanding of the card trial, and a personal commitment to uphold the objectives of the trial". They also had demonstrated sound decision making and impartiality, and a strong understanding of the community, he said.

"Personal information will only be collected by the panel administrator on behalf of the panel for the assessment and administration of the application, with the permission of the applicant," he said.

"To protect the identity of the panel members from community harassment, the specific panellists for each decision will not be made public. To protect the information of the applicant, all panel members are required to sign a non-disclosure confidentiality agreement with the department of social services."

Siewert told Guardian Australia and estimates that she was concerned that with the end of the trial in Ceduna less than two weeks away, people in that community still had no idea whether the trial would continue. She feared that transition services would not have time to help people adjust to whatever decision the government made.

It was also revealed during estimates that the independent evaluation of the trial had been completed and had been handed to the human services minister, Alan Tudge. But department staff said it would be up to the minister whether that evaluation was made public.

Departmental staff also admitted that some merchants in the trial towns were still applying processing fees to the cashless welfare card.

Although the trial has been described as a success by the government and by some community leaders, concerns have been raised by those on the card and other members of the community that those with alcohol, drug and gambling problems are

finding other ways to get cash, and that many people on the card are being unfairly disadvantaged.

But Siewert said she feared “that regardless of the evidence, the government will move towards an extended rollout in some form” of the card.