



**PO Box 21
HALLS CREEK WA 6770
Tel: (08) 9168 6007
Fax: (08) 9168 6235
Email:
hcshire@hcshire.wa.gov**

Senator Zed Seselja
PO Box 6100
Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

8 October 2015

Dear Senator Seselja

SOCIAL SECURITY LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (DEBIT CARD TRIAL) BILL 2015

As you will be know the Shire of Halls Creek has resolved to oppose any trials of a cashless debit card as set out in our submission on the Social Security Legislation Amendment (Debit Card Trial) Bill 2015 to the Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee. The Shire has also advised Assistant Minister Tudge of our opposition and concerns related to the trials.

We would like to make you aware that a press release dated 2 October 2015 (Attachment 1) was subsequently made by the Shire which resulted in a report on the ABC news site (Attachment 2). In the report the Assistant Minister gave the following statement:

"At the end of the day, Halls Creek is not a safe place for everyone, particularly women. There were 1593 domestic assaults in 2013/14 from a population of 1,570. This is up from 906 in 2007/08. Much of this would have been alcohol-related, paid by the taxpayer through the welfare payments. This is what the Welfare Debit Card is aimed at addressing."

Having looked into the statistics quoted by the Assistant Minister the Shire believes these figures relate to police statistics for the entire Kimberley Region rather than the town of Halls Creek as set out in our second press release dated 7 October 2015 (Attachment 3). To date there has been no response from the Assistant Minister to this matter.

The Shire is genuinely concerned that the Assistant Minister would use incorrect statistics to defend the trials of a cashless debit card and that they would then be published in the national media. It is another example of the misuse of statistics to support a policy which will not achieve its stated intentions.

Furthermore the statement in the national media yet again paints a very negative picture of our town giving the rest of Australia a false image of the members of our community and what it is really like to live in our town.

We would urge you as Chair of the Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee Inquiry into the legislation to carefully consider the statistics presented to you by departmental staff giving the committee advice. Accurate and relevant background information is a cornerstone of robust decision making particularly for a government making legislation intended to make a real positive difference in the lives of individuals and communities.

We would also, once again, express the Shire's opposition to the legislation as it has been presented which will, amongst other things:

- Restrict the personal freedoms of responsible members of the community trying hard to do the right thing for their families,
- Make the elderly more vulnerable to abuse; and
- Ignore the documented outcomes of similar trials in the Northern Territory.

Kind Regards

~~Rodger Kerr-Newell~~

Chief Executive Officer

Copies to:

Senator Rachel Siewert – Deputy Chair Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee

Senator Dean Smith – Senator for Western Australia

Hon. Alan Tudge - Assistant Minister to the Prime Minister

Ms. Melissa Price MP – Member for Durack, Western Australia

Ms. Josie Farrer MLA – Kimberley

Ms. Jennifer Goolagong - A/g Assistant Secretary at Dept Prime Minister & Cabinet



Contacts: Malcolm Edwards, Shire President
Rodger Kerr-Newell, CEO

2 October 2015

Shire of Halls Creek – Cashless Credit Card Trial response

The Shire of Halls Creek has rejected the concept of Cashless Debit Card trials which are being considered by the Federal Government as a way to reduce alcohol and drug induced harm. The Shire is one of the locations under consideration for a trial of the new income support system proposed by the Department of Social Services.

At a Special Council meeting on 2 October 2015 the Shire resolved to advise the Government that it does not support the Cashless Debit Card trials being undertaken in the Shire or any other location.

'The stated intention of the Federal Government is fully supported but when we looked at the specifics that we know about the Cashless Debit Card system we just couldn't see how it would achieve that intention' said Shire President Malcolm Edwards.

The council report outlined the details of what the changes would mean for the 1300 people in the Shire who would be affected by the new system. It also raised a significant number of issues that needed to be addressed and answered by the Government before a trial could even be considered in the Shire. Central to the Shire's decision were the informal discussions councillors have been having with people in the Shire, the views of the Council's Aboriginal Advisory Committee and the outcomes of the evaluation of the Northern Territory income management system*.

'We know that some of the details of the Northern Territory system are different to the Cashless Debit Card but they are similar enough to see how the results would be the same – more dependence on welfare and little or no change in the way alcohol, drugs and gambling were impacting families'.

The Aboriginal Advisory Committee also noted that the system would unfairly restrict the majority of those on welfare who were already making responsible decisions about how they spend their money. It could also lead to an increase in crime as cash became more scarce and make the old people, who will not be automatically on the system, even more vulnerable to abuse.

Support services were also an issue of concern for the Shire. The existing support services around drug and alcohol abuse are already limited and despite promises of new services to cope with an anticipated increase in demand the Shire, based on recent experience, did not consider these would be adequate even if they did eventuate.

'In the end, after we have considered all the issues, we just can't see how the Cashless Debit Card system would significantly reduce problems around alcohol and drugs nor can we see the justification for restricting the financial independence of the responsible majority of people on income support in our community or any other for that matter'

*(Evaluating New Income Management in the Northern Territory: Final Evaluation Report – University of New South Wales September 2014

http://caepr.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/cck_misc_documents/2014/12/Evaluation%20of%20New%20Income%20Management%20in%20the%20Northern%20Territory_full%20report.pdf)



Halls Creek Aboriginal advisory council rejects cashless welfare card trial

ABC Kimberley By Ben Collins

Updated Tue 6 Oct 2015, 12:40pm

The Shire of Halls Creek's Aboriginal advisory committee has voted to reject a proposed trial of a health welfare card that would limit the proportion of cash made available to welfare recipients.

Assistant Minister to the Prime Minister Alan Tudge has been overseeing plans to trial a card that would make 80 per cent of welfare payments cashless, and only available via an electronic debit card that could not be used to purchase alcohol.

The trial was planned to begin in March 2016 in the South Australian town of Ceduna and the Kimberley towns of Kununurra and Halls Creek, in the north of Western Australia.

But Shire of Halls Creek president Malcolm Edwards said the shire had adopted the position of its Aboriginal advisory committee to reject the plan.

"At the last meeting, they voted against having the card. They thought it was a bit unfair because it targeted everyone," Mr Edwards told Natalie Jones on ABC Kimberley radio.

He said the Aboriginal advisory committee was representative of Aboriginal people in the Halls Creek area.

"They are representative of people right around from the town of Halls Creek, plus all the communities," he said.

"We've got an Aboriginal advisory committee. If we're not going to take any notice of them, then why do we have them?"

Lacking support services, consultation and evidence

Cr Edwards said the Halls Creek community was reluctant to take part in another trial after the town became one of two locations restricting the sale of full-strength takeaway alcohol in 2009.

"When the alcohol ban came into Halls Creek, we were under the assumption that we would get increased services, and that really hasn't happened," he said.

The process that has led to Halls Creek becoming a proposed trial location for the cashless welfare card has increased Cr Edwards' concerns about the way the plan will be implemented.

"Initially there was no consultation at all," Cr Edwards said.

"The first thing was the ABC rang me and asked me what I thought of the cashless card coming to Halls Creek, and that was the first I heard of it."

The Shire also cited a study of income management in the Northern Territory, which found no evidence of the program changing behaviour such as spending patterns and alcohol consumption.

Cr Edwards said the combined experiences had left the community not wanting to take part in the welfare card trial.



PHOTO: Halls Creek is a small town in the central Kimberley with a largely Aboriginal population. (ABC Kimberley: Hilary Smale)

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RELATED STORY: Kimberley local concerned about welfare card

MAP: Halls Creek 6770

We don't trust the government, I suppose.

Malcolm Edwards, Shire of Halls Creek president

"We don't trust the government, I suppose," he said.

Assistant Minister Tudge provided the following statement in response to the Shire of Halls Creek's position on the cashless welfare card.

"It is disappointing that Halls Creek Shire Council is against this trial, but I know from our consultations that there are many Indigenous leaders who are in favour of it. Our discussions will continue before making any decision.

"At the end of the day, Halls Creek is not a safe place for everyone, particularly women. There were 1593 domestic assaults in 2013/14 from a population of 1,570. This is up from 906 in 2007/08. Much of this would have been alcohol-related, paid by the taxpayer through the welfare payments. This is what the Welfare Debit Card is aimed at addressing."

Editor's note: the Assistant Minister's statement was added to this article an hour after it was first published.

Topics: welfare, alcohol, aboriginal, halls-creek-6770

First posted Tue 6 Oct 2015, 11:04am

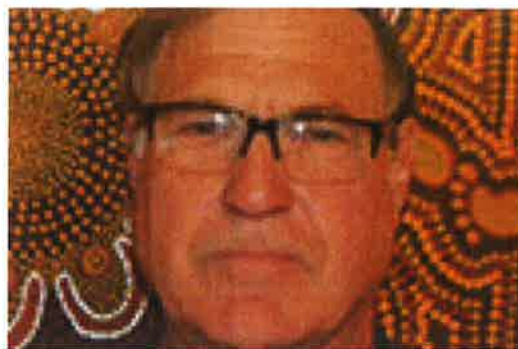


PHOTO: Shire of Halls Creek president, Malcolm Edwards. (Supplied: Shire of Halls Creek)



Contacts: Rodger Kerr-Newell, CEO
Malcolm Edwards, Shire President

7 October 2015

Shire of Halls Creek response to Assistant Minister's statement – 'If you make up the facts you can justify anything'

In reference to Federal Assistant Minister Tudge's statement about Halls Creek not being a safe place for people Rodger Kerr-Newell, Chief Executive Officer at the Shire of Halls Creek says

'If you make up the facts you can justify anything. The Assistant Minister appears to have attributed the statistics for domestic assaults for the entire Kimberley Region to the town of Halls Creek to prove that we should be included in the trial of the cashless debit card'

In the ABC news report 6 October 2015 'Halls Creek Aboriginal advisory council rejects cashless welfare card trial' Mr Tudge is quoted as saying:

"At the end of the day, Halls Creek is not a safe place for everyone, particularly women. There were 1593 domestic assaults in 2013/14 from a population of 1,570. This is up from 906 in 2007/08. Much of this would have been alcohol-related, paid by the taxpayer through the welfare payments. This is what the Welfare Debit Card is aimed at addressing."

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-10-06/halls-creek-aboriginal-advisory-committee-rejects-cashless-welf/6830742?WT.ac=localnews_kimberley

Council believe the figures quoted refer to the entire Kimberley District - as evidenced in the Western Australian Police Service Monthly Verified crime statistics 2013/2014 in which domestic assault numbers are reported at 1,593 for the region. The regional figures for the 2007/2008 year as reported in the crime statistics also match the Assistant Minister's figure of 906.

<http://www.police.wa.gov.au/ABOUTUS/Statistics/CrimeStatistics/tabid/1219/Default.aspx>

The Kimberley District is defined as the four Shires of Broome, Derby/West Kimberley, Wyndham/East Kimberley and Halls Creek with a total estimated 2013 population of 39,890 (Australian Bureau of Statistics).

The figures quoted are not only incorrect but grossly contradict the trend of the statistics released by the Western Australian Police to the Government of Western Australia Drug and Alcohol Office for use in their report 'The Impact of Liquor Restrictions in Halls Creek Quantitative Data – Five Years Post-restriction' which is available on the DAOs website:

http://www.dao.health.wa.gov.au/DesktopModules/Bring2mind/DMX/Download.aspx?Command=Core_Download&EntryId=1155&PortalId=0&TabId=211



Reporting on the number of verified domestic violence offences recorded by Halls Creek Police the report states that for the June 2008 to May 2009 period there were 201 offences and for the June 2013 to May 2014 period there were 109 offences in the town of Halls Creek.

'Is it any wonder that the community has no trust in the government and the way it justifies its latest plans to introduce a trial of a compulsory form of restrictive income support payments for all those on income support except the elderly?.'

Not only does this demonstrate the government's misuse of statistics it also shows their disregard for the communities they are elected by.

'Statements like this only reinforce to the community and Australia that the government sees Halls Creek as a problem and the people in it as dysfunctional. Everyone reading that erroneous comment was once again confronted with an extremely negative picture of the town driven by a Federal Assistant Minister based on incorrect information. Did the Assistant Minister not even question the statistics which indicated we have more domestic assaults per year than we have people living in the town? Is this really the best way to make significant decisions which impact on people's private lives on a daily basis?'

The Shire is well aware of the issues facing the community and the need to ensure all the people in the Shire are safe from harm and violence fuelled by alcohol. We are committed to finding ways which effectively improve the lives of the people in our community. We simply do not believe that the cashless debit card system will make any difference or change the behaviour of the minority of people who are the cause of the problems.