

The implementation and performance of the Cashless Debit Card Trial

The Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) has recently released a report assessing the performance of the Department of Social Services' (DSS) implementation and evaluation of the Cashless Debit Card Trial in Ceduna, SA and East Kimberley, WA.

The purpose of the audit was to 'identify whether the Department of Social Services (Social Services) was well placed to inform any further roll-out of the CDC with a robust evidence base'.¹ The report found that it was not possible to determine whether the objectives of the trial had been achieved, in particular, whether the trial had resulted in a reduction in social harm.

Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation

While the audit found that there were suitable governance arrangements and appropriate consultation and communication with the communities involved, the management of risks and procurement arrangements were found to be inadequate.

The audit identified a range of issues regarding monitoring and implementation. Many of the key performance indicators had no baseline data or specific targets and were not regularly reported against. There were no mechanisms in place to measure the success of the support services that were provided to the community. Furthermore, there were no clear lines of responsibility for managing the risk register, which meant that identified risks to the community were not adequately addressed.

The ANAO also identified a number of serious flaws in the evaluation of the trials. The report found that the process for scoring tenders to undertake the evaluation was incomplete, inconsistent and lacking transparency and there was no baseline survey data on which to base the evaluation due to late commencement. Available data was not used, or not used effectively, and some of the advice to the Minister was found to be lacking an evidence-base due to inaccurate analysis of data. Perhaps most critically, the evaluation was not designed to determine scalability, yet the results were used to expand the trial to a new location.

The ANAO made six recommendations, all of which have been agreed to by the Department of Social Services.

The Centre's position

The Centre welcomes this report from the ANAO which recognises the flawed evidence upon which further roll-outs of the Cashless Debit Card Trial have been based.

It is critically important that any new initiative is robustly evaluated. This is particularly so when people who are already experiencing vulnerability could potentially be further disadvantaged by a new program or scheme. Government has a responsibility to rigorously explore whether its interventions are effective.

Legislation is currently before parliament seeking to expand the trial to the Bundaberg and Hervey Bay areas in Queensland. In the absence of clear evidence that these trials have led to improved outcomes for participants and their communities, the Centre does not support expansion of the trial. We call on the federal government to fully implement the recommendations made by ANAO in the current trial sites and welcome the ANAO's role in holding government to account.

The report can be downloaded here:

<https://www.anao.gov.au/work/performance-audit/implementation-and-performance-cashless-debit-card-trial>

¹ Australian National Audit Office (ANAO), *The implementation and performance of the Cashless Debit Card Trial*, Auditor-General report no. 1 2018–19 performance audit, Australian National Audit Office, Barton, 2018, p. 7.