

EXCLUSIVE

NSW Minister suspends regional seniors travel card amid cigarette loophole

A travel card has been suspended after The Daily Telegraph revealed regional apprentices could buy cigarettes with taxpayer money last week.



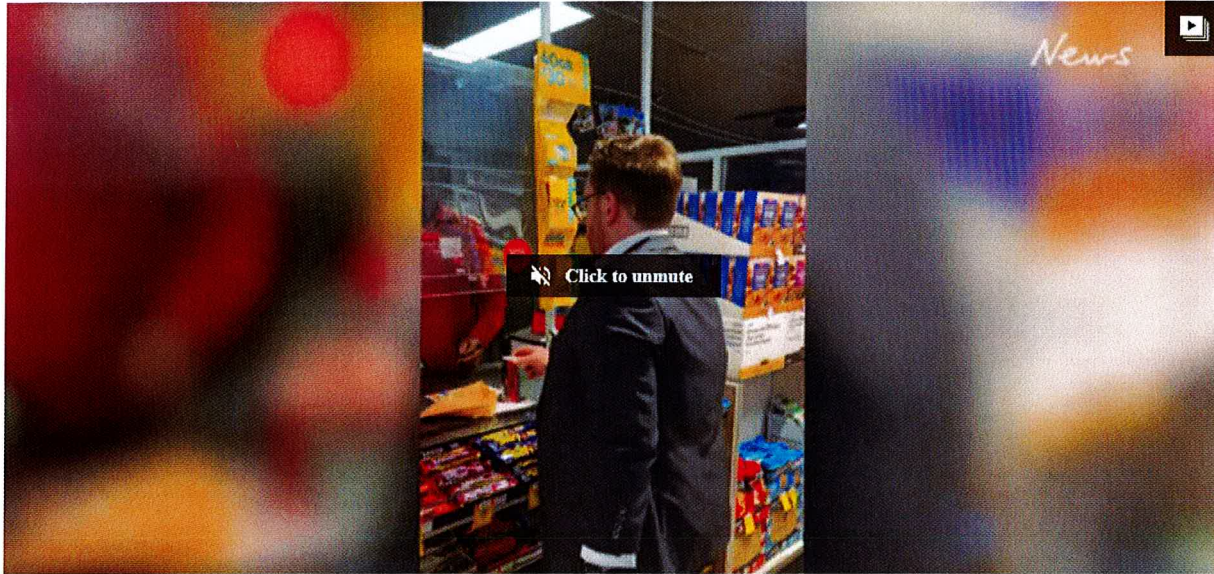
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Daily Telegraph

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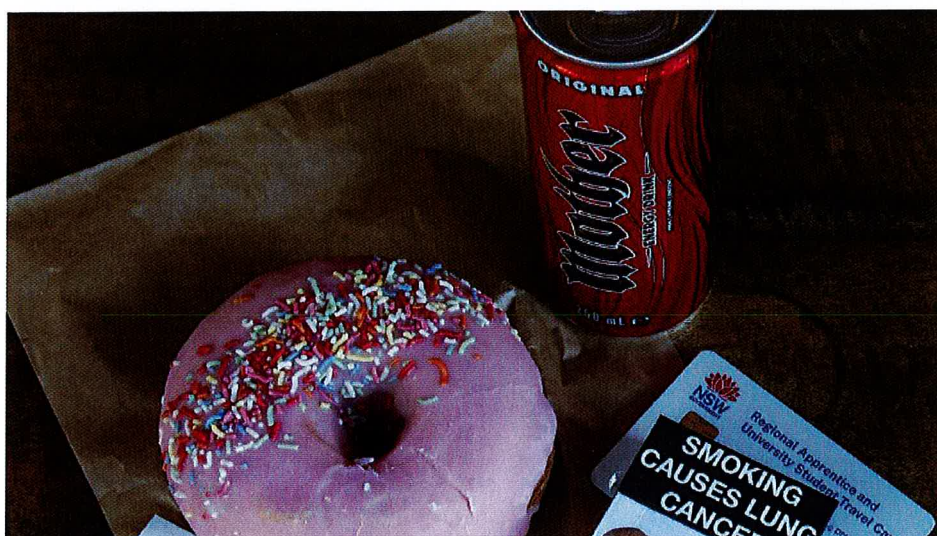
The Minns government has suspended a cost of living relief program worth hundreds of millions of dollars after revelations the prepaid travel card for regional seniors could be abused.

Bureaucrats have now been tasked with finding a way to close a loophole that [allowed recipients to buy cigarettes and junk food](#) with a \$250 taxpayer-funded card.

It can also be revealed that the department identified a risk that the card could be misused before the scheme was launched, but that problem could not be fixed.

New applications for the Regional Seniors Travel Card have been suspended while the department works to close the loophole.

The regional travel cards are on the chopping block as Premier Chris Minns looks to widespread cuts in the upcoming budget. Mr Minns has already slashed the Active Kids and Creative Kids vouchers, with further cuts on infrastructure spending expected.



NSW Government Regional Apprentice and University Student Travel Card, meant to help apprentice tradies and students purchase fuel and pay for travel, can also be used to purchase cigarettes. Picture: John Appleyard

The Daily Telegraph revealed last week that a card giving regional apprentices \$250 per year for travel costs could be used to buy anything sold at service stations – including cigarettes.

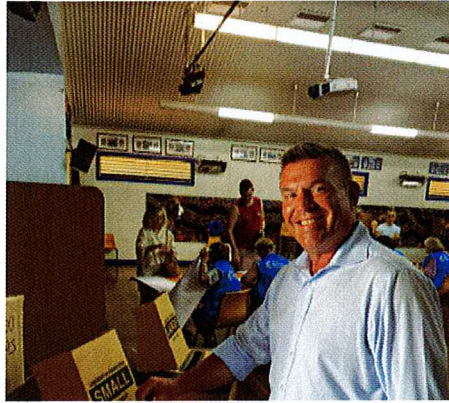
It can now be revealed that the Regional Seniors Travel card can also be exploited in the same way.

“The Minister has instructed the department to pause applications for the Regional Seniors Travel Card following the confirmation this card operates in the same manner as the Regional Apprentice and University Students Travel Card,” a spokeswoman said.

“The department has been directed to investigate options to remediate the issues this card has and report back to the Minister.”

Answers are expected as early as next week.

Both schemes are set to be axed in Treasurer Daniel Mookhey’s September budget.



Regional Transport Minister Jenny Aitchison has suspended applications for both cards. Picture: NCA NewsWire / Simon Bullard

Nationals Leader Dugald Saunders said the regional seniors travel cards "probably need to be reassessed".

"We as a government are committed to spending public money in the best interests of the people of NSW, and the fact is, this does not seem to meet that benchmark in its current form," Ms Aitchison's spokeswoman said.

Nationals Leader Dugald Saunders defended the regional seniors card, but acknowledged it might need to be tweaked to close the loophole.

"The cards probably need to be reassessed but the cards are still a really important part of supporting regional seniors," he told the Telegraph.

"If there needs to be things tweaked, they should be. But in the meantime it has been an extremely successful support mechanism for regional seniors."

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The Regional Seniors Travel card was launched as a Covid cost of living measure in 2020. It has cost \$343.74 million over three years.

The Regional Seniors Travel Card was supposed to help seniors in the bush, similar to how the Gold Seniors Opal card gives cut-price fares for seniors in Sydney.

While the card can only be used at certain retailers, bureaucrats were unable to place any restrictions

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While the card can only be used at certain retailers, bureaucrats were unable to place any restrictions on what can be bought at approved vendors.

“The cards are restricted to certain merchants based on their category code,” a Transport for NSW spokeswoman said.

“While this allows restrictions to be placed on the types of businesses the travel card could be used at it does not restrict specific purchases within businesses.”

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