



Response to the proposal for the future of Wilmslow Jobcentre

Response to consultation

July 2017

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Background

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) announced new proposals on Thursday 26 January 2017 to relocate some of its Jobcentre Plus offices.

Jobcentre Plus operations have changed in recent years as people make more use of online and telephone services, generally only attending offices for appointments or for help in researching job vacancies.

To reflect this, achieve more efficient use of DWP premises and save public money, the following change was proposed to move from Wilmslow to Macclesfield Jobcentre.

Guidelines around the movement of jobcentres, referred to as 'ministerial criteria', have been used for many years across the whole of the UK network. They originated from a desire to standardise the circumstances when considering the movement of one jobcentre to another.

DWP believes that it is reasonable to expect claimants to travel 3 miles or 20 minutes by public transport from their existing jobcentre. Where it is proposed to move or close an office, and the move to a new jobcentre is outside of these criteria, DWP has the option to consult publicly about these changes. The proposal to move the jobcentre at Wilmslow to Macclesfield falls outside of this criteria:

- distance: 7.7 miles
- public Transport: approximately 35 minutes
- car: 20 minutes

The public consultation paper, ***Proposal for the future of Wilmslow Jobcentre***, was published on 30 January 2017. It invited comments from everyone with an interest in the future of this jobcentre. This included the closure of the building with the services provided being transferred to Macclesfield Jobcentre.

DWP's estate strategy

On 31 March 2018, DWP's PFI PRIME (Private Finance Initiative for the management of the estate) contract with Telereal Trillium expires. This 20-year contract covers the majority of DWP's current property portfolio of 966 sites. This provides an opportunity to review which offices are needed in the future, taking account of the increased use of online services, the reforms being implemented over the coming years and the anticipated demand on services.

The roll out of Universal Credit and reforms of Jobcentre Plus, have increased the number of interactions claimants now have with DWP online. For example, eight out of ten claims for Jobseeker's Allowance are now made using digital channels and 99.6% of applications for Universal Credit are submitted online. At the same time, DWP has seen record levels of employment across the UK, with the claimant count dropping to around 800,000 now.

As a result, 20% of the space DWP currently occupies is no longer being used: even allowing contingency for any medium term increase in demand. This offers a major opportunity for both modernisation and rationalisation: over the next 10 years, DWP expects to save £180m per annum on average as a result. When considering how to achieve this, DWP's priority has been to offer the best possible service to claimants while delivering a good deal for the taxpayer.

Summary of responses

Thirteen responses to the consultation proposals were received.

DWP is grateful for all the contributions made in response to the consultation.

The respondents have been categorised as follows:

- 4 responses were from claimants
- 6 responses were from individuals or members of the public
- 3 responses were from local organisations

Response themes

Themes are summarised as follows.

Travel time

Sixty-nine per cent of responders were concerned about the increase in travelling time. These related specifically to longer journey times, the inconvenience and increased difficulties.

Typical comments:

"The bus to Macclesfield takes 35-50 minutes, runs every 2 hours and costs £5.50 return. The closest bus stop is 15 minutes walk from my house... This would obviously have an impact in the amount of time I could spend looking for and applying for jobs."

"Bus services to Wilmslow are presently very good from Knutsford, with the 88 service running pretty much every 30 minutes, whereas buses services to Macclesfield are only every two hours or so."

"The distance to Macclesfield would be too much for the largely vulnerable group of people that you deal with."

"I live in Knutsford which means travelling to Macclesfield will be both costly and inconvenient..."

Response

DWP believes that it is reasonable to expect claimants to travel to an office within 3 miles, or 20 minutes by public transport from their existing jobcentre. Wilmslow Jobcentre falls outside these criteria so DWP chose to consult publicly.

Specific travel times and public transport routes have been compiled - see [Annex C](#)

DWP's work coaches personalise the support provided for each claimant based on individual need and circumstance. Where claimants have limitations due to a health condition or disability or because of caring responsibilities, then this is taken into account when arranging any attendance. DWP has various ways of interacting with vulnerable claimants, including

- face-to-face
- by email
- by telephone
- by post
- by SMS

However, DWP recognises that some claimants will be taking an unfamiliar journey: work coaches will support claimants over the transition period until they become familiar with new travel arrangements. Claimants can also request to attend a jobcentre that is closer to their home. Work coaches will help signpost claimants in such circumstances.

Travel cost

Fifty-four per cent of respondents expressed concern about the potential increase in travel costs and the impact this would have on disposable income.

Typical comments:

"If there is no centre in Wilmslow, users must catch a bus to Macclesfield at £5 per return trip. This is only partly reimbursed, especially if they are on weekly sign-ins. The rest comes out of their benefits."

"Cost wise I doubt that everyone affected is going to be financially supported in their extra costs to get to Macclesfield JCP."

"It is totally unfair to expect everyone to pay to travel when they are only receiving Job Seekers Allowance which is a minimal amount anyway."

Response

DWP acknowledge that the proposals included in the consultation may increase travel costs for some claimants when they are required to attend a jobcentre. This will be particularly so for those who currently live within easy reach of their current jobcentre. DWP are able to reimburse travel costs for claimants and customers, taking into account their particular circumstances, who are asked to attend the jobcentre outside of their minimum requirement of attendance. This is not new and is the case for any claimant required to attend a jobcentre throughout the UK.

Support to meet travel costs is also available to eligible claimants via the Jobcentre Plus Travel Discount Card. Claimants can also choose to attend a jobcentre closer to their home, should there be one. Work coaches will help signpost claimants in such circumstances.

Access to services

Fifteen per cent of respondents expressed concern about the adverse effect, on the local community, of removing access to services and support for vulnerable benefit claimants and those seeking work.

Typical comment:

“I suspect that this move will not improve the outcome for your jobseekers. It will be to their detriment.”

Response

DWP is not reducing its services and is committed to retaining an accessible jobcentre network. This proposal ensures that DWP can respond better to customer demand, support the move towards Universal Credit and increase flexibility to deliver services across the full working day.

DWP fully recognises the value of the developed relationship between claimants, work coaches and with partners. These will continue after services have moved to Macclesfield Jobcentre.

Sanctions

Fifteen per cent of respondents expressed concern that the number of sanctions issued would increase if the proposed jobcentre closures went ahead.

It was been stated that longer more complex journeys by public transport could lead to increased lateness or failure to attend appointments. This might then affect the time available to claimants to search for jobs. Concerns have been expressed about the effect on public transport services of external factors such as the length of travel

Typical comment:

“People who fail to arrive at appointments or arrive late will be penalised in the current system.”

Response

The National Audit Office has estimated that a million jobseekers missed appointments between July 2015 and December 2015 compared with only 34,000 sanction referrals. This reduction is specifically due to on-going work to ensure claimants know and understand expectations with their work coaches. The number of sanction decisions for failure to attend, or failure to participate in a work coach interview without good cause, has fallen.

Concern about public transport will continue to be considered on an individual basis. DWP do not expect this proposal to result in additional sanctions, as a direct result of the impact of travel journeys beyond the claimant's control.

DWP recognise that some claimants will be taking an unfamiliar journey: work coaches will support claimants over the transition period until they become familiar with new travel arrangements

It should also be noted that claimants, including those with vulnerabilities, are only asked to meet reasonable requirements. These take into account their individual circumstances, capability (including health conditions) disability and caring responsibilities.

Outreach

Thirty-one per cent of respondents expressed the view that a 'footprint' or outreach facility should exist in the local community. People acknowledged that this type of service would not replace the jobcentre but could provide advice, support or guidance for claimants or jobsearch in the event of any closures.

"The Town Council supports proposals to deliver more services more locally and introducing the delivery of services alongside organisations such as the Welcome, Library service and the Citizens Advice Bureau is to be encouraged."

"We would urge you to consider maintaining a physical presence in the Wilmslow area even if you close the present office site by having staff in other local Government buildings e.g. libraries, Council offices."

Response

DWP are committed to retaining a jobcentre network and continuing to serve people in all areas of the UK to make sure they can continue to access the tailored services they need. When a full-time jobcentre closes following a public consultation, we will put an 'outreach' service in place within the local community.

Outreach is a vital front-facing service to claimants. Host organisations offer access to their facilities as part of the ongoing partnership activities with DWP. This allows work coaches and partner organisations to work together to support the joint needs of claimants. DWP are currently working with partner organisations within the local area to develop an outreach service following the closure of Wilmslow Jobcentre. What this service will offer will be publicised ahead of the closures.

Equality assessment

DWP has been mindful of its duties under the Equality Act 2010 and has carried out local jobcentre level consultation to inform understanding of the effect of the proposal. Careful consideration has been given to the wider effect on the local communities. DWP will maintain services to claimants, whether in their existing

jobcentre where a decision is made to retain that office or, where their existing jobcentre will close, at an alternative site.

DWP recognises that these proposals represent a major change that will have a greater impact on some groups with protected characteristics than others, as evidenced by the consultation responses.

DWP has had due regard to the impact of the proposals throughout programme development, as evidenced by the high level equality analysis that was undertaken before the proposal was finalised and by the consultation and full Equality Analysis that has just been undertaken.

Conclusion and next steps

DWP has considered the points raised by all of the people and organisations that have responded to the consultation. The points raised by respondents do highlight difficulties raised in making these changes, but DWP has to balance the need to provide services along with the budget it has to deliver those services.

After careful consideration of the responses, it is DWP's view that these do not provide a basis to amend or change the proposal to close Wilmslow Jobcentre and move the services to Macclesfield Jobcentre.

Consequently, the recommendation of this report is to proceed with the proposal to close Wilmslow. DWP will also explore 'outreach' opportunities to situate a part-time work coach service providing advice and support within a community location.

Annex A: questionnaire

The consultation paper invited responses to the following questions:

Question 1: Do you agree with the proposals? What overall comments would you like to make on the proposals?

Question 2: Will the proposals to close Wilmslow Jobcentre have a direct impact on you? If yes, please provide further details.

Question 3: If you currently use Jobcentre Plus services at these Jobcentres, what impacts are there on the time and cost taken to travel to your new Jobcentre?

Question 4: Are there any other particular impacts of the proposals that DWP should take into account when making a decision?

Question 5: Are there alternative services that could be provided that would be a benefit to some claimants? For example, this could be a member of Jobcentre Plus staff based in a community venue to provide help with looking for work. Please explain your answer, with specific examples and evidence of the potential demand for the service where possible.

Question 6: Please provide any additional comments that you have.

Annex B: list of respondents

In addition to members of the public and claimants who responded to the consultation, the following named individuals and organisations provided a response:

- The Welcome
- Hampers of Hope
- Knutsford Town Council

Annex C: travel information

- No. 130 bus Wilmslow (SK9) to Macclesfield bus station every 30 mins until 6:30 - 45mins journey £5.30 day ticket
- Trains from Wilmslow (SK9) to Macclesfield 2 per hour - 30 mins journey £8.90 return