



Department
for Work &
Pensions

Response to the proposal for the future of Eltham 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 with people making more use of online and telephone services, only attending offices for appointments or help in researching job vacancies.

To reflect this, achieve more efficient use of DWP premises and to save public money, the following change was proposed: to close Eltham Jobcentre, transferring staff and services into Woolwich 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 falls outside these criteria, DWP has the option to consult publicly about these changes. The proposed relocation of services from Eltham Jobcentre to Woolwich Jobcentre falls outside these criteria:

- distance: 4 miles
- public transport: 23 minutes
- car: 15 minutes

The public consultation paper, ***Proposal for the future of Eltham Jobcentre***, was published on 30 January 2017. It invited comments from everyone with an interest in the future of this jobcentre including the proposed closure of the building, and the transfer of its services to Woolwich 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 made online. At the same time, DWP has seen record levels of employment across the UK, with the claimant count dropping to its current level of around 800,000.

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

There were 12 responses, in total, to the public consultation proposal:

- 1 from member of the public
- 8 from claimants
- 3 from organisations

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

The consultation was seeking the views of everyone with an interest in Eltham Jobcentre's services.

Response themes

The response themes are summarised as follows.

Travel time

Nine respondents were concerned about the increase in travel time. These related specifically to longer journey times, inconvenience and increased difficulties.

Typical comments:

"...usually in excess of an hour to do some 5 miles...with the buses taking a convoluted route plus stopping for passengers to alight and get on plus allowing for traffic, which is usually slow and heavy in Woolwich...the traffic for the Woolwich ferry causing tailbacks and massive queues..."

"...the Journey to Job Centre Plus at Woolwich will involve two buses in both directions and will take up to 1 hour approx..."

"...travel time will be increased for those who reside in areas that require two buses each way..."

“...benefit claimants have to travel further to access jobcentre service, They will incur additional expense that they can ill afford and parents with young children, older claimants and those with disability will be particularly disadvantaged...”

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.

It should 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.

DWP’s work coaches personalise the support provided for each claimant based on individual needs and circumstances. 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

Concerns about public transport will continue to be considered on an individual basis. However, DWP recognises that some claimants will be taking an unfamiliar journey. Work coaches will support them over the transition period until they become familiar with new travel arrangements. Claimants can also choose to attend a different jobcentre if it is closer to their home or if there are any safety concerns. Work coaches will help signpost claimants in such circumstances.

[Annex C](#) provides additional detailed travel information for claimants travelling from the Eltham area to Woolwich Jobcentre.

Travel cost

Four respondents expressed concern about the potential increase in travel costs and the impact this would have on disposable income.

Typical comments:

“...the closure of the Eltham Office will cause me so much hardship and difficulty. I use the Bus to get to Eltham, and being relocated to Woolwich will involve 2 Buses to get there and two Buses to return, thus doubling my travelling expenses. I cannot always afford the Bus fare for the single bus needed to get to Eltham, and have to walk some 5 miles to get there: having to get to Woolwich will be too far for me to walk...”

“...the proposals will have a direct impact on residents in the south of the Borough, who will have to travel to Woolwich and pay fares to get there. Bus journeys take on average 40 minutes each way with a round-trip costing £3...”

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.

[Annex C](#) provides additional detailed travel information for claimants travelling from the Eltham area to Woolwich Jobcentre.

Access to services

Seven respondents expressed concern that closing Eltham Jobcentre would have an affect on vulnerable benefit claimants and those seeking work.

Typical comments:

“...clients with mental health issues and disabilities find the large space at Woolwich difficult to access; it is a barrier to them finding employment rather than a support...”

“...we have a built a good relationship at Eltham enabling us to support many of your customers with mental health issues. Woolwich appears to have a different culture and we have struggled to gain the same working relationship, despite many attempts in different ways to engage with work coaches...”

“...I found it [Woolwich Jobcentre] extremely busy and the tension almost explosive, the security and the staff extremely unhelpful and very officious. I didn't feel at all safe, it was far too volatile I was spoken to very rudely despite being polite and following orders...”

“...this possible office closure from the Eltham to Woolwich is a real Handicap for me as li have been Medically dependant on my Son taking me to these appointments at Eltham because unable to travel following a near fatal heart attack some time ago...”

“...reduced computer and IT provision, there could be a considerable impact on access to IT services and support for online claims and other DWP online services, with the burden passing to Local Authority library resources and staff...”

Response

DWP is not reducing its services and is committed to retaining an accessible jobcentre network. The proposal will ensure 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.

The overall aim is to provide an enhanced service in jobcentres. IT equipment will be moved and rehoused in Woolwich Jobcentre. Claimants will continue to be encouraged to bring their own electronic devices into jobcentres to make good use of DWP's free Wi-Fi to help them manage their online claim and support their jobsearch activities. Dedicated staff will be available to support claimants by delivering services and additional support in our digital suites. For those claimants who do not have access to IT equipment, the following centres offer free online access:

- Blackheath Library
- Coldharbour Hall
- Eltham Centre
- Greenwich Local Labour And Business
- Old Library
- New Eltham Library
- The Point

The excellent working relationships that are already in place with voluntary and partner organisations, and employers, will be maintained, with plans to build on these over the coming year. Eltham Work Coaches will continue to maintain and build good relationships with local organisations. Both of these offices share the same Partnership Manager who will continue to build and maintain relationships across the Borough of Greenwich.

Flexible tailored support will continue to be offered to meet customer needs including the delivery of specific group sessions, co-delivered with employers and partners if appropriate, and tailored to offer maximum support. The proposals will ensure claimants have full access to employers via job fairs, recruitment events and, networking events that currently cannot take place in all offices due to space and resource constraints. The department aims to provide a consistently high level of service across all of our sites.

DWP fully recognises the value of the developed relationship between claimants and work coaches and this will continue after services have moved. Unless there are exceptional circumstances, claimants will retain their current work coach who will continue to deliver tailored and personalised support from the new jobcentre wherever possible.

DWP delivers a front line service and a number of measures have been implemented to ensure risks of incidents are minimised, such as Customer Service Officers. These measures are regularly reviewed to ensure the continued safety of our customers. Concerns about access to services and the safety of vulnerable claimants have been mentioned: see response to **Travel Time**.

Sanctions

Two respondents were concerned that longer more complex journeys, by public transport, could lead to increased lateness or failure to attend appointments.

Typical comment:

"...this time for this journey does not include any incidents or accidents that might occur on route - only normal traffic flow. If I were late to arrive for an appointment I would be sanctioned..."

Response

The longer more complex journey may be particularly difficult for more vulnerable claimants: See response to **Travel Time**.

Concern about public transport will continue to be considered on an individual basis. 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, should there be one. Work coaches will help signpost claimants in such circumstances.

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 the on-going work to ensure claimants know and understand expectations with their work coaches.

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

Outreach

Three respondents expressed the view that a 'footprint' or outreach facility should be left in the Eltham area.

Typical comments:

"...we would welcome the opportunity to work with you to look at ways to support people in the community which would improve outcomes and reduce costs..."

"...we would welcome the opportunity to jointly plan outreach options with DWP, utilising the extensive outreach provision delivered by Council departments. Co-location could be explored at a number of venues ..."

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 Eltham Jobcentre. What this service will offer will be publicised ahead of the closures.

Equality analysis

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 may have a greater impact on some groups with protected characteristics than others, as evidenced by the consultation responses, and consideration has been given to how any such impacts can be mitigated.

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 Eltham Jobcentre and relocate services to Woolwich Jobcentre.

Consequently, the recommendation of this report is to proceed with the proposal to close Eltham Jobcentre and transfer services to Woolwich Jobcentre.

Annex A: questionnaire

The consultation paper invited responses to the following questions:

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

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

Question 3: If you currently use Jobcentre Plus services at this jobcentre, 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 proposal 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 Organisations provided a response:

- Public and Commercial Services Union
- Royal Borough of Greenwich
- Social Enterprise Employment Company

Annex C: detailed travel information

Travel times for claimants travelling within the Eltham area to Woolwich Jobcentre are as follows:

- the shortest and longest bus journey take about 28 minutes and about 62 minutes
- some claimants travelling from the furthest away postcode areas may need to catch 2 buses or 2 trains
- the journey by train takes about 55 minutes

Travel costs for claimants travelling from the Eltham area to Woolwich Jobcentre:

- cost of travel is £1.50 for a single bus journey ticket. If two bus journeys are taken within one hour of each other a single fare will cover both journeys
- a day ticket for travel by bus costs £4.50 and applies to all journeys that day
- the daily cap for train journeys is £9.50