



Department
for Work &
Pensions

Response to the proposal for the future of Southall 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 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 Southall Jobcentre to Ealing and Acton Jobcentres.

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 these criteria, DWP has the option to consult publicly about these changes. The proposal to move the jobcentre at Southall to Acton falls outside these criteria:

- Southall to Ealing Jobcentre: 2.8 miles
- Southall to Acton Jobcentre: 8.3 miles

The public consultation paper, ***Proposal for the future of Southall 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 other jobcentres within the borough of Ealing.

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.

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 offering the best possible service to claimants while delivering a good deal for the taxpayer.

Summary of responses

Sixty-nine 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:

- 17 responses were from claimants
- 44 responses were from individuals or members of the public
- 1 response was from the MP
- 7 responses were from organisations

Detailed responses were received from Ealing Equality Council and Ealing Borough Trades Union Council.

A number of responses were received from the Public and Commercial Services (PCS), the local trade union representing members in the area. There were also representations from DWP members of staff. The consultation was seeking the views of everyone with an interest in Southall Jobcentre's services. These representations from PCS and DWP staff have been included within this report for completeness as well as forming part of the internal employee consultation.

Response themes

The themes are summarised as follows.

Travel time

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

Typical comments:

"The extra time being wasted making this travel which depending on traffic could be an hour each way. I feel this time could be better spent on looking for employment."

"While Southall Jobcentre is situated at the heart of the most deprived areas of my constituency, often within easy walking distance, Ealing Jobcentre fails both of those tests."

“Although the nearest alternative Jobcentre to Southall (Ealing) is just within 3 miles, that only works on a map, not on the ground.”

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. Through consultation, the catchment area of each jobcentre has been investigated and the specific travel times and bus and tube routes have been compiled, [Annex D](#)

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

Travel cost

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

Typical comments:

“Traveling to Ealing or Acton means traveling 3 to 4 miles to attend appointments. The cost and inconvenience of this will cause, won't be helping customers at all.”

“An extra couple of bus journeys might not mean anything to someone with a regular income but as anyone who has been living on benefits knows - every penny counts.”

“I and many others would be affected by additional bus fare and lengthy time to travel to Ealing.”

“Currently by having my Jobcentre so close to my home address, I am able to attend my compulsory appointments in a short 15 minute walk. This saves me £3, the equivalent of 2/5 of my weekly food budget.”

“It takes me 10 minutes to walk to Southall Jobcentre for my appointment and if I went to Ealing Jobcentre instead then it may take up to 30 to 40 minutes because of the traffic in Southall and west Ealing.”

Response

DWP acknowledges that the proposals included in the consultation are likely to increase travel costs for some claimants when they are required to attend Ealing or Acton Jobcentres. This will be particularly so for those who currently live within easy reach of Southall.

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

Access to services

Fifty-six 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. They raised specific concerns about Universal Credit roll out and the loss of access to computers and support on offer at Southall Jobcentre.

Typical comments:

"I understand that cut back have to be made but this is taking away vital services to the Southall community."

"Claimants also have a chance to use the facilities at the job centre like job searching/applying for free as they may not have a pc at home but still is possible to go to the library as well."

"All community members will suffer and they will face a lot of inconvenience if they had to travel to another area to attend to their appointments or for any other need ."

"...it [Southall Jobcentre] provides positive changes to peoples life's through financial aid... I can assure you that closure of the centre will result in far more pressure and tighter budgets on the local claimants."

"It's important to note that the need for foodbanks in Southall has increased. The increased cost of travel and risk of additional sanctions due to unreliable public transport means more could be put into hardship and food poverty, should the proposed Jobcentre closure go ahead."

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.

There is confidence that the additional workload can be accommodated in the new jobcentres with the capacity to expand as necessary. Working practices and service delivery methods will continue to be reviewed and adopted to maximise the use of the estate.

The aim is to provide an enhanced IT service in both Ealing and Acton Jobcentres: IT equipment will be moved from Southall and rehoused at both offices. Claimants will be encouraged to bring their own electronic devices into the jobcentre to make good use of DWP's free Wi-Fi to help them manage their online claim and support their jobsearch activities.

The need for space for support organisations has been considered as part of space planning. The proposal means that partners will be able to reduce the number of sites they attend and will have access to a larger customer base. The excellent working relationships that are already in place with voluntary and partner organisations will be maintained with plans to build on these over the coming year.

DWP fully recognises the value of the developed relationship between claimants, work coaches and with partners. These will continue after services have moved to Ealing and Acton Jobcentres and food bank vouchers are available through a range of partner organisations in the area.

Sanctions

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

It has 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:

- congestion
- length of travel

Typical comments:

"If I arrive late for my appointments due to traffic then there is also the risk of sanction."

"Given the excess strictness applied to those even a minute late for signing on, who are then deprived of their benefits, it seems nonsensical to move the Jobcentre further away..."

“I am worried that I may be sanctioned if I fail to get to appointments on time due to travel delays.”

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 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.

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.

Outreach

Four per cent of respondents expressed the view that a ‘footprint’ or outreach facility should exist in the local community, although this may be too difficult for one Work Coach to handle. People acknowledged that this type of service would not replace the jobcentre but could provide advice, support or guidance for claimants about their benefits or jobsearch in the event of any closures.

“I feel that there should be an advisor at the local library that is available for claimants looking for work that provide information about new and upcoming businesses who are looking for staff and also give advice on how to apply.”

“Although I am strongly opposed to the closure of the current Southall Jobcentre, if it does go ahead then it will be vital to provide appropriate local support. The main community venues that are well-used locally are faith buildings, and it would be vital to have Jobcentre Plus staff in the main Sikh Gurdwaras, Mosques, Hindu Temples and Churches.”

Response

Partnerships are an integral part of DWP’s service delivery model and plans are being produced to ensure the close working with local groups and voluntary organisations to maximise customer support available from all our offices. These will be monitored to assess the effect of these proposals and steps will be put in place to provide additional support as required.

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

Vulnerability

Forty-five per cent of responders referred to the most vulnerable customers, living in particularly deprived areas of the Southall area and the adverse effect that closing the jobcentre would have on the community.

Typical responses:

“I work at a church in Southall, and have regular contact with many vulnerable people across Southall who I know would be disproportionately adversely affected by this closure.”

“It is absolutely clear this proposal will have severe negative consequences for vulnerable users of the services. This is a vital part of the social infrastructure and should not be closed.”

“...many of them are vulnerable, with mental or physical health problems, many face other challenges such as language or other cultural barriers.”

Response

DWP recognises the value of the developed relationship between claimants and work coaches, and the established links would continue after services have moved to Ealing and Acton Jobcentres.

Equality analysis

Fifty-four per cent of respondents have referred to the multicultural area that Southall Jobcentre currently serves.

Typical comments:

“The multicultural atmosphere is well suited to the locale and the proposed move is - in my humble opinion - harmful and unnecessary as it would inconvenience both the people who work there and those who rely upon the offices multiple services”

“There should be consideration for language barriers so perhaps these advisors could have information and advice in an ethnic language.”

“If this planned closure goes ahead it will present an obstacle to people in Southall getting a job and this will be bad for the economy. The local staff often speak mother tongue languages which contributes to local people feeling more confident and ready

for a job. Local knowledge of local staff must also be prized. The large population of Southall also merits a Jobcentre of its own.”

Response

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 this proposal throughout its 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 Southall Jobcentre and relocate services to Ealing and Acton Jobcentre.

Consequently, the recommendation of this report is to proceed with the proposal to close Southall Jobcentre and transfer services to Ealing and Acton Jobcentres.

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 Southall 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:

- Greenfield Children's Centre
- Near Neighbours
- Centre for Armenian Information and Advice
- Southall Community Alliance
- London Borough of Ealing Council (Head of Regeneration)
- Ealing Equality Council
- Councillor Ranjit Dheer

Annex C: detailed responses

- Public and Commercial Services Union
- Ealing Equality Council
- Ealing Borough Trades Union Council

Annex D: travel information

Claimants, customers and staff commuting between Southall Jobcentre and Acton/Ealing Jobcentres:

- the nearest train station is Southall National Rail Station which is a 5 to 10 mins. walk from the jobcentre
- it takes 12 mins. by train to reach Ealing Broadway Train station and costs £1.50
There are 4 trains leaving the station every hour
- the nearest bus stop would be the St Georges Avenue/Southall Broadway bus stop (18 mins on the 207/427 costing £1.50 or 14 mins on the express 607 bus from Southall Police Station bus stop)

207 Timetable:

- 7am to 8am: every 3 to 6 mins
- 8am to 7pm: every 4 to 8 mins

427 Timetable:

- 7am to 8pm: every 5 to 9 mins.

607 Timetable:

- 6am to 8am: Every 8 to 12 mins.

Acton Jobcentre is on the same route and is further up the Uxbridge Road. This also costs £1.50 and takes 33 mins on the 607 express bus route and 47 mins on the 207 or 427 route.

- National Railways offer the following tickets at 50% discount rate:
 - Savers & Super Savers
 - Standard Day and Open Singles and Returns
 - Season Tickets: 1 week minimum/3 months maximum
 - Cheap Day Singles and Returns
 - Standard Day Singles and Returns
 - Network Away Breaks