



Department
for Work &
Pensions

Response to the proposal for the future of Westminster Jobcentre

Response to consultation

July 2017

Contents

- Background 2
- DWP’s estate strategy 2
- Summary of responses 3
- Response themes 3
 - Travel time 3
 - Travel cost 4
 - Access to services 5
 - Vulnerability 6
 - Equality analysis 7
 - Outreach 8
- Conclusions and next steps 8
- Annex A: questionnaire 10
- Annex B: list of respondents 11

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, a proposal was made to move Westminster to Marylebone 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 further than these criteria, DWP has the option to consult publicly about this proposal. The proposal to move to Marylebone Jobcentre falls outside these criteria as follows:

- distance: 3.2 miles
- public Transport: approximately 26 minutes
- car: 14 minutes

The public consultation paper, ***Proposal for the future of Westminster 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 another jobcentre within London.

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 gives DWP 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 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 a 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

Twenty-three 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:

- 18 were from individuals or members of the public
- 5 were from organisations

Response themes

The following summarises the responses by grouping issues into a series of themes.

Travel time

Forty eight per cent of the responses expressed concerns about the increase in travel time to visit the new jobcentre. Concerns cited included:

- inconvenience with the ability to walk to the office now
- journey times on public transport due to congestion
- length of travel
- increased difficulties for vulnerable groups; those with disabilities and those caring for young children

Typical comments:

"...what is normally a 15 min walk could turn into hours of sitting in traffic on the bus."

"... congested traffic could be a big factor in being late which I have always been able to avoid as I can walk to my current centre."

"...a large number have health and mobility problems which affect their ability to travel around the city..."

"The figure of 26 minutes by public transport is again very optimistic and we assume this would be if travelling by tube. Our clients, who are struggling to make ends meet on their benefits, simply cannot afford to travel by tube..."

"... From experience I know that, using the bus, travelling door to door from many homes within the surrounding area (in Pimlico for example) can take over 45 minutes, depending on the time of day."

“...it is impractical to walk to it because of the great distance involved. We would have to use public transport.”

“...for a significant number of claimants will offer a closer Jobcentre but not all... should have options to access an office that is closer, not just adding time and money to their day.”

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.

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

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.

Concerns about public transport are an everyday issue and will continue to be considered on an individual basis.

DWP recognises that some claimants will be taking an unfamiliar journey so work coaches will support them 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, for example, if there are any safety concerns with gangs. Work coaches will help signpost claimants in such circumstances.

Travel cost

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

It has been argued that claimants will face a more expensive journey to get to their jobcentre and many will no longer have the option to walk thus incurring additional expense.

Typical comments:

“...generally I am literally penniless and this last week I wouldn't have been able to afford to attend my signing...”

“...would cause me great hardship. I could not afford the costs...”

“I have to budget and live on the £73 a week Jobseeker's Allowance....This effectively means.....will be taking a cut in our already tight budgets of up to £4.80 for each visit to the Jobcentre.”

“We have to be at the Jobcentre at our allocated time so the only way to achieve this is to use London Underground which costs £2.40 for a single journey or £4.80 return.”

Response

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 will be particularly so for those who currently live within easy reach of their current jobcentre.

- A single bus journey costs £1.50 reduced by 50% (75p) if the customer has been issued with a jobcentre travel discount card. Buses are capped daily at £4.50 (£2.25 with a jobcentre travel discount card)
- London underground journey is 10 min and costs £3.30, when a customer has been issued with a jobcentre travel discount card

The reimbursement of travel costs, other than mandatory attendance, is considered on an individual basis in line with DWP regulations nationally. 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 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

Thirty per cent of respondents expressed concern about the adverse effect, on the local community, of removing access to services and the ability of the new jobcentre to absorb the increased workload.

A number of respondents commented that moving to a jobcentre outside the local area may affect the existing relationships between the current local jobcentre and local support groups.

Typical comments:

“...The Marylebone site would be over crowded.”

“...our organisation in terms of losing the relationship we have with staff and managers at Westminster Jobcentre in terms of both referrals and signposting to our services.”

“...use the facilities that are available there e.g. phone, computer.”

“...worried will lose the level of support...”

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 into the new jobcentre 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 Marylebone Jobcentre: IT equipment will be moved from Westminster and rehoused in there. 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.

Vulnerability

Thirty per cent of respondents expressed concerns over the effects of having to travel to another jobcentre, on claimants who are vulnerable, and on the community.

Typical comments:

“Westminster Jobcentre staff in particular have developed specialist knowledge and understanding working directly with some of Central London's most vulnerable claimants i.e. street homeless.”

“...For me, having to travel to north Westminster will make life much more stressful.”

“...we are concerned that this will take its toll on people’s levels of stress and lead to a deterioration in their relationship with us as we attempt to help them manage their frustration at the new arrangements.”

“...Some claimants may be unable, due to their mental health or through being the victims of violence and intimidation, to attend that part of Westminster and will need to be provided with alternatives, but again these alternatives will be at a greater distance and will still be a barrier to those with mental health and/or mobility issues.”

Response

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 recognises the value of the developed relationship between claimants and work coaches, and the established links would continue after services have moved to Marylebone Jobcentre.

Equality analysis

Thirteen per cent of respondents expressed concerns that an Equality Impact assessment was not included in the consultation paper.

“...deep concerns relating to the DWP failure to follow process regarding Equality Impact Assessments (EIA) which would be expected prior to any such closure announcements.”

“The document does not include an impact assessment.”

“... the impact analysis which is not currently set out in the consultation document and which the City Council would assume has been undertaken.”

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 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.

Outreach

Thirteen per cent of respondents expressed concerns about the level of the outreach service that is currently being provided and how that will continue.

“We currently receive outreach support on site from a DWP Homeless Outreach Adviser.”

“In the past, we have also hosted a Work Coach who has attended our weekly Jobs Club and has been able to provide support to clients looking for work. We believe there is capacity for increasing outreach work at our Centre and also at other community venues where we provide housing advice sessions in addition to our Centre-based provision.”

“The consultation document references ‘a Work Coach’ in a community location. The City Council needs to understand the rationale for this level of support and how it compares with the current support delivered in and around Westminster Jobcentre.”

Response

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

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

Conclusions 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 Westminster and relocate services to Marylebone Jobcentre.

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

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 Westminster Jobcentre have a direct impact on you? If yes, please provide further details.

Question 3: If you currently use Jobcentre Plus services at this, 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 Connection St Martin in the field (homeless charity)
- Cardinal Hulme Centre (voluntary organisation for homeless young people, families in need and local community)
- City of Westminster Council
- PCS