



Department  
for Work &  
Pensions

# Response to the proposal for the future of Whitstable and Herne Bay Jobcentres

Response to consultation

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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, a proposal was made to move Whitstable and Herne Bay into the Canterbury 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 believe 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 Canterbury Jobcentre falls outside these criteria:

- Whitstable Jobcentre
  - distance: 5.3 miles
  - public transport: approximately 43 minutes
  - car: 14 minutes
  
- Herne Bay Jobcentre
  - distance: 8.1 miles
  - public transport: approximately 40 minutes
  - car: 19 minutes

The public consultation paper, ***Proposal for the future of Whitstable and Herne Bay Jobcentres***, 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 buildings with the services provided being transferred to another jobcentre within Kent.

## 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.

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.

## **Consultation**

The consultation period closed on 28 February 2017 and this report summarises the responses.

## **Summary of responses**

Twenty two responses to the consultation proposals were received: nine for Whitstable and thirteen for Herne Bay.

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

The respondents have been categorised as follows:

- 16 responses were from members of the public
- 5 responses were from organisations
- 1 MP response for Herne Bay

## **Response themes**

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

### **Travel time**

Seventeen respondents expressed concerns about the increase in travel time to attend Canterbury Jobcentre. Concerns cited included inconvenience, journey times on public transport and increased difficulties for vulnerable groups: those with disabilities, mental health conditions and those caring for young children.

Typical comments:

*"...those signing on would have to travel 20 mins or more to sign on..."*

*“The bus service to Canterbury is difficult for people with disabilities to use, adding further barriers to those that people already face in receiving services and entering the labour market. ...”*

*“The journey time of 1 hour will be tiring and cause problems for those with disabilities and family/carer commitments.”*

*“This will make it harder for those on a low income and do not drive to access services as they will no longer be in walking distance.”*

## **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. Herne Bay and Whitstable Jobcentres fall outside these criteria so DWP chose to consult publicly. Through consultation, the catchment area of each jobcentre has been investigated and the specific travel times by public transport have been compiled, see [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

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 make a request to attend a jobcentre that is closer to their home. Work coaches will help signpost claimants in such circumstances.

## **Travel cost**

Nineteen respondents expressed concern about the potential increase in travel costs and the effect this would have on disposable income for food and other necessities.

It has been suggested that some 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:

*“Even taking the most favourable estimations of public transport service and traffic conditions, it takes well over 40 minutes to travel from Herne Bay to Canterbury, and even more than that from Whitstable. A return ticket for one person on a Stagecoach bus costs £6.70.”*

*“...the financial cost would be enormous as a bus fair to Canterbury from Beltinge is nearly an entire day’s money. As the jobcentre don’t pay for the travel cost of all their mandatory meetings.”*

*“...the fare to Canterbury is £6.30 which is at least 10% of their job seekers allowance per week.”*

*“The bus fare of £6.70 from Herne Bay and Whitstable to Canterbury is very expensive.”*

## **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 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 make a request to attend a jobcentre closer to their home, should there be one. Work coaches will help signpost claimants in such circumstances.

Claimants in other parts of Kent are already paying similar amounts such as:

- Deal to Dover a return is £6.40
- Faversham to Sittingbourne is £6
- New Romney to Folkestone is £6.40
- Sevenoaks to Tonbridge £7
- Tatsfield to Tonbridge £9.70 (£4.70 bus and £5 train)

Additional detailed travel information has been provided in [Annex D](#) from the wards affected by this proposal.

## **Access to services**

Six 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 comments:

*“The impact of these proposals on jobseekers with disabilities or mobility impairments must be a significant factor in the DWP’s decision, as must the impact on those with children or dependents.”*

*“Disabled/mentally ill people are already vulnerable, by closing a local help point will not benefit them in anyway.”*

*“...it will affect me in getting vital information I need on future job prospects and any job interviews taking place that I go to within the jobcentre.”*

*“There are a lot of people that use the Herne Bay branch who also suffer mental health/anxiety and depression... And I feel the closure of this office would have a great impact on our community.”*

## **Response**

DWP is not reducing its services and is committed to retaining a jobcentre network in Kent. The offices proposed for closure will deliver economies of scale, which will enable DWP to deliver enhanced services to support business improvements including digital services, group information support and access to a wider spectrum of partners and employers.

The overall aim is to provide an enhanced service in jobcentres: IT equipment will be moved and rehoused in the new office. 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 the digital suites.

These proposals will ensure that DWP can respond better to customer demand, support the move towards Universal Credit and increase flexibility to deliver a full service across all jobcentres.

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.

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 Canterbury Jobcentre.

## **Sanctions**

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

Some responses highlighted that longer more complex journeys by public transport could lead to increased lateness or failure to attend appointments. Longer journey times might also affect the time available to claimants to meet their claimant commitment. Concerns have been expressed about the impact on public transport services of external factors such as:

- frequency of service
- reliability

These could all affect an already challenging journey. The affordability of the journeys has also been mentioned: see response to **Travel costs**.

Typical comments:

*“£6.70 is the Bus fare from Herne Bay and Whitstable to Canterbury – Journey time minimum 1 hour. Sanctions if you are late.”*

*“For those reliant on the bus service...we urge that any public transport difficulties should be taken into account when deciding whether or not to apply sanctions...”*

## **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.

DWP does not expect these proposals to result in additional sanctions. 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 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**

Three respondents expressed the view that a 'footprint' or outreach facility should exist in these local communities. People acknowledged that this type of service would not replace jobcentres but could provide advice, support or guidance for claimants about their jobsearch in the event of any closures.

Typical comment:

*“There are opportunities to occupy the upper floor of the library in Herne Bay which, whilst requiring improvement, has IT connections. It would be a better use of the building. Failing that there is the under used local Council offices in William Street.”*

## **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 **Herne Bay Jobcentre and Whitstable Jobcentre**. What this service will offer will be publicised ahead of the closures.

## **Equality analysis**

One of the main contentions of respondents who signed the petition was that DWP is in breach of its duties under the Equality Act 2010.

Typical comments:

*“Our view is that you are in breach of the Equality Act 2010 by not allowing access to your services locally, but having to travel to Canterbury. This will affect disabled job seekers.”*

*“...the proposal... represents a significant cut in services which will make life harder and poorer for some of the most vulnerable people in our town. It also breaches the DWP’s duties under the Equality Act 2010.”*

## **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.

## **Conclusions and next steps**

DWP has given due consideration to 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. DWP has to balance the need to provide services along with the budget it has to deliver these.

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 the Whitstable and Herne Bay Jobcentres and move the services to Canterbury.

Consequently, the recommendation of this report is to proceed with the proposal to close these jobcentres and transfer services into Canterbury Jobcentre.

## **Annex A: stakeholders**

Discussions held with:

- Chief Executive of Canterbury City Council Colin Carmichael
- Sir Julian Brazier MP for Whitstable
- Sir Roger Gale MP for Herne Bay

## **Annex B: 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 Whitstable and Herne Bay Jobcentres 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 C: 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:

- Town and Country Housing Group
- Herne Bay Labour Party
- Citizens Advice Canterbury
- Kent County Councillors for Herne Bay, Brian Macdowall and Nick Bond
- Sir Roger Gale MP

## Annex D: travel information

Wards affected:

Herne Bay	Whitstable
Beltlinge	Chestfield
Greenhill	Gorrell
Herne and Broomfield	Seasalter
Heron	Swalecliffe
Reculver	Tankerton
West Bay	

### Public consultation mileage information

Journey	Mileage	Journey time by public transport	Journey Time by Car
Whitstable to Canterbury	5.3 miles	Approx. 43 mins	14 minutes
Herne Bay to Canterbury	8.1 miles	Approx. 40 mins	19 minutes

### Travel Information to Canterbury

Bus	Frequency	Cost Single	Cost return	Dayrider Unlimited
Whitstable to Canterbury	Every 20 mins	£4.40	£6.40	£6.70
Herne Bay to Canterbury	Every 20 mins	£4.70	£6.40	£6.70
Train		Peak return	Off peak return	
Whitstable to Canterbury Via Faversham	Hourly	£9.10	£7.70	
Herne Bay to Canterbury Via Faversham	Hourly	£10.40	£9.50	

There is a 15-minute walk from Canterbury East station to the Jobcentre.

Buses from Seasalter run once an hour and the journey time is approximately one hour.

### Parking

Currently there is free on street parking within walking distance of both Herne Bay (short stay only) and Whitstable Jobcentres.

There is disabled parking in Oxford Street Whitstable, outside Herne Bay Jobcentre and directly opposite Canterbury Jobcentre.

There is no free off street parking near Canterbury Jobcentre, although people using Sainsbury's can park there free for up to two hours.

The car park in Canterbury, Northgate, opposite the jobcentre, costs £1.40 per hour.

Kingsmede, which is within walking distance costs £0.80 per hour.

### **Travel from wards by bus**

Bus travel between Whitstable, Herne Bay and Canterbury is delivered by Stagecoach and is called the Triangle. Claimants can travel in both clockwise and anti-clockwise directions.

Timings vary but those listed are the minimum times according to Stagecoach timetables.

### **Travel from Wards to Canterbury**

If claimants travel clockwise the bus stops at Canterbury bus station (approx. 20-25 mins walk from Jobcentre). If claimants travel anti-clockwise the bus stops in Northgate (Sturry Road) – less than 5 minutes walk to Jobcentre

<b>Ward</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Duration (hrs/mins)</b>	<b>Cost of return</b>
<b>Seasalter</b>	Hourly	01:00	£6.40
<b>Gorrell</b>	15 mins	00:41	£6.40
<b>Chestfield</b>	15 mins	00:25	£6.40
<b>Tankerton</b>	15 mins	00:45	£6.40
<b>Swalecliffe</b>	15 mins	00:32	£6.40
<b>West Bay</b>	15 mins	00:54	£6.40
<b>Green Hill</b>	30 mins	00:58	£6.40
<b>Beltinge</b>	30 mins	00:42	£6.40
<b>Herne</b>	30 mins	00:25	£6.40
<b>Broomfield</b>	30 mins	00:28	£6.40
<b>Reculver</b>	1 -2 hourly	01:29	£6.40
<b>Whitstable</b>	15 mins	00:31	£6.40
<b>Herne Bay</b>	15 mins	00:34	£6.40

## Travel from Wards to Herne Bay

<b>Ward</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Duration (hrs/mins)</b>	<b>Cost</b>
<b>Seasalter</b>	Hourly	00:45	£6.40
<b>Gorrell</b>	15 mins	00:40	£6.10
<b>Chestfield</b>	15 mins	00:32	£4.10
<b>Tankerton</b>	15 mins	00:30	£6.10
<b>Swalecliffe</b>	15 mins	00:20	£4.10
<b>West Bay</b>	15 mins	00:15	£4.10
<b>Green Hill</b>	30 mins	00:12	£2.30
<b>Beltinge</b>	30 mins	00:10	£2.30
<b>Herne</b>	30 mins	00:11	£2.30
<b>Broomfield</b>	30 mins	00:10	£2.30
<b>Reculver</b>	1-2 hourly	00:44	No bus
<b>Whitstable</b>	15 mins	00:33	£6.10