



Response to the proposal for the future of Highgate 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, a proposal was made to move Highgate into Finsbury Park and Barnsbury 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 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 Finsbury Park and Barnsbury Jobcentre falls outside these criteria:

- **Finsbury Park**
 - distance: 1.4 miles
 - public transport: approximately 20 minutes
 - car: 9 minutes

- **Barnsbury**
 - distance: 3.1 miles
 - public transport: approximately 25 minutes
 - car: 18 minutes

The public consultation paper, ***Proposal for the future of Highgate 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 buildings 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 applicants 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

Eighteen 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 individuals or members of the public
- 1 response was from the MP for Islington North

Response themes

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

Travel time

Thirty-nine per cent of respondents expressed concerns about the increase in travel time to attend Finsbury Park or Barnsbury Jobcentres. Concerns cited included inconvenience, journey times on public transport and health issues.

Typical comments:

"...would have to take no less than four buses in total to journey to either of the mentioned alternatives."

"...too far and inconvenient to get to..."

"...is an hour walk there and an hour walk back from my location..."

"...exhausting - especially for those of us older claimants suffering from any health issues..."

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. Highgate Jobcentre falls 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 and bus routes have been compiled.

Various buses travel from Highgate to Barnsbury or Finsbury Park either directly or to nearby stops. If there is a need to change buses there is no additional cost if doing so within one hour, (cost is £1.50 without the JCP Travel Discount Card).

Buses to Barnsbury are 43, 263, 271, 91 then change to 153 if choose to or continue on 43 and buses to Finsbury Park are 43, 263, 271, 91 then change to 29, 253, 254, 259 if choose to or direct bus 210.

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

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. 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

Thirty-three per cent of respondents expressed concern about the potential increase in travel costs and the effect this would have on disposable income, food and other necessities.

Typical comments:

"...I would not have enough to pay the bus fares even with the reduced Oyster card....I walk so that I can have the extra little money to ensure I get some basic food to eat."

"The other locations would require public transportation to get to on a daily basis, which I can't afford to do. I can't afford to pay £4.50 (daily bus fare) out of the £10.40 per day that I receive. Will this extra cost be compensated for?"

“...when every penny counts, having to find extra for bus fares will be extremely difficult, even with a discounted travel card.”

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 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

Eleven per cent of respondents expressed concern about the adverse effect on the local community, removing access to services, the ability of the new office to absorb the increased caseload, and where the medical assessment centre will be moved.

Typical comments:

“...The other offices are already over subscribed and operate in a far less friendlier and supportive manner.”

“There are concerns that the remaining jobcentres may struggle to deal with the increased footfall as the front of house staffing resource at remaining jobcentres has reduced over the years.”

“It is important that jobcentres have an adequate office space to facilitate proper employment support services that meet the needs of jobseekers.”

“...also houses a medical assessment centre and it is unclear where this service can be relocated to locally. There is a clear need for this to remain in the constituency...”

Response

DWP is not reducing its services and is committed to retaining a jobcentre network in London. 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 Finsbury Park and Barnsbury: IT equipment will be moved and rehoused there. 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.

The current proposal is to relocate the Highgate Medical Centre to the first floor of the Wood Green Jobcentre in a like for like move.

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 is confident 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 adapted to maximise the use of the estate.

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 Finsbury and Barnsbury Jobcentres.

Sanctions

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

The responses received highlighted that longer, more complex journeys by unreliable public transport, could lead to increased lateness or failure to attend appointments.

Typical comment:

"... I would fear being sanctioned all the time by having to rely on the sometimes unreliable public transport, road works or traffic problems."

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 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. 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.

Vulnerability

Five per cent of the respondents expressed concern over the effects of having to travel to another jobcentre.

Typical comment:

"This will no doubt cause a huge emotional and psychological disturbance on the quality and continuity of job seeking support that I receive as an older user of the office...I may lose confidence.as I am getting older I get tired more easily with walking, walking to the relocated office will not be too bad but it is the walking back."

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.

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.

Assessment of risk

Five per cent of the respondents expressed concern over the safety issue of attending the Finsbury Jobcentre.

Typical comments:

“...I had the unhealthy privilege of the Medina Rd branch for a year. Every time I visited, there was some kind of altercation.”

“...the current site is well positioned....and also I feel relatively safe within its current location especially in the winter dark months, it being close to a main road.”

Response

Any potential Health and Safety-related incidents at Finsbury Park are prevented or mitigated by a fully staffed and trained Front of House team, an experienced and fully staffed team of Customer Care Officers, a strong relationship with local police and a whole office familiarity with the Local Incident Management Plan.

Finsbury Park is very close to the major Seven Sisters Road and bus stops and tube station; and Barnsbury is opposite the main borough police station and a busy road and market place.

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.

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

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 Highgate Jobcentre and move the services to Finsbury Jobcentre and Barnsbury Jobcentre.

The recommendation of this report is to proceed with the proposal to close Highgate Jobcentre and transfer services to Barnsbury 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 Highgate 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:

- MP for Islington North