



Department  
for Work &  
Pensions

# Response to the proposal for the future of Mountain Ash Jobcentre

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 Mountain Ash Jobcentre into Aberdare 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 Aberdare Jobcentre falls outside these criteria:

- distance: 4.5 miles
- public transport: approximately 26 minutes
- car: 12 minutes

The public consultation paper, ***Proposal for the future of Mountain Ash***, 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 the Cynon Valley.

## 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.

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

Eight 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:

- 6 responses were from individuals or members of the public
- 1 Welsh Assembly Member response for Cynon Valley
- 1 from PCS Wales

## Response themes

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

### Travel time

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

Typical comments:

*“By travelling further to attend the jobcentre in Aberdare I will have to take more time out of the day to allow for the extra travelling, thus reducing job search time.”*

*“I am concerned that if vulnerable customers have to travel considerably further to another Job Centre.”*

*“... will take at least 50 minutes, followed by a walk of 10 – 15 minutes as the bus/train station is situated at the opposite end of the Town to the Jobcentre.”*

### 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 routes have been compiled.

The journey from Mountain Ash to Aberdare is possible via train or bus. The train and the bus station are both approximately 10 minutes walk from Aberdare Jobcentre. However, there are buses available from either station to the jobcentre, including buses with low-level flooring. Aberdare Jobcentre is on a number of bus routes and there is a bus stop outside Aberdare Library, which is very close to the jobcentre.

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.

## **Travel cost**

Five 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 new jobcentre and many will no longer have the option to walk thus incurring additional expense.

Typical comments:

*"...every penny counts and the people who have to travel by bus to their new centre will not get any money back for that...they need that money for more important things."*

*"I would incur not only transport costs in petrol or public transport but also town centre car parking charges due to its location (currently 75p per hour)."*

*"The extra cost of travelling from Mountain Ash to Aberdare is £3.10-£3.30 which will have a detrimental impact on individual's income"*

## **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 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**

Three respondents expressed concern about the adverse effect of the proposal on the local community. Examples given were the removal of access to services, support for vulnerable benefit claimants and disability access.

Typical comments:

*“...The Aberdare office is too big a place not to mention it is not disability friendly at all as I experienced myself a few days ago.”*

*“The library in Mountain Ash is closed Wednesday afternoon and Thursday and currently the jobcentre is providing an important service for those who are digitally excluded.....These are the only facilities on the days that the library is shut.”*

*“In relation to the savings that may be made by closing this building, I would ask that these be looked at, in areas such as Mountain Ash very often the running costs are low compared to other areas. The value of this resource which is provided to the local people has a significant impact on their lives and in my view outweighs the possible small amount of monetary savings that may occur.”*

## **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.

The overall aim is to provide an enhanced service in Aberdare: 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.

Aberdare Jobcentre is on two floors, however, the approach to the jobcentre is more disability friendly than Mountain Ash. Work coaches will move to the ground floor if customers are unable to reach the first floor. The additional digital resources (from Mountain Ash) will be housed on the ground floor to increase accessibility. In addition, as a larger office they will be able to provide full opening hours (9am-5pm, Monday to Friday – except for a 10am start one morning per week). DWP is unable to provide a similar service in Mountain Ash given the staffing limitations of a smaller office.

## **Sanctions**

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

Some responses highlighted that longer journeys by public transport could lead to increased lateness or failure to attend appointments. Concerns were expressed about impact on vulnerable claimants and the reliability of public transport.

Typical comments:

*“... the extra time may overlap the school runs, which in turn limits my time for job search interviews. This may lead to me being seen as un-cooperative which could then in turn lead to sanctions which would be far from the case.”*

*“...more vulnerable constituents will simply not be able to face the prospect of travelling to Aberdare.....This may even cause them not to turn up resulting in sanctions for them and the loss of benefit.”*

## **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.

Concerns 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.

## **Vulnerability**

Four respondents expressed concern about the effects of the longer journey to Aberdare, on claimants who are vulnerable or have a disability.

Typical comments:

*“My son uses the office and this is the only place he goes every 2 weeks. He has severe Asperger and needs to stick to the same routine as he always has. He will not be able to cope and as a result of this...”*

*“A lot of the public who attend this jobcentre are vulnerable...Many of these claimants suffer from anxiety and depression...”*

*“I am concerned that the more vulnerable constituents will simply not be able to face the prospect of travelling to Aberdare.”*

## **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'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.

## **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.



## **Outreach**

One respondent expressed concern about the potential loss of services currently provided by third party organisations at Mountain Ash Jobcentre.

*“Mountain Ash jobcentre is used by a range of 3rd party organisations and outreach to provide important services to the public to help overcome the barriers to finding work.”*

## **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 Mountain Ash 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 Mountain Ash Jobcentre and move the services to Aberdare Jobcentre.

The recommendation of this report is to proceed with the proposal to close Mountain Ash Jobcentre and transfer services to Aberdare 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 Mountain Ash 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 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 individuals and organisations provided a response:

- Vikki Howells Welsh Assembly Member for Cynon Valley
- PCS Wales