



Department
for Work &
Pensions

Response to the proposal for the future of Leytonstone 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 Leytonstone to Walthamstow Westbury 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 Walthamstow Westbury Jobcentre falls outside these criteria as follows:

- distance: 3.7 miles
- public Transport: approximately 36 minutes
- car: 18 minutes

The public consultation paper, ***Proposal for the future of Leytonstone 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 in Walthamstow.

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

Following the announcement about Leytonstone Jobcentre, a series of meetings and engagement events were held as part of the consultation. These provided any interested parties with an opportunity to discuss first hand with DWP officials their observations and concerns about the proposals.

The consultation period closed on 28 February 2017 and this report summarises the responses, including how the consultation process influenced the final decision on the future of Leytonstone Jobcentre.

Summary of responses

Fifty-seven 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:

- 49 were from individuals or members of the public
- 7 were from organisations
- 1 MP

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 Leytonstone Jobcentre's services. The 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 following summarises the responses by grouping issues into a series of themes.

Travel time

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

- inconvenience – particularly for claimants currently within walking distance of Leytonstone Jobcentre,
- journey times on public transport due to congestion and the effect of the ‘mini-Holland’ scheme in the area
- increased difficulties for vulnerable groups; those with disabilities, mental health problems and those caring for young children

Typical comments:

“Due to the construction of the councils “mini-Holland scheme”, there are severe traffic delays and congestion on roads towards getting to Walthamstow job centre.”

“Most of us [claimants] would find it extreme difficult to travel all the way to Walthamstow... especially those of us who have to do school runs...thus leading to us being sanctioned.”

“At the moment I can walk from home to get to my appointments in Leytonstone; this will not be possible if I have to go to Walthamstow.”

“The bus route from my house to Walthamstow is heavily congested for much of the day. Long delays are not infrequent. As the appointment time varies, as does the congestion, it will be difficult for me to predict journey times.”

“...for me this would be quite hard as I have problems with my mobility, it's hard enough to get to Leytonstone, I have to get a taxi to and from the jobcentre every two weeks...”

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. This proposal falls outside these criteria so DWP chose to consult publicly.

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, should there be one. Work coaches will help sign post claimants in such circumstances.

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.

Through consultation, the catchment area of each jobcentre has been investigated and the specific travel times, costs for bus and tube routes have been compiled as follows¹:

- E10: walk or bus, adult fare £1.50 one-way and daily cap £4.50. Jobcentre Plus offer for bus and tram £0.75 one way and daily cap £2.25)
- E11: walk to Leytonstone High Road to Walthamstow Queens Road Rail Station/Walk to Walthamstow Jobcentre Plus cost (£9.50). Bus fare £3.00 return or Jobcentre Plus offer £1.50 return
- E18: walk to South Woodford Station/Central Line to Leyton Underground station. Bus 97 or 69 to Walthamstow cost (£9.50)
- IG8 9: walk to Woodgrange Park Station to Walthamstow Queens Road Rail Station cost (£9.50). The bus is longer can take up to an hour.

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

Forty-one per cent of 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 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:

"...some weeks I really to struggle getting a two-week bus pass, and I can always walk to the Leytonstone jobcentre..."

"Therefore, if this proposal were to go ahead then I think people living more than a 30 minute walk away should have their travel paid for (cheapest method)."

"To have to pay to travel to Walthamstow every time I want to job search is not feasible therefore limiting my opportunity of finding work."

¹ Source: adult rate prices: All Tube, DLR, London Overground, TfL rail services and National Rail services in Zone 1-9

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

Thirty 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.

Concerns were also raised about the ability of the new office to absorb the increased caseload, specifically whether work coaches would be able to continue to devote the time to support claimants. Comments were also made about claimants losing the support from their current work coach and reductions in local access to PCs for example.

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 and businesses. Local support groups commented that claimants may approach them for help instead of making the longer, more expensive journey to the new jobcentre.

Typical comments:

“...The Leytonstone jobcentre staff have provided me with valuable information and help when securing additional skills to increase my employment. I feel that other jobcentres will not have the same level of professionalism.”

“The community depends on a local Jobcentre Plus location... the relocation of staff to the remaining Walthamstow branch would cause overcrowding of staff and the remaining branch in Walthamstow does not provide an adequate lift for disabled users.”

“I wouldn't be able to make it in my disabled condition and I don't know what I would do.”

“When problems are not resolved by telephone you need to see an adviser

quickly. You may not see same adviser on your visits to help you on your journey back into work.”

“...a number of other organisations, such as the National Careers service and the Waltham Forest Adult Learning Service, provide support and assistance... The closure of the site will not only diminish the ability of these organisations to offer help and assistance but will also reduce customers’ ability to access such services.”

“Leytonstone has a screened area on the ground floor for those who have displayed unacceptable behaviour; its closure would leave one of the largest boroughs in London with no screened area. As no screened area is in place at Walthamstow.”

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.

Both the Leytonstone and Walthamstow Westbury Jobcentres have lifts. Neither of these is for public use as they are situated away from the jobcentre’s public floor space and are used by the DWP staff within the buildings. Walthamstow Westbury has a large ground floor area where it would be able to accommodate claimants who are unable to go to any upper floors, more adequately than Leytonstone. Walthamstow Westbury is more spacious and for accessibility, claimants will have more space to manoeuvre than within Leytonstone currently.

The aim is to provide an enhanced IT service in Walthamstow Westbury Jobcentre: IT equipment will be moved from Leytonstone and rehoused 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.

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 Walthamstow Westbury Jobcentre.

Over the past five years, there have only been nine instances where there was a need for a screened area in Leytonstone Jobcentre. If a similar need was identified in

the Walthamstow Westbury Jobcentre, then claimants will be referred to a neighbouring borough with a screening facility.

Sanctions

Twenty-six per cent of respondents expressed concern that the number of sanctions issued would increase if the proposed jobcentre closure went ahead.

It was 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 on a given day I do not have any money to travel by bus or train, this will result in me getting sanctioned altogether and I would not be able to pay any bills or buy food to eat”

“The sanctions imposed for late arrival should be waived for all those claimants too if their lateness is due to the change of location.”

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 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.

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.

Outreach

Twelve per cent of respondents expressed the view that a ‘footprint’ or outreach facility should exist in the local community. 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.

Comment:

“We believe that the JCP should provide conveniently located support during the transition period to help clients plan journeys and, if possible, access services digitally... We would be keen to explore these opportunities as part of the Council’s One Public Estate programme.”

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

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.

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 Leytonstone and relocate services to Walthamstow Westbury Jobcentre.

Consequently, the recommendation of this report is to proceed with the proposal to close Leytonstone Jobcentre and transfer services to Walthamstow Westbury 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 Leytonstone 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 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:

- Business Growth Investment and Employment London Borough of Waltham Forest
 - East London Unite Community
 - Leyton and Grove Green Branch Labour Party
 - Leyton and Wanstead Constituency Labour Party
 - Local PCS Trade Union
 - Waltham Forest Councillors
 - Waltham Forest Trades Council
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- John Cryer MP