



Department
for Work &
Pensions

Response to the proposal for the future of Darwen 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 with jobsearch.

To reflect this, achieve more efficient use of DWP premises and save public money, a proposal was made to move Darwen to Blackburn 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 Darwen Jobcentre falls outside these criteria:

- distance: 4.8 miles
- public transport: approximately 23 minutes
- car: 14 minutes

The public consultation paper, ***Proposal for the future of Darwen 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 Blackburn Jobcentre.

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 submit their claim 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, including how the consultation process influenced the final decision on the future of Darwen Jobcentre.

Summary of responses

Nineteen responses to the consultation proposals were received and DWP is grateful for all of these contributions.

The respondents have been categorised as follows:

- 15 were from individuals or members of the public
- 4 were from organisations

Response themes

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

Travel time

Ninety-five per cent of the responses expressed concerns about the increase in travel time to visit the new jobcentre.

Typical comments:

"...I was curious about the proposed journey times - the journey certainly takes more than 14 minutes by car or 23 minutes by bus!"

"...I live I can walk to the job centre and if I had to walk to the other place it will take me a couple of hours because I have to stop for a rest because I have asthma and a bad back."

"...to travel to Blackburn on a regular basis is not a realistic option, nor is it desirable..."

"Darwen Jobcentre is within reasonable walking distance of the most deprived areas of Darwen. Blackburn Jobcentre is not."

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. Darwen Jobcentre falls outside these criteria so DWP chose to consult publicly.

Through consultation, the catchment area of each jobcentre has been investigated and extensive research has been completed on the availability of local travel options. Specific travel times and bus and train routes have been compiled and are included within [Annex C](#)

Given these travel options, DWP's work coaches will 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 request to attend a jobcentre that is closer to their home. Work coaches will help signpost claimants in such circumstances.

Travel cost

Seventy-four 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:

"If the cost of travel is not reimbursed, then this will be an impossible additional financial burden for unemployed people...many [claimants] have to attend daily to meet their requirements to claim unemployment benefits."

"...we are on very little money so to incur another expense would be practically unmanageable if not for the food bank I dont know how I would manage..."

"...why should we have to travel to Blackburn people can't afford Bus Fares they are to expensive."

Response

DWP acknowledges that the proposals included in the consultation are likely to increase travel costs for some claimants when they are required to attend Blackburn Jobcentre. This will be particularly so for those who currently live within easy reach of Darwen.

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.

Regardless of the benefit involved, the mode of transport and any health condition or disability the claimant might have, are taken into account when a refund of fares is considered.

Access to services

Thirty-one per cent of respondents expressed concern about the adverse effect, on the local community, of removing access to services and support for those seeking work.

Comments were made about claimants losing the support from their current work coach and about reductions in local access to PCs for example. Continuity of work coach support and access to PCs would continue to be accessible through Blackburn Jobcentre.

Typical comments:

"...The positioning of the Jobcentre within the community is one of the things that enables staff there to maintain local knowledge and sensitivity."

"The jobcentre currently provides a convenient, accessible service for the people of Darwen."

"As I am not on-line at home and only have a very basic phone, i.e. calls & texts only I rely on Darwen Jobcentre's PCs for my Internet access."

"The decision to close should not be made on the assumption that there are other agencies in the town that are able to pick up any demand for support and assistance. There are no other advice service that have a permanent presence in the town."

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 aim is to provide an enhanced IT service in Blackburn: IT equipment will be moved from Darwen and rehoused. 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.

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 new jobcentre.

Vulnerability

Forty-two per cent of respondents commented about the effects that having to travel to Blackburn would have on claimants who are vulnerable or have a disability and the impact on the community.

Typical comments:

"I think some people would find it difficult to travel to Blackburn in a financial way and those with disabilities."

"...Of these people Darwen (and to a large extent Blackburn) have a large amount of people with mental health problems PTSD etc. Darwen has a particularly large Autistic community. Many anxious people cannot use public transport with the ease of normal people."

"Although not large in number those we do refer have increased vulnerabilities through either physical or mental health conditions which mean that travelling to Blackburn to receive services would be much more difficult."

Response

In terms of claimant insight, the local work coaches have established that there are currently five Universal Credit claimants diagnosed with autism and no one with PTSD at Darwen Jobcentre¹.

For those claiming Jobseekers Allowance currently there are:

- 10 PTSD
- 21 Social Phobia
- 8 bipolar
- 5 ADHD
- 6 schizophrenic

¹ Data correct as of March 2017

- 17 Asperger's/autism
- 34 learning difficulties
- 117 mental health – ranging from low mood to psychosis

In terms of Employment and Support Allowance for the Work Related Activity Group (WRAG) 56% of claimants present with mental health issues and, ending assessment, 49% present with mental health issues.

In terms of provision, most of the support in Darwen is also available in Blackburn. DWP recognises the value of the developed relationship between claimants and work coaches, and the established links would continue after services have moved to Blackburn.

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 result of 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

Twenty-one per cent of respondents expressed the view that a 'footprint' facility should exist in the local community. People acknowledged that this type of service would not replace a jobcentre but could provide advice, support or guidance for claimants about their benefits or jobsearch in the event of any closures.

Comment:

"We would like to understand in more detail what the 'significant footprint service' will consist of and other opportunities that might be available around the future of the building."

"Any alternative service provision would rely on such community venues being available."

"...we believe that consideration should be given to a permanent alternative location with Darwen. It will be essential that people are given the option to see an advisor locally rather than travelling to Blackburn..."

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 Darwen 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 Darwen and relocate services to Blackburn Jobcentre.

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

Annex A: 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:

- Darwen Councillors
- Age UK
- Blackburn District Trades Union Council
- Jubilee Credit Union

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

Question 3: If you currently use Jobcentre Plus services at these Jobcentre, 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: travel information

Travel Times for Users of Darwen Jobcentre to Blackburn Jobcentre

The following travel times from postcodes within the area currently served by Darwen Jobcentre to Blackburn Jobcentre (BB1 6HA) are obtained from Google Maps.

Darwen Jobcentre currently covers addresses in the postcode area BB3. This area is further subdivided into postcodes BB3 0**, BB3 1**, BB3 2** and BB3 3**.

The greatest concentration of postal addresses lies within close proximity to the A666, which is a direct bus route (No. 1) between Darwen and Blackburn. Travel times for addresses lying within close proximity of this route are as follows:-

Postcode	Distance	Time by car	Time by bus	Walk to bus
BB3 0AT	3.6 miles	17 mins	22 mins	2 mins
BB3 1AT	4.5 miles	19 mins	27 mins	2 mins
BB3 2AA	5.1 miles	22 mins	28 mins	2 mins
BB3 3AA	5.8 miles	19 mins	37 mins	11 mins

NB: All times given for bus journey are total times and include time to walk to bus stop and from Blackburn Bus Station to jobcentre.

Two bus routes run between Darwen and Blackburn: the No. 1 operated by the Blackburn Bus Company and the No. 33 operated by Moving People.

The following table gives an average for the journey times to Blackburn Jobcentre from the most outlying addresses in each postcode subdivision.

Postcode	Distance	Time by car	Time by bus	Walk to bus
BB3 0**	5 miles	15 mins	36 mins	15 mins
BB3 1**	5.1 miles	20 mins	33 mins	8 mins
BB3 2**	7.3 miles	23 mins	52 mins	20 mins
BB3 3**	5.5 miles	17 mins	52 mins	14 mins

NB: All times given for bus journey are total times and include time to walk to bus stop and from Blackburn Bus Station to jobcentre.

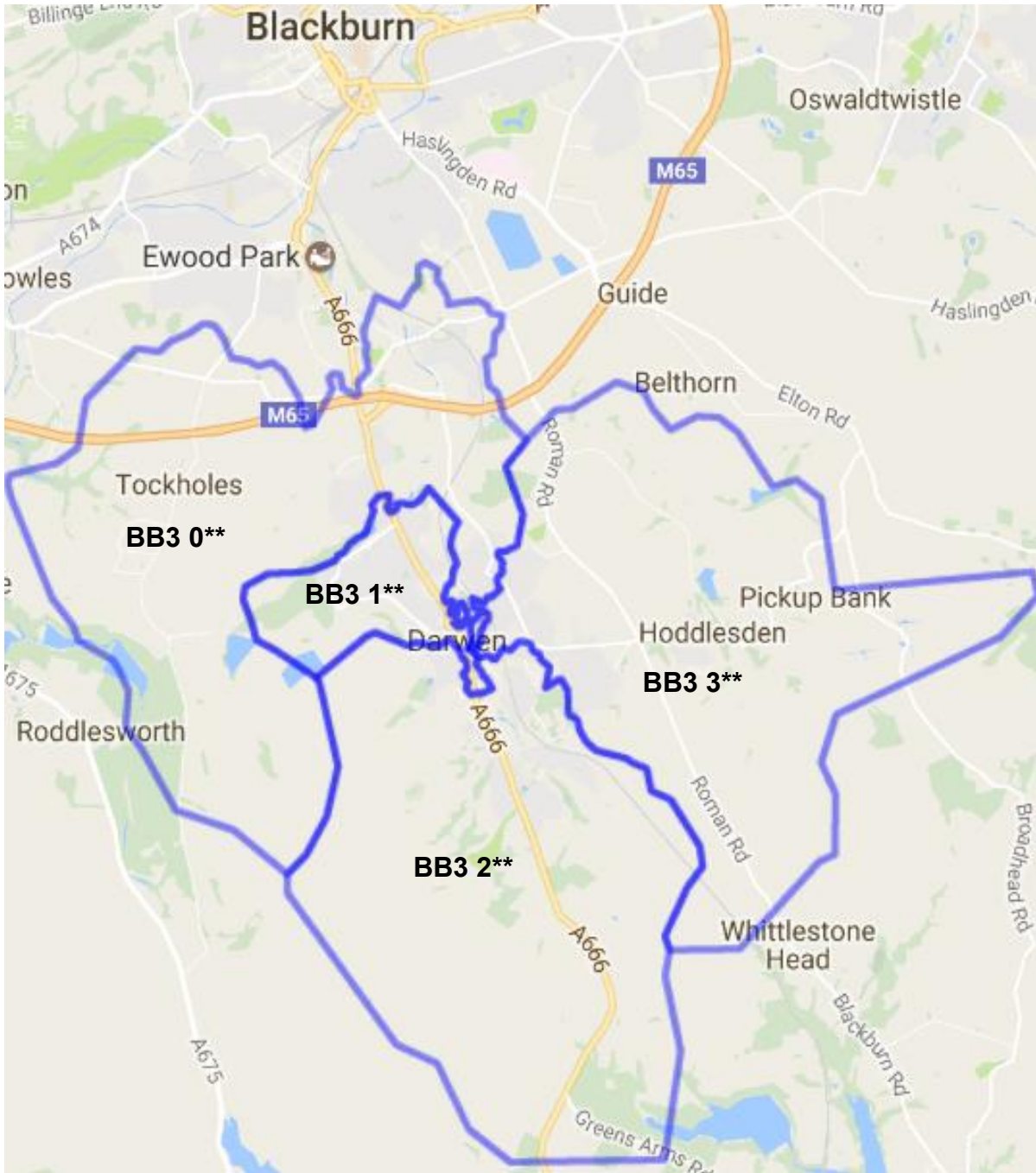


Fig 1: Map showing boundary of area served by Darwen Jobcentre and BB3 postcode subdivisions