



Department
for Work &
Pensions

Response to the proposal for the future of Edgware 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 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 Edgware into Hendon 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 Hendon Jobcentre falls outside these criteria:

- distance: 4.0 miles
- public transport: approximately 29 minutes
- car: 16 minutes

The public consultation paper, ***Proposal for the future of Edgware 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 Hendon 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 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

Five 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:

- 3 responses were from individuals or members of the public
- 1 response from The Commissioning Group, London Borough of Barnet
- 1 response from Barnet Labour Group

Response themes

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

Travel time

All of the respondents expressed concerns about the increase in travel time to attend Hendon Jobcentre. Concerns cited included inconvenience, increased difficulties and increased journey times on public transport.

Typical comments:

"...Traveling to Hendon can be very time consuming by bus as people would have to change at least two buses."

"We believe the travel times suggested in the consultation document to access Hendon and Barnet jobcentres from Finchley and Edgware are unrealistic, and are in fact much longer – particularly at peak times."

"We are concerned at the proposal to 'lift and shift' caseloads from closed jobcentres to neighbouring centres without regard to claimants' home addresses and local transport routes"

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

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

Travel cost

Four of the respondents expressed concern about the potential increase in travel costs and the effect this would have on disposable income.

Typical comments:

"...By relocating to Hendon, this would add additional cost to get to the job centre. If the government were to reimburse the travel cost, that could be reasonable compromise to those outside a certain radius."

"...concerned about both the additional cost to services users brought about by the extra travel distance..."

"The biggest impact will be felt by those currently within walking distance (e.g. one mile for those with no health issues) ...who have not previously had to incur any costs to attend the jobcentre."

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

One of the respondents expressed concern about the adverse effect on the local community, of removing access to services, and the proximity of the Jobcentre.

Comment:

“But to remove a local community benefit.....it may have an impact on the number of visits by those who use the facilities other than sign-on.... which is a great benefit for those who do not have a computer, printer or access to internet, etc.”

Response

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

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 Hendon Jobcentre.

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.

Sanctions

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

Comment:

“Travel times on bus routes in particular can be unpredictable....the extra travel distance, and the risk of people receiving financial penalties for being late for appointments.”

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.

Outreach

One respondent expressed concern that the DWP should make use of local facilities, which currently exist in the community.

Comment:

"Barnet Council has a good track record of working in partnership with DWP to provide services from community and other venues...It is essential that this joint working continues, and that claimants are able to undertake formal DWP processes at these sites as well as receiving advice and guidance."

Response

The excellent working relationships that are already in place with voluntary and partner organisations will be maintained.

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 Edgware. 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 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 Edgware Jobcentre and move the services to Hendon Jobcentre.

Consequently, the recommendation of this report is to proceed with the proposal to close Edgware Jobcentre and transfer services to Hendon 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 proposals?

Question 2: Will the proposal to close Edgware 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:

- Barnet Labour Party
- The Commissioning Group, London Borough of Barnet