



Response to the proposal for the future of Newton-le-Willows Jobcentre

Response to consultation

July 2017

Contents

- Background 2
- DWP’s estate strategy 2
- Summary of responses 3
 - Response themes 3
 - Travel time 3
 - Travel cost 4
 - Access to services 5
 - Sanctions 6
 - Equality analysis 7
- Conclusion and next steps..... 7
- Annex A: questionnaire 8
- Annex B: list of respondents 9
- Annex C: detailed travel information 10

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 with people making more use of online and telephone services, only attending offices for appointments or help in researching job vacancies.

To reflect this, achieve more efficient use of DWP premises and to save public money, the following change was proposed: to close Newton-le-Willows Jobcentre, transferring staff and services into St. Helens 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 falls outside these criteria, DWP has the option to consult publicly about these changes. The proposed relocation of services from Newton-le-Willows Jobcentre to St. Helens Jobcentre falls outside these criteria:

- distance: 5 miles
- public transport: 30 minutes
- car: 16 minutes

The public consultation paper, ***Proposal for the future of Newton-le-Willows Jobcentre***, was published on 30 January 2017. It invited comments from everyone with an interest in the future of this jobcentre including the proposed closure of the building and the transfer of its services, to St. Helens 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 provides 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 made using digital channels and 99.6% of applications for Universal Credit are made online. At the same time, DWP has seen record levels of employment across the UK, with the claimant count dropping to its current level of around 800,000.

As a result, 20% of the space DWP currently occupies is no longer being used, even allowing 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

There were 15 responses, in total, to the public consultation proposal:

- 5 from members of the public
- 8 from claimants
- 1 from a local organisation
- 1 from the local MP

DWP is grateful for all the contributions made in response to the consultation.

The consultation was seeking the views of everyone with an interest in Newton-le-Willows Jobcentre's services.

Response themes

The respondent themes are summarised as follows.

Travel time

Fourteen respondents were concerned about the increase in travel time. These related specifically to longer journey times, inconvenience and increased difficulties.

Typical comments:

"...St Helens is about 7 miles from my home, and would involve a 45 minute bus trip, with buses only running twice an hour, so, it would take about 1.5 hours each way, door to door..."

"...the proposal would go above guidelines by making residents travel 5 miles, or at least 30 minutes on public transport, large parts of the town, including the Vulcan Village in Wargrave, one of the most deprived areas in the UK, have recently lost their public transport connectivity due to cuts to routes by MerseyTravel..."

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. Newton-le-Willows Jobcentre falls outside these criteria so DWP chose to consult publicly.

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 needs and circumstances. 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.

[Annex C](#) provides additional detailed travel information for claimants travelling from the Newton-le-Willows area to St. Helens Jobcentre.

Travel cost

Nine respondents expressed concern about the potential increase in travel costs and the impact this would have on disposable income.

Typical comments:

"...People are already struggling with finances and would be expected to travel further for the help and advice they need. This would incur further cost, stress and pressure in an already difficult situation..."

"...The closure of the job centre would mean that people who are already struggling would have to pay more in transport costs to gain access to forthcoming information about employment..."

"...You cannot get your bus fares refunded on the same day any more..."

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 sign post claimants in such circumstances.

[Annex C](#) provides additional detailed travel information for claimants travelling from the Newton-le-Willows area to St. Helens Jobcentre.

Access to services

Eight respondents expressed concern about access to services including access to IT equipment and easily accessible local support for claimants.

Typical comments:

“...The proposed closure would be crippling to a town that already has a low amount of jobs. It is not a risk that this town and it's people can afford, literally. Newton-le-Willows job centre is necessary and has been people's lifeline since it opened its doors...”

“...Closure would weaken the existing close working relationship between the jobcentre and community based support such as the Wargrave Big Local. These positive working relationships have delivered jobs locally and the closure would put this at risk...”

“...Future development between now and 2020: 90% of proposed future employment and industrial development within the Borough of St Helens is proposed to take place within 1 mile of Newton-le-Willows Job Centre. This isn't speculative, but is already at planning stage and granted in some cases. This has the potential to create more than 6,000 jobs as a conservative estimate.”

Response

DWP is not reducing its services and is committed to retaining an accessible jobcentre network. The proposal will ensure 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 jobcentres. IT equipment will be moved and rehoused in the new office. 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 our digital suites.

The excellent working relationships that are already in place with voluntary and partner organisations, and employers, will be maintained, with plans to build on these over the coming year.

DWP fully recognises the value of the developed relationship between claimants and work coaches and this will continue after services have moved. Where possible, claimants will retain their current work coach who will continue to deliver tailored and personalised support from the new jobcentre. Where a change of work coach is necessary, the level of support available will be the same, no matter who the work coach is.

Regeneration is taking place in the wider geographical area surrounding Newton-le-Willows. The current local jobcentre is very small and St. Helens Jobcentre will be better equipped to manage any large-scale recruitment in the area. Most vacancies are advertised online. For those claimants who do not have access to IT equipment, the following centres offer free online access:

- Newton-le-Willows Community Library
- Trees Community Centre
- Haydock East Community Library

Sanctions

One respondent expressed concern that they were more likely to be sanctioned if the proposal goes ahead.

Comment:

“If the bus is late or doesn't turn up I would get a sanction which means it would leave me with no money to get to St Helens.”

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 ongoing 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 the 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 that is closer to their home, should there be one. Work coaches will help sign post claimants in such circumstances.

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.

Conclusion 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 Newton-le-Willows 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 Newton-le-Willows Jobcentre and relocate services to St. Helens Jobcentre.

The recommendation of this report is to proceed with the proposal to close Newton-le-Willows Jobcentre and transfer services to St. Helens 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 Newton-le-Willows Jobcentre have a direct impact on you? If yes, please provide further details.

Question 3: If you currently use Jobcentre Plus services at this 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 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 MP and organisation provided a response:

- Conor McGinn MP
- Newton Community Centre

Annex C: detailed travel information

Travel times for claimants travelling within the Newton-le-Willows area to St. Helens Jobcentre are as follows:

- the shortest and longest bus journey take between 27 minutes and 57 minutes
- Vulcan Village is 5.8 miles from St. Helens Jobcentre and the journey takes about 51 minutes by bus.

Travel costs for claimants travelling from Newton-le-Willows to St. Helens Jobcentre:

- A 'Saveway' ticket, which can be used on all buses after 9:30am, costs £3.90. This ticket is valid for all journeys on the day of purchase.
- Where an appointment requires the claimant to travel before 9:30am, the cost of a single ticket is £2.20.
- A day bus ticket costs £4.30. This ticket is valid for all journeys on the day of purchase, including those to St. Helens Jobcentre and Newton-le-Willows Jobcentre.