



# Response to the proposal for the future of Tunbridge Wells Jobcentre

Response to consultation

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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, the following change was proposed to move Tunbridge Wells to Tonbridge 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 of their existing jobcentre. Where it is proposed to move or close an office, and the move to a new jobcentre is outside of these criteria, DWP has the option to consult publicly about these changes. The proposal to move the jobcentre at Tunbridge Wells to Tonbridge falls outside of this criteria:

- distance: 4.5 miles
- public transport: approximately 27 minutes
- car: 14 minutes

The public consultation paper, ***Proposal for the future of Tunbridge Wells 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 Tonbridge.

## 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 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 now.

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 offering the best possible service to claimants while delivering a good deal for the taxpayer.

## Summary of responses

Ten 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
- 4 responses were from organisations

Detailed responses were received from Citizens Advice, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and Town and Country Housing.

## Response themes

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

### Travel time

Eighty-two per cent of responders were concerned about the increase in travelling time. These related specifically to longer journey times, the inconvenience and increased difficulties.

Typical comments:

*“Although you state the travel time is 27 minutes on public transport, this actually is not the case at all times of the day...This will lead to unattended appointments and sanctions, causing greater poverty.”*

*“...at times it has taken almost 1 ½ hours to travel to Tonbridge during rush hour.”*

*“For me personally it takes a little under two hours to make the journey to and from the current jobcentre...For others who come from further a field this will only be greater.”*

*“This is nearly as difficult as getting to Haywards Heath, needing at least 2 bus trips or bus and train. For disabled clients I can imagine that they won't be able to, plus not have sufficient money to do so.”*

*“Any branch closures will be most detrimental to those most at need of the support ...This include access to the internet through the on-site PCs or the other facilities the jobcentre currently offers.”*

## 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 and train routes have been compiled, see [Annex C](#)

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

Some claimants have previously elected to attend jobcentres that are not always the nearest to their homes. For example, people who live in Crowborough have historically chosen to go to Tunbridge Wells even though Haywards Heath is their nominated office.

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

Sixty-four per cent of respondents expressed concern about the potential increase in travel costs and the impact this would have on disposable income.

Typical comments:

*"...this journey by bus can take 2 hours and cost £6.50."*

*"I support vulnerable young people in west Kent, I am already having to transport young people to Tonbridge as even before this consultation has taken place the under 18 advisor is now based in Tonbridge."*

*"The suggestion that this is acceptable because Tunbridge Wells is only 14 minutes from Tonbridge by car is laughable."*

*"The high cost of public transport is another factor for people on a low income... additional travel could have significant negative consequences for vulnerable individuals and families"*

## 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.

Claimants in other parts of Kent are already paying similar amounts such as:

- Deal to Dover a return is £6.40
- Faversham to Sittingbourne is £6
- New Romney to Folkestone is £6.40
- Sevenoaks to Tonbridge £7
- Tatsfield to Tonbridge £9.70 (£4.70 bus and £5 train)

Additional detailed travel information has been provided in [Annex C](#) from the wards affected by this proposal.

## Access to services

Eighteen 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. They raised specific concerns about Universal Credit roll out and the loss of access to services at Tunbridge Wells Jobcentre for claimants in parts of Sussex.

Typical comments:

*“The phone numbers used to sort out issues that people have also cost money and for those on benefits they don’t have any to spare.”*

*“We would like confirmation that all claimants are able to attend the centre which is most convenient for them based on their own travel arrangements. e.g. Maidstone presumably if this is nearer than Tonbridge.”*

## Response

Calls to DWP to claim benefit are free. DWP uses 0800 telephone numbers for these calls. 0345 telephone numbers are used where the call is for other reasons. If a claimant raises concern over the cost of a call using this number, DWP will offer to call them back. However, telephone is not the only way claimants can contact the department. Contact can also be made using a variety of other ways, including online and text.

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.

DWP fully recognises the value of the developed relationship between claimants, work coaches and with partners. These will continue after services have moved to Tonbridge Jobcentre.

## Sanctions

Thirty-six per cent of respondents expressed concern that the number of sanctions issued would increase if the proposed jobcentre closures 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 comment:

*“If they are minutes late for their appointments they can be sanctioned and lose part of their benefit, driving them in desperation to rely on handouts from the local food bank.”*

## 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 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.

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.

## **Outreach**

Thirty-six 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.

Typical comments:

*"At present any supporting documentation, Sick notes, proof of education, ID etc has to be provided to the Jobcentre in person or posted, this takes time and could also mean another journey..."*

*"... the idea of having an advisor being in a local centre for appointments I believe would benefit. We work with 37 vulnerable adults (16-25) plus have past residents asking for advice on a regular basis."*

*"Many people that use Citizens Advice don't have the skills to use computers so a people friendly service in the community would be welcomed."*

*"...if the Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge offices were to merge, there should remain a presence in both towns possibly in the council run Gateway 8 or in other community centres on a regular basis."*

*"We would like to work with you to make this [co-location] a reality and think that it would go some way to address the concerns that the Council has regarding the proposed closure."*

## **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 Tunbridge Wells Jobcentre. What this service will offer will be publicised ahead of the closures.



## **Vulnerability**

Twenty per cent of respondents referred to the most vulnerable customers, living in particularly rural areas around Tunbridge Wells and the adverse effect that closing the Jobcentre would have on the community.

Typical responses:

*“However I do have real concerns on the impact that this will have on the most vulnerable in society. The very young and or those with both physical and mental health issues.”*

*“We are seeing the withdrawal by the Government of social services for the most needy...”*

*“...it will create further hardship and difficulties for the most vulnerable people...and it will put further pressure on the already overstretched services provided by Citizens Advice at a time of increasing demand for its services.”*

## **Response**

There appears to be numerous offers of outreach facilities in the Tunbridge Wells area which can be explored further in order to maintain services for particularly vulnerable groups.

## **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 responders 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 Tunbridge Wells Jobcentre and relocate services to Tonbridge Jobcentre. The merge of the two offices was explored but is not viable in reverse.

Consequently, the recommendation of this report is to proceed with the proposal to close Tunbridge Wells Jobcentre and transfer services to Tonbridge Jobcentre.

## **Annex A: 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 Tunbridge Wells 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 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 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:

- Citizens Advice Tunbridge Wells and District
- Tunbridge Wells Borough Council
- Town and Country Housing

## Annex C: travel time and costs

### Travel information to Tonbridge

<b>Bus</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Cost Return</b>	
Tunbridge Wells to Tonbridge	Every 30 mins	£4.80	
<b>Train</b>		<b>Peak return</b>	<b>Off peak return</b>
Tunbridge Wells to Tonbridge	Every 20 mins	£5.70	£4.10

### Fare Comparison to Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge (based on Peak Time)

<b>Ward</b>	<b>Fares to Tonbridge</b>	<b>Fares to T'bridge Wells</b>
Hawkhurst	£12.10	£6.40
Sandhurst	£12.10	£9.20
Cranbrook	£16.60	£7.00
Benenden	£4.80	£7.00
Frittenden	£9:60	£8.50
Sissinghurst	£16.60	£7.00
Goudhurst	£4.80	£7.00
Lamberhurst	£10.50	£7.00
Brenchley	£7.00	£7.00
Horsmonden	£4.80	£7.00
Paddock Wood	£5.60	£5.70
Pembury	£4.80	£4.80
Southborough	£4.80	£4.80
Sherwood	£4.80	£4.80
St Johns	£4.80	£4.80
Speldhurst	£4.80	£4.80
Bidborough	£4.80	£4.80
Rusthall	£4.80	£4.80
Tunbridge Wells	£4.80	

**Duration Times from Wards to Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge (based on Peak Time transport)**

<b>Ward</b>	<b>Duration to Tonbridge (hh:mm)</b>	<b>Duration to Tunbridge Wells (hh:mm)</b>
Hawkhurst	1:10	0:50
Sandhurst	1:41	1:20
Cranbrook	1:02	1:13
Benenden	1:41	1:26
Frittenden	0:33	0:54
Sissinghurst	0:52	1:29
Goudhurst	1:02	0:57
Lamberhurst	1:18	0:33
Brenchley	1:00	0:43
Horsmonden	1:05	0:50
Paddock Wood	0:08	0:45
Pembury	0:26	0:29
Southborough	0:13	0:30
Sherwood	0:36	0:28
St Johns	0:22	0:15
Speldhurst	0:24	0:22
Bidborough	0:16	0:47
Rusthall	0:29	0:17
Tunbridge Wells	0:33	