



Department
for Work &
Pensions

Response to the proposal for the future of Sheffield Eastern Avenue 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 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 Sheffield Eastern Avenue Jobcentre, transferring staff and services into Sheffield Cavendish Court Jobcentre and Sheffield Bailey Court 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 Sheffield Eastern Avenue Jobcentre to Sheffield Cavendish Court Jobcentre and Sheffield Bailey Court Jobcentre falls outside these criteria:

To Sheffield Cavendish Court Jobcentre:

- distance: 3 miles
- public transport: 24 minutes
- car: 12 minutes

To Sheffield Bailey Court Jobcentre:

- distance: 3.6 miles
- public transport: 25 minutes
- car: 14 minutes

However, after more detailed planning the decision would be to locate all claimants within Cavendish Court, a three mile distance from Eastern Avenue.

The public consultation paper, ***Proposal for the future of Sheffield Eastern Avenue 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 Sheffield Cavendish Court Jobcentre and Sheffield Bailey Court 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 submitted 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 10 responses, in total, to the public consultation proposal:

- 6 from members of the public
- 2 from a claimant
- 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 Sheffield Eastern Avenue Jobcentre's services.

Response themes

The response themes are summarised as follows.

Travel time

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

Typical comments:

“...with delayed buses and traffic build up it is slowing the journeys down by over 10-15 minutes but there is also the change of missing buses which I had and was waiting 30 minutes for the bus back to Cavendish Court...”

“...I have limited mobility. I am able to park my car easily at eastern avenue. Should I have to go into the city centre this would create problems for me in that I would find it extremely difficult to walk from a car park or from public transport...”

“...I have serious reservations about the method used to calculate travel time and believe it does not paint an accurate picture of the impact on claimants...”

“A high proportion of ESA and IS claimants attend regular interviews and although these are not as frequent as for current UC and JSA claimants, they are likely to have additional considerations that the extra travel distance would impact on, including caring responsibilities and disabilities...”

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. Sheffield Eastern Avenue 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 make a 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 Sheffield Eastern Avenue area to Sheffield Cavendish Court and Sheffield Bailey Court Jobcentres.

Travel cost

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

Typical comments:

“...the bus fare to Bailey/Cavendish is £1.80p single. It is completely wrong to omit this fact from your consultation paper. This will be an additional tax of £1.80/week for those on fortnightly signings...”

“...it is expensive to travel, £4.00 for a day saver, and remember no-one in the 60 – 66 age group gets a bus pass any more...”

“...around Cavendish Court Jobcentre, all roads require payment to park and are frequently full, therefore claimants would be forced to pay to park on the road, park in a car park or travel by public transport; all of these options would incur extra expense and potential lateness...”

“...when considering the additional transport cost it is important that the rates of social security benefits is considered. For example JSA for a single 18 to 24 year old is only £57.90 per week...”

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.

[Annex C](#) provides additional detailed travel information for claimants travelling from the Sheffield Eastern Avenue area to Sheffield Cavendish Court and Sheffield Bailey Court Jobcentres.

Access to services

Eight respondents expressed concern that closing the jobcentre would have an adverse impact on the local community, removing access to services and support for vulnerable benefit claimants and those seeking work.

Concerns were also raised about the effect the proposed closure would have on current levels of service, in particular, whether Cavendish Court Jobcentre has the necessary space and staff to absorb the increased caseload and footfall.

Typical comments:

“...Cavendish Court Job Centre...felt crowded and the staff didn't seem to have the time to do their jobs well, I came away from the building feeling depressed and anxiety of what might happen if we were made to travel down there...”

“...many of the current Eastern Avenue claimants are likely to prefer to attend Woodhouse Jobcentre, however there are already limits applied to Woodhouse Jobcentre because of the limits on the size of the building...”

“...some benefit claimants must be seen, and some decisions must be delivered, in a screened environment. The proposal would reduce the number of screened rooms in Sheffield to three and put pressure on the facilities in Cavendish Court...”

“...if the closure of Eastern Avenue Jobcentre goes ahead as proposed, this will be a significant blow for the local area and community. Many struggling shops and businesses benefit from claimants and staff spending money in the area...”

“...in particular, the Council is concerned that the existing strong relationship will be lost between JCP work coaches operating out of Eastern Avenue and those local organisations, such as Manor Castle Development Trust, who work daily with unemployed residents...”

Response

DWP is not reducing its services and is committed to retaining an accessible jobcentre network. The proposal takes account of any increases in demand for its services and 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 offices. 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. Dedicated Employer and Partnership Managers and Service Delivery Leaders linked to the Eastern Avenue area will continue with current communication routes to build on existing relationships and identify additional local organisations over the coming months. Voluntary and partner organisations will be invited to Sheffield Cavendish House Jobcentre on a regular basis.

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 the new jobcentre.

Sheffield Eastern Avenue Jobcentre currently houses one of three screened areas in Sheffield. Its closure will leave two screened areas, located at Bailey Court Jobcentre and Cavendish Court Jobcentre. At present twenty-one claimants from Eastern Avenue are seen in a screened environment, DWP are confident that Cavendish Court Jobcentre will be able to accommodate these claimants.

DWP is committed to supporting the most vulnerable in the community.

Sanctions

Three respondents were concerned that longer more complex journeys, by public transport, could lead to increased lateness or failure to attend appointments.

Typical comment:

“...it is a big ask to expect them to travel across town to the Cavendish building, both logically and culturally intimidating. It could result in more people failing to attend appointments , or not being on time and receiving sanctions...”

“...jobseekers are expected to do regular online searches to find job vacancies. For those who do not have access to the internet at home the loss of a job centre will mean loss of internet resources. This may put individuals at risk of sanctions if they are deemed not to have put sufficient effort into finding work...”

Response

The longer more complex journey may be particularly difficult for more vulnerable claimants: See response to **Travel Time**.

Concern about public transport will continue to be considered on an individual basis. 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.

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.

Equality analysis

Four respondents commented on the apparent lack of any detailed Equality Analysis. At the time of public consultation, DWP was considering a proposal to close Sheffield Eastern Avenue Jobcentre.

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 Sheffield Eastern Avenue 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 Sheffield Eastern Avenue Jobcentre and relocate services to Sheffield Cavendish Court Jobcentre and Sheffield Bailey Court Jobcentre.

The recommendation of this report is to proceed with the proposal to close Sheffield Eastern Avenue Jobcentre and transfer services to Sheffield Cavendish Court Jobcentre and Sheffield Bailey Court 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 Sheffield Eastern Avenue 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:

- Louise Haigh MP
- Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS)

Annex C: detailed travel information

Buses and trams run frequently from Sheffield Eastern Avenue area. The majority of claimants will transfer to Cavendish Court Jobcentre, which is closer to Eastern Avenue than Bailey Court Jobcentre.

Travel times for claimants travelling from within the Eastern Avenue area to Sheffield Cavendish Court Jobcentre are as follows:

- The shortest and longest journeys by bus take about 12 minutes and about 30 minutes.
- The shortest and longest journeys by tram take about 15 minutes and about 30 minutes

Travel Costs:

There is a Jobcentre Plus discount card, for claimants who have been in receipt of benefit for thirteen weeks. The card lasts for a three-month period, and can be renewed if conditions are met. This provides a 50% reduction in costs, on a stagecoach bus.

Travel costs for claimants travelling from the Eastern Avenue area to Sheffield Cavendish Court or Bailey Court Jobcentre are:

- Cost of travel by bus is £ 3.90 for an unlimited day ticket (discounted price £1.95)
- Cost of a Tram Day rider is £3.90
- A single tram ticket costs £1.60 or a return would be £3.00
- For customers with limited mobility parking is available within 50 yards of the jobcentre for approximately £4 for 1 hour.
- For customers with no mobility issues the cost of parking within a 4-minute walk is 50p per hour/£2.50 per day.