

# Proposal for the future of Bridgeton, Castlemilk and Maryhill jobcentres

Evidence submitted by Scottish Refugee Council

January 2017

## About Scottish Refugee Council

In 2015 Scottish Refugee Council celebrated 30 years of working to ensure that all refugees in Scotland are treated fairly, with dignity and that their human rights are respected. Our vision is for a Scotland in which all people seeking refugee protection are welcome.

As an independent charity, we provide essential information and advice to people seeking asylum and refugees in Scotland, campaign for political change, raise awareness about issues that affect refugees, and work closely with local communities and organisations.

Our Scottish Refugee Integration Service assists new refugees and their family members reunited in Scotland to access their rights and entitlements. We provide advice, advocacy and assistance in a range of areas, including housing, social security, health, education, employability, and encourage people to participate in their communities and wider society.

Along with the Scottish Government and Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), we lead on the implementation of Scotland's Refugee Integration Strategy, *New Scots: Integrating Refugees in Scotland Communities*.<sup>1</sup>

## About the consultation

This consultation seeks views on the closure of Bridgeton, Castlemilk and Maryhill jobcentres and the services provided being transferred to other jobcentres in the city of Glasgow. The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) says that the closures will contribute to the consolidation of the Glasgow jobcentre network and will create opportunities to deliver improved customer services at reduced costs to the taxpayer.

## Introduction

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the consultation and would be happy to provide further information on the points raised in our submission.

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish Government, COSLA and Scottish Refugee Council (2014) *New Scots: integrating refugees in Scotland's communities 2014-17*, at <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0043/00439604.pdf>

In our response, we draw on our more than thirty years' experience of working with refugees and their communities in Scotland including evidence from our services as well as the views gathered from refugees as part of our ongoing engagement with refugees and their communities.

While our focus is on the impact of the office closures on refugees in Scotland, many of the points that we raise will equally affect other groups of people, some of whom may be marginalised or excluded.

## **General comments**

Successive reports have stressed the need to create Jobcentres which are accessible, local and integrated into existing structures<sup>2</sup>. These reports confirm the need to overhaul the current structures and processes for social security and employability, placing Jobcentres within local provisions and creating innovative solutions to the complex challenges that the system currently faces such as the need to provide improved, innovative support to those that have been inadequately served by the current system (including improved support for those that are furthest from the labour market) and the imminent changes of social security and employability systems (including the roll-out of Universal Credit and the end of current contracting arrangements for employability).

Instead of placing systemic improvement through local provision at the heart of the issue, this consultation focuses on Jobcentre closures, treating "alternative services that could be provided that would be a benefit to some claimants" as something of an afterthought at question 5. We would, therefore, urge the DWP to carry out further work to determine how local Social Security and Employability services in Glasgow could be improved and integrated before making any decisions on whether this might involve any office closures.

## **Question 1: Do you agree with the proposals? What overall comments would you like to make on the proposals?**

Scottish Refugee Council strongly disagrees with the proposals to close the Jobcentres in Bridgeton, Castlemilk and Maryhill. Contrary to the suggestion in the proposal document that there is a declining requirement for local Jobcentres, we believe that the necessity of local Jobcentres has increased in recent years, particularly for our client group. As we note in our [Holistic Integration Service Final Report 2016](#), accessing social security entitlements, maintaining Claimant Commitments, avoiding sanctions and accessing employment remain major barriers to refugees in Scotland (most of whom live in Glasgow). The findings of this report

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<sup>2</sup> Work and Pensions Committee; *The Future of Jobcentre Plus; 2016* [http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmworpen/57/57.pdf?utm\\_source=57&utm\\_campaign=modulereports&utm\\_medium=module](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmworpen/57/57.pdf?utm_source=57&utm_campaign=modulereports&utm_medium=module) and Association of Public Service Excellence; *Work it out: Creating Local Systems for Employability Support* <http://www.nlgn.org.uk/public/wp-content/uploads/Work-it-out-1.pdf>

point towards the need for improvement in systems, processes and accessibility rather than these proposals which we consider will create further barriers for refugees reliant on accessing social security entitlements and looking for jobs.

Through our work in the [New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy](#) we have welcomed the ambition of DWP to improve services for refugees and have seen some tentative movement towards fulfilling this goal through, for example, an innovative Master Class co-developed by Scottish Refugee Council and DWP Central District for Jobcentre staff to increase staff understanding of refugee experiences and better support refugees to access employment. As these proposals make it more difficult for individuals to access their local Jobcentre, they run contrary the DWP's improvement ambitions.

**Question 2: Will the proposals to close Bridgeton, Castlemilk and Maryhill jobcentres have a direct impact on you? If yes, please provide further details.**

Yes.

One of the main demands upon Scottish Refugee Council's resources is assisting refugees to access their social security rights and employment support – both at the early stages of them receiving their status and later in their journey to ensure that they remain in compliance with welfare conditionality. Removing local Jobcentre provision for refugees is likely to put significant further pressure on our charitable resources far better spent supporting people to meet their longer-term skills and job aspirations. This is not sustainable.

As the UK social security system moves closer to “digital by default”, the availability of and ability to use the internet is also a key issue. As has been noted in a [recent report by citizens advice Scotland](#) that Glasgow's broadband uptake is significantly below the Scottish average and that 42% of respondents had never used the internet before, with those in the most deprived areas least likely to use the internet. This report recommends more focus on access, skills and motivation to improve access to social security. In addition to these problems, our [Holistic Integration Service Final Report 2016](#) demonstrates how many refugees have difficulty understanding complex DWP processes for claiming and maintaining their entitlements which they would not be able to resolve through internet access alone. We consider that closing Jobcentres will present a further barrier to using the internet to support job search and other opportunities to progress towards employment that by removing the local support to do so.

**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?**

Generally, we consider that the travel times, distances and costs associated with the proposed closures are unacceptable. We note that DWP consider travel times of 20 minutes and distances of less than 3 miles to be acceptable. We consider travel time on public transport to be a better measure of accessibility than distance (as it would not be acceptable to ask individuals to walk up to 3 miles to attend appointments with their job coach) and note that, in all cases, the proposed travel times exceed the recommended 20-minute maximum times, particularly in the case of the transition between Castlemilk and Newlands Jobcentres which amounts to some 45 minutes on public transport on two busses. This is a clear contradiction within the proposals which suggests that the closures are unreasonable. Furthermore, the distances suggested are the time that it takes to travel *from the original Jobcentre* to the proposed Jobcentre, not the real time from individuals' homes to their new Jobcentre. It is likely that many individuals will need to travel considerably longer distances to get to their proposed Jobcentre if, for example, that individual lives some distance away from the relevant bus route to access their new Jobcentre.

Indeed, we note that the Jobcentres that DWP has chosen as alternative service delivery centres are neither the closest nor the most convenient to get to. For example, Parkhead Jobcentre is approximately 1 mile (12 minutes by public transport) closer to Bridgeton Jobcentre than Shettleston Jobcentre. Similarly, Partick Jobcentre is 0.6 miles (14 minutes by public transport) closer to Maryhill Jobcentre than Springburn Jobcentre. This also calls into question the reasonableness of the proposed closures and suggesting that further justification of the proposals is required.

We also wonder what consideration has been given to the equality impact of these proposals. Examples of issues we would like DWP to consider are:

- Gender – is it acceptable to ask single parents of young children (many of whom are now required to attend work focussed interviews and undertake other forms of work-related activity) to walk 3 miles or travel over 30 minutes on public transport to attend meetings with an adviser?
- Disability - Disabled people have a right to access support from Jobcentres, including the many people on Employment Support Allowance who are required to engage with jobcentres as part of their work related activity. What consideration has been given to the ability of disabled people to gain access to these new centres, some of which may involve changing bus routes, with walking between those busses?

An equality impact assessment should be published.

We would add that the DWP's assessment of reasonableness should include not only issues of cost and distance but should also consider issues of community and belonging. We consider that it is vital for individuals to feel connected to the services that they use and local delivery is a key element of this. The current proposals

remove vital services from the local areas that need them the most, damaging the sense of community and belonging that they bring.

**Question 4: Are there any other particular impacts of the proposals that DWP should take into account when making a decision?**

We consider that the proposals will considerably increase the current barriers to refugees accessing social security rights and support to progress towards employment in the affected Jobcentres. Maryhill, for example, contains one of the highest concentrations of refugees in Glasgow<sup>3</sup>, many of whom are exactly the people that Jobcentre Plus should be targeting as they will need additional support to ensure that they are able to access the employment market. The proposals will also impact on the ability of the alternative Jobcentres to deliver their services. Springburn and Shettleston Jobcentres, for example, are already heavily used with many refugees currently accessing services there. We have seen no evidence of any assessment of how these new locations will be able to cope with the increased demand on their services.

**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.**

We agree with the premise in the consultation document that there could be benefits in members of Jobcentre staff being co-located in community venues. This would be useful both to ensure people are assisted to claim their social security entitlements and to provide innovative responses to providing employability advice to people who have not been reached using current systems<sup>4</sup>. Scottish Refugee Council's current work, for example, involves assisting refugees to make social security claims, due to DWP current systems based on phone and digital access are not accessible by new refugees. This system is inefficient, creating additional work both for Scottish Refugee Council and DWP, and is not a long-term solution to inaccessible systems for accessing social security. We would, therefore, welcome proposals to co-locate DWP staff at community locations such as ours, to ensure that applications are taken and processed in a timely, efficient and effective way. Furthermore, we would

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<sup>3</sup> CJM Research. Glasgow City Council: Mapping of Integration Networks under the Integrated Grant Fund. 2015

<sup>4</sup> Evidence of the usefulness of this approach is noted in Work and Pensions Committee; *The Future of Jobcentre Plus*; 2016 [http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmworpen/57/57.pdf?utm\\_source=57&utm\\_campaign=modulereports&utm\\_medium=module](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmworpen/57/57.pdf?utm_source=57&utm_campaign=modulereports&utm_medium=module) and in Association of Public Service Excellence; *Work it out: Creating Local Systems for Employability Support* <http://www.nlgn.org.uk/public/wp-content/uploads/Work-it-out-1.pdf>

welcome innovative solutions involving DWP staff which would allow us to work better with refugees to increase knowledge of rights and responsibilities in relation to social security and to improve employability services for refugees. We feel that this would build upon our previous work delivering Master Classes to DWP employees and will have mutual benefits for refugees and DWP.

However, this sort of work should not be a replacement for a properly working, accessible DWP with local Jobcentres in the right places which are open to the public to use. We do not see sufficient evidence that the proposals provide this and we have set out the reasons for this above.

**Question 6: Please provide any additional comments that you have.**

We have serious concerns about the timing of these changes (which we assume are part of the reported closure of half of the Glasgow's Jobcentres) in relation to the devolution of Social Security to Scotland. After receiving control of a significant portion of the social security budget including employability support, the Scottish Government faces significant challenges ensuring that the transfer of social security entitlements takes place as smoothly as possible. This is likely to involve the creation of a new social security agency for Scotland. Doing so will require careful consideration of how devolved social security systems work with existing systems to ensure an effective service. Notwithstanding our comments above on the dangers of closing local provisions per se, we consider that any changes to the current provisions should only take place once the full shape of the Scottish social security system has formed and arrangements have been made with the social security agency for Scotland as to how agencies will work together in the new system.

**For further information, please contact:**

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