

# Scottish Affairs Committee

## Oral evidence: Jobcentre Plus closures in Scotland, HC 979

Wednesday 8 February 2017

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 8 February 2017.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Pete Wishart (Chair); Deidre Brock; Mr Christopher Chope; Margaret Ferrier; Chris Law; Ian Murray; Anna Soubry;

Questions 1- 180

### Witnesses

[I:](#) Ian Pope, DWP Group Executive Committee, PCS Union, and Stewart Malcolm McDonald MP, Member of Parliament for Glasgow South.

[II:](#) Frank Mosson, Manager, Glasgow-Bridgeton Citizens Advice Bureau, Reverend Dr Martin Johnstone, Minister and Secretary of the Church and Society Council, Church of Scotland, and Carla McCormack, Policy and Parliamentary Officer, Poverty Alliance.

[III:](#) Damian Hinds MP, Minister of State for Employment, Department for Work and Pensions, Karen Gosden, Director, People and Locations Programme, Department for Work and Pensions, and Susan Park, Director of Work Services, Department for Work and Pensions.

## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Ian Pope and Stewart Malcolm McDonald MP.

Q1 **Chair:** Could I welcome you both to this one-off evidence session on the Jobcentre closure programme? For the record, if you just say who you are and who you represent. We will not bother with opening statements because we only have a short amount of time available to us. We will start with you, Mr Pope.

**Ian Pope:** Ian Pope, Public and Commercial Services Union.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Stewart McDonald, Member of Parliament for Glasgow South.

Q2 **Chair:** I am grateful. I think both of you gentlemen have been involved very closely with the campaign since the first announcement last year. Could you just maybe detail—in the briefest detail—your major concerns about what has been announced? We will start with you, Mr McDonald.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** The announcement was made, as members of the Committee will know, early in December. Members of Parliament, claimants, the Scottish Government had to find out about this through the media. A letter was sent to Members some seven hours after the announcement had been made. The announcement was that eight of Glasgow's 16 Jobcentres would close. Looking at where those closures are, Chair, they are in some of the hardest-hit parts of the city in terms of poverty, employment rate and access to other services. What this will do is put disproportionate hardship not just on my constituents on the south side of Glasgow, but on Glaswegians right across the city.

Q3 **Chair:** Just before you answer, Mr Pope, the DWP have said that these reforms are necessary because of the falling number of claimants and more people being online in order to make these claims. Do you believe that there is a case for the reform of the Jobcentre network in Glasgow, and if not, why not?

**Ian Pope:** The figures, they have said unemployment has gone down in Glasgow and it has, but it is currently running at 8%, which is 3% above the national average. Unemployment itself is still high in Glasgow; child poverty has risen in Glasgow; the use of foodbanks has increased by 20% in the last two years. The figures that the Department have given, they don't add up in that respect. There is still high unemployment; there is still the requirement for localised Jobcentres, particularly in the deprived areas of Glasgow.

Q4 **Chair:** Mr McDonald, do you have a view? Does it need reform, in your opinion?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** It needs enormous reform, but this is not the reform I would be seeking and it is certainly not the way I would seek to reform it. The hassle we had, for example, trying to get the

consultation more publicly available—something basic like putting it on the Department's website, which they had no plan to do—they had to be forced into doing that by Members of Parliament. So the way that they want to go about the reforms is concerning, but this actual reform in itself—the closure of half of the city's Jobcentres—is something that I just have to oppose.

- Q5 **Chair:** Could you maybe bring us up to date with exactly where we are just now? We had the initial pilot as it was announced in the December and then there was a subsequent announcement, which had an impact across the whole of the United Kingdom, which is still out for consultation. I don't know if you can maybe help the Committee with this or if it is something that is for the Minister: why was there a pilot announced and then a subsequent announcement for the whole of the United Kingdom? Was there any reason for that?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I think what must have happened was that there were to be weekly announcements of office closures around the UK, but Glasgow was the first city-wide announcement in the UK. Clearly, the ramifications of the campaign of opposition from ourselves, claimant groups, MPs, the Scottish Government and others saw a halt to the announcements. Then we heard on the 27th, I think it was, of the rest of the estate, either whether it is being divested or kept. There has been a delay, but the consultation exercise for the Glasgow closures ended on 31 January and we now await the outcome of that.

- Q6 **Chair:** I know Margaret Ferrier has a supplementary and I will come to her in a minute, but there have been a number of debates in the House, I think there have been two debates in Westminster Hall thus far, and there was a statement to the Minister. What have you made of the response from Government about the concerns that have been put and is there any satisfaction you could take from what you have heard about the current arrangements?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I have to say not really. It is obvious to me that they have made a decision, irrespective of what they might say that they are currently considering consultation responses, because they have only ever stuck to essentially a departmental crib sheet in what I can tell. That is frustrating for me and for other Members.

In terms of the timeline as to where we are, the Glasgow Jobcentre closure consultation closed on 31 January. I am not clear on when we are expecting the results of that consultation to be announced, when we are expecting a decision to be announced and what the subsequent programme would be presumably between now and 2018 to eventually close half the Jobcentres. They have not been forthcoming with any of that.

- Q7 **Margaret Ferrier:** I want to draw your attention to the fact that I have a Jobcentre in my area closing, just for the purposes of the Committee.

Mr Pope, was the PCS consulted before this policy was announced—any of it before the Glasgow eight and then the next lot?

**Ian Pope:** Meetings have been taking place going back over the past year on possible announcements, but the actual Glasgow announcement, we only found out about 48 hours before the announcement. That is part of what we are not happy about, the lack of consultation, because if they had done it properly, if the Department had done this properly, we, who have members who are experts who work with claimants day in and day out, particularly in areas like yours, Easterhouse, and all around the city, we would have been able to tell the Department that this wouldn't work and that their plans are wrong. Also politicians, claimant groups and claimants themselves: they would have been able to say this is wrong.

We were told at very, very short notice before the announcement itself on Glasgow. A lot of this is shrouded in secrecy and whatever. There was a lot of nervousness around the Department, particularly around the Trillium contract, which was expiring on 31 March. I think if information had come out earlier, there was a possibility of rent being put up on the estate and whatever, so the Department were very nervous about that, but as I say, it was only really 48 hours' notice we got.

Q8 **Margaret Ferrier:** Have you any idea why it was Glasgow they chose first of all and why half of the Jobcentres are closing? Was it not 20% across the case, whereas in Glasgow it is eight of 16, which is 50% of the Jobcentres?

**Ian Pope:** The Chancellor announced in the 2015 autumn statement that there was to be a 20% reduction in the DWP estate. That is the point that a lot of people are making—that 50% is disproportionate in Glasgow compared with the rest of the UK. The Department are saying that that is because we have more Jobcentres than anywhere else, but clearly we are refuting that. Basically we think we still need the amount of Jobcentres that we currently have.

Q9 **Anna Soubry:** Mr Pope, are you a representative across the whole of Scotland? Do you represent all of Scotland, not just Glasgow?

**Ian Pope:** I am the branch secretary for Glasgow. I am also a member of the PCS National Executive Committee and the DWP Group Executive Committee.

Q10 **Anna Soubry:** Excellent. Can you tell me, how many Jobcentres there are in Aberdeen?

**Ian Pope:** How many in Aberdeen? I know that Greyfriars has just been announced for closure last week. Ebury House is the one that will remain, so I think it is now one.

Q11 **Anna Soubry:** So they have one in Aberdeen, right. How many do they have in Edinburgh?

**Ian Pope:** Again, in Edinburgh, the central one was announced for closure last week.

Q12 **Anna Soubry:** So they do not have any?

**Ian Pope:** No, there are Jobcentres in Edinburgh, but—

**Anna Soubry:** Yes, but how many do they have? I want to establish how many Jobcentres there are in comparable cities. Now, of course the population of Aberdeen would be less than the 600,000 in Glasgow—we would agree on that—but I want to establish how many Jobcentres there are in Aberdeen. I think there is one in Aberdeen, so there is how many in Edinburgh?

**Ian Pope:** Off the top of my head, about three.

- Q13 **Anna Soubry:** Three? Because, you see, I come from the city of Nottingham, which has a population of 300,000 and we have one Jobcentre. What has historically happened in Glasgow that means that you have so many Jobcentres? Because you have 16 with a proposal to close eight. Even if you have eight and you compare it with a city like Nottingham, if we do it on the population, Nottingham would have two, so that means that you would still have four times as many as Nottingham. What has been going on then? What is the history of it?

**Ian Pope:** I would say that up until about 10 years ago, we had about 18 Jobcentres in Glasgow. One dealt with exclusively the single homeless and that closed. I think that historically Glasgow has had higher levels of unemployment and social deprivation going back many, many years, going back decades. Historically that is why, with the pockets of Glasgow, Castlemilk, Easterhouse—I know Drumchapel is not closed, but that is another area of the city that has suffered over the years—so when you look around the whole city, there is a large number of Jobcentres, but there has been a necessity for them. That is why.

- Q14 **Anna Soubry:** Quite. So in the past, with high unemployment, pockets of deprivation and poverty, Jobcentres are important. Now the city has an unemployment rate of 8%, which is exactly the same as Nottingham, so why shouldn't you proportionately have as many Jobcentres as a city such as Nottingham?

**Ian Pope:** That is a good question, but clearly the issues in Glasgow, whether they are the same issues in Nottingham. It is a bigger city, I would imagine, Glasgow.

- Q15 **Anna Soubry:** I think it is twice the population.

**Ian Pope:** It is a large city. You look at, for example, the Castlemilk Jobcentre. They are going to move to Newlands and it is outwith the ministerial criteria. There is no proposal to retain 50% as per the ministerial criteria—50% of the work in that location—but it is also the effect it has on claimants having to travel nearly four miles at £4.50 return on the bus. Now, that £4.50 to a benefit claimant is a lot of money.

**Anna Soubry:** It is a lot of money.

**Ian Pope:** It is the difference between money and a kid's mouth. These are the reasons why we feel that when you look at the areas that are targeted, you see that they are areas of high deprivation and of child

poverty, and hence the reason why we think that this service should still be retained.

- Q16 **Anna Soubry:** I understand that, but in a city like Nottingham, the Jobcentre is right between the bus station and the train station, which obviously helps with access; it still costs money. But even if Nottingham had as many—a population of 600,000 in Glasgow, Nottingham 300,000—even if we had two in Nottingham, you would still be having eight. I want to know why Glasgow should have more proportionately than a city like Nottingham. It is only because I know Nottingham, because I am a Nottingham MP. Why do you need more in Glasgow?

**Ian Pope:** I can understand the point you are making, but I think what I would throw back is that these Jobcentres are in particular areas. Castlemilk, for years there has been massive unemployment; Easterhouse, Maryhill, Bridgeton, all these areas. It was the requirement because of the footfall: the number of people that were going into and using the Jobcentres. There was a requirement for Jobcentres in these areas. Now, Glasgow would appear to be unique in that, but we would still make the case that these Jobcentres are still required today.

- Q17 **Margaret Ferrier:** To add to that, I think the population of Glasgow is much more than Nottingham. I think it is 318,900 for Nottingham at the last census, so I think Glasgow, if you take the suburbs as well, and I am sure Mr McDonald would like to come in and speak about the Castlemilk Jobcentre in particular and how far away it is from the Jobcentres that they are suggesting that these people travel to.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Yes, if I could just respond to some of that. Glasgow is just not Nottingham. I don't see a comparison. I accept your point about the 8% unemployment rate being the same, but if we take, for example, Ms Soubry, in my constituency the close of the Castlemilk Jobcentre, Castlemilk was once bigger than the Chairman's constituency and it is a borough in my constituency. It was the largest housing estate in Europe at one point. Now, Castlemilk is on the periphery, it is on the south-east periphery of the city of Glasgow. The suggestion is that people from Castlemilk will now go to the Newlands Jobcentre. They call it the Newlands Jobcentre; it is actually Pollokshaws, which is even further away than Newlands. That would be an eight-mile round trip.

The way that this was worked out, and I am sure this will be in the briefing papers provided to you, the way the Department worked this out was by using Google Maps. Now, Google Maps, in my view, is fine to use if I visit Nottingham and don't know where I am going. It is not really what I would have expected of a governmental Department. There has been no transport survey carried out, no equality impact assessment carried out prior to the consultation, which I would have thought should have been done to help inform respondents to the consultation, as opposed to publishing it afterwards.

Also, we have digital exclusion rates that are quite big in Glasgow. I know, for example, in Glasgow East, digital exclusion is about 35%. In Castlemilk, in my constituency, it is—

**Q18 Anna Soubry:** So, just so we know, that is people who don't have access at home to the internet? Is it 35% of homes?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Yes, and in Castlemilk, which I have just mentioned, it is roughly the same. I get that moving people online, where possible, is a good thing. I understand all of that. If the Department had come to us and had said, "This is an issue here. We do need to have a conversation about how we reform the service, how we deliver the service to Glaswegians", that would have been fine. We could have had that conversation with an open mind, but that is not what has happened. These issues, like digital exclusion, like how people physically move around the city to access the service, you cannot learn that from Google Maps. Nobody from the Department has bothered to go on a bus and work out how this happened. If this was a school closure—

**Q19 Anna Soubry:** But if they did do that, the point I am trying to get to—and I am sure it is not lost on anyone—is that even in the city of Nottingham, there are two further Jobcentres. One is in my constituency, so it serves people on that side of the city, and then there is another one in West Bridgford, which serves people on the southern side. Those three Jobcentres, one right in the heart, then two in other areas, and then there is another one in Derbyshire. I won't bore you, but what I am trying to get to is, for an incredibly large population, because now we are talking about at least 500,000, those three Jobcentres, and if you put in the Derbyshire one, really do work.

I just want to know why Glasgow cannot have the same proportion of Jobcentres to people. What is there about the geography? Is it that your buses are useless, not as good? Because there is no logic to Glasgow having a higher proportion than it seems any other city in the whole country.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I would disagree with that, I have to say. We could have a conversation about buses and Castlemilk and be here all day, believe me, but I think when you take the combination of the geography, like the Castlemilk Jobcentre, where you take the combination of digital exclusion, the historical poverty rates over the years in Glasgow that are an issue, I think that bringing this kind of change, this big cut in half to the service that is being provided, is just unfair on Glasgow. Now, I don't accept comparisons with Nottingham. I just don't.

**Anna Soubry:** We can go to any city in the country. You have a higher percentage than any other—

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Take Manchester, for example.

**Q20 Anna Soubry:** All right, tell me how many you have in Manchester.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Manchester has about 14 Jobcentres, I think. I would say that is more comparable to Glasgow than Nottingham is.

Q21 **Chair:** I think we will move on. That has been helpful.

One of the reasons that we are reaching a decision about this is that one of the drivers there seems to be about the expiry of the main estates contract. Is that a central feature about how we are now at this stage and why there is now a review of all this? How does that impact? Should services be predicated on the fact that a contract is up for renewal and the estate therefore has to be looked at once again?

**Ian Pope:** I think what has happened is the Department have taken the opportunity at this stage, because the contract expires next year, to do this. That is the rationale behind it, but you can't play games with people's lives depending on contracts. This is going to have a major effect on a vast number of people in Glasgow, and not only Glasgow, everywhere else, as I mentioned, there are going to be some hard effects but certainly at any time we would be arguing for these Jobcentres to remain open. The Department think it is the appropriate time to do it and we would say there is no appropriate time to close half the Jobcentres in Glasgow.

Q22 **Chair:** Lastly, we understand that as well as the Jobcentres there are 27 back offices that are up for closure. Could you just give us a flavour about what these offices do and the types of service they provide to local communities?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** One of the offices that has been announced for closure is in Corunna House in Glasgow. That is the contact centre. They deal with the telephony, basically claims for ESA, Social Fund inquiries and things like that. It is back-office functions dealing with telephony. There are some Child Maintenance Group sites that are affected as well, processing sites for benefits, so that is the kind of work that is done in the back-office functions, but my office will be moving to another office in Glasgow.

Q23 **Chair:** There are also plans to co-locate Jobcentres with wider community services. How would this work in practice?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Co-location again would depend on the staff. This is one of the issues that our members are raising. They are more concerned about the benefit claimants and how it affects them, but they are worried about the staffing levels in the DWP. We have lost 30,000 in the DWP since 2010 and clearly we have a staffing campaign and a claim in to get staff back in—20,000 I think it is. It would really depend on the amount of staff that are left to be in the co-location.

Q24 **Anna Soubry:** We may need to get this verified, but a Google search says there are three Jobcentres in Manchester with a population of 2.5 million and an unemployment rate of 5%.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** You are talking about Manchester city. I am talking about the metropolitan area.

Q25 **Anna Soubry:** I have to tell you that includes the metropolitan area of Manchester, because like Nottingham they have one right in the centre, then two out beyond the suburbs to scoop up better for buses and so on; still three.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I will double-check that, Chair, but that is the information I have from the Department.

**Chair:** Okay. What we will do to satisfy these concerns is we will get a picture of just how many Jobcentres serve metropolitan areas across the UK. I am sure that would help Ms Soubry and her concerns.

Q26 **Deidre Brock:** I had better declare on the record that I have a Jobcentre closing in my constituency as well.

Mr McDonald, you will have been contacted, I am sure, by constituents about this issue. Can you share with us some of their views on the proposed closure?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Yes, as well as lots of contact, lots of constituents signing petitions, lots of constituents responding to the online consultation, I had two well-attended public meetings, at which Ian sat beside me, like we are right now, in Castlemilk and in Langside, where there is the other Jobcentre in my constituency that the Department wishes to close. I think that for those who have been in the system for a while, those who have been attending Jobcentres for a while, what they see is a climate of constantly being harassed, benefit sanctions, being made to feel like a nuisance by the system sometimes. What they now feel is it is just another hardship to them.

I mentioned, for example, that round trip in Castlemilk, which will go to eight miles—an eight-mile round trip they will have to do if it changes. Some folk have just said to me, “I can’t go eight miles”. Their cash is already stretched. Some people have said in the past, “We expect people to travel further if they get a job”. The difference with that is you have ownership over the decision. You have chosen to take a job eight miles away or more than eight miles away. This is going to be a decision that is going to be imposed on them. Pollokshaws is not a neighbouring community to Castlemilk, as the Department continues to describe it. They just feel it is one thing after another, frankly, and they are pretty peeved off with it.

Now, in the case of Langside, it is very different from Castlemilk, where unemployment isn’t as large. Having said that, it is the second most densely populated council ward in Scotland and the kind of work lots of people there are in is kind of part-time work—often unsecure, for example, maybe hotels, bars, call centres—and they are on short-term private rented leases as well. The Jobcentre is also directly across the road from a college campus. I can’t think of a better place to have a Jobcentre.

Q27 **Deidre Brock:** I am guessing therefore that with all these public meetings and consultation and so on that have been taking place and the petitions, that you have shared this with the DWP. What has their reaction been so far?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** They stick to the line that it is only a consultation at this stage. It is very difficult to get anything out of them. What I think would help my frustration and the frustration of unions, other Members and also those who are using the service, would be if we had an idea of a timeline: when can we expect a decision, what would we expect a closure programme to physically look like in time? None of that has been forthcoming.

Q28 **Deidre Brock:** You think uncertainty is adding to people's concerns?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Yes, I do, because it just seems like a decision that came like a bolt out of the blue, particularly for us, who had to read about it in the press. I would have to say it has not been handled very well at all.

Q29 **Ian Murray:** I wonder if Mr McDonald could just run through for us how you would get to Newlands Jobcentre from a Castlemilk primary school without having to walk four miles and you don't drive.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Sure. Entirely by bus. For example, if I take a primary school in the middle of Castlemilk, Castleton Primary School, you are looking at a walk down to where the Jobcentre is at the minute to get a bus. That bus will take you down to Langside and there you would have to change bus to go through Langside to get to Shawlands, where you would get off the bus and walk to Pollokshaws Jobcentre. In total, you are probably looking at three-quarters of an hour and that is if all your buses turned up and you are getting off one and on the other.

Q30 **Ian Murray:** What would the cost of that round trip be?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** You can get a day ticket for that, which is about £4.50. If you were to get taxis, which some people will have to, you are probably looking at about £15 there and £15 back.

Q31 **Anna Soubry:** Chair, can I ask a question? Obviously I can't remember the geography of Glasgow very well. From where you describe, how long would it take to get to the city centre?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** It would probably take—

**Anna Soubry:** By bus.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** It can take the best part of an hour to get to the city centre of Glasgow. It is on the periphery of the south-east.

Q32 **Anna Soubry:** So you are an hour from the city centre. Is it easier to get into the city centre than this convoluted route all the way around?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Yes, one bus.

**Anna Soubry:** One bus into the city here.

Q33 **Chair:** I have a map here and there is just an array of Jobcentres around the Glasgow metropolitan area. There doesn't seem to be a Jobcentre in the city centre.

**Ian Pope:** They closed it down.

Q34 **Chair:** Is this a historic feature of the development of Jobcentres, that they served individual communities around the whole metropolitan area of Glasgow? Is this possibly one of the reasons why there is a difficulty getting from Jobcentre A, which has been closed, to Jobcentre B?

**Ian Pope:** There was a Jobcentre with the Benefit Agency at the time in Pitt Street in Glasgow. They closed that and they moved down to Argyle Street and then they closed that about seven, eight years ago. We made the case that I think that Glasgow was the only big inner city without a Jobcentre in the city centre.

**Chair:** My city is neither as big as your city, Mr McDonald, or Ms Soubry's. In Perth, we only have 52,000 people, but my Jobcentre is on the high street of Perth, which would be equally accessible to anybody from Perth. It just seems a strange feature that in closing these Jobcentres there isn't an obvious point where people can go and they are expected to go to other communities in order to access these services. But I know Ms Ferrier has a question.

Q35 **Margaret Ferrier:** Thank you, Chair. I am going to ask Mr McDonald this question. Are you aware of any equality impact assessments that were carried out before these announcements?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** There haven't been any.

Q36 **Margaret Ferrier:** None at all? Because I am thinking about the kind of detrimental impact that it will have on, say, disabled people or those with mental health conditions or single parents with very young children with the timing factor around it. Are you aware of any—

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** The Department have said they have no intention to carry it out until the consultation has been completed. That has now ended on 31 January. Presumably they are now embarking on that impact assessment as we speak, but they haven't confirmed that.

Q37 **Margaret Ferrier:** Is that not a bit of putting the cart before the horse?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Yes. I would have thought that you would publish that, which would then help those who wished to respond to the consultation to respond to the consultation. It would help inform your response. But the Department seems to take a different view.

Q38 **Mr Christopher Chope:** You are—I think probably quite fairly—critical of the process, but looking at the substance of it, I think we have established that there are a lot more Jobcentres in Glasgow than there are in equivalent cities in the United Kingdom and there still will be a large number more in Glasgow proportionately even after these closures.

I just say, Chairman, that in my constituency some years ago, our only Jobcentre closed and that people on what is regarded as the most deprived housing estate in Dorset have to travel a lot more than an eight-mile round trip in order to access the Jobcentre in Bournemouth. We are not talking about something that is new. This is a policy that has been evolving.

But the Chairman asked about the question of co-location, which is at the core of the Smith Agreement. We have had a rather negative response from Mr Pope, as though he did not really buy into co-location at all, but my understanding is that both the UK Government and the Scottish Government have bought into co-location. I wondered if we could hear a bit more about what you expect that to lead to in terms of Jobcentre provision in Glasgow.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** We would love to have a conversation about co-location. For example—I keep coming back to Castlemilk Jobcentre, if you will forgive me, Chair—it is part of a shopping centre and a few doors down from there is the Citizens Advice Bureau. Kind of around the corner, maybe an eight-minute walk from there, is the Law and Money Advice Centre. There are also a few housing associations quite nearby. If we could have a discussion about, “Okay, we are all offering a similar service in relation to job-finding and welfare and employment support and all the rest of it. How can we better pull that together in the community?” that would be a conversation that would be worth having. I think housing associations would like to have that conversation, councillors would like to have that conversation. I am not against that, but that is not the conversation that we have been offered. What we have been offered is a straight up closure and shifting it to the opposite end of the constituency.

**Ian Pope:** Can I come in, just for clarification? PCS and I are not against co-location. I was asked by the Chair what effect that might have and the point I made was it had to be staffed properly. If there was to be co-location, clearly under the ministerial criteria there should be a footprint left in the existing area. That could be co-location and that is certainly something we would support.

Q39 **Mr Christopher Chope:** So the conversation you say you haven’t yet been invited to have by the UK Government, is that a conversation that has been initiated by the Scottish Government?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I am so glad you asked that, because just as I have had to find out in the press, so did the Scottish Government. That is contrary to the Smith Agreement that you referred to. I am sure members of the Committee will have copies of correspondence from the Scottish Government’s Employment Minister and they are very keen to try to have that conversation. I think there has been a bit of progress, but I would not like to speculate on that too much. However, I think the high-handed way that they have approached it frankly has just got everyone’s back up and I think that it has led to an atmosphere of mistrust.

Q40 **Mr Christopher Chope:** But surely the obligation under the Smith Agreement to investigate co-location predates this announcement. What I really wanted to find out was what was happening after that part of the Smith Agreement was brought into effect. What efforts did the Scottish Government make to try to work with the UK Government to establish co-location so that it could deal with these sorts of issues?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** The agencies of the Scottish Government work closely, as you would expect, with the agencies of the United Kingdom Government. The problem is that the Scottish Government did not have any prior knowledge that this announcement was taking place, so you cannot have a conversation about something that they have not told them about.

Q41 **Mr Christopher Chope:** But you can have a conversation about co-location in general and the desirability of it.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I don't work for the Scottish Government. I can only say to you that I assume the agencies, or I know the agencies of the Scottish Government, work with, for example, the Department for Work and Pensions, but if you want to get into the intricacies of that and what discussions they have physically had on co-locations, I am afraid I am not your guy.

**Chair:** On that, we are doing a piece of joint work with a Scottish Parliament Committee, the Social Security Committee. This is an issue that I think we will want to examine and explore and have a conversation with them about. At this moment I think the debate has started in the Scottish Parliament on this very issue too and I think the concerns about lack of consultation will feature quite highly. I know Mr Murray has to leave for a few minutes and he has a question.

Q42 **Ian Murray:** I want to ask Mr Pope, and you might find this quite difficult to answer because your members are obviously involved in the service, but are your members giving you a concern about the potential rise in sanctions on clients because of this difficulty in being able to access Jobcentres? It seems to me, looking at the map and the discussion we have had already, that Glasgow is built on an arterial model, where buses go in and out of the city centre, but your claimants are being asked to do a circular journey. Are there concerns about the increases in sanctions and what are PCS able to do, through your members who are on the ground, at the coalface in Jobcentres, to make the case to Ministers and to senior staff that they are going to find that quite a difficult process?

**Ian Pope:** That is part of it. We have responded to DWP in the consultation and we have highlighted that. There is no doubt—and Stewart gave the Castlemilk example—and clearly, in our opinion and the opinion of the members who work in Castlemilk, this will increase the likelihood of people being late for appointments at the new Jobcentre, because not everyone lives next to the Jobcentre. People live out away from the Jobcentres. When they have done the calculation on Google Maps, it is from Jobcentre to Jobcentre. There will be that likelihood for this.

Clearly the vast majority of our members oppose benefit sanctions, because they are, as you say, on the shop floor—they are at the front representing the Department, they are the ones that get the criticism, they are the ones that are facing the backlash. It is not Government Ministers, it is not a Department; it is our members. What we would want is clearly a benefit system that treats people with dignity and respect and offers assistance instead of attacking them.

That is all part of what our members are concerned about. When we held members' meetings on all eight of the sites, the first question at every meeting was, "What about the claimants?" Not one of them said, "What about me? Am I going to get a car park space at this new office?" Everyone was talking about the claimants. That was a real concern. It is a credit to them, because they have built up years of experience in working with the communities and they don't want to lose that. That is their concern, their roles and all that will go, because I think we know once a Jobcentre closes, it will never reopen again. They know that as well, so we are fighting as hard as we can to retain the vital services.

**Ian Murray:** I think your members and the staff in Jobcentres have done a remarkable job, given the circumstances of the last few years. They deserve a great deal of credit, but also the support, and I hope the DWP give the staff the support they require for these changes, if they go through.

Q43 **Chris Law:** It is clear from the discussion so far that at just about every single level there has been a lack of consultation and had that been done in the first place, we might not be sitting here today. I am going to return to the point raised by my colleague, Christopher Chope, with regard to the Smith Commission, because we are constantly told by the UK Government that Scotland will be an equal partner in discussions. In fact, he is quite right to raise the Smith Commission report. Paragraph 58 says, and I quote, "The UK and Scottish Government will identify ways to further link services through methods such as co-location wherever possible and establish more formal mechanisms to govern the Jobcentre Plus network in Scotland". Why do you think DWP did not consult the Scottish Government and what do you think it is hiding from?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I think they knew there would be enormous opposition to it. I have to say, I don't think that is a reason to do what they have done. You have the Minister coming after me. I think your question would probably be better put to him, but as you say, it outlines there are formal ways to work together to establish co-location. It does not strike me that either side would have expected for one to tell the other—in fact, they did not even tell the other; they had to also hear about it in the press and then ask questions later. You would expect consultations between the two Governments to have been happening prior to any announcement, but it is clear that did not happen.

**Ian Pope:** That is right. I reiterate what I said earlier about the consultation. If the Department had consulted us, the union, at an earlier stage to say, "Here are the eight sites we think in Glasgow", we could

have sat down with them, had that conversation and raised all the concerns that we have raised in our response to the consultation and we are raising here today. It may have alleviated some of the pressures and we could maybe have had a review of it at an early stage, but instead the Department went full sail into announcing eight closures in Glasgow with very little consultation.

We were only given prior notice of it 48 hours before, so we had no opportunity to raise anything at any meetings to say, "Well, this isn't a good idea. What about Castlemilk? Here are the issues". But as Stewart says, he read about it in the papers and most of our members read about it in the papers as well.

**Q44 Chris Law:** Just one additional question, if you don't mind. Ian, I know you are from the PCS and the PCS have also raised concerns about HMRC closures. Does this not feel very similar in the way that it has been approached and for the reasons it has been done?

**Ian Pope:** Yes. I think when you are looking at Scotland, for many, many years it has been at the forefront of closures, political experiments and everything else. HMRC in Scotland went down to two hubs: Glasgow and Edinburgh. For example, in East Kilbride, in which it is one of the biggest employers in the town, a massive effect, Bathgate, Livingston and further north. This is now our HMRC moment. We are now facing office closures as well and the more closures there are, it is going to be harder to get people redeployed, our members redeployed and keeping their jobs. We had one instance in Scotland with the announcement the other week in Cumnock, where 89 staff could be facing redundancy, because there are no redeployment opportunities in Ayrshire for them.

**Q45 Anna Soubry:** Can I ask you this, Mr Pope? On behalf of your members—obviously we all pay tribute to the work they do in difficult circumstances and recognise it is always difficult when you don't know whether you are going to have a job, it is really tough—are you, as a union that represents its workers, completely set against any closures of any Jobcentre in Glasgow or do you accept the need for some closures?

**Ian Pope:** As a union we look at any proposal. There were a number before the Glasgow one where we recognised that there was no opposition to it because it was maybe a small office that had not been used for some time or they were being deployed to an office maybe 100 yards down the road. So we did not launch campaigns of opposition.

**Q46 Anna Soubry:** So you have an open mind?

**Ian Pope:** Yes. But in Glasgow, after looking at the proposal, we felt that we were not in that position.

**Q47 Anna Soubry:** No. Am I right that it is because it is illogical? Is that it? I know there are the other things, but it is not logical, because if I am right, it seems to be that what has happened is that somebody has sat down—and it may well be that Mr McDonald is right—with Google Maps and gone, "Oh well, that looks all right. We will take this one out, take

that", and so on and so forth, as opposed to saying, "Right, what can we do to get the very best service for as many folk as possible in this city?" That might mean you close them all down—don't get too disheartened when I say that—and effectively start again and say, "Right, let us have one in the city centre, let us have one here". I don't know, would it help Ms Ferrier to have one maybe there in her constituency?

But you see my point. It looks like what they have done, they have not taken that radical approach and said, "How do we get a system that delivers value for the taxpayer and delivers value for the people that use those centres and is logical?" Because I must confess, some of this doesn't look even remotely logical if you have to catch a bus that takes for blooming ever. Would you be willing to do that, Mr McDonald?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** We are in opposition to the plan as it stands. What we recognise is—and it has been mentioned by the Department—that some of these Jobcentres have lots and lots of free floor space, so you might have one floor on the ground level and one above that is not being used. Now, I accept you need to get value for the taxpayer—of course you do—as well as value for the user. I know I keep coming back to Castlemilk. In the case of Castlemilk Jobcentre, if this is about saving money—everyone has to save money, I accept—it is in a town shopping centre. I have written to the Department to say, "If you want to save money, we will have a discussion with you to offer you a lower rent to allow you to deliver the service and save money". The Department has refused to even engage in those conversations.

Q48 **Anna Soubry:** Could they co-locate with somebody on your patch?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Yes, they probably could.

Q49 **Anna Soubry:** You see, my Jobcentre is going in with my borough council, so that building, which has shrunk in terms of the amount of people in it and everything else, now has a police station, it has the fantastic Citizens Advice Bureau. What a whole load of sense it makes to have obviously the Jobcentre in there as well. You are not ruling that out, that sort of free thinking?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Absolutely not.

**Anna Soubry:** There we go; we can sort this out.

**Chair:** We don't have a lot of time left and I want to discuss some of the employment issues with Mr Pope, but I know Ms Ferrier has a supplementary.

Q50 **Margaret Ferrier:** I just wanted to clarify something. We were talking about Manchester earlier and I have had a look. I have just researched us. Manchester: Atherton, Rusholme, West Didsbury, Alexander Park, Cheetham Hill, Middleton, Newton Heath, Openshaw and Longsight. It is certainly a lot more than three. I don't know whether you have been looking at Google Maps. I think we all agree that this is a perfect example, Mr Pope and Mr McDonald, that Google Maps maybe should not form part of the process in looking at these proposals.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I should just say on the Google Maps point, Ms Ferrier was at the meeting where Denise Horsfall was there, whose title escapes me—Director for Scotland—and I asked her as a joke, “Did you just Google Map this?” and she said, “Yes, that is what we used to calculate it”, and other MPs were at that meeting.

**Anna Soubry:** But there is only one in Nottingham.

Q51 **Chair:** We will try to get a proper assessment of Jobcentres right across metropolitan areas of the UK, so we will know exactly how we are comparing apples with pears or bananas, oranges or whatever.

Just lastly, Mr Pope, I think I saw in the December announcement that there were to be no compulsory redundancies. I don’t know if that is still the case now that there is the UK-wide consultation. Could you update us about where we are with compulsory redundancies?

**Ian Pope:** In Glasgow, the Department has said there will be no compulsory redundancies as a result of this announcement and also the new announcements last week. There is a new office in Glasgow and staff will move into this new office in Glasgow by next year. That still stands as far as I know. There will be no need for any redundancies. The only one in Scotland is in Cumnock, as I mentioned.

Q52 **Chair:** Just about the relocation, I know we did not get an opportunity to explore with you some of the further threatened Jobcentres. I know there is one in the Western Isles, for example. Is there any support that staff will have in terms of relocation or are there concerns that have come to you as a union head about relocation packages?

**Ian Pope:** Of course, we support our members through all of this. There may come a time, as I said earlier, with the HMRC point and the possibilities of redeployment reducing. We will support our members through this process, but I think in the Western Isles one of the offices there has not been used for years. I think it is a house, somebody was telling me, and so it might not be an issue. Up in Glasgow it is fine, but in areas like Cumnock and Ayrshire, there may be problems.

Q53 **Chair:** Lastly, what happens next? They close the consultation in February, is that right, the end of February?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** End of January it closed: 31 January.

Q54 **Chair:** End of January, and then what do you anticipate will be following that at the end of the consultation?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** We have not had any formal dates of when to expect more announcements. From doing my own digging, I think we are expecting an announcement on the decision sometime late February, early March, but I do not know whether they will publish consultation responses first. I do not know if they will publish the equality impact assessment at any point and, if so, when. I would appreciate it if you could get that from the Minister when he appears before you this afternoon.

Q55 **Chair:** We will see what we can do is all that I can say to you. Thank you both ever so much for attending this one-off session. If there is anything else that you feel that we have missed or you could add to this Committee's knowledge about what is going on, that would be very helpful. We may use your evidence in our Sustainable Employment inquiry, if that is all right with both of you.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Yes, certainly.

## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Frank Mosson, Reverend Dr Martin Johnstone and Carla McCormack.

Q56 **Chair:** Thank you. Are we all organised and sorted? Again, we will forego any initial statements because of the lack of time, but just for the record could you say who you are and what organisation you represent?

**Frank Mosson:** My name is Frank Mosson. I am the manager of Bridgeton Citizens Advice Bureau, which is located in the East End of Glasgow.

**Carla McCormack:** I am Carla McCormack. I am the policy and parliamentary officer at the Poverty Alliance.

**Reverend Dr Johnstone:** I am Martin Johnstone and I am secretary of the Church of Scotland Church and Society Council.

Q57 **Chair:** I am grateful. Thank you ever so much for attending this afternoon's session at reasonably short notice. Can we start with a general question? How does the closure programme impact on the services that you provide and what are your major concerns about what is proposed? We will start with you, Reverend Johnstone.

**Reverend Dr Johnstone:** Thank you. In a way, I would want to begin by saying that we are not primarily concerned with our members. We are concerned with the people across Scotland in every part of Scotland that we are seeking to serve. The Church of Scotland has had a very deliberate focus over the last 20 years of prioritising resources and energy and commitment to our poorest communities and our poorest places. When we look at the planned Jobcentre closures, we see that those match some of the very, very poorest communities in Scotland, and that is one of the reasons why we feel that this to date is just wrong.

**Carla McCormack:** The Poverty Alliance is Scotland's national anti-poverty network so, like Martin, we are largely concerned with the impact this will have on the poorest people in Scotland. As Martin has highlighted already, by choosing to close the Jobcentres that are mentioned in the consultation, they are generally in areas with high levels of deprivation. We believe that choosing to close those Jobcentres is, therefore, choosing to have a negative impact on people experiencing poverty.

**Frank Mosson:** I would like to echo that. The Citizens Advice Bureau service in Glasgow last year dealt with over 22,500 benefit issues. Obviously, the area in which we are located is an area of multiple deprivation and one of the areas that my bureau covers has a child poverty rate of 50%. We are obviously concerned that this relocation of services is going to have a very negative impact on the most deprived members of our community.

Q58 **Chair:** Could you help us with what sort of relationship you do have with these Jobcentres? Are you in regular contact? Do you help to provide some of the services that may be ongoing from these Jobcentres?

**Frank Mosson:** Certainly, with the Jobcentres, what has happened is they removed the telephone access to the local Jobcentres and it became a means by which you had to contact centrally the Jobcentre. That created a barrier between helping your clients and basically the DWP staff understanding exactly what was going on with your client on a local basis. It was always really good, if you have a vulnerable client with maybe mental health issues or anxiety issues, to be able to go round to the Jobcentre where the bureau is located. Bridgeton bureau is only about five minutes along the road. That is something that is going to be missed with our service.

Q59 **Chair:** Ms McCormack, is there any relationship that you have with the local Jobcentres?

**Carla McCormack:** Our relationship is primarily with claimants, but we also have Poverty Alliance organisational members who work closely with Jobcentres. We were in Castlemilk last week, which Mr McDonald also referenced quite a lot prior to this. We met the Law Centre there, and one of the things they were very keen to highlight is the fact that most of the people who come to seek legal advice in the Law Centre come directly from the Jobcentre. By closing the Jobcentre, there is a potential to break that link between advice and Jobcentre appointments.

**Reverend Dr Johnstone:** I am proud that the church operates an open door and certainly one of the things that the church has been deeply involved with over the last number of years, sadly, has been the rise of foodbanks. Day in, day out, we see people turning up in desperate need, and when we speak to those people about the planned closures, we see people in tears knowing that they are almost at the end of their tether and that this may be a tipping point for them.

Q60 **Chair:** I am grateful. Lastly from me, the Government have stated their intention is to co-locate 50 Jobcentres with local authorities or other community services. Have any of you been approached at all about being a possible co-location?

**Frank Mosson:** No.

**Reverend Dr Johnstone:** No.

**Chair:** I am looking at the shaking of heads, which indicates no, that has not been the case. Thank you for that.

Q61 **Margaret Ferrier:** I am going to ask a supplementary first. In my own constituency a local Church of Scotland minister, the Reverend Neil Glover of Flemington-Hallside Church, has keenly backed the campaign to stop the closure of Cambuslang Jobcentre, calling it a moral issue. Are ministers doing likewise in other areas and, if so, have they raised any particular local concerns?

**Reverend Dr Johnstone:** One of the things that the Church of Scotland does that I mentioned earlier is this particular commitment to the poorest 65 neighbourhoods across the country, the poorest neighbourhoods in Scotland. That network of churches and ministers has certainly been particularly focused on trying to stop those closures, whether or not they are in Glasgow. Across Scotland, we have had that level of concern and I think Neil is absolutely right: this is fundamentally a moral issue.

Q62 **Anna Soubry:** What? How on earth is it a moral issue? I am so sorry, I absolutely recognise the great work you do, but on what possible basis is this a moral issue? Sorry, Ms Ferrier, very rude of me to interrupt, but what do you mean that it is a moral issue?

**Reverend Dr Johnstone:** Okay. If people end up being destitute—

**Anna Soubry:** Destitute?

**Reverend Dr Johnstone:** Yes, as a result—for example, I have a particular person who has spoken to me about her concern that if she has to go to a local Jobcentre, it means that it will take her an hour to get there and an hour to get back. She will have to drop off her three year-old at nursery before she goes. She will need to get to the Jobcentre. If she misses one bus she could be 35 or 40 minutes before the next one comes along. It will then take her an hour to get there, be at the Jobcentre, and then back. She will miss her child. That level of anxiety, it seems to me, is a moral issue in our society.

Q63 **Anna Soubry:** Because of the network that you have as a church, have you looked at how it works in other cities? Other cities do not have the number of Jobcentres that you have in Glasgow, so how does it work in those cities in a way that it cannot work in Glasgow?

**Reverend Dr Johnstone:** With respect, we have gone over quite a lot of that information. I think that some of the problems that are there are around geography. Some of the problems that are there are that because this has been suggested without any prior consultation, we might relocate people from one place to another place without understanding the bus routes or the arterial movements around the city.

Q64 **Anna Soubry:** I do not think there is any debate about that, but going back to your woman, how often does she have to go to the Jobcentre?

**Reverend Dr Johnstone:** She probably has to go there once a fortnight.

Q65 **Chair:** Can you just clarify? Is it once a fortnight? Is that what people are required to do, to turn up for? If you are on jobseeker's allowance, is that the case?

**Frank Mosson:** It can vary. DWP has the power to vary. Usually, it is set at once a fortnight. However, it can be weekly and there have been examples where it has been daily.

- Q66 **Anna Soubry:** We need to know because when you use an example of somebody, other Members of Parliament may well say, "My constituents have an hour's bus journey to go and sign on. If they can do it, why can't this woman do it?" Are we sure that she is having to go and do we know how often she has to go? Does she have her childcare sorted out and so on and so forth? Do you see my point? Rather than saying this woman will be destitute, which is a very, very strong word, we need to be sure that we know exactly her situation before we then judge, would you not agree, that she is going to be destitute?

**Reverend Dr Johnstone:** We absolutely do and I know the woman.

- Q67 **Anna Soubry:** You think she will be destitute if her Jobcentre closes?

**Reverend Dr Johnstone:** I think she has a real fear and anxiety about that level of destitution.

**Chair:** We will leave it there. We are trying to determine the geographical spread of Jobcentres in metropolitan areas and we will make sure that we get the facts and access to that information. Ms Ferrier has another supplementary.

- Q68 **Margaret Ferrier:** It is just the destitute question. Obviously, if transport does not run on time, the woman turns up late, then there is a high possibility, is there not, of increased sanctions? That is what will lead to destitution, but we will leave it at that and I will come on to my next question.

Apart from dealing with people's benefit claims, what other services do Jobcentres provide to people? Is that the best way of providing them or could the likes of the Citizens Advice Bureau do what they do?

**Frank Mosson:** I think there is a misconception that it is only claimants that utilise Jobcentres. Jobcentres also deal with people who have disabilities, who are on ESA and the work-related group, and who are attending Work programme interviews and things like that. In addition, Jobcentres also receive documentation and do verification of documentation such as a fit note or sick lines. For someone who is having to provide a sick line to then have an additional journey, and my bureau's concern is 2.7 miles from Bridgeton to Shettleston, that is 5.4 miles someone is having to go to provide a fit note into a local Jobcentre, which is quite a journey.

In regard to the services the bureau provides, obviously we deal with an awful lot. Apart from benefits, there is debt, housing and so on. Could we host any other? I really do not know. An issue is in regard to our principles and how we look at working with partners. One of the things we have to consider is our independence and how it can be perceived if we are working too closely, in a sense. That independence could be threatened.

**Margaret Ferrier:** Ms McCormack, do you have any comments?

**Carla McCormack:** We do not provide a service as such. We are a membership organisation, but one of the things a lot of our members have raised, and to echo what Mr Mosson had said, would be that they would be concerned about co-locating Jobcentre services in somewhere that might compromise their neutrality, particularly with the ongoing sanctions regime. They do not want to feel like they are co-locating with an organisation that is sanctioning people and is leaving people without money to live on. That puts them in an awkward situation.

The other thing as well on top of that is people need to speak with Jobcentre staff somewhere that is private and where they can do that without fear of being overheard. This is particularly true for ESA claimants. I think with all the Jobcentres in Glasgow targeted for closure—Mr Mosson will correct me on this if I am wrong—ESA claimants make up the majority of claimants in those Jobcentres. If you are going and you are having to discuss a health condition, you do not want to do that somewhere where you might be overheard or if you know the person who works in the library or community centre.

Q69 **Margaret Ferrier:** Is there not a security issue as well? If someone is going in at the moment, Jobcentre Plus normally have security on their premises for anyone that possibly kicks off in the Jobcentre and you have to deal with it. A library is not really the best place to relocate or co-locate.

**Carla McCormack:** Yes.

Q70 **Chair:** On that, we have received some concerns about some of the disability issues. Although no impact assessment has been done about the impact this is going to have on people who have disabilities and ensuring they can get to Jobcentres, I know the CAB in particular has been looking at some of these things. Is there anything you can help this Committee with about some of your concerns with that, if there are any?

**Frank Mosson:** Yes, certainly. The Citizens Advice Bureaux in Glasgow have been conducting surveys of claimants and people who use the Jobcentre, with some very interesting results, if you can bear with me while I find it among my papers.

Some of the quotes are quite pertinent in regard to the distance, the mobility and general fear of sanctions. We have one client who said, "I would have to get two buses to Shettleston, which might mean that I was late to an appointment. I would be worried about sanctions". Another states, "I cannot walk any distance so need to use public transport. If I had to go there, it would be expensive to pay for bus fares". That was a client that was on ESA. There are other issues as well. We have a lone parent who talks about having to take their child there and the difficulty they have with walking with their daughter. They would find it difficult and expensive. One of the other things is the anxiety that is created by people even just using public transport if they have children, or trying to meet a deadline, and things like that.

One of the things we also got from our survey was that the vast majority of people walked to the Jobcentre, not necessarily always through choice but because it was more affordable to use Shanks's pony. The concern, as you heard earlier, is that the plan looks at Jobcentre-to-Jobcentre travel. Some of our clients are about two miles away from the Jobcentre. Clients are distant from the Jobcentre and one of the difficulties they then have is that there is an additional journey there, which is going to have an impact on them.

- Q71 **Chair:** Are there any reassurances you have had from Government or from the DWP that people will be compensated for these further journeys? I am not sure you could help us about how, if there is going to be compensation, it is paid. Is it given when they arrive at the Jobcentre or does it go into the monthly benefit? How would that work out?

**Frank Mosson:** The DWP does have a jobseeker's fare scheme, but you have to be registered for three months before you can access that. It does not have a large uptake, unfortunately. Having said that, for the vast majority of people with the scheme, it is £1 for a single journey—£1 on the bus for a single journey. If someone has to get two buses to the Jobcentre, that would be £2, and then back again would be another £2, so it is £4. An all-day ticket is £4.50. There is a small saving there of 50p. There is that scheme but, as I said, from our clients there has not been a great uptake.

**Reverend Dr Johnstone:** Certainly, from a meeting that we had with the Minister a couple of weeks ago—so you can maybe ask him more about this—we were informed about the possibility or about a scheme that, if people were travelling to a Jobcentre more than once a fortnight, there was an opportunity for that second fare to be compensated, but there was not for the first one. Obviously, £4.50, which is what it would be in the vast majority of cases, is a significant amount of money out of people's budgets.

- Q72 **Margaret Ferrier:** Were they getting that £4.50 back there and then or were they having to wait for it?

**Reverend Dr Johnstone:** I don't know. You should ask the Minister.

**Chair:** I think we will. Thank you for that.

- Q73 **Anna Soubry:** Reverend Johnstone, you were talking about the foodbanks. At the foodbanks, do you also have any computers?

**Reverend Dr Johnstone:** We do and a number of our churches also run job clubs and work on occasions very closely with local Jobcentres. We want to try to do that and at the moment we work effectively with a number of Jobcentres across the country, less effectively with others. We would want to be able to help, but we would want to also recognise what others have said about some of the real challenges of being very closely associated with the DWP, where the staff, I think as Mr Murray said earlier, are on the whole superb, but in actual fact the policy is something that the church would disagree with.

Q74 **Anna Soubry:** Going back to the use of computers, you help people to go online. Do you do some training for people on computers if they do not have them at home?

**Reverend Dr Johnstone:** We try to provide some of that support and that help.

Q75 **Anna Soubry:** Do you work with the local Jobcentres? I was not sure. I have a church with a foodbank and they have a big bank of computers, which they have begged, borrowed and stolen, and then they help people get online and help them with their job applications and so on. Do you do that in your churches?

**Reverend Dr Johnstone:** We do.

Q76 **Anna Soubry:** Excellent. Now can I ask about the fact that we know that obviously some people have to go physically into the office? I do not know who can help me with this. Can people tell us what the circumstances are in which a claimant would physically have to go into an office and, heaven forbid, engage with a real human being? What sorts of cases? Why would people need to do that? This is a very important point.

**Frank Mosson:** I think if you are looking at—

**Anna Soubry:** That was sarcastic, by the way, about engaging with human beings.

**Frank Mosson:** For instance, if someone has been claiming employment and support allowance and they have been taken off that and they are appealing it or they are going through the mandatory consideration, in the meantime they are required to attend the Jobcentre. They have to claim jobseeker's allowance. Until such time as their appeal is lodged, an individual who may be quite ill is having to attend a Jobcentre as a job seeker.

Q77 **Anna Soubry:** They still have to go even if they are ill?

**Frank Mosson:** Yes.

Q78 **Anna Soubry:** Is that every fortnight?

**Frank Mosson:** That would be to the discretion of their work coach.

Q79 **Anna Soubry:** What about people who have disabilities and have somebody at the Jobcentre who is helping them either to get back into work or to get into work for the first time? Would you agree that often they physically want to go and talk face to face with somebody who is helping them to get a job?

**Frank Mosson:** Yes, absolutely. That is a point, but I think the difficulty is that if you have someone with disabilities who is seeing a disability adviser, I am not sure how much easier that is going to be for them if they are having to travel a longer distance and over more time.

Q80 **Anna Soubry:** I think it is the fact that they do have to go into the office. Not everybody can just do stuff online, even if they have access to

it. We need to know the sorts of cases where people have to physically go into the office and, as I say, talk to somebody, have an appointment, whatever it may be. You are giving us examples of that?

**Frank Mosson:** Yes.

- Q81 **Anna Soubry:** I do not like stereotypes, but would you agree with me that younger people—those under the age of 30 to 35—tend to be more au fait with doing pretty much everything online, but people who are over that age may not have such a willingness? Would you agree with me on that?

**Frank Mosson:** Without getting into stereotypes, I think there are issues for people using online in Glasgow, definitely. The Glasgow bureaux participated in a study in 2013: 950 people had a questionnaire and, of that, 70% of the benefit claimants said that they needed help online. They would need help to complete a form. When we did our survey at the four Jobcentres in the East End of Glasgow—that is Bridgeton, Shettleston, Parkhead and Easterhouse—we did a survey using our community information workers. That found 51% of the people we asked stated that they would need help completing a form online.

- Q82 **Anna Soubry:** Did they say why?

**Frank Mosson:** There are a number of reasons. For instance, I think as you heard earlier, the digital pick-up in Glasgow, the pick-up for broadband, I believe an Ofcom survey found that only 40% of households had picked up on broadband in Glasgow. There are issues with digital by default in Glasgow.

One of the other things that I think came from it is that if the Jobcentres move location, if they relocate further away, then there are resources that are going to be taken out of the local communities. IT resources and advisory resources are going to be relocated. The difficulty is that people would then have to access the libraries and things like that. The problem with the library service is that they are time constrained. You only have one hour to complete your business on a computer in the library. The difficulty is that most of—

**Anna Soubry:** That is very interesting.

- Q83 **Chair:** That comment you made that there is 40% pick-up of broadband in Glasgow—

**Frank Mosson:** Yes, I got that from Ofcom.

**Chair:** One is assuming that that 40% are going to be among the most prosperous people in Glasgow.

- Q84 **Anna Soubry:** I used to be a criminal barrister and I used to represent people. I did not prosecute very much. One of the things that always struck me was that a lot of people—it takes a long time to get them to admit it—cannot read and write.

**Frank Mosson:** Yes.

**Anna Soubry:** If you can only do it online, how do you do it online if you cannot read and write very well?

**Chair:** This concerns us greatly, given that one of the major drivers for this is the fact that most of this is now being processed online. What you are telling us is that the majority of people in Glasgow do not have access to that facility and there is a great deal of difficulty in ensuring that these claims are being processed.

Q85 **Anna Soubry:** Do you have any statistics among you of what you think the percentage could be of people who are claiming who cannot read and write, or cannot read and write very well?

**Frank Mosson:** I did try to obtain the literacy figures for Glasgow before I came here, but unfortunately I couldn't.

**Chair:** It would help us if you could give that information to the Committee, if it is available in a form that we could use. That would be really helpful to try to get a sense of some of the difficulties we are trying to explore here in the innovations. That brings us to Chris Law.

**Chris Law:** I think Anna Soubry has asked most of the questions.

**Anna Soubry:** I am so sorry.

Q86 **Chris Law:** No, it is okay. One of the key points that the Government stated for closing these Jobcentres was increased online engagement, but from what you are saying this flies in the face of exactly what can be done. I heard earlier also that in Castlemilk 30% have no digital connection in their homes. Am I right in saying, just looking at your own survey for the CAB, surveyed service users say 80% will be inconvenienced or greatly inconvenienced by these closures and the impact from reduced access to digital services and support? Did you say your last report was in 2013? Is that correct?

**Frank Mosson:** There was one done in 2015 as well, which is the later one. It showed that there was some improvement but not a substantial improvement.

Q87 **Chris Law:** To be blunt, the DWP is out of touch with its service users, frankly, on this?

**Frank Mosson:** To be blunt, yes.

Q88 **Chair:** I think all of us as Members of Parliament are familiar with these issues where people are coming to our constituency surgeries needing assistance in order to make these claims. You heard me say I have one Jobcentre in Perth and we have a great relationship particularly with CAB where it is all interconnected and mutually supportive and helpful. I am presuming that these models apply across Glasgow, that you are pretty much connected with the Jobcentres and work together in order to try to help the clients.

**Frank Mosson:** Yes, obviously we are all trying to help the client. Just how connected that is in Glasgow I cannot really compare to Perth and what is happening in Perth.

Q89 **Chair:** Again, we have a foodbank in Perth and what we found on my recent visit was that most people who access the services from the foodbank were people who had been sanctioned. That was, again, as a result of not being able to turn up on time for appointments and so on. I do not know if that is what you found. I think you said it was mainly ESA.

**Reverend Dr Johnstone:** Yes, that is certainly our experience alongside other faults within the DWP benefit system. People perhaps not getting the benefit that they are entitled to, that not coming through, is another very major reason for us.

For me, one of the other real challenges in this is that an awful lot of our conversation is talking about what is going on as if the number of people who will be visiting Jobcentres over the next period of time will inevitably be declining. In actual fact, as Universal Credit is rolled in, then DWP policy has that the number of people attending Jobcentres will increase or should increase over the next number of years. It seems to me that that then flies completely in the face of reducing something at a time when you are envisaging there will be significantly greater usage. We would anticipate from some very rough calculations that that may well mean another 20,000 people in Glasgow would have to access Jobcentres over the next number of years.

Q90 **Chair:** That is a very helpful point and I will bring the other guests in on this, because there are also economic forecasts as a result of leaving the European Union. I think Fraser of Allander, for example, is forecasting possibly losing tens of thousands of jobs and a major impact on all our communities when it comes to these things. Therefore, we have a situation with Universal Credit being one thing and the possibility of an economic downturn and more people being unemployed and these Jobcentres being closed. Have you done any work about possible future pressures that would be on the Jobcentres that would still exist?

**Frank Mosson:** I think the Reverend Doctor makes a good point there about Universal Credit rollout. We do know that when Universal Credit rolls out there will be increased footfall at the Jobcentres because people will be called in if they are underemployed or they are not satisfying the amount of hours. There is going to be an increase in Jobcentre footfall.

**Carla McCormack:** One of the other things in addition to increased in-work conditionality and increased conditionality for lone parents is you obviously mentioned as well what is going to happen with Brexit. I am not an economist, I do not know, but it does seem like a strange time now to decide to close these Jobcentres, particularly with new powers coming to the Scottish Government and disability benefits being devolved to Scottish level. We already know that there is quite a lot of confusion among the people we work with anyway about what is coming to the Scottish Government and what will remain reserved. If you are on a benefit that is being moved and your Jobcentre has closed, you are like, "Where do I go for help now?" We would at the very least like to see any closures postponed until we have had a full rollout of Universal Credit and

the Scottish Government's devolved powers have been up and running in their time as well, just to avoid any additional confusion for people.

**Chair:** Thank you for that. I see Ian Murray has a supplementary question.

- Q91 **Ian Murray:** Yes, and apologies for being slightly late. I had to nip away from the Committee. You may have covered this already, but I wonder if part of the problem here is like we have with any public service, like primary schools. We built them all at a time when populations were of a certain size, and they have developed, and cities have developed, differently. In terms of this proposal, obviously closing these centres looks complicated and difficult because of accessibility, but is there a potential to be looking at where we do provide those services? It seems to me that maybe it is not the quantum of physical Jobcentres we have but the location. Is there a way we can be looking at persuading the DWP to try to access these services without physically having to go into one of these offices that takes you four hours to walk or an hour and a half by three buses? Is that something that your clients would be saying to you, "No, it is too difficult to get to. It is just impossible to get to"? It is about accessibility rather than the number.

**Frank Mosson:** Certainly, the routes that clients have to follow using the buses or walking is a concern, so yes, it is about accessibility. I walked the route from Bridgeton to Shettleston Jobcentre and it took me an hour and five minutes on a nice dry day, I have to say.

**Ian Murray:** We have the maps here, yes.

**Frank Mosson:** It is unusual in Glasgow to have a nice dry day. I also returned and it took me an hour and 15 minutes coming back because it is uphill. You can see that there are issues there. I know we have heard a lot about Google and things like that. I think the difficulty is that unless you know the terrain and the territory, it becomes very difficult to see how it impacts on real people's lives.

While accessibility is key, there is also another issue that I think is important and it came out in our survey. It is in regard to territoriality, which does exist still unfortunately in Glasgow and in other cities. Twenty-six per cent of the people we surveyed expressed concern about travelling into another neighbourhood and expressed concern about their safety.

- Q92 **Deidre Brock:** I want to ask Ms McCormack a question. The Poverty Alliance has come up with some specific recommendations to help mitigate the effects of this policy. One of the examples is the travel costs that were mentioned before and about paying those upfront for folk travelling to a Jobcentre so that it is in advance and they have money in their hand before that happens. Could I ask how the DWP has responded to that?

**Carla McCormack:** They haven't. The reason we have made that suggestion is because people have come to us and said the £4.50 is a lot, especially out of £73.10 a week jobseeker's allowance. We spoke to a

lone parent—it was through one of our members, One Parent Families Scotland—and she said that losing £4.50 a week for her is like losing a food shop for a day. That is really what we are talking about here. I know there had been a bit of talk earlier about destitution and things like that, but it is all relative. While many of us in this room might be able to afford to lose £4.50 a week, if you are living on the breadline that is a big difference. Obviously, we hope that the current proposals will not go ahead, but if they do and people are going to have to pay this £4.50 a week, we would really like to see that added to their benefit level in advance so that they are not having to skip, for example, eating for a day just to ensure that they can attend their Jobcentre appointment.

- Q93 **Mr Christopher Chope:** Dr Johnstone said that there are 20,000 extra people going to go to these Jobcentres as a result of the introduction of Universal Credit. Can he put that in context? Is that 20,000 out of 200,000 at the moment or 2 million? What percentage are we talking about?

**Reverend Dr Johnstone:** At the moment, when we are talking about the Jobcentres in Glasgow now—others will be able to help me with this—I think we are talking about 31,000 attending the Jobcentres across the city, so we are talking about an additional 20,000.

- Q94 **Mr Christopher Chope:** That means that you have 16 Jobcentres at the moment and 2,000 people a year are visiting each of those Jobcentres? That does not seem very many. If we work out how many per week, that is—

**Reverend Dr Johnstone:** 1,000 a week, probably slightly more.

- Q95 **Mr Christopher Chope:** It is 1,000 a week visiting all 16 you mean?

**Carla McCormack:** It varies.

- Q96 **Mr Christopher Chope:** You say there are 31,000 visits to Jobcentres in Glasgow at the moment and you have 16 Jobcentres, so that means per Jobcentre there is an average of 2,000 visits per year. Two thousand visits per year is not particularly busy, is it, if you only have 2,000 visits a year at each Jobcentre?

**Carla McCormack:** That is the number of claimants rather than the total number of visits.

**Mr Christopher Chope:** I do not have the figures but that is just on the basis of what was just said.

- Q97 **Anna Soubry:** You have 31,000 claimants who would on average go every fortnight, is that right?

**Carla McCormack:** Yes.

- Q98 **Chair:** I think that the charge as such or the question that was put to you is: are these Jobcentres being underutilised, given that there seems to be a high number, although that is debatable, for the Glasgow service? Is there a sense that these places are not busy at all?

**Carla McCormack:** I do not think anyone has ever walked into a Jobcentre and seen Jobcentre advisers looking for something to do. Any time we have been in or claimants are trying to access services, it is certainly always a busy environment.

Q99 **Mr Christopher Chope:** Can I have one more question to try to help put this in context? How many Citizens Advice Bureaux are there in Glasgow?

**Frank Mosson:** There are eight Citizens Advice Bureaux in Glasgow and one telephone service.

Q100 **Mr Christopher Chope:** We will have the same number of Jobcentres as CABs? You have tailored your service to try to fit the needs of the community, I imagine?

**Frank Mosson:** No, unfortunately not. Our Citizens Advice Bureaux are located in the most deprived areas of Glasgow, yes, but unfortunately it is not in every deprived area of Glasgow. I would probably be arguing for more Citizens Advice Bureaux in Glasgow.

Q101 **Anna Soubry:** Do you have one in the city centre?

**Frank Mosson:** There is one in the city centre. It is Glasgow Central and it is located at the Merchant City at the moment.

Q102 **Mr Christopher Chope:** Do you think your eight locations, including one in the city centre, are more convenient for your clients than the current locations of the Jobcentres?

**Frank Mosson:** Yes. You will find in Easterhouse, for example, the bureau is located directly across from the Jobcentre. In Bridgeton it is located just round the corner, a five-minute walk around the corner. In Parkhead, it is a five-minute walk down the street. Castlemilk CAB is located in the same shopping precinct as the Jobcentre as well. The Citizens Advice Bureaux do tend to be near Jobcentres, but it is not by plan. We are located in areas of deprivation.

Q103 **Margaret Ferrier:** I have to declare an interest in this again because I was a volunteer at the local Citizens Advice Bureau in Parkhead. I know how busy the CAB offices are and what they deal with. Just to clarify, it is not just people coming in and looking for benefits advice. It is things like debt advice, consumer advice, family, everything. As far as I am aware, my local Citizens Advice Bureaux are very, very busy and I know that others throughout the city are. As you say, they do a great job but we need more of them.

**Frank Mosson:** Yes.

Q104 **Chair:** We are running out of time and we are very grateful for your appearance today. Maybe just to round up, I think I heard Mr Johnstone say that he had a meeting with the Minister. What representations have you made on behalf of the groups that you serve? What responses have you had and what do you now expect to happen in the next stages of the consultation and rollout of this programme? Can we start with you, Ms McCormack?

**Carla McCormack:** We have recently submitted evidence to the DWP consultation regarding the Glasgow Jobcentre closures. We will do similar now with Broxburn. In terms of next steps, we have not heard a great deal back from the DWP. We had an acknowledgement e-mail yesterday and that was it.

I am sure there will be agreement from Martin and Frank here on this as well. First, the consultation has been massively unsatisfactory so far. The picking and choosing of which Jobcentres you will consult on has been massively disappointing. We do not feel there has been anywhere near enough effort to reach out to claimants in those Jobcentres and get their views. As well as an equality impact assessment, we would really like to see any decisions poverty-proofed to make sure that they are not impacting further on people in poverty. If we push people even further into poverty, we are just widening inequality and that ends up costing society much more than it would to just keep these Jobcentres running.

Q105 **Chair:** What did you say to the Minister, Reverend Johnstone, when you met him and what response did you get?

**Reverend Dr Johnstone:** We said that we felt that this was unfairly impacting on our very poorest communities. We said that we felt that there were huge issues about travel and about digital inclusion. We made an offer to work with other organisations and agencies to ensure that we got beyond simply an organisational response to the problems that are here to directly hearing from and working alongside benefit claimants. We were politely listened to.

**Chair:** So it was a minister-to-Minister conversation?

**Frank Mosson:** The bureaux have submitted their own responses to the consultation and Citizens Advice Scotland have submitted their response. I have to echo Carla's comments in regard to the consultation process. There was absolutely no consultation and we had no idea that this was happening until we read it in the media. Afterwards, we were informed and we were invited to an event in the east but unfortunately we only had three days' notice. We were able to attend but other stakeholder organisations obviously could not because only four other organisations could manage along on three days' notice, which is not a lot of time.

**Chair:** This has to be very tiny, Anna, because the Minister is waiting.

Q106 **Anna Soubry:** I think you said, and I know obviously that Margaret will probably help, on the cost of travel, is there a travel card that you said was £4.50 on the bus for a day?

**Frank Mosson:** Yes, I did. No, it is £1 for every single journey.

**Anna Soubry:** £1 for every single journey?

**Frank Mosson:** Yes, so if you go on the bus once it is £1 but if you take two buses it is £2.

**Anna Soubry:** Right, and there was something for a day that was £4.50? Ms Ferrier can help us with this.

Q107 **Chair:** We are extremely grateful to you for coming down and giving us evidence and helping us out with this inquiry. If there is anything you felt you had missed or needs to be re-emphasised or anything that you would like to further contribute, please get in touch with the Committee. Mr Mosson?

**Frank Mosson:** There was just one thing I was going to say, because I was basically speaking about the consultation process, and just to finish, for me if there is an organisation that is properly customer-focused they should be asking their customers and it would be very nice if we could ask the Minister whether there will be a customer-focused survey or consultation with the users of the Jobcentre.

Q108 **Chair:** I can already see my colleagues scribbling that down as you speak. Thank you ever so much.

**Reverend Dr Johnstone:** That is certainly our offer to the Minister. We would be happy to work with others to facilitate that.

**Chair:** Fantastic. Thank you ever so much for coming along today, and if we could have the Minister and the civil servants please.

## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Damian Hinds MP, Karen Gosden and Susan Park.

Q109 **Chair:** Minister, good afternoon to you. We are extremely grateful to you for coming along at such short notice, and I know that you have two colleagues with you this afternoon. For the record, if you could say who you are, we obviously know who you represent, but if you have anything to say by the way of a short statement, we would be delighted to hear that. We will start with you, Minister, and maybe you could introduce your colleagues.

**Damian Hinds:** I certainly will, thank you, Chairman, and thank you for inviting us along. It is a good opportunity to be able to say a bit more about the change that we have had with the People and Locations Programme in DWP, which of course is nationwide but includes Scotland and there has been particular interest from colleagues in Glasgow and elsewhere around Scotland and throughout the UK. As I say, we are grateful for the opportunity.

I am joined by Karen Gosden, who has run what we call the PLP—the People and Locations Programme—so effectively, formulating the estate strategy and enacting it, and Susan Park, who manages the Jobcentre Plus network nationwide.

Q110 **Chair:** I am grateful. We have just heard from community organisations. We have heard from local Members of Parliament and we have heard from the unions involved in all of this. All of them are extremely unhappy and have raised a number of issues and points that we want to explore

with you. It does not seem to be getting communicated that this is a particularly good idea. Why is it that they are maybe all wrong and you are right when it comes to this, and are you prepared to listen to some of the what I found quite compelling cases and issues that they raised with us and some of the real difficulties that people have presented? Would you review what you are planning and are you prepared to listen to the range of community organisations that have concerns?

**Damian Hinds:** We are absolutely prepared to listen and have and do listen. It is important that all views are taken into account. That is why we are running public consultations on a number of these proposals where they fall outside of what are called ministerial criteria, the distance and time outwith we consider it is right to have a public consultation.

Your question was: why do we think we are right? Any organisation periodically reviews its physical lay down: it reviews what it does and how it does it. That is a normal part of operating. For 20 years that has not been possible in DWP because a PFI contract was signed in 1998 by the then Labour Government, which tied DWP in Scotland as in England and throughout the UK into what was quite a restrictive arrangement, which expires in March 2018. Almost all of the buildings we are talking about fall under that prime contract.

Q111 **Chair:** Just to be clear, you are doing this, then, as an exercise because the contract is over and there is an opportunity to review the estate? If there was no opportunity to review the estate then would you be leaving all these Jobcentres alone?

**Damian Hinds:** By definition, Chairman, if there were no opportunities then I guess it would not be possible. We may well have reviewed some of these items on a different timing if there were no lease-expiry dates to consider and so on, but let me speak a little more if I may about the rationale.

Q112 **Chair:** I am trying to understand whether it is about an opportunity or whether it is need that is driving this. What you seem to be saying is all about the fact that you have an opportunity to restructure and reorganise the estate. That is what we are hearing just now.

**Damian Hinds:** We were talking, Chairman, about the timing and the timing is indeed to do with the fact that the leases all expire, or the PFI with the leases attached to it, expires in March 2018 after a full two decades. That is, by definition, a rare opportunity in that sense to review. What we are doing is seeking to make better use of buildings, make better use of facilities and put our resourcing—put Scottish and English and Welsh taxpayers' money—into the things that we know make the biggest positive difference in helping people into work and then helping people progress at work.

We had a number of buildings that were underutilised and it has been possible in some cases to merge operations in some of those buildings. The overall exercise does save quite a lot of money; it saves £180 million annually recurring, which is of course a substantial sum, but our primary

objective was to end with a network of Jobcentres that had good coverage right across the UK, were accessible to people who are in the job market and need help finding a job as well as doing some of the administration of the benefits that we have, and that is how we have come up with this set of plans.

- Q113 **Chair:** I am just trying to clarify. We know that you want to try to improve the service and we have heard you and your colleagues say that in several debates and the statement, but I want to try to clarify this fact. I think what I am hearing is that this change and this new programme is coming about because this contract has ended and there is an opportunity to look at the estate, to look at the delivery across the United Kingdom. It is not based on needs assessments or having a look at what is required in terms of claimants and demand. It is just an opportunity to review this because the contract is up and you can now look at the estate again.

**Damian Hinds:** Chairman, I think one has to separate the thing itself from the timing of it. What I have been trying to explain is that PFI was signed almost 20 years ago. It expires 20 years later. By definition that is the moment at which you review the operation, you review the network, the physical estate. I mean you could do such a review and decide you really did not want to change anything at all. Then you would go into new negotiations and in some cases buildings that you might want to renew and you might not be able to, and that is a different set of decisions, but the timing is absolutely to do with the fact that there is a 20-year PFI coming to an end.

What we have decided we want to do is try to make best use of resources, try to make sure that we do not have empty space, that we utilise what we have, that we have modern facilities. There are some things you can do well in a big Jobcentre that you cannot do as well in a small Jobcentre, things that are helpful for getting people into work. We are putting more of our resourcing into frontline staff, so we are currently recruiting work coaches, including in Scotland and including in Glasgow, and we expect to have more people working in Jobcentres in Scotland at the end of this process in 2018 than we do right now, but what we will not have is nearly so much—there will still be some but not nearly so much—unused space on which you pay the full rent but you do not get the benefit as there is now.

- Q114 **Chair:** Another opening question about the process issue. This has been announced in two waves. We received the announcement, which I think came as a shock as we have heard from MPs, trade unions and community organisations. It came out of the blue that there was what you call the pilot exercise first and then there was a subsequent announcement that was UK-wide. Why were there two different announcements made about the Glasgow Jobcentres and then a subsequent one for the whole United Kingdom?

**Damian Hinds:** Where did you get the word “pilot” from?

- Q115 **Chair:** It has been described as such. If it is not a pilot then tell us what

it was, then.

**Damian Hinds:** Not by me, Chairman. There was a series of announcements when it was possible to move forward in particular areas. It is not the case that there was one exercise for Glasgow and then another exercise for the rest of the UK.

Q116 **Chair:** So why then was the Glasgow one announced separately?

**Damian Hinds:** There were a number of locations. I would have to defer to Karen.

Q117 **Chair:** We would really like to know why Glasgow was announced separately.

**Damian Hinds:** Glasgow was announced before some other cities.

Q118 **Chair:** Why?

**Damian Hinds:** Because it was ready at that time to do it, but it was not the first.

**Chair:** Why could you not have waited a few more weeks?

**Damian Hinds:** There were others. We then decided for all sorts of reasons that for the remaining sites, and it was public knowledge that this PFI was coming to an end, many people would have known that between now and March 2018 we would have had to finalise—I mean, one way or another, including deciding where we were going to stay, we would have had to finalise those decisions and we determined—

Q119 **Chair:** I am still not understanding and hearing why Glasgow was announced earlier.

**Damian Hinds:** I have explained that Glasgow was not singled out. It is not that Glasgow was done and then everywhere else was done. There were a number of places where we were in a position to make announcements, to be able to tell the staff what was going to happen to start the consultations where necessary and we were doing it in a staged programme. We decided that for the ones that had not yet been announced it made sense, because of the great interest that there was, to announce them all on one day and that is what we did. It was an enormous communications exercise, we have a lot of staff in a lot of different locations and our primary objective was to make sure that our staff heard about this before anybody else did. That was a big logistical exercise in its own right, managed by Karen and by our senior leadership team. It is absolutely not the case, and I do not wish there to be any misunderstanding, that in some way the Jobcentres in Glasgow were some sort of pilot. It was not a pilot, it was not an advance exercise or anything like that. It just was the case that on that date that was the date on which it was possible to make announcements and to speak to staff and to move forward on proposals for Jobcentre Plus.

Q120 **Chair:** I think you can understand why we are a bit cynical about exercises like this applied to Scotland first then the rest of the United

Kingdom, because that has happened in history on several occasions.

**Damian Hinds:** Let me be clear it was not—

**Anna Soubry:** A conspiracy theory.

**Damian Hinds:** So there were 39 Jobcentres that were announced before Glasgow; I am just going to have to ask Karen where they were.

**Karen Gosden:** Across the country we had a range of Jobcentre and back-of-house locations and it had been our intention that we would do them singularly, if they were in isolation. It just so happened that Glasgow was the first. As commercial deals were struck, because all of this was happening in commercial confidentiality, our intention was to announce city by city so that we could give a full picture. It is just pure coincidence that Glasgow was the first city where all of those negotiations were complete. We were then going to go on and do others in cities but as the Minister has explained we changed our focus.

Q121 **Chair:** We are grateful for that, but I still cannot understand why you could not just hold back a month and announce the whole range of closures at the one time. I accept the—

**Damian Hinds:** We could have done but—

**Chair:** Yes. Why didn't you?

**Damian Hinds:** Because, as I was explaining, 39 Jobcentres had already been announced at that point. We were going through a staged programme. It is not that there was one big announcement and we did some early. It is that we were doing them in a staged way and then we decided that we should do all the remaining ones at the same time.

Q122 **Chair:** Lastly from me, and I know other colleagues are very keen to come in on this, the main driver behind this from what I understand is the reduction in claimants that we are anticipating or expecting. You are shaking your head, so it is not to do with that, then. Can you tell us why you are doing this?

**Damian Hinds:** You said it was to do with an expectation of reduction in claimants. We have had good employment numbers as you know in Scotland. We have had a very significant reduction in the claimant count in Scotland. We as an organisation always of course have to consider all sorts of contingencies and you do not know what is going to happen in the future. You are always planning of course for the long term. The fact that there is lower unemployment in Glasgow and in Scotland as a whole of course is very welcome, and that has an effect on the fact that we have relatively low utilisation of the buildings, but the fundamental rationale as I was trying to say earlier is that we have a lot of space that we are not using and we are consolidating locations so that space is better used, so a better deal for the taxpayers. It does save money. As I say, there are also some things you can do in a larger Jobcentre that you cannot do in a smaller Jobcentre quite as well, so it is an estate that fits

the purpose of what a modern, public employment system as ours needs to do.

- Q123 **Chair:** Have you seen any forecasts about the possibility of a spike in unemployment, not just in Scotland but across the UK? You might have seen the Fraser of Allander report, for instance, which anticipates thousands of job losses coming to Scotland as a result of us exiting the European Union. Have you done any assessments about what will be required from Jobcentres in the future, and how does fewer Jobcentres in fewer locations service what may be a larger claimant number?

**Damian Hinds:** The UK economy, as you know, Chairman, is in a good space and has a strong underpinning. We have seen employment growth since June 2016. As you know, at the end of last year we were the fastest growing among the G7 economies. We have had strong wage growth and especially so towards the bottom of the wage scale. The economic indicators, the signs, the inward investment that has come in, have been positive. As I say we always have to consider all sorts of contingencies and there is in these plans, as there always would be in a DWP plan, a margin for if we need to do more of this and so on.

We are also, of course, through Universal Credit doing more, so we are working with people who are in work, helping them on in-work progression. We are helping people who are self-employed under Universal Credit, so we are expanding what we are doing. The estate is there to reflect what it is we need to do.

You ask, "How does this reflect the model?" For example, if you have employers coming into a Jobcentre it is a much better proposition for an employer to come into a bigger Jobcentre where they can see more potential candidates. If you are running group sessions—we do this quite a lot and we do quite a lot of work with third parties on mental health—on confidence, as well as on CV building and all sorts of things, again that works better quite often when you have a larger establishment to work with. There is a lot of logic to it.

- Q124 **Chair:** I am not so sure it works so well for the claimant, who we have just heard may experience an hour-long bus journey in order to access Jobcentre facilities. We will leave that just now.

Lastly from me, and again it is about claimant figures, another reason behind this is the fact that more people access these services now online, and I know there is a requirement with jobseeker's allowance to make you claim online and with ESA also there is a requirement for that. What we were told—and I asked the Clerks to check the figure—by some of our colleagues that were in was that there was a 40% uptake of broadband in Glasgow. I asked the Clerks to check it. There is 69%—that is the total uptake of broadband in Glasgow. Are you not concerned that there seems to be a digital divide here? The people who might need to access your services might not have the same access as everybody else.

**Damian Hinds:** Digital, including digital skills, Chair, as you say is a very important area. It is one of the reasons we have invested in our

Jobcentres having terminals. I am showing my age but you know what I mean: having IT equipment that people can use. People can also bring in their own devices, and we have people who can help guide the claimant through what they need to do. It is really fundamental not just because you need to do that to be able to make applications for benefits or other public sector services, but in the world of work there are these days not that many jobs you can do that do not require some degree of IT ability, digital inclusion. So we think it is also part of that journey into work.

**Chair:** I am going to come to Chris Chope, but Chris Law has a supplementary, as has Margaret Ferrier.

Q125 **Chris Law:** You said these contracts have come to an end after 20 years. Were they a bad deal for the taxpayer?

**Damian Hinds:** We have decided not to enter into a 20-year deal this time. I think you have to have some flexibility and we were just talking about the need for flexibility. Other opportunities may come along in years to come as other buildings become available that have more co-located facilities and so on. I think having shorter leases does make some sense, so these are predominantly 10-year leases we are entering into with a five-year break clause and, yes, I think that is a much better deal for us.

Q126 **Chris Law:** All of these offices in Glasgow: are they all owned by the same company?

**Damian Hinds:** No, they are not owned by the same company. There is a distinction to be drawn, and either side of me I will be corrected if I get any of these details wrong, between the real estate owner and the PFI contract holder. I think in all of these Jobcentres in Glasgow our contract is with the same PFI contract holder, but they in turn may take leases from different real estate owners. Our contract is with them, which is a company called Telereal Trillium.

Q127 **Chris Law:** That is really helpful. What I wanted to know is how you came to the number, of reducing it from 16 to eight, and are those eight the most expensive? Is that the real reason you have chosen eight out of those 16 to be closed?

**Damian Hinds:** It was to do with where we have space and where buildings are underutilised. Sometimes you will have a larger building and a smaller building, and if the larger building has considerable space available then it can make sense to move the operation from a smaller into the larger. Overall our objective here was you take the city of Glasgow as you take the city of Manchester or you take the city of Dundee or Birmingham and you say, "What would be a network that would have the accessibility that people need, the size of unit that makes most sense and that minimises the amount of space that the taxpayer is paying rent for but which we are not in fact using?" That was the objective. I know that a question that is perfectly legitimate for the Committee to bring up would be to ask why in the city of Glasgow has there been apparently a greater percentage change than in other cities.

Part of the reason was that Glasgow historically has had an unusually large number of Jobcentres for its population and on average they are quite small. Not all of them are small—there is a variety—but compared with other cities there is more likely to be a larger number of small Jobcentres.

At the end of this exercise Glasgow will not be underprovided for in terms of Jobcentres. If you compare it to comparable cities elsewhere in the UK it is absolutely not the case that Glasgow will be left with fewer, or a thinner network of, Jobcentres than elsewhere. If it would be helpful, Chair, I would be happy to talk through some of those comparisons for the Committee.

Q128 **Chair:** If you can supply that in written evidence that would be fine, because we have had a conversation about this already and I think we did not come to any great conclusion about all that, and I do not know how helpful some people—there was a comparison I think with Manchester that was raised, which we—

**Damian Hinds:** The city of Manchester is one geographical unit and Greater Manchester is certainly different again with different local priorities and sometimes there can be a difference there but I have a series—

Q129 **Chair:** Do you have a comparison with Manchester?

**Damian Hinds:** I have a series of cities that I could talk you through.

Q130 **Chair:** Could you also maybe explain if there is any other city that seems to be unique like Glasgow where there isn't a city centre Jobcentre? So when you are comparing could you tell us first of all, if there is a closure of a Jobcentre means people can then access the city centre Jobcentre, but Glasgow does not seem to have that?

**Damian Hinds:** What we are trying to do with the Jobcentre network for every city is to try to make them accessible to people, to have a reasonable and accessible network of Jobcentre outlets that people from across the city can come to.

In terms of the number of Jobcentres per thousand of population or those sorts of measures, Glasgow at the end of this exercise will be higher than somewhere like Birmingham or Sheffield. It would be a little lower than Manchester and Liverpool but not dramatically so, but also higher than Bristol, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and so on. Every city is different so you cannot necessarily make a direct comparison, because as I say this is about getting a network that is accessible and that has to recognise the unique layout, the unique features of every city. What I would not want the Committee to think is that there is, as I say, a thinner coverage for Glasgow than would be typical for a UK city because that would not be the case.

**Chair:** I know there are lots of colleagues keen to come in and Chris Law is still to finish his supplementary. We have Margaret Ferrier, Anna Soubry, Ian, and then Christopher Chope has his questions and his

supplementary.

- Q131 **Chris Law:** My last question is in terms of deciding the closures you have made it clear it was about the utilisation of these centres and how large or how small. Are you telling me—

**Damian Hinds:** Subject to being accessible.

**Chris Law:** Subject to being accessible. That was your No. 1 priority or was it the No. 1 priority that the cost under the PFI was very expensive, and therefore you looked at certain centres that became the most costly? I am trying to be very clear about this, because I can fully understand you might look at it and go, "Look, we have six or eight centres here in Glasgow. Extortionate. These are the ones we need to prioritise".

**Damian Hinds:** It is a blend of factors. I am not apologising for trying to save the taxpayer £180 million a year. Please do not misunderstand me. There is no apology for that. That is an important thing to do. It also partly of course is what enables us to be able to invest in people, so that is why we are recruiting people to do the things that we know have an impact on really helping people into work. Yes, the cost of the lease clearly is one of those things, but it is not something that you look at exclusively. You are looking at the blend, the layout of the building and does it do the job that we need it to do, the accessibility of it, the potential sometimes for it being close to other important facilities and services. Fundamentally, yes, it is about utilising space in a cost-effective way and a way that is going to help people to get into work.

- Q132 **Chair:** Could you provide this Committee with the costs of these contracts and how much these buildings and this estate is costing you per Jobcentre? Would that be possible?

**Damian Hinds:** I would have to look at what is possible to put into the public domain, because these are contracts that have been entered into, but I will have a look and see.

**Chair:** That should be all right. Margaret Ferrier and then Anna Soubry and then Ian Murray.

- Q133 **Margaret Ferrier:** I want to go back to what you said about public consultation, because with all due respect that was not going to be happening until I and my colleagues had asked you to carry out a public consultation. Now we find out that the indication is that you are only going to consult on three out of the eight. Maybe you can explain why only three out of the eight, and was an equality impact assessment done before this all went to press?

**Damian Hinds:** Starting at the end, the equality assessment is part of our legal duty that we take very seriously and absolutely will do. We were consulting on the three sites outside ministerial criteria. After I met you, Ms Ferrier, and colleagues from Glasgow—I was grateful to you for taking the time to talk about it—we extended what we were doing but we did not start doing the consultation. I took helpful thoughts from you and colleagues and was pleased to be able to help in that way.

On the question of why we are consulting on the three only there is this thing called ministerial criteria, which is a measure that we have of what we think is a reasonable distance if you are moving facility, a Jobcentre, what is the reasonable distance between the one and the other to ask people to be able to change where they use without having a public consultation. In fact there are some cases including in Scotland where something is just within those criteria but we thought because it is quite borderline and there is some other consideration, that it is the right thing to do to consult and we are doing that in those cases as well.

Q134 **Margaret Ferrier:** You mentioned accessibility a couple of times. Castlemilk, which has been mentioned, is nowhere near the Jobcentre that you are proposing people have to go to. They cannot walk there, or it would take them all day, so I think you need to revisit some of the information that you have, and that has come up before, but it looks as if it was Google Maps that was used to work out these distances, which have not been updated for a number of years. Have you or any of your civil servants visited any of the eight Jobcentres before this proposal came out? Have you taken the time to visit them?

**Damian Hinds:** As I mentioned before the proposal for Jobcentres across Glasgow, as is the case for all the other cities, all the other places and areas we are looking at, is to try to have a network that works across the city. Yes, it is the case that when you are removing some of them, closing some of them, there will be longer distances for some people and where those distances go beyond the criteria that I mentioned we have a public consultation. One of the purposes of the public consultation is precisely to answer the questions about what impact it will have on people. We have done some quite detailed analysis within the Department in terms of travel times and so on. In some cases it is the case that for some people, depending on exactly where they live, even if in principle their business would be transferring from Jobcentre A to Jobcentre B for some people, depending on precisely where they live and precisely the bus and train timetables and so on it might be better for them to go to Jobcentre C and that would be the right thing to do for some people.

I do not want to dodge your question about visiting Castlemilk Jobcentre. I have not been to Castlemilk Jobcentre or the other Jobcentres in Glasgow, and I have been in post since July. I do get to a Jobcentre at least every two to three weeks but there are upward of 600 of them and no, I have not been to all.

**Margaret Ferrier:** We are offering you a visit today, if you wish to come.

Q135 **Anna Soubry:** Is there somebody in DWP who is responsible for Glasgow?

**Karen Gosden:** Yes.

Q136 **Anna Soubry:** So you have somebody responsible for Glasgow who lives in Glasgow, yes?

**Karen Gosden:** Yes.

**Q137 Anna Soubry:** So when it is decided, quite rightly, to save some money, with contracts coming up and everything else, did that person then look at the Jobcentres in Glasgow and was it that person that made the assessment as to which ones would close? What is being said—and I am not being rude, Minister, but it does look like it and I do not know Glasgow that well but these guys and other people do—is that it looks like it is one of those desktop exercises by somebody 100 miles away who has gone, “Oh, we will close this one”. Why don’t you scrub everything and start again? The evidence this Committee has heard is that these eight that you have selected will pretty much not serve anybody other than the existing claimants that are using them. What was the process that decided which ones were going to be closed, and was it done in Glasgow?

**Damian Hinds:** Chair, I think it would be right if I deferred to—

**Anna Soubry:** Yes, not you, Minister, but obviously your colleague.

**Karen Gosden:** In spring 2015—that is when this process started—we knew that we had, as the Minister said, the opportunity to review all of our estate because of the end of the PFI contract, so we started to bring together in each region and country senior operational colleagues, the Government Property Unit, and other related colleagues, to review how we might best take the opportunity of making better use of the space that we had and paying for less unused space. Those groups of operational people including the person responsible for Glasgow made recommendations of what they thought would be the right amount of estate for Scotland and indeed within that Glasgow. They went through a scrutiny panel that was chaired by the Work Services Director, Denise Horsfall, this was all back in 2015, to agree that that looked, on balance, to be the right balance of estate. At the heart of that was—for example in Glasgow, we knew we had Jobcentres over a large part of the city in different housing estates—how we made accessible services that were good for our customers and minimised the impact on our people. That then went to national panels in July 2015 and December 2015, which were chaired at a very senior level in DWP where we again reviewed whether those seven regional/country plans make sense. That then became our blueprint, which was approved by our programme board, which I chair, and the Government Property Unit. That was then the blueprint of requirements that we then decided and having taken all of that local information into account was what we would ideally want to operate from, from April 2018 onwards. That then was handed over to our commercial team who are also accountable to me.

**Q138 Anna Soubry:** I do not doubt for one moment that all these processes have not been gone through. We just need to know on what criteria were these eight closed? I have to say we have heard overwhelming evidence that for a lot of people it would take them an hour to get to their new one, and I am struggling with that. It is an hour and that is a long time and that is £4.50 in a city. It is not a rural area; it is a city, and it looks like instead of going in a logical way that somebody has gone, “Oh, that is all right, it is just next door, so we will stick them over there” instead

of saying, "We might open one in the city centre and have all these guys go into there and then one here and one there". Do you see what I mean?

**Karen Gosden:** I do. Some of the sites were very low utilisation and it was not always in our gift to move people from A to B. Sometimes A would not fit into B, so you have to look at going the other way. We looked at all of the estate that we had, the services that we wanted to deliver to our customers, and the considered view at the time was that that mix of Jobcentres would give the right spread. As the Minister has said, three of those are being consulted on because they are outside of what we would consider to be our acceptable ministerial criteria.

Q139 **Anna Soubry:** Did anybody look at putting one in the city centre? Being revolutionary and saying, "Let us get the very best service for people and the taxpayer"? I think that is the point I am trying to get across.

**Chair:** It does seem to be, given that there is no city centre Jobcentre, you are asking people to go around convoluted routes in order to access these services. You can understand why to us it does not make sense.

**Anna Soubry:** It does not make sense to me and I do not live in Glasgow.

**Karen Gosden:** We needed to work with the Jobcentres that we had and the considered view regionally—I would also hold my hand up; I am not from Glasgow, obviously—at the time was that the best way to deliver services when we did have a number of Jobcentres that were significantly underutilised, and it was not driven entirely by money, but as the Minister said that is part of it, to look at how we best make use of taxpayers' money. We were looking to strike the balance between making effective use of taxpayers' money, delivering a high-quality service to our customers and minimising the impact on our people.

**Chair:** I need to move on because lots of people want to come in and ask further questions.

Q140 **Ian Murray:** I am really interested in this prime contract issue. Are there any offices in Glasgow post this process, if it does not change, that will still be covered by the prime contract?

**Karen Gosden:** No, the prime contract ends entirely at the end of March 2018.

Q141 **Ian Murray:** Are there any centres across the entirety of the country that will still be covered by any kind of contract similar to prime or an extension of prime at the end of this process?

**Karen Gosden:** No. Nearly all of our buildings are covered by prime. There are a few that aren't that are under different arrangements, but we are entering into new lease terms with all the buildings that we want to remain in.

Q142 **Ian Murray:** Just to be clear, the entirety of the Jobcentre estate in the United Kingdom is currently covered as we sit here today by this prime

contract.

**Karen Gosden:** There are a few exceptions.

**Susan Park:** In Great Britain.

**Damian Hinds:** Not Northern Ireland.

Q143 **Chair:** Everywhere on the mainland of Britain?

**Damian Hinds:** Are covered by prime.

**Karen Gosden:** In 1998 we as a Department transferred all of our buildings and the risks associated with those to the supplier for a 20-year period.

Q144 **Ian Murray:** So the eight that will remain in Glasgow on its current trajectory, how will they be contracted?

**Karen Gosden:** We have been entering into individual lease negotiations with landlords.

Q145 **Ian Murray:** One other quick question, if I may. The initial prime contract allowed the DWP to reduce its estate by 35%. Was that fully taken up?

**Karen Gosden:** It was taken up in some locations. We did not do it equally across the country and I think I would have to say at that point that was over a 20-year period, which I personally would not be confident in accounting for to this Committee because I was not involved at that point. Susan and I both know that we have closed some Jobcentres over the years using some of those flexibilities, but this is the first chance that we have had. March 2018 is our opportunity without bearing the cost of pulling out of a building. There have always been some costs associated with that, which is why we are reviewing all of it.

Q146 **Ian Murray:** This is a supplementary and I do not want to hold the rest of the Committee up to get to their questions, but if in the unlikely event at the end of this consultation that we decide to keep, as an example, Castlemilk office open, how do you do that?

**Karen Gosden:** We have discussed this with prime supply at the moment. They know that. We had an obligation to give them our intention, which we have done at the end of January, but they know that these are all proposals because we are consulting now with our own people, and they do know that we may need to return if, for either an internal or an external reason, we decided not to go ahead with one of our plans and we would enter into discussions with them at that point.

**Chair:** Christopher Chope has been waiting patiently.

Q147 **Mr Christopher Chope:** In 1998, PFI arrangements enabled the Christchurch Jobcentre to be closed, which it was and there was minimal consultation and I find it incredibly depressing to hear that there does not seem to be any institutional change in approach since those days. We are faced here in Glasgow and elsewhere with a lack of consultation and

issues that do not seem to me to be fully thought through. In Christchurch's case, the alternative Jobcentre was more than three miles away, more than 20 minutes by public transport and so on.

If under that PFI contract it became possible for the whole of your estate to in a sense have a break after 20 years, why have you not said, like Tesco or Lidl or whoever, "Let's choose an estate for our purposes that is going to meet the needs of our customers"? What it seems as though you are doing is saying, "Let us take into account where we already have public buildings". I can understand that if you have buildings which have long leases and all the rest of it, but since the previous Government decided rather sensibly to bring all these to an end at the one time, why are you not taking advantage of the great opportunity that offers to rationalise?

If you look at Glasgow, to take an example, it would suit Glasgow, surely, to have a new big Jobcentre in the centre of Glasgow and a series of satellite Jobcentres, perhaps not very many, if they were well connected by public transport. Why has that not been your approach?

**Damian Hinds:** We have taken the opportunity like Tesco or Lidl, although not to do the same things as Tesco or Lidl, but this is precisely what has happened coming to the end of this 20-year period, to look at the entire estate. Karen and her team did not have an instruction that says 90% of the estate must stay the same. There is some value of course in maintaining operations in one location. At a very basic level there is fit-out and move cost and so on. It is not entirely without cost. You can turn it around the other way. We do think there are many places where we have Jobcentres today that it is the right network, the right setup, it is convenient for customers and so on.

Q148 **Mr Christopher Chope:** I accept that. How many new acquisitions have there been in different locations as a result of this exercise?

**Karen Gosden:** For Jobcentres?

**Mr Christopher Chope:** Yes.

**Karen Gosden:** For Jobcentres I would have to check because I do not want to give the Committee the wrong information. There is one in Scotland, which is a new acquisition. The new acquisition is Galashiels. Stornoway were moving into a back of house. I would need to check.

**Damian Hinds:** There are back-of-house changes going on as well and I would not want to give the impression this was one location in the whole scheme that is a location that we are not currently operating out of that we will be in the future.

There were considerably more than that and there are examples of moving together, back-of-house operations with front-of-house operations, Jobcentre and so on.

**Karen Gosden:** Our plans are to have an acquisition in Glasgow, of course, and our back-of-house services, those that are done on the telephone and online.

Q149 **Mr Christopher Chope:** But basically estate rationalisation has taken priority over customer convenience.

**Damian Hinds:** No.

**Chair:** Was that a “no”?

**Damian Hinds:** Yes, that was a “no”. I know I have said this a few times. I do not want to sound too repetitive but this is about making sure we are effectively using space. You can call that rationalisation but it is effective use of space. It is about making sure you have a network that is accessible to people, that does the things that have to be done but does not spend money unnecessarily, leaves money, more money, to be able to invest in things like people or work coaches who we know have a real positive effect on helping people into work.

**Anna Soubry:** It does not seem like that, Minister. It looks like you had a great opportunity. You should have rubbed your hands with glee—not you, obviously—and said: “Right, we can do a bespoke service. All these leases have gone and we can tailor-make it for the city to meet the need and in churches.” I do not know. That is the whole point. It just looks like somebody has gone, “Tell you what, eight go out, here are the eight, job done”, as opposed to tailoring it when you have a great opportunity.

Q150 **Mr Christopher Chope:** If that had been done, as Anna Soubry suggests, then you would have been able to satisfy what you describe as your ministerial criteria instead of having to ignore them in so many cases.

**Damian Hinds:** I am not sure what you said is correct in terms of travel times and distances. I think it would be perhaps the opposite. But I have a couple of other things to say: first, this was a holistic view of the overall piece, and as I say, back of house as well as front of house. In most cases, we decided to stay in the Jobcentre or the back-of-house locations but there are quite a lot of moves across the UK and it does involve some new locations. It involves some new co-locations. This is something that has not come up so far. Now that we are moving to 10-year leases with five-year break clauses, it does give us more capacity to be able to do more co-location in future. We have Skills Development Scotland inside a lot of Jobcentre locations at the moment. We can do more with them in the future. Now we have a settled Jobcentre, or we will have at the end after the proposals, after the consultation period has been through, we will then be able to talk with Skills Development Scotland and other partners about further opportunities into the future.

The other thing we have not talked about is outreach, so part of the consultation process—

**Chair:** You are not being asked about that yet. We are on to the issues that concern this Committee so we may have time to come to that.

**Damian Hinds:** Forgive, me, I thought we had been talking about partnership work being about designing a network and a presence—

**Chair:** The way this usually works is we ask you questions and you answer them. Deirdre Brock has been sitting patiently to ask a question.

Q151 **Deidre Brock:** In reference to something you said before, Minister, about the savings of potentially £180 million across the estate, are you saying you will be taking some of the money from that estates budget and shifting that, say, into your employment and training budget to provide extra work coaches? Is that the case? You will be shifting it from one budget to another directive.

**Damian Hinds:** In an accounting sense it does not quite necessarily work like that but it is the case that we will be spending less on buildings and we are recruiting more workers so I suppose in one other sense you could describe it like that, yes.

Q152 **Deidre Brock:** So, you are increasing one budget while you are making savings in another.

**Damian Hinds:** Yes.

Q153 **Deidre Brock:** There was a report recently by Inclusion Scotland. I do not know if you are familiar with them but they are a consortium of organisations that represent disabled people and that report published last week shows what it describes as the impact of the Westminster austerity agenda on the rights of disabled people. It points out closures taking place in areas with high levels of poor health, greater levels of disability, often very poor access to public transport and low rates of car ownership. These factors will hit people living in some of the poorest neighbourhoods in Scotland certainly, and I am sure in the UK as well.

But it concludes from the evidence it has taken on this that there is evidence the UK Government is breaching its obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. We are suggesting your Department's decision will be a breach of human rights and equalities law, given that those closures will adversely affect access to these proposed new sites for people with disabilities. I wonder what your reaction is to that.

**Damian Hinds:** Clearly, we will not do anything that is in contravention of our duties nor of what is right. It is probably important to clarify who attends Jobcentres and what the requirement is for attending Jobcentres regularly.

People on ESA—Employment and Support Allowance—and people on Income Support and their equivalents on Universal Credit are not as a rule required to attend Jobcentres on the same regular basis that people in receipt of jobseeker's allowance are. It is the case that with people who have particularly high barriers to employment, including some people with certain disabilities, people with mental health barriers and others, there is more that can be done working with partner organisations. Some of that can involve some of the outreach work that I

was just touching on a few moments ago and, of course, we want to do more of that.

Q154 **Deidre Brock:** I was thinking of a constituent of mine who presented at one of my surgeries and was told by one of the assessors that she was able to walk 100 feet and she could hardly walk to my surgery table. I am thinking of what happens to people like that and are they being properly taken account of in all these decisions that are being made and making it harder, as we have heard, to get to the various centres for people who are assessed as capable of reporting for work.

**Damian Hinds:** May I first say I am sorry if a mistake was made with your constituent and sometimes mistakes do get made. That happens in any large organisation. As constituency MPs we all meet people who have had cases where they have come up against something in the public sector and it has not worked as it should and I can only apologise to you and your constituent for anything that has gone wrong.

The answer to the broader question of whether we paid attention to people with different needs is absolutely yes, of course, and it is at the core of our duty to do so. It is also, of course, part of what we are in work for. There are a large number of people with disabilities who want to work and we think we are part of the solution to help them work and we want to do more and more of that. You will be aware there is the current work and health Green Paper that is looking in a broad way at all the support that DWP and the broader public sector can give and, as I say, I am sure there can be much more that can be done.

Q155 **Margaret Ferrier:** I would like to talk about the involvement the Scottish Government has had. Despite the UK Government telling us Scotland would be an equal partner the closures really fly in the face of the Smith Commission. Paragraph 58 states: "The UK and Scottish Government will identify ways to further link services through methods such as co-location wherever possible and establish more formal mechanisms to govern the Jobcentre Plus network in Scotland". I would like to know why the devolved Administration at Holyrood was not included, was not told about these changes. Also to point out that in reply to a written question I put in to the Secretary of State for Scotland, he was not even informed of the specific plans either so why were both Holyrood and Mr Mundell not made aware of DWP's plans?

**Damian Hinds:** Ms Ferrier, you are undoubtedly right about the potential for close working, first of all, with the Scottish Government and it is also true that per paragraph 58, we are to have arrangements for having some shared governance over the Jobcentre estate and we absolutely intend to do that. I know that the two initial employability programmes are due to start imminently, in April, I think, and then the following April the long-term ongoing employability programmes, and of course, the Jobcentre network has a role to play in supporting that. I have to play my part in supporting colleague Ministers in Scotland to do that. Now that we have a settled estate, it is easier to be able to identify and potentially move forward on other co-locations.

Q156 **Chair:** I think we want an answer to Ms Ferrier's question. Why did you not consult the Scottish Government before you made this announcement? Did you just forget or did you feel it was not necessary?

**Damian Hinds:** As I understand it, and Karen or Susan can jump in, but in 2016 we discussed opportunities for co-location in various sites but at that time we had relatively short lengths obviously left on our—

Q157 **Chair:** I am not hearing an answer. Why did you not consult the Scottish Government before you made an announcement about Jobcentres in Scotland that you may even share locations with?

**Damian Hinds:** Chairman, as I say, the officials in the DWP are in touch regularly with Scottish Government Ministers. The fact is we will work together. We will carry on working co-operatively together. You have my absolute commitment on that but—

Q158 **Chair:** We will try it one more. Why did you not—

**Damian Hinds:** When it comes to the network of Jobcentres, that is an estate that comes under DWP, which is a UK Government organisation. We then want to work co-operatively—

**Chair:** So, you did not feel it was necessary to consult the Scottish Government.

**Damian Hinds:** I spoke with Scottish Government counterparts immediately before the announcement on the recent rounds of—

**Chair:** Forty minutes, I think.

**Margaret Ferrier:** The recent rounds but not the first rounds, Minister.

**Chair:** The first one; we are talking about the first announcements.

**Damian Hinds:** As I say, officials are in contact with officials in Scotland and we will continue to be in future. I have made clear to Ministers in the Scottish Government that of course we want to work co-operatively and I think there are great opportunities on—

**Chair:** We have tried our best to get an answer.

Q159 **Margaret Ferrier:** Can I just push the Minister, because the Scotland Act 2016 does see the transfer of some welfare powers to the Scottish Parliament, so without consulting them on this before you went ahead with this policy, which could impact on Scottish people and on the Scottish Government's own social security policy. Do you not agree with that?

**Damian Hinds:** The consultation on social security in future is current and obviously we, like you, look forward to seeing the results of that. As I mentioned, the employability programme is imminent and there is obviously an interaction there with the Jobcentre Plus network and, of course, we recognise that.

Q160 **Chair:** Do you know how angry the Scottish Government is with this? You have seen the correspondence, because we have, but there is a debate

taking place in the Scottish Parliament just now on a Government motion about the unhappiness and dissatisfaction with how this process has been handled. I am pretty certain the motion that has been put forward by the Scottish Government, which I presume you have seen, will be overwhelmingly passed, such is their anger at the way this has been dealt with. What do you think of that?

**Damian Hinds:** Was I aware of the debate?

**Chair:** Yes.

**Damian Hinds:** Yes, I am aware of the debate.

Q161 **Chair:** What is your response to it?

**Damian Hinds:** I have not heard the debate.

Q162 **Chair:** Have you seen the motion?

**Damian Hinds:** I have not heard the debate. Obviously, we have been here. I am trying to address the questions the Committee is rightly putting.

Q163 **Chris Law:** I want to ask about the impact on communities. My constituency is Dundee and sadly it was known as "Sanction City" during 2014. Thankfully, that has abated a little.

However, has there been an impact assessment for some of the most vulnerable people in Glasgow? In addition to that, do you expect the number of sanctions to rise or fall as a result of your Jobcentre closures?

**Damian Hinds:** The number of sanctions across Great Britain has fallen quite substantially, so in the most recent complete 12-month period it is 55% down across Great Britain. In Scotland, that number I believe was minus 62% so that is a very significant reduction in the number of sanctions. We do not anticipate sanctions arising from these Jobcentre changes.

Q164 **Chris Law:** You do not think taking an hour to get to a Jobcentre may impact if the bus arrives late or the weather is awful walking there or anything else.

**Damian Hinds:** Generally speaking, when people have an explanation, of course—I will let Susan talk about this and how this works in practice—there is a feeling we sometimes hear that if anyone is five minutes late for an interview at a Jobcentre that is going to be sanctioned. That is just not the way that things work. It is true that some people have long journeys to a Jobcentre. Even with no changes to the Jobcentre network in the Chairman's constituency there will be people who have to travel for quite long times to get to the Jobcentre. Indeed, in my own constituency in England in some parts you have to travel quite a long way to get to a Jobcentre.

I should stress that for people who we are requiring to attend a Jobcentre, who in the system are required to attend to do fortnightly or weekly signing, these are JSA or the equivalent in Universal Credit

recipients; they are people who by definition on JSA are available and ready to start work. Yes, we do expect that people have the time available to attend the Jobcentre, including the travel time, and indeed to attend interviews, to be searching for work and so on. But on the specifics of how the sanctions system works, I should defer to Susan.

**Susan Park:** I do not know whether you have been into Dundee Jobcentre. If not it is probably worth everybody going in and spending some time sitting with a work coach because if you do you will understand that there is a very real responsibility on both parties to keep each other informed. We will always take account of those reasonable travel, sick, have an interview, and the emphasis that is placed in the first meeting and every subsequent meeting is, "Can you just keep me informed? Here is my personal number. Here is my personal e-mail address. Please make sure that if there is a reason for you to be late or not attend that there is a communication." When you do not attend, one of the first things the work coach does is try to make contact with you. So, I do not understand why people think it is an automatic sanction, because it is far from that.

Q165 **Chris Law:** That is not what I was asking. I was asking if there would be an impact as a result of closure.

**Susan Park:** We do not think so.

Q166 **Chris Law:** You do not predict that. I also want to ask you if there would be an impact on those who are transferring over to Universal Credit now because we have been hearing from witnesses today that there will be more need for those centres under the Universal Credit system and part of that is because perhaps of underemployment or part-time employment and they need more constant assessment. How does that square the circle when you are going to close centres yet there is going to be an increased impact through Universal Credit?

**Susan Park:** What we tend to be doing is making sure that we are amalgamating rather than closing completely. I think somebody raised earlier the Castlemilk example. We have done a consultation exercise and I think there have been some helpful suggestions already about what we might do in terms of retaining some presence there. Where we get some helpful suggestions of either retaining a presence or some outreach, we will certainly look at doing that but that is in consultation with the local people. Universal Credit, as the Minister says, does bring some additional customers into our Jobcentre and when we have looked at our network again we have taken account of that either increase or not so all that has been taken account of in the realignment of our estate up and down the country.

Q167 **Chris Law:** If I can just focus on that because we are now talking about staffing levels. It was promised last year in Parliament that there would be, and I quote, "No job losses for the Jobcentre network in Glasgow". Do you still stand by this promise for the staff in Glasgow?

**Susan Park:** Our prediction is we are increasing our number of colleagues in Jobcentres rather than reducing.

Q168 **Chris Law:** That is helpful and on that basis I heard in January also, and I quote again about UK-wide Jobcentre closures, that, "The vast majority of staff will have the option to relocate". My question is how many redundancies are you expecting to make, both voluntary and forced?

**Karen Gosden:** I think in Jobcentres we do not expect there to be any job losses. We cannot account for every individual. That is why we are having one-to-ones with people. Those are happening at the moment as part of checking what would the exact impact be on an individual, because until we have that conversation we do not always know their entire personal circumstances.

As Susan said, because for all Jobcentres we are merging with another one, albeit not as close from a customer point of view, for our staff they are relatively close and therefore we expect that all people will be able to move. We are not closing a site. We are just moving the whole service—people, customers and service—into another one. I would not want to guarantee, because we have to have those one-to-ones, but we do not expect—

Q169 **Chris Law:** With respect, we heard this before over HMRC job losses where we talked about reasonable times of travel. For those who cannot relocate, what package is being offered the staff?

**Karen Gosden:** There are no packages at the moment because we are undertaking one-to-ones and as we said previously, we are in the middle of our consultation with our people. These are proposals at the moment that will then, once we have had those one-to-ones, we will come to a firm conclusion somewhere around the end of March. Every effort will be made, as we always do within DWP, to either move somebody entirely, with their work, to a new office. If that is not possible, we will then look for other relocation opportunities within the whole of DWP. If that is not possible, we then look if there are opportunities within other Government Departments. So, we will do as we always do, all that we can to find a suitable alternative for people and that is the purpose of the one-to-ones, to establish people's personal circumstances.

**Chair:** We only have a couple of questions left and I am grateful for your patience, Minister, because we said about an hour and it is just about an hour now, so thank you for that. We have Ian Murray and then Margaret Ferrier.

Q170 **Ian Murray:** I have three very brief questions if I may. If you do see a significant spike in sanctions to claimants who are now using new offices, will the Department be assessing that? What action will you take? Will there be a process for these to be looked at again?

**Damian Hinds:** As I say, Mr Murray, sanctions have been coming down and I welcome that. I do not want to see anybody being sanctioned. We want our staff to be—

Q171 **Ian Murray:** I know they are coming down, but what happens if they go up in these offices as a result of changes? Is there an assessment process?

**Damian Hinds:** I do not anticipate there being an impact on sanctions as a result of these changes.

Q172 **Ian Murray:** If there is?

**Damian Hinds:** It is very difficult to talk hypothetically about something you do not expect to happen. I would say whenever there is some change that becomes apparent in reporting and the numbers and so on that you see, then of course you look at it but I do not anticipate that happening.

Q173 **Ian Murray:** What is the percentage chance of any of these offices remaining open beyond this consultation process?

**Damian Hinds:** At the moment these are proposals. Clearly what we are proposing we think is the appropriate network set of sites to have but they are proposals. People have come and made points and so on. We have to consider all those and that consideration is happening at the moment. I do not think you can put a percentage on it, Mr Murray.

Q174 **Ian Murray:** What percentage of the consultation responses has backed the closures?

**Damian Hinds:** We have not yet finished going through the responses.

Q175 **Ian Murray:** Have you seen any?

**Damian Hinds:** Altogether I gather we have about 290.

Q176 **Ian Murray:** Have any of those 290 backed the proposals that you have seen?

**Damian Hinds:** As you will be aware, Mr Murray, from your own work, consultations ask about the impact something will have on individuals; they ask, in this case, about the impact on travel times. They ask about proposals for outreach and so on, and we have responses on all those lines including, as I think Susan mentioned, some proposals, some suggestions, on outreach and we have to work through those.

Q177 **Ian Murray:** But nobody has written to you and said, "This is a great idea, get on with it"?

**Damian Hinds:** I am not aware of consultations past in which such wording has been common.

Q178 **Ian Murray:** Just a brief question, Chair, if I may, or maybe a comment. It goes back to Ms Ferrier's comments earlier. The Smith Agreement is predicated on Governments working together and if I could gently say to the Minister that the Scottish Government and the UK Government have to find a way to work together, otherwise the Smith Agreement will not work and nothing ever works so you are going to be in front of this Committee incessantly receiving questions on why you have not done X, Y, and Z, and likewise the Scottish Government has a responsibility too.

So, I would encourage you and all your colleagues in ministerial office to have a chat with David Mundell, the Secretary of State, and read the Smith Agreement and find a way of getting both Governments to work together.

**Damian Hinds:** May I first say I would welcome any opportunity to be with this Committee, as you outline? I agree entirely with what you say that the UK Government and the Scottish Government have to work together. Devolution is a fact and it entirely has my support and the support of ministerial colleagues and, of course, officials, to work collaboratively together.

We have the joint ministerial working group on social security matters. The next meeting is coming up quite soon. Jamie Hepburn will be at that, as will I. I was in Edinburgh a few weeks ago and met Jamie Hepburn and Angela Constance and we were able to have good conversations about the areas of interaction between what we do. There are obviously things, and we were talking about some of them earlier, for example, the Employability Programmes where clearly we have things to be facilitated. There are interactions between IT systems. There are questions about how the Universal Credit flexibilities may be used and things that at our end need to be done to help that to happen and I am very clear that we are here to be constructive and help that to work.

We think our approach is right. Where there is a difference in approach—I am not saying we think the Scottish Government approach is right; we think our approach is right and that is why we are doing it—we also think we are here to support and facilitate and enable the different approach, and there is a total democratic mandate for that to happen.

Q179 **Chair:** I think the whole Committee welcomes those warm words and we would encourage you as much as possible to have that wish. We will put the lack of consultation with the Scottish Government down to an unfortunate, unnecessary episode and blip in an otherwise fruitful engagement that we have with the Scottish Government.

Lastly on this point, we will be doing a lot of joint work with the Scottish Parliament Social Security Committee. We are looking to do a couple of joint sessions and we would like the maximum amount of input from the DWP in order to make sure all the new devolved responsibilities that have been passed to the Scottish Parliament work effectively and I am pretty certain that I will hear some encouragement and warm words about that too from you, Minister.

**Damian Hinds:** For your joint work with the Committee, I am sure that is an outstanding initiative, yes.

**Chair:** Thank you for that.

Q180 **Margaret Ferrier:** I have two quick questions. Will travel costs for claimants have be reimbursed at the time with cash in hand or will they have to be paid into a bank account? Because £4.50 for a return ticket is quite a lot—the cost of a meal. Secondly, just something you brought up at the beginning, you said there was an argument it would be easier to

attract employers into larger Jobcentres. If Cambuslang Jobcentre, which is in my constituency, closes, and almost 100% then of the floor space in the Rutherglen Jobcentre would be utilised, does that mean it would be less likely that employers would come into Rutherglen Jobcentre?

**Damian Hinds:** No, I do not think so. What I meant was anything where there are group sessions or an employer would like the opportunity to see a range of people then there is an obvious advantage to having a single location with more people and that would indeed be possible.

Can you remind of your previous question?

**Margaret Ferrier:** The travel costs: will they be reimbursed?

**Damian Hinds:** On the exact way travel costs are reimbursed I will have to defer. We will get back to the Committee on that. The general point on travel costs is that if you are required to attend the Jobcentre more frequently than fortnightly then you can have your travel costs reimbursed. There is also the Jobcentre Plus travel discount card so if you have been out of work for more than 13 weeks or if you are on ESA—Employment and Support Allowance—or Income Support or their Universal Credit equivalent and are actively engaged in seeking work from day one, so not after 13 weeks, there is this discount card available which many of the different bus and train companies accept, including First and Stagecoach, which give discounts. They vary a little bit but can be up to 50% or 55% for the times you are travelling, and of course that will also go for when you are looking for work and attending job interviews and so on as well.

**Susan Park:** The point is there are variations from Jobcentre to Jobcentre depending on the deal there is locally and also depending on whether we issue travel warrants and whether that is accepted by the local travel. For Glasgow specifically I cannot answer but we will write to you.

**Chair:** I will be grateful if you do. Thank you for that. I think we have concluded all the questions. We are very grateful to you, Minister, for coming along at short notice and the encouraging words we concluded with about making sure we have positive engagement, not just with this Committee but with the Scottish Government and we are pretty certain we are about to get the vote in the Scottish Parliament. It would have been quite interesting to have shared it with you but unfortunately that has not come through at this stage but thank you ever so much. We might use some of this evidence in our inquiry into sustainable employment and secure employment. There are things we might want to take away and include in our report so we are very grateful to you for that. Thank you.