



Department
for Work &
Pensions

THE RT HON THERESE COFFEY MP
Secretary of State for Work & Pensions
Caxton House, Tothill Street, London, SW1H 9NA

Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP
Chair, Work and Pensions Select Committee
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

19th July 2021

Dear Stephen,

Thank you for your letter dated 16th June regarding safety in DWP Jobcentreplus offices.

From the start of the pandemic in 2020, we worked quickly to secure the safety of both customers and colleagues. We deployed IT equipment at record levels in order to equip them to deliver essential services from home. We have kept our jobcentres open throughout this time, particularly so we could help highly vulnerable or disadvantaged customers access support.

We have now re-opened the estate to all claimants and customers. The general extension of opening hours was already part of the change in working practices previously agreed. Each site has its own risk assessment and we will continue to strive to have a safe estate, taking necessary measures. I have responded to each of your questions in turn as follows:

1. How is the Department ensuring that it is listening and responding to any concerns that members of staff may have about Covid safety in Jobcentre Plus offices?

The health and safety of colleagues remains at the centre of our response. All our offices are Covid secure, including the practice of social distancing, the availability and use of hand sanitisers, wearing of face coverings in communal areas, screens on customer-facing desks and all offices are required to meet relevant guidance on ventilation. We have worked closely with colleagues and trade unions on these issues, and will continue to do so. In addition, we have a dedicated social distancing complaints mailbox, which colleagues can email with their concerns and a health and safety business partner will investigate and respond. These will be treated anonymously, at the individual's request.

We continuously record and report on Covid safety in our Jobcentreplus offices, deploying a Crisis and Incidence Response Team from May this year, who report and escalate notification of any incident compromising safety on site directly to senior officials, so we can respond rapidly and decisively. As they have done throughout the pandemic, colleagues are encouraged to continue to keep in close contact with their line managers to raise any concerns they may have.

2. What mechanisms does the Department have in place to monitor coronavirus cases amongst Jobcentre Plus staff?

All positive cases, where the individual has been in the office in the preceding 72 hours are reported to the health and safety team, via a dedicated positive cases mailbox. These are responded to seven days a week. A case conference is held with the site and local trade union representatives on each of these cases. As part of that discussion, alongside the requirements to deep clean and identify individuals to self-isolate, consideration is given to any other recent cases on site.

2a. Since Jobcentre Plus opening hours have returned to normal, how many Jobcentre Plus offices have been closed as a result of coronavirus cases amongst staff?

Since reopening on 12th April we have taken decisions to temporarily close 72 Jobcentres as a precautionary measure to protect staff and customers and allow for remedial action. Sites are closed for a day/part-day, following identification of a single positive case on a site, to allow for a full sanitisation of the area to take place. Depending on circumstances, sites can be closed for a longer period.

2b. Following the closure of Jobcentre Plus Wigan, what measures has the Department put in place to ensure that the office is Covid-safe?

Wigan JCP was closed for 10 days. During the closure the health and safety business partners undertook two separate visits to ensure the site met Covid safety measures. In addition, the Health and Safety Executive visited. No breaches of 'Covid safe' measures were identified at Wigan JCP.

Health and safety business partners also supported local leaders to host all staff calls to provide information and assurance to staff about returning to the workplace.

2c. The Committee has also seen reports about positive cases at Jobcentre Plus in Glasgow, which is still under Level 3 restrictions. Can you confirm whether this is the case and what action has the Department taken in response?

For the period Jan 2021 to date there have been 4 positive cases reported across the 3 DWP Job Centre sites in Glasgow. Actions taken in response to cases are set out above.

2d. Guidance from the Scottish Government states that, under Level 3 restrictions, people should work from home "wherever that is practicable". How are you ensuring that DWP staff in Level 3 areas are supported to work from home where they can?

We remain absolutely committed to maintaining all our services to customers, and ensuring our sites remain Covid secure in line with the latest public health and Government guidance. DWP staff are working from home where possible but as key workers we must maintain our services. We know that face-to-face interactions help people overcome barriers and find work. This is why we worked so hard to make DWP offices Covid secure and we continue to apply and communicate the 'Keeping Safe Guidance'. Guidance on what this means for our colleagues and customers is available on the Department's coronavirus hub. There is also information available on what the Covid-19 levels for Scotland and Wales and what this means for DWP services.

- 3. Are there any plans to restrict Jobcentre Plus opening hours or introduce additional safety measures in areas which are seeing a significant increase in the number of cases? a. What plans, if any, does the Department have to restrict opening hours or introduce additional safety measures in the event of a significant increase in cases nationally?**

DWP comply with government guidance on all aspects of Covid safety and all our offices are Covid secure, as listed above. In addition, we have rolled out lateral flow testing to many of our larger sites and also those sites in areas of enhanced response. At all other sites, we encourage colleagues and customers to take part in community lateral flow testing where this is available.

- 4. What plans, if any, do you have to expand the provision of JCP services in areas with a low number of cases?**

Jobcentres have remained open throughout the pandemic for anyone who could not access our services via telephony/digital channels and needs face-to-face support, which includes all vulnerable customers. From 12th April Jobcentres extended their face-to-face service, reintroducing mandatory face-to-face interviews. We will continue to reintroduce other services, including measures to prevent and investigate fraud.

- 5. Which categories of claimant are currently required to attend an in-person interview as part of their claim, and do you have any plans to expand this list?**
a. Why are some categories of claimant required to attend an interview in person and not others? Why can these interviews not be conducted remotely?

Jobcentres have prioritised interviews with 16-24 year olds, allowing them to take full advantage of our comprehensive employment offer and our ambitious Plan for Jobs, including our flagship Kickstart Scheme. Jobcentres are continually reviewing their capacity in line with social distancing/risk assessment requirements and invite additional claimant groups into the Jobcentre as capacity allows.

- 5b. How are you ensuring the safety of both customers who are required to attend a Jobcentre in person and of the staff who work with them?**

All of our offices are Covid safe. Measures are in place to protect both our colleagues and customers including signage and direct interaction. On arrival, we ask customers to scan a QR code, we offer them a face covering and hand sanitiser and show them to a screened desk.

- 5c. Has the Department carried out a risk assessment before requiring claimants to attend an in-person interview again? What was the outcome of that assessment?**

Yes. We have a DWP Covid risk assessment that covers all the safety measures required in our offices for the safety of colleagues and visitors. All offices are required to comply with all safety control measures to ensure our offices remain Covid safe for all colleagues and customers.



DR THERESE COFFEY MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WORK AND PENSIONS



Work and Pensions Committee

House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

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From the Chair

Rt Hon Dr Thérèse Coffey
Secretary of State for Work and Pensions

16 June 2021

Dear Thérèse,

I am writing about concerns that have been raised by members of staff about Covid safety in Jobcentre Plus offices.

This follows reports of a number of confirmed cases among staff at the Jobcentre Plus in Wigan, which has since re-opened following a temporary closure. The Committee has seen evidence that some members of staff have expressed concerns about the decision to extend Jobcentre opening hours. The PCS Parliamentary Group wrote to you about these concerns in March but has not yet received a response.

It would be helpful to have answers to the following questions:

- 1. How is the Department ensuring that it is listening and responding to any concerns that members of staff may have about Covid safety in Jobcentre Plus offices?**
- 2. What mechanisms does the Department have in place to monitor coronavirus cases amongst Jobcentre Plus staff?**
 - a. Since Jobcentre Plus opening hours have returned to normal, how many Jobcentre Plus offices have been closed as a result of coronavirus cases amongst staff?**
 - b. Following the closure of Jobcentre Plus Wigan, what measures has the Department put in place to ensure that the office is Covid-safe?**
 - c. The Committee has also seen reports about positive cases at Jobcentre Plus in Glasgow, which is still under Level 3 restrictions. Can you confirm whether this is the case and what action has the Department taken in response?**
 - d. Guidance from the Scottish Government states that, under Level 3 restrictions, people should work from home “wherever that is practicable”. How are you ensuring that DWP staff in Level 3 areas are supported to work from home where they can?**

In light of reports that coronavirus cases are rising in some areas of the country, including an increase in cases of the Delta variant, could you confirm:

- 3. Are there any plans to restrict Jobcentre Plus opening hours or introduce additional safety measures in areas which are seeing a significant increase in the number of cases?**
- a. What plans, if any, does the Department have to restrict opening hours or introduce additional safety measures in the event of a significant increase in cases nationally?**

Some areas, however, are experiencing low numbers of cases. This includes areas that are experiencing significant levels of unemployment and where there is high demand for Jobcentre Plus services.

- 4. What plans, if any, do you have to expand the provision of JCP services in areas with a low number of cases?**

The Committee has also heard that the Department is proceeding within plans to require some categories of claimant to attend an in-person interview, such as first-time Universal Credit claimants, Jobseeker's Allowance claimants, and 18-24 year olds (some of whom will have not yet have been vaccinated).

- 5. Which categories of claimant are currently required to attend an in-person interview as part of their claim, and do you have any plans to expand this list?**
- a. Why are some categories of claimant required to attend an interview in person and not others? Why can these interviews not be conducted remotely?**
- b. How are you ensuring the safety of both customers who are required to attend a Jobcentre in person and of the staff who work with them?**
- c. Has the Department carried out a risk assessment before requiring claimants to attend an in-person interview again? What was the outcome of that assessment?**

We would be grateful for a response by Monday 28 June.

Yours sincerely,

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Chair, Work and Pensions Committee



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