



Regeneration & Culture Scrutiny Panel

FINAL REPORT - JOBCENTRE PLUS

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To present the findings of the Regeneration and Culture Scrutiny Panel following the Panel's investigation into the potential impact on the local community, as a result of changes in service delivery being introduced by Jobcentre Plus.
- 1.2 The review was undertaken in the context of assessing the impact and identifying options, which would minimise any hardships.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The amalgamation of the Benefits Agency and the Employment Service into Jobcentre Plus in 2002 has resulted in a change in the way services are delivered.
- 2.2 This is a National policy, which aims to reduce the 1600 operational offices to approximately 1000 by 2006 nationally. The changes include greater use of telephony for the region, from a centre based in James Cook House, Middlesbrough.
- 2.3 This new contact service aims to improve the speed of processing queries and form completion and increase remote accessing of services. James Cook House will be the primary customer outlet where face to face customer engagement will continue.
- 2.4 As a consequence of this rationalisation of the Jobcentre Plus Services, at a local level, the sites at Dalby House, Grange Road and Crown House are programmed to close, affecting approximately 850 residents. However,

Jobcentre Plus anticipates minimum disruption to the residents currently serviced by Crown House and Grange Road.

- 2.5 Residents presently serviced by Dalby House are those potentially most affected by this rationalisation, due to its distance from the Town Centre and therefore James Cook House, where they would be expected to register on a fortnightly basis.
- 2.6 Three measures have been developed following consultation with Council officers, are aimed at minimising the impact of closing and enhance service provision.
- 2.7 The three measures are briefly outlined as follows:-
 - (a) Enhance outreach services with job points, focusing on Hemlington and Coulby Newham. The job point is a stand alone terminal which provides a search facility for job vacancies and training. Each job point also has a direct line telephone to Jobcentre Plus where advice can be sought if required;
 - (b) A project involving a range of partners operating in the Hemlington and Coulby Newham areas providing job support services. A project co-ordinator is to be appointed to bring various partners together offering access to a range of organisations including, Sure Start, At Work, Working Links in addition to Jobcentre Plus; and
 - (c) Provision of Community Transport to residents who need to register every two weeks at James Cook House. This service will be facilitated and costs met by Jobcentre Plus.

3. AIM OF THE SCRUTINY

- 3.1 The key aim of this scrutiny investigation was to examine the actions and proposals of Jobcentre Plus and make appropriate recommendations, which would limit any hardship on the 850 residents affected by these changes.

4. TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE SCRUTINY INVESTIGATION

- 4.1 A report outlining the amalgamation of the Benefits Agency and the Employment Service into Jobcentre Plus was submitted to the Councils Executive on 16th December 2003. The report presented the three proposals outlined in 2.5 of this report, which were approved.
- 4.2 The Executive wished to convey to Jobcentre Plus their concern regarding the proposed changes and the implications for residents of South Middlesbrough. The Executive also asked that the Overview and Scrutiny Function consider exploring the consequences of Jobcentre Plus's proposals

with the objective of identifying opportunities, which would reduce the impact of changes to service provision.

- 4.3 The Overview and Scrutiny Board considered the request on 13th January 2004 and directed the Regeneration and Culture Scrutiny Panel to commence a Scrutiny within the brief presented by the Executive. The Scrutiny Brief is as follows :-

Scrutiny Brief

- (a) That greater clarity be obtained as to what the exact consequences will be to residents arising from the closure of the three centres;
- (b) The extent to which the three proposed measures will meet the needs of residents (especially those living in the south of the town) and whether, in the light of those findings, further options need to be considered;
- (c) Whether there were any 'opportunities' to be gained by closer working between existing agencies (e.g. Sure Start and Jobcentre Plus) in actually improving the provision of employment services; and
- (d) What are the long term plans for the three properties to be closed.

5 UNDERTAKING THE SCRUTINY

- 5.1 The Panel was conscious that in this particular examination, the Council could only act in an advisory capacity. Whilst there has been very positive joint working between the agencies concerned, the final decisions on any scrutiny recommendations supported by the Executive, will rest with Jobcentre Plus and not the Council. Furthermore although there are no immediate time constraints for the Overview and Scrutiny function to consider this, the Panel considered they should take evidence from the appropriate partners and convey the Panels findings back to the OSB at the earliest opportunity.
- 5.2 The Panel met on the 29th January 2004 and received information from Council officers who outlined the present understanding and the basis of the three measures to limit any hardship.
- 5.3 The Panel met on the 11th February 2004, at which time they engaged with the representatives of Jobcentre Plus to receive relevant information and make appropriate enquiries.
- 5.4 Key information was given regarding how the Jobcentre service restructure is being applied across the Tees Valley, the level of funding, staffing and the conversion of sites to full Jobcentre Plus status.

6 EVIDENCE

- 6.1 From the information submitted by both the Council officers and also the representatives from Jobcentre Plus it is evident that this Scrutiny examination is being undertaken, as the changes to the Jobcentre service are being introduced.
- 6.2 The Panel is clear that Jobcentre Plus are aware of the hardship issues on residents in the areas being affected and are endeavouring to limit the detriment this change may have. The Panel welcomed the intention of Jobcentre Plus to engage with the Council throughout this transition to ensure residents are aware of the change and to limit any difficulties encountered.
- 6.3 The following illustrates some of the service areas provided and options to users:-
- (a) Jobcentre Plus website holds approximately 400,000 jobs;
 - (b) Residents have an option to sign in at the location of their choice;
 - (c) 66% of the register of unemployed are without work for less than 26 weeks;
 - (d) Provision of free community transport from Hemlington/Coulby Newham twice per week;
 - (e) Job Points being installed to provide fast direct access by residents; and
 - (f) Extensive programme of IT provision for completion in June 2004.

7. FINDINGS

- 7.1 The Panel is aware that these changes are being implemented. However there were a number of areas where the Panel considered further clarity would have been helpful. At this stage, some detail was not available. Jobcentre Plus does not anticipate any adverse impact on the residents/users who have been using the Grange Road and Crown House outlets. As the Job Centre at Coulby Newham is no longer considered to be in the best location to meet the needs of Middlesbrough residents.
- 7.2 The following findings endeavour to illustrate the key areas, which the Panel considers requires further clarification and the areas of concern where it considers the Council could engage:-

7.3 Transport

The Panel focused on a number of fronts regarding transport, which it considers requires addressing. While Jobcentre Plus have agreed to support

Community Transport from Hemlington / Coulby Newham with an anticipated frequency of twice per week. At present no commitment has been given to the length of time this service will be provided or if it is available to new claimants.

The Panel is concerned at the limited free car parking outside James Cook House and that increased usage may result in displacement into residential areas.

7.4 Buildings

The Panel was informed that the Jobcentre at Grange Road would remain in use until 2006 (although not to the public), while buildings at Dalby House and Coulby Newham are scheduled to close in June 2004. Consequently the Panel was concerned for the future use of these vacated buildings. The Panel considers redundant buildings will not enhance the area and whilst acknowledging a partner company will be responsible for the building maintenance the Panel would like to know any future plans for the buildings. Jobcentre Plus recognises this concern and has agreed to convey this to the managing company.

In response to the Panels request, the Jobcentre Manager has agreed to contact Middlesbrough Town Centre Company to discuss the future of the Grange Road site.

7.5 Marketing

The Panel enquired as to the degree of information conveyed to residents regarding the closures and options available. Also the level of consultation Jobcentre Plus has undertaken with service users. The Panel was informed that a survey to gauge opinion regarding the proposals had yet to be undertaken in Coulby Newham and Hemlington. The Panel was concerned that the planned closures had not been publicised earlier to residents within the affected area.

Jobcentre Plus was advised that Members of the Wards affected were willing to publicise the service changes in their newsletters to assist in marketing the proposals.

7.6 Awareness

The Panel considered general awareness of the proposals to be a major factor in ensuring a smooth transition.

The Panel was informed that Jobcentre Plus staff were informed in November 03 and that users were currently in the process of being informed. Ward Members expressed concern that they had not been appraised of the impending rationalisation and the cessation of services in these areas until January 2004. This concern was compounded when the Panel was informed that Officers of the Council were appraised of such changes being introduced as early as July 2003.

7.7 Outreach Service

The Panel considered the Outreach service identified in Measure No 2 as a very positive initiative to support those residents in pursuit of employment.

The Panel was encouraged that such an initiative was secured, however it is understood that funding for this pilot project has only been allocated for 18 months. The Panel appreciate that there will need to be an evaluation of the project's success and would suggest this be undertaken relatively early in order to ensure the sustainability of the project beyond the 18 months.

7.8 Service links

The Panel considered that the indications of linking data with the Council's Housing Benefits Department and Jobcentre Plus to be positive. The Panel is aware there are a number of operational and technical issues to be addressed but were encouraged that the possibility of links was being pursued.

7.9 Funding

The Panel recognises that combining the Benefits Agency and the Employment Service into Jobcentre Plus is a substantial exercise.

The Panel also recognises that the rationalisation of the service and closure of sites is in itself a sensitive and involved process.

While recognising this, the Panel was clear that the Council should not have to contribute resources or financial assistance to any services put in place to address Jobcentre Plus's reduced service provision.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 The Panel appreciates that it is examining the amalgamation and change in service provision of an external organisation and therefore its proposals are essentially to influence Jobcentre Plus to limit the hardship the service users will encounter in the areas affected.

8.2 The Regeneration and Culture Scrutiny Panel recommend:-

(a) That the subject of transport be further examined by Jobcentre Plus in relation to the following:-

- That the frequency of community transport to be established is appropriate to customers who were previously served at Dalby House;
- That this service be provided for a minimum of 18 months; and

- That the car parking at James Cook House be assessed to limit any displacement of cars into residential areas.
- (b) That information on the changes in the way Jobcentre Plus will be providing its services, and the access points available, be sent to service users in the areas affected as soon as possible. Also that Ward Members' Newsletters be used to update residents of developments;
 - (c) That customers who are currently served at Dalby House be offered the option of registering with other Jobcentre Plus facilities, in addition to James Cook, within the local area;
 - (d) That funding is pursued to secure the Outreach initiative beyond the 18 months;
 - (e) That the future of the redundant buildings be identified and that MTCC and the Council's Regeneration Department be engaged with Jobcentre Plus with the aim of pursuing and securing appropriate usage of the buildings for the future. Upon conclusion of this engagement, Jobcentre Plus be invited to present to the panel the future usage of these redundant buildings;
 - (f) That consideration be given to linking the Council's Housing Benefit Service and Jobcentre Plus; and
 - (g) That Jobcentre Plus consider the introduction of translators and language phones into the facilities.

8.3 Whilst the above recommendations relate directly to the actions and future of Jobcentre Plus and the affect on service users. It became evident that Ward Members were not aware of this impending change. The implications of the following recommendation extends beyond Jobcentre Plus, and is considered of importance to be raised within this investigation: -

- (h) That issues of similar significance to Jobcentre Plus, which affect the local community is conveyed to the relevant Ward Member as soon as possible to ensure they are aware and appraised of developments.

9. CONCLUSION

- 9.1 The amalgamation of major services will inherently bring with it change. These changes are enhanced with the influence of technology and the consolidation of buildings. Jobcentre Plus are embracing all these issues and the Panel have recognised their desire to modernise its services and be more customer focused.
- 9.2 In many respects the access to a range of services is to be enhanced, although, the means in which these services are accessed will clearly change. It is the impact of change on local communities that has focused this Panels attention.

- 9.3 The Panel has endeavoured to influence Jobcentre Plus is ensuring the hardship or difficulties service users will experience through this transition are minimised. Consequently, issues of awareness, choice, transport and Outreach Services should be approached sympathetically and supportively. The Panel considered that Jobcentre Plus recognised this and would be receptive to secure a smooth transition.
- 9.4 The Panel has expressed a concern over the uncertainty of vacant building use. They believe that engagement with the MTCC and other partners can only add value to ensuring a useful purpose for these buildings.

10. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- 10.1 The Panel wishes to acknowledge the contribution of the below individuals: -

Debra Stoddart - Jobs and Training Manager
Steve Davidson - District Manager, Jobcentre Plus
Linda Aspery - Deputy District Manager, Jobcentre Plus

COUNCILLOR JAVED ISMAIL CHAIR OF REGENERATION & CULTURE SCRUTINY PANEL

March 2004

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PANEL MEMBERSHIP

Councillors -- Biswas, Bloundele, Booth, McPartland, Sanderson and Williams.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

The following Background Papers were used in undertaking this investigation: -

- (a) Report to the Executive 16th December 2003.
- (b) Minutes of the meetings of the Regeneration and Culture Scrutiny Panel held on 29 January 2004 and 11 February 2004, accessible via the Council's COMMIS system.