
Consultation on proposals to close the Cookstown Social Security Office and Cookstown JobCentre

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Department for Communities is consulting on proposals to close the Cookstown Social Security Office and the Cookstown JobCentre.
- 1.2 As an organisation the Department for Communities remains committed to being a regional organisation which delivers services to working age claimants from a network of modern, 'fit for purpose' local offices located across Northern Ireland.
- 1.3 The Department is taking forward a significant programme of change including the implementation of changes to the welfare system as a result of the Welfare Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 2015 and the subsequent publication of the Evason Report which will have significant impact on the way that the Department for Communities delivers its service to claimants. This change programme is being delivered against a background of continued pressure on public finances and reducing Departmental budgets. The Department therefore needs to ensure that service provision is efficient, maximising the delivery of value for money.
- 1.4 In preparation for the welfare changes, including the delivery of Universal Credit during 2017, the Department for Communities has assessed each of our local offices to determine whether they are 'fit for purpose', providing suitable modern accommodation from which to deliver the new services. This assessment has included consideration of the feasibility and cost of modernising offices and the scope of the building to support the necessary IT infrastructure to deliver the new telephony and digital based services. We have also considered the number of claimants using individual offices and what options are available by which those claimants can continue to access the necessary services.
- 1.5 The outcome of this assessment has confirmed that the Cookstown Social Security Office and the Cookstown JobCentre do not provide the necessary accommodation from which to deliver future services, requiring significant investment or alternative premises to enable the Department to provide the office environment required to deliver future services.

- 1.6 The accommodation issues and limited ability to reconfigure the buildings to deliver the quality level of service to claimants has been recognised for some time and while a variety of options, including the procurement of a site for a new build, have been explored no viable alternative has been identified.
- 1.7 Given the absence of a financially viable option for these offices the current financial pressures facing the Department and the proximity of alternative Jobs & Benefits offices from which to deliver the full range of services to claimants, it is proposed to close the Cookstown Social Security Office and the Cookstown JobCentre.
- 1.8 Whilst the proposal for office closures contained in this document will have an impact for users of the services, the priority for the Department has been to ensure that we can mitigate these impacts by providing a quality, enhanced service through alternative service delivery channels such as the increased use of technology and alternative offices.
- 1.9 In making these proposals the Department confirms its commitment to continue to progress a programme of modernisation and continuous improvement aimed at enhancing accessibility to services and the quality of local offices.
- 1.10 An initial pre-consultation equality screening exercise indicates that the proposals would not have a differential impact on any of the nine Section 75 categories. However we do acknowledge that the proposed office closures will impact on existing users of these offices and will therefore keep the need for an equality impact assessment under review during the consultation process.
- 1.11 Your views on the consultation are welcome and will provide the opportunity to inform our decisions on the proposals for delivery of services within the Cookstown area.

2. How to Respond

2.1 The Department wishes to consult as widely as possible and is seeking the views of interested individuals and organisations. A copy of the document is available on the NICS website <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/consultations> or can be requested by contacting us at the address below.

2.2 If this document is not in a format that suits your needs, please contact us and we can discuss alternative arrangements.

2.3 Unless respondents indicate otherwise, all responses to this consultation may be published in full or summary form. You should also note that the Department is subject to the Freedom of Information Act 2000. This means that we have to consider any request made to us under the Act for information relating to responses made to this consultation.

2.4 **Public Consultation – Submit your comments online**

The Department for Communities welcomes anyone who wishes to comment on this Public Consultation to submit their comments online via a form created on our feedback and survey channel, Survey Monkey. This is the most convenient way for respondents to submit any comments they may have.

Comment online on the on proposals to close the co-located Cookstown Social Security Office and the Cookstown JobCentre:

<https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/ProposalsCookstown>

Any information submitted in this way is stored securely and will not be used for anything beyond this Public Consultation process. Nor will it be shared with any third-parties. You can view Survey Monkey's privacy policy at <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/mp/policy/privacy-policy/>

2.5 If you prefer, you can complete the questionnaire at Appendix 2 and send your response to:

028 9037 6200

2.6 Please send us your responses by **15th November 2016**.

EMAIL:

servicefirstproject@communities-ni.gov.uk

POST:

Department for Communities

Service First Project Team

Ground Floor

Design Centre

39 Corporation Street

Belfast BT3 1BA

TELEPHONE:

3. Background

3.1 The Department for Communities is responsible for delivery of Social Security services in Northern Ireland. Within the Department, the Working Age Group is responsible for delivery of services to working age claimants. The main focus of the Working Age Group is to help people improve their lives by helping those who want to work, providing support to those who are

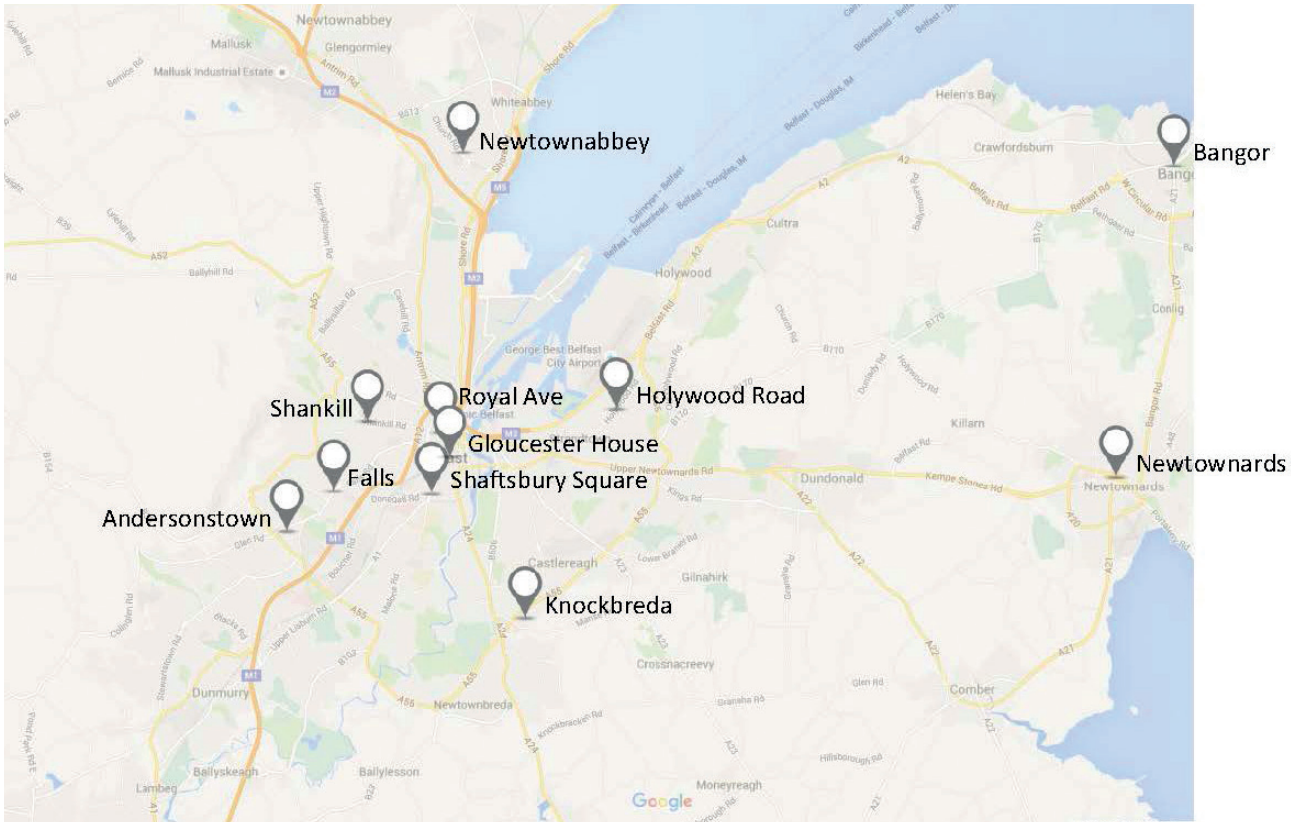
unable to work and positively working with those people who won't work.

3.2 Face to face services are currently delivered to 36,329 Jobseeker's Allowance claimants by staff working throughout a network of 39 Jobs & Benefits offices, Social Security Offices and JobCentres. The locations of our offices are shown on the maps below.

MAP 1: Location of local offices



MAP 2: Location of Belfast offices



3.3 The local office network is responsible for the administration of Income Support (IS), Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA), Social Fund (SF), National Insurance Number (NINO) applications/allocations and the provision of information and advice to callers to the local offices on the broad spectrum of social security benefits.

3.4 Whilst all offices deliver face to face front line services to claimants, due to

the early closure of the Jobs & Benefit Project, only 27 of the offices are Jobs & Benefits offices which were refurbished in order to deliver an integrated benefit and employment service.

3.5 The overarching aim of the Jobs & Benefit Project was to co-locate the Social Security Offices and JobCentres in order to deliver an enhanced work focused service for claimants through a programme of refurbishment of

existing Social Security Office buildings complemented by a capital build programme for 10 new build offices in areas where there were prevailing issues in relation to capacity and/or quality of existing office stock.

3.6 By 2010 the Jobs & Benefits Project had delivered 27 Jobs & Benefits offices. However, a variety of difficulties, including issues with identifying and securing sites for new build offices, adversely impacted the Jobs & Benefits Project. Due to a lack of capital monies being made available under Budget 2010 the Jobs & Benefits Project was closed and the proposed eight new build offices which included the Cookstown office were not completed.

3.7 Funding was however subsequently secured for the new Strabane Jobs & Benefits office which was recently opened.

3.8 As to the remaining offices:

- 4 offices are Social Security Offices (North Belfast, Cookstown, Newtownards and Downpatrick) delivering the benefit related activities to claimants who must then attend their local JobCentre (Gloucester House, Cookstown,

Newtownards and Downpatrick) which is often in a different locality for their employment related activities; and

- in 3 offices (Bangor, Newcastle and Ballynahinch) the benefit and employment related services have been co-located in the same building for financial purposes but due to accommodation and structural issues they are unable to operate the fully integrated Jobs & Benefits office delivery model.

3.9 A variety of contingency options have been considered as to how best to deliver a Jobs & Benefits service for the remaining seven sites and value for money options have been identified and are under consideration with the Department of Finance for the Downpatrick and North Belfast Jobs & Benefits offices.

3.10 The Department for Communities is continuing to work with the Department of Finance on solutions for the Bangor and Newtownards offices.

3.11 As we take forward the implementation of the welfare changes and introduction of new ways of working and in order to ensure that claimants continue to have

access to facilities and accommodation that meets their needs, including vulnerable claimants, it is concluded that the Jobs & Benefits offices will be at the core of the delivery of the new Finance Support Service and Universal Credit.

3.12 The Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI), 2011 – 2021 ¹ advocates the provision of maximised and enhanced jobs and benefits services. The ISNI Strategy indicates that the co-location of previously separate benefit delivery and job assistance services in a single Jobs & Benefits office is a leading example of how services can be re-engineered to improve customer experience and generate cost efficiencies. The ISNI Strategy indicates that the new service model allows the Executive to provide more than just financial support to those who are affected by the current downturn in the labour market.

3.13 In light of the continued pressure on public finances the Asset Management Unit of the Strategic Investment Board is currently developing a programme of invest to save area based office consolidation projects at the request of the Delivery Oversight Group for the

Northern Ireland Executive's Asset Management Strategy. This work has considered the consolidation and exiting of leasehold properties in order to deliver potential resource savings.

3.14 In addition, the Northern Ireland Audit Office 2014 value for money report "Modernising benefit delivery in the Social Security Agency's local office network" ² stated that the former "SSA should take the opportunity offered by the implementation of Universal Credit to consider to what extent they can realise efficiencies by reducing the overall size or number of offices within its network without significantly affecting the service they can provide to claimants."

3.15 Considering the above a number of contingency options have been considered for the three locations (Social Security Offices and JobCentres in Cookstown, Ballynahinch and Newcastle) but no viable solutions have been identified. The current building configurations will not enable the Department to offer the enhanced service to claimants which is delivered elsewhere in Northern Ireland and the building configurations will not

¹ <http://www.isni.gov.uk/pipeline/Pipeline.pdf>

² <https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/publication/modernising-benefit-delivery-social-security-agencys-local-office-network>

accommodate the Universal Credit delivery model and new ways of working.

3.16 As detailed later in this document, Universal Credit will be introduced during 2017 and is a key element of

Welfare Reform. The front office will be at the core of the delivery of Universal Credit and it is essential that there is a suitable modern environment from which to deliver a high quality of service. This requires office accommodation that is fit for purpose.

QUESTION: Background

Q.1 Given the strategic context provided are there any other factors that the Department needs to consider to inform the decision in relation to the Cookstown Offices? If yes please provide further details.

4. Drivers for Change

4.1 Against this background there are two main factors which need to be considered in determining how best to continue to provide a quality service to claimants currently served by the Cookstown Social Security Office and JobCentre. The two main factors are:

- **SERVICE PROVISION** - the need to maintain an effective, responsive, and resilient customer service which will meet the needs of claimants following the introduction of Universal Credit and the new ways of working; and
- **VALUE FOR MONEY** - the need for service provision to be efficient, maximising the delivery of value for money.

Service Provision Position

Current Service Provision

4.2 The Cookstown Social Security Office and Cookstown JobCentre provide face to face services to claimants in Cookstown and the surrounding area, including Pomeroy and areas of Dungannon and Omagh. The town lies in Mid Ulster and is 11 miles from Dungannon and 10 miles from Magherafelt.

4.3 According to the 2011 census, Cookstown has a population of 11,620 people. Current estimates as published by NISRA updated for 2015 indicate a population of 11,599 people. Cookstown is traditionally a market town, and the main employment in the area can be attributed to the Agricultural sector with employment also in the retail and tourism industry.

4.4 The Cookstown Social Security Office is located at 38-40 Fairhill Road, Cookstown, BT80 8AG and the JobCentre is located at Phase 1, Unit 3, Molesworth Plaza, Molesworth Street, Cookstown, BT80 8PA.

4.5 The building that houses the Social Security Office is listed and dates from the early to mid 1960's and while considered acceptable for staff accommodation it has not been subject to any modernisation.

4.6 The JobCentre moved into a refurbished Molesworth Plaza in April 2013. This is a 5,600 square foot space which is rented on a 10 year lease which is due to expire at the end of March 2023. Both buildings have been subject to yearly and very standard planned preventative maintenance that ensures minimum

standards are met and any immediate health and safety or statutory requirements are addressed.

security benefits and help in completion of forms.

4.7 The Cookstown Social Security Office and JobCentre are amongst the smallest in the local office network with a Jobseeker's Allowance liveload at July 2016 of 359 claimants. The liveload has decreased by over 27% since July 2015.

4.10 An outreach officer from Improving Benefit Uptake is also based within the office.

4.8 The offices also provide services to other benefit claimants although these are mainly related to benefit enquiries which are largely dealt with by telephone.

4.11 The processing of claims to Jobseeker's Allowance and Income Support is carried out by staff in the Magherafelt and Coleraine Benefit Processing Centres.

4.9 The benefit related face to face services available at the Cookstown Social Security office include:

4.12 The JobCentre provides the following face to face employment related services to claimants:

- processing Jobseeker's Allowance fresh claim appointments;
- fortnightly Jobseeker's Allowance signing (including postal signing);
- processing applications for Social Fund Crisis Loans;
- processing work focused interviews / lone parent appointments;
- providing Habitual Residency Test / Genuine Prospect of Work Interview appointments; and
- providing benefit information and advice on a wide range of social

- identifying claimant's barriers to employment and offering advice and guidance to determine the further action(s) needed to find work;
- provision of advice and support on available training opportunities to enable skills development and promote the movement from benefits into work;
- provision of voluntary Work Focused interviews and job search review interviews to help claimants move closer to and into sustainable employment; and
- advice and guidance on a range of employment related services e.g. Adviser's Discretionary Fund, Careers Service.

4.13 The JobCentre also provides the following services to local employers:

- job vacancy management;
- advertising vacancies on JobCentre Online; and
- submitting potential applicants for vacancies.

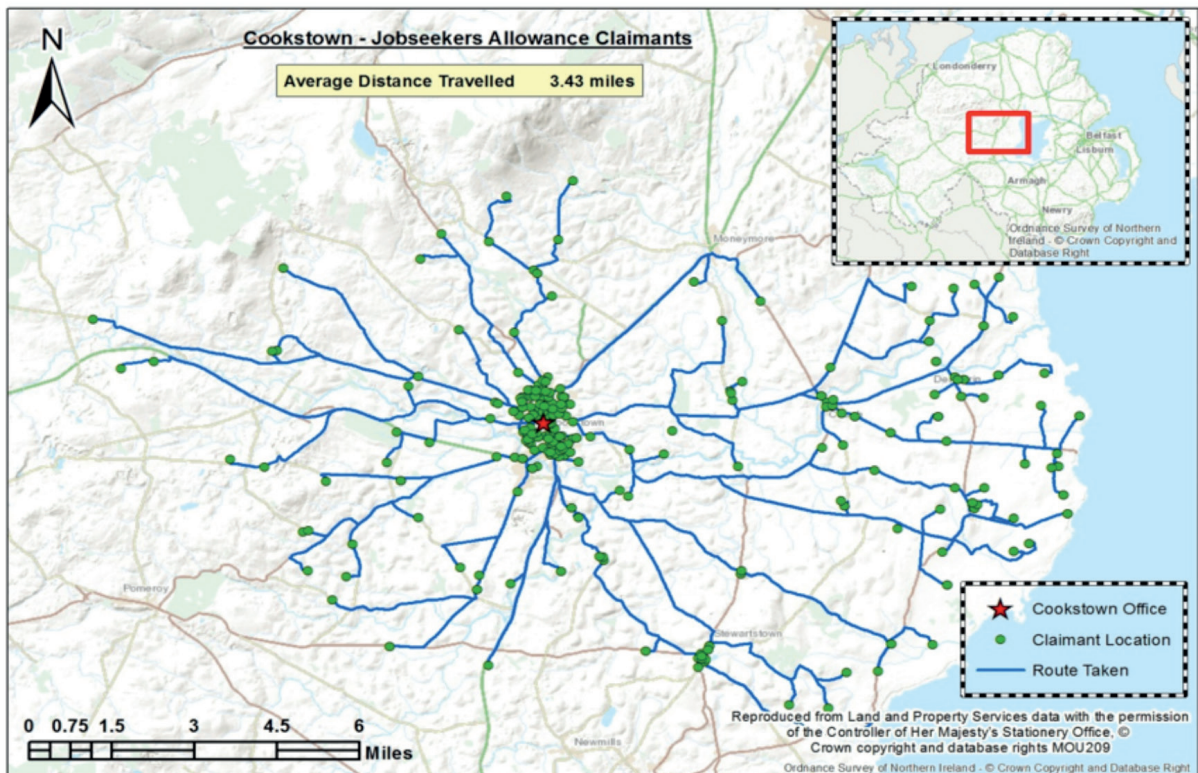
4.14 Between April 2015 and March 2016 office records indicate that the total caller traffic to the Cookstown Social Security Office was approximately

12,000 callers. Caller traffic to the Cookstown JobCentre in the same period was 3640 callers.

4.15 The map below illustrates the geographical distribution of Jobseeker’s Allowance claimants using the Cookstown Social Security Office and JobCentre and the distance travelled.

4.16 The average distance travelled by claimants to the Cookstown offices is 3.43 miles.

MAP 3: Distribution of Jobseeker’s Allowance Claimants using the Cookstown Social Security Office and JobCentre by Home Address



Future Service Provision

- 4.17 The Working Age Group local office network needs to maintain an effective, responsive and resilient customer service, in the face of the welfare changes and in particular the introduction of Universal Credit and new ways of working including digitalisation. This requires the office accommodation to be fit for purpose providing suitable modern accommodation from which to deliver the new services.
- 4.18 Universal Credit will be introduced in Northern Ireland during 2017 and is a key element of Welfare Reform. Its introduction will bring together 6 benefits: income-based JSA and Employment Support Allowance, Income Support, Housing Benefit, Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit. Universal Credit will be delivered through an internet based platform enabling claimants to make a claim and maintain their claim on-line without any need to visit an office. Claimants will be required to attend work focused activity in local offices which will be an appointment based system. Support will be available for vulnerable claimants or those who need bespoke support e.g. those with literacy issues or learning difficulties. The front office will be at the core of the delivery of Universal Credit playing a key role in supporting people into work.
- 4.19 It is therefore essential that there is an appropriate modern environment from which to deliver the high quality of service going forward. Our face to face services need to be delivered in a modern setting that enables staff to discuss employment with claimants, provides facilities where claimants can utilise web enabled job search approaches, and provides appropriate support to vulnerable job searchers. This requires the office accommodation to be fit for purpose.
- 4.20 As part of the preparation for these changes, the Universal Credit Interim Estates Strategy (November 2013) assessed each of our local offices, including the Cookstown Social Security Office and JobCentre, to determine whether they could be adapted to accommodate the changes in the delivery model that will arise as a consequence of the implementation of Universal Credit and other reform programmes.
- 4.21 One of the primary areas of consequential change identified was the use of the front office i.e. claimant

facing elements of the offices. Key considerations in relation to available space in the front office included:

- Can the claimant facing desk space be maximised to mitigate against the impact of the potential increase in claimant volumes?
- Can the front office be re-configured to support the new roles that are envisaged in the Universal Credit operating model, particularly the health and safety issues in relation to the new roles?
- Can the front office be re-configured to support the new access points

that are envisioned in the model, particularly access to the internet?

- All considerations must be made in the context of security for both staff and claimants along with access to information within those local offices.

4.22 This assessment has identified that it is not feasible to deliver Universal Credit and the new ways of working from the Cookstown Social Security Office and JobCentre as currently configured, requiring capital investment to provide the necessary quality accommodation and infrastructure.

QUESTION: Current and Future Service Provision

Q.2 Taking account of the information provided on the current and future service provision is there any additional information you think we need to take into consideration to inform the decision in relation to the Cookstown Offices?

Value for Money Position

4.23 As it has long been recognised that it is not feasible to deliver the future level of service from the current office accommodation in Cookstown without significant investment, consideration has been given as to the feasibility and cost of modernising the offices or providing alternative accommodation from which to deliver the new telephony and digital based services.

4.24 As to the consideration of the feasibility and costs of making the necessary improvements to the offices to enable them not only to deliver the full integrated Jobs & Benefits service available to claimants elsewhere in Northern Ireland, but also Universal Credit and the new service delivery model, work by the former Department for Social Development concluded that

there would be a need for significant financial investment in order to make the necessary improvements to enable them to do so.

4.25 In terms of the Cookstown Social Security Office, the building would need to be demolished and a new office built on the site. The Jobs & Benefits Project estimated in 2009 that the cost of building a new office on the site was approximately £5m. Considering the new service delivery model and the introduction of Universal Credit these costs are likely to have increased.

4.26 Table 1 below details the current re-furbishing/re-build costs of delivering the integrated Jobs & Benefits service in Cookstown against one of our small, medium and large offices located elsewhere in Northern Ireland.

TABLE 1: Comparison of Re-furbishing/Re-build costs

| Office | Re-furb/Re-build Costs (£M) | JSA Claimants (July 2016) | Unit Cost (£) |
|-----------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------|
| Foyle | £1.5 | 3282 | £457 |
| Strabane | £4.7 | 1286 | £3,654 |
| Banbridge | £1.6 | 618 | £2,589 |
| Cookstown | £5 (estimate) | 359 | £13,927 |

4.27 Tables 2 and 3 below detail the annual office running costs (2015/16) per staff at Whole Time Equivalent (WTE) and claimant numbers for the Cookstown

Offices against one of our small, medium and large offices located elsewhere in Northern Ireland.

TABLE 2: Comparison of annual Office running cost per Staff WTE

| Office | Office Running Costs (£k) | Staff WTE (July 2016) | Unit Cost (£k) |
|-----------|---------------------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| Foyle | £6,134 | 180.56 | £34 |
| Strabane | £1,286 | 44.12 | £29 |
| Banbridge | £1,121 | 32.09 | £35 |
| Cookstown | £805 | 22.19 | £36 |

TABLE 3: Comparison of annual Office running cost per claimant numbers

| Office | Office Running Costs (£k) | JSA Claimants (July 2016) | Unit Cost (£) |
|-----------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------|
| Foyle | £6,134 | 3282 | £1,889 |
| Strabane | £1,286 | 1286 | £1,000 |
| Banbridge | £1,121 | 618 | £1,814 |
| Cookstown | £805 | 359 | £2,243 |

4.28 In addition, to the capital investment in a period of pressure on the Department's funding, the Cookstown Social Security Office site presents a number of challenges as it is a listed building which restrict the design of any new office and as a result demolition and rebuilding is not a viable option.

4.29 Similarly, the development of a new office using the Cookstown JobCentre is not feasible as the lease on the building is due to expire at the end of March 2023 and, as stated previously, in light of the continued pressure on

public finances the Asset Management Unit of the Strategic Investment Board is considering the consolidation and exiting of leasehold properties in order to deliver potential resource savings.

4.30 As to the development of a new office on an alternative site, the Jobs & Benefits Project took forward a number of procurement exercises to secure an appropriate site within the Cookstown area and following evaluation it was concluded that the proposed development costs did not represent value for money.

QUESTION: Value for Money

Q.3 Taking account of the information provided in relation to value for money is there any additional information you think we need to take into consideration to inform the decision in relation to the Cookstown Offices?

Impact of proposed closure on claimants

4.31 In light of the above analysis, which has confirmed that the current offices are not fit for purpose and value for money alternatives are not available within Cookstown and recognising that the closures of offices will have an impact for claimants currently accessing services, consideration has been given as to what options are available from which claimants can continue to access the necessary services.

4.32 This analysis has included an assessment of the capacity of alternative offices to accommodate the increased footfall, the distance and travel time that claimants may have to travel to an alternative office and the associated costs.

4.33 The Department recognises the importance of local access to its services and therefore the proposed closures are premised on the basis that a strong network of public offices delivering frontline services will continue to exist.

4.34 The Department has also made significant investment in modernising and improving access to our services through the use of technology: electronic communication, web-based systems and telephony.

4.35 Cookstown lies in Mid Ulster and is 11 miles from Dungannon and 10 miles from Magherafelt. Under this proposal it is proposed that claimants impacted by the proposed closures will be able to access services from the Dungannon and Magherafelt Jobs & Benefits offices where a full service is currently provided. These offices can also accommodate the changes required for the introduction of Universal Credit and the new ways of working. These offices are in closest proximity to the Cookstown Social Security Office and Cookstown JobCentre.

4.36 Table 4 overleaf outlines the distance between Cookstown and the Dungannon and Magherafelt Jobs & Benefits offices, information on transport links and associated fares. While the frequency of transport between locations varies, there are direct transport links which means that claimants will not have to interchange on their journey.

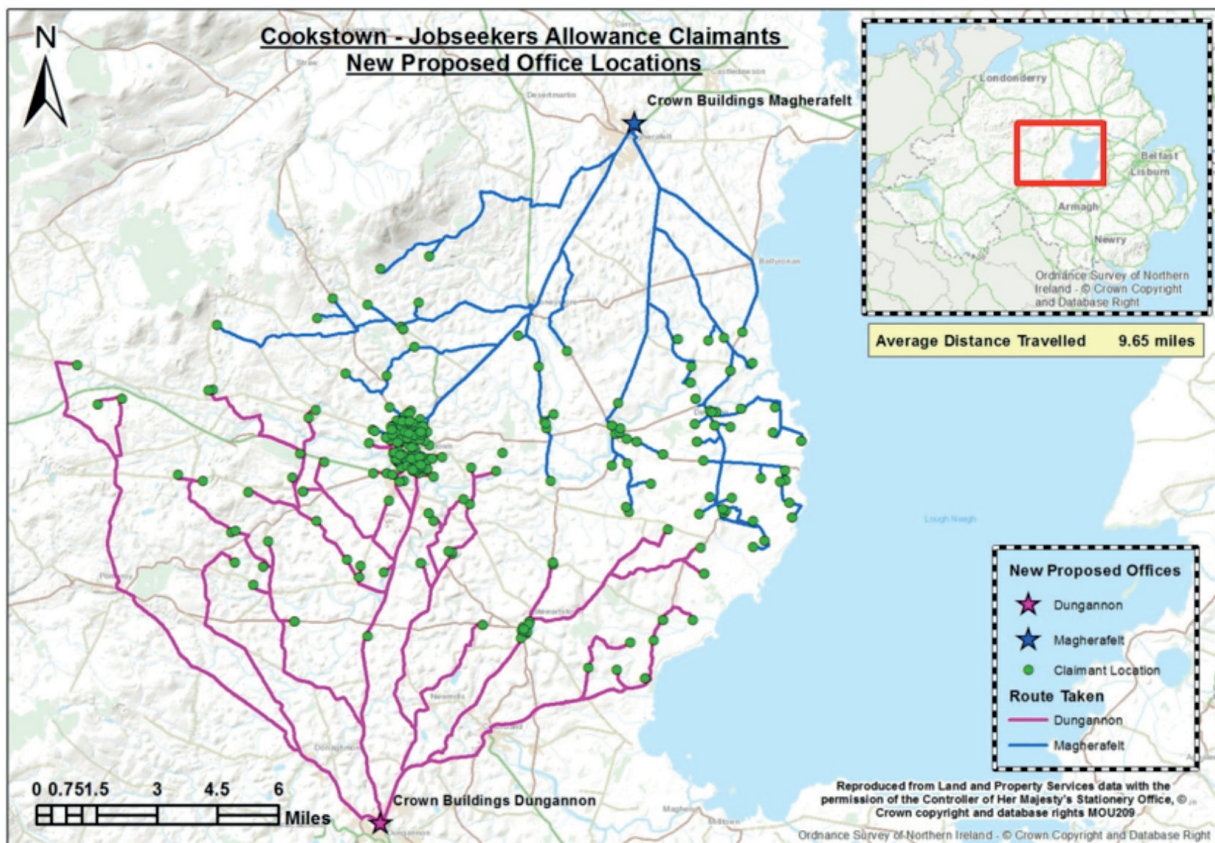
TABLE 4: Proximity to Dungannon Magherafelt Jobs & Benefits offices, journey times and associated cost

| Office | Distance from Cookstown | Direct Transport Links | Journey Time to and From (Public Transport) | Public Transport Cost (Return Journey) |
|---|-------------------------|--|---|--|
| Magherafelt Jobs & Benefits office | 10.4 miles | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular bus service to and from Cookstown and Magherafelt. • Service runs approximately every hour. | 30 minutes | £6.30 |
| Dungannon Jobs & Benefits office | 10.1 miles | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular bus service to and from Cookstown and Dungannon. • Service runs approximately every hour. | 25-40 minutes (dependent on bus service) | £6.80 |

4.37 The average distance to be travelled by claimants to and from home to their new proposed office is 9.65 miles which

is an increase of 6.22 miles. This is illustrated in the map overleaf.

MAP 4: Distribution of impacted claimants by home address accessing services at Dungannon and Magherafelt Jobs & Benefits office



QUESTIONS: Impact of proposed closure on claimants

- Q.4 If the Cookstown offices are closed, do you agree that Dungannon and Magherafelt are appropriate alternatives?
- Q.5 What impact (positive or negative) would our proposals for closure of the Cookstown offices have on you?

4.38 The Department will also provide services to claimants by:

Telephony

- the use of our modern Automated Call Distribution (ACD) telephony equipment manned by highly skilled staff trained in the use of technology and who are benefit experts. The ACD equipment will provide a useful combination of historical and real time management information to enable call volumes to be effectively managed throughout the working day/week;
- ensuring that all claimant calls are answered quickly by staffing our telephony teams to match identified daily call profiles;
- ensuring that any hand-offs are kept to a minimum and that where a hand-off is appropriate, the right person is identified and the claimant's details are passed on in order to avoid them having to be repeated;
- low/fixed rate calls from landlines with Interactive Voice Response system which is customer friendly, simple and straightforward to operate with a default system which always allows the caller to speak to a person;
- ensuring that the Department's telephony teams have the right customer service skills and benefit knowledge; and
- monitoring telephony performance closely to ensure that any call-backs or follow-up actions happen promptly and that service continues to improve.

The Department anticipates that many claimants may migrate through choice to the telephony service instead of visiting an alternative office. The telephony service will provide real benefits for many claimants in terms of increased privacy and convenience, savings in travel time (particularly in rural areas) and waiting time and cost savings in bus fares and car parking. However, it is also accepted that telephony may be unsuitable for some claimants including those:

- with hearing difficulties, although the Telephony Support Units are equipped to handle calls from textphones;
- whose first language is not English, although Telephony Support Units have access to translation services;
- with concentration, mental health or learning difficulties;
- older claimants, although very few pensioners tend to ring or visit local offices other than the occasional Social Fund enquiry; and
- claimants who do not have a telephone, although our services are available from mobiles and public telephone kiosks.

Face to face service delivery

A face to face service will continue to be available, by appointment, at the alternative locations for all of the above claimants and to any claimant who needs it.

It is recognised that there will be a need to publicise and manage the telephony arrangements. This is likely to involve the Department advertising the new arrangements in local newspapers, and using poster displays in offices. Local staff will signpost claimants to the new arrangements.

Telephony Support Units

Each front office is already supported by the Telephone Support Units. The Units are staffed by experienced benefit processing staff with the appropriate telephony and customer service skills to ensure that calls are handled in a business-like and efficient manner. We will provide dedicated numbers of staff to ensure that calls are answered promptly and that claimants receive a highly effective telephony service that meets their requirements.

Appointment System for Callers (footfall)

The local office network currently receives around 710,000 callers through its doors every year and already uses appointments very effectively for claimants wishing to make new claims to Jobseeker's Allowance and Income Support as well as those customers

seeking to apply for a National Insurance number. The existing appointment based system will be available for claimants in Dungannon and Magherafelt Jobs & Benefits offices.

Access to Department's Website

Access to the Department's website will be freely available to claimants in all modernised front offices with the introduction of Universal Credit. This will allow those claimants who can, to source information such as benefit rates, check qualifying conditions for specific benefits and print leaflets and forms, if not already available in the office.

4.39 Claimants impacted by the proposed closure of the Cookstown Social Security Office and Cookstown JobCentre will therefore continue to have a choice over how they access our services.

Impact of proposed closure on Staff

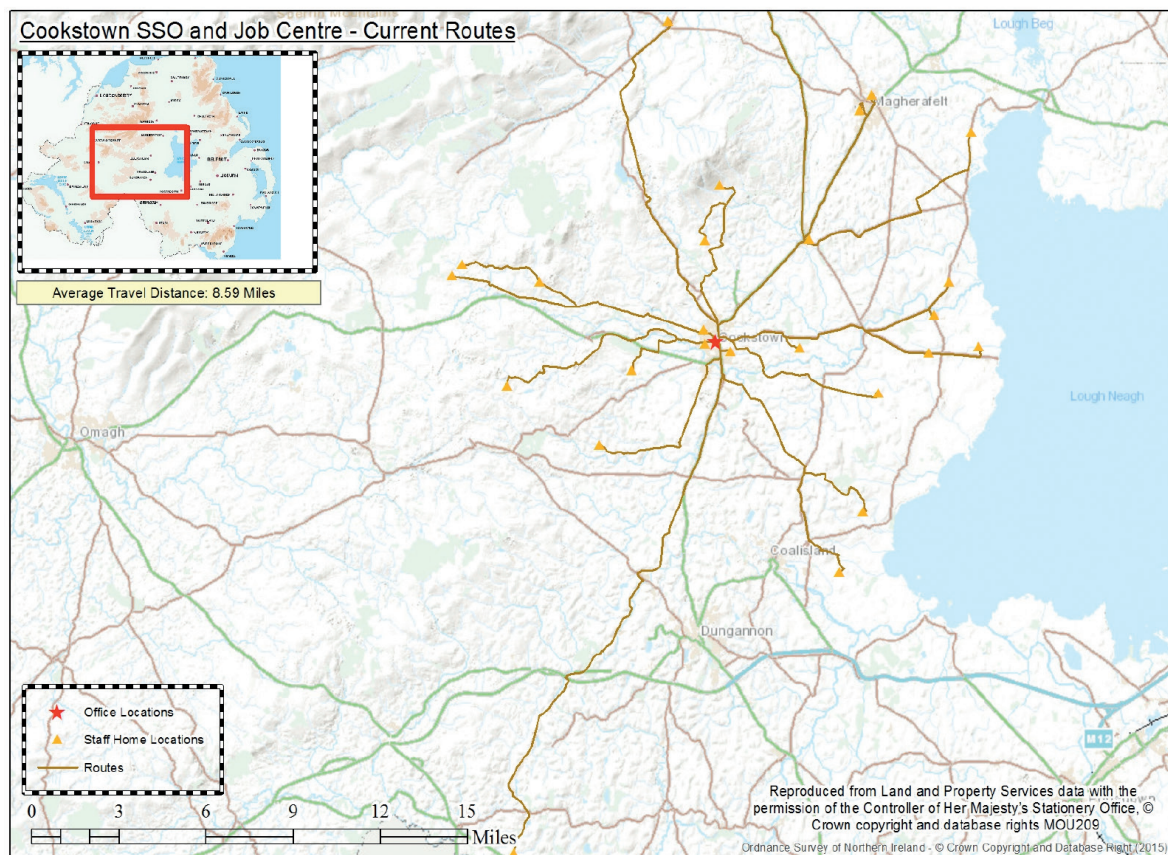
4.40 We are aware that the closure of offices raises concerns for the staff regarding the impact of proposals on jobs.

4.41 Services in the Cookstown Social Security Office and the JobCentre are delivered by 26 members of staff. The average travel distance to the Cookstown Offices for these staff, based on their home addresses is 8.59 miles.

4.42 Map 5 below illustrates the geographical distribution of staff working in the Cookstown Social

Security Office and JobCentre and the distance travelled.

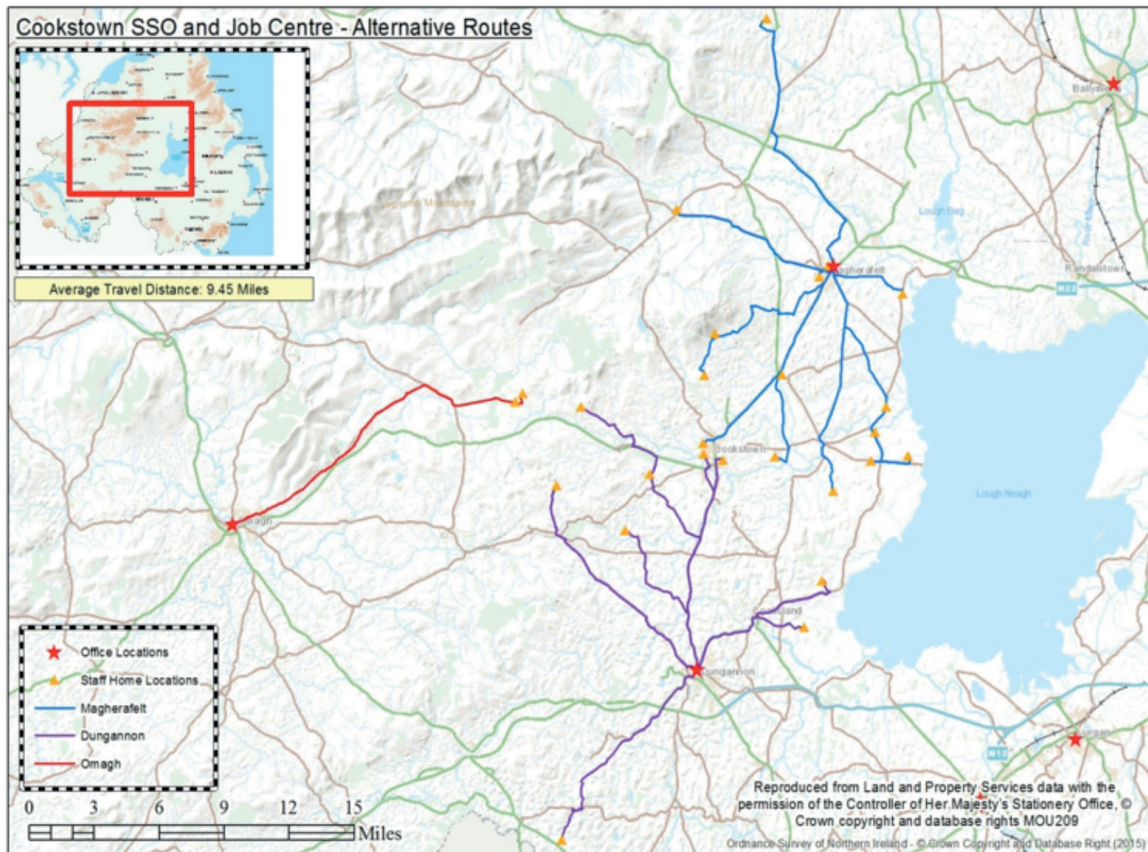
MAP 5: Distribution of staff working in the Cookstown Social Security Office and JobCentre by Home Address



4.43 The Department has carried out analysis to assess the impact on travel distance for staff to alternative offices. This analysis indicates that the average travel distance for staff to their new office is 9.45 miles. The analysis also indicates that 17 staff will have to travel further than is the case currently while 9 staff will be closer to an alternative office than the Cookstown offices.

4.44 Map 6 overleaf illustrates the geographical distribution of staff working in the Cookstown Social Security Office and JobCentre and the distance travelled from home to an alternative office.

MAP 6: Distribution of impacted staff traveling to an alternative office by home address



4.45 There are no plans for any redundancies in the Cookstown offices.

4.46 A Redeployment Plan has been developed and is subject to consultation with Trade Union side. The Redeployment Plan is based on the principles set out in the Northern Ireland Civil Service Human Resources Handbook. Staff will also have the opportunity to apply for posts created by the introduction of the welfare changes.

Wider Concerns

4.47 We are also aware of wider concerns regarding the impact of the closure of offices on job opportunities and the local economy.

4.48 Previous analysis of this issue indicated that the overall impact is marginal due to the ‘reasonable’ travelling distances involved and because we are still maintaining a dispersed organisation ensuring that staff are unlikely to be

required to move home. This has been supported by advice from independent economists who have concluded that at a local level there will be economic impacts, though for many areas these are likely to prove extremely modest given the numbers of staff involved.

4.49 As stated above there are no plans for redundancies and the Department remains committed to a network of local offices providing quality services to claimants and delivering value for money.

QUESTION: Wider Concerns

Q.6 Are there any other factors we should take into consideration when making the final decisions about the proposed closure of the Cookstown offices?

5. Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998

- 5.1 Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires that consultation is an integral part of the policy making process and that all persons likely to be affected by a policy should have the opportunity to engage with the public authority.
- 5.2 An Equality Screening of the proposals has been completed to identify whether they are likely to have an impact on the equality of opportunity and/or good relations and so determine whether an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) is necessary.
- 5.3 The conclusion of the Equality Screening is that an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) is not necessary. A copy of the Equality Screening Form can be found at <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/dfc-equality>.
- 5.4 However, if after having read this document you consider that any of the proposed changes are likely to have a differential impact on any of the nine Equality Groups defined within Section 75, please complete the pro-forma included at Appendix 1. You should indicate which of the groups are impacted and the reasons why. The completed pro-forma should be returned to us with any other comments you might have.

6. Freedom Of Information

- 6.1 The information you send us may be passed to colleagues within the Department and published in any summary of responses received.
- 6.2 Under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 all information contained in your response, may be subject to disclosure.

Equality Groups Section 75

If you consider that any of the proposed changes are likely to have a differential impact please indicate which group(s)

| Impact (please tick as appropriate) | | Equality Groups |
|-------------------------------------|----|--|
| Yes | No | |
| | | Religious belief |
| | | Political opinion |
| | | Racial group |
| | | Gender |
| | | Marital status |
| | | Age |
| | | “Persons with a disability” ¹ |
| | | “Persons with dependants” ² |
| | | Sexual orientation |

¹ **Disability** By disability we mean any physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term (lasted or expected to last 12 months or more) adverse impact on your ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities, without mechanical or electronic assistance or the adaption of your workplace

² **Dependants** By ‘having dependants’ we mean persons with primary responsibility for the care of a child; persons with personal responsibility for the care of a person with a disability; persons with primary responsibility for the care of a dependant elderly person.

Consultations on proposals to close the Cookstown Social Security Office and Cookstown JobCentre

RESPONSE QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Consultee Details

Name:

Name of Organisation:
(if appropriate)

Address:
.....
.....

Are you content for your response to be published in full or in part (if in part, please specify those parts that should not be published within your response below)?

YES/NO/IN PART

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2. We would welcome responses to the following questions set out in the consultation paper and you may use this form to complete your response

QUESTION: Background

Q.1 Given the strategic context provided are there any other factors that the Department needs to consider to inform the decision in relation to the Cookstown Offices? If yes please provide further details.

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QUESTION: Current and Future Service Provision

Q.2 Taking account of the information provided on the current and future service provision is there any additional information you think we need to take into consideration to inform the decision in relation to the Cookstown Offices? If yes please provide further details.

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QUESTION: Value for Money

Q.3 Taking account of the information provided in relation to value for money is there any additional information you think we need to take into consideration to inform the decision in relation to the Cookstown Offices? If yes please provide further details.

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QUESTION: Impact of proposed closure on claimants

Q.4 If the Cookstown offices are closed, do you agree that Dungannon and Magherafelt are appropriate alternatives?

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Q.5 What impact (positive or negative) would our proposals for closure of the Cookstown offices have on you?

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QUESTION: Wider Concerns

Q.6 Are there any other factors we should take into consideration when making the final decisions about the proposed closure of the Cookstown offices? If yes please provide further details.

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