

TEESDALE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Report To: OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
4 June 2008

From: Pamela Spurrell, Co-opted member

Ward Member: ALL

Subject: **JOB SECTOR – EMPLOYMENT CLAIMS**

1.0 SUMMARY

- 1.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee have investigated issues around the difficulties some of the residents of Teesdale have experienced when making employment claims. To progress this review representatives from the Citizens Advice Bureau and Job Centre Plus have been invited to attend the meeting to discuss this matter further.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION(S)

- 2.1 It is recommended that

2.1.1 The report be received.

3.0 LINK TO CORPORATE KEY PRIORITIES/AMBITIONS

- 3.1 Priority: To Grow the Economy of Teesdale
- 3.2 Ambition: Create and sustain employment in Teesdale District Council
- 3.3 Outcome: Residents have the improved skills and confidence to meet current and future business needs

4.0 BACKGROUND

- 4.1 A representative from the Citizens Advice Bureau responded to a request by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for any items they would like investigating to be placed on the committee's work programme.
- 4.2 Their request came about as the Jobcentre in Barnard Castle (Situated on the Bank) closed down and many clients complained to the CAB about having to switch to postal signing or traveling to Bishop Auckland or Darlington to sign on.
- 4.3 Councillor Ken Hodgson submitted a feasibility study report in September 2007 in which the round trip of 35 miles for some clients

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was highlighted. (appendix 1). A further detailed report was drafted by Councillor Martin Clark (appendix 2).

- 4.4 Following a request from the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Mrs Pamela Spurrell (Co-opted Member) was requested to meet with a representative from the CAB. After this meeting had taken place it was agreed that some form of representation of clients who use and experience the service should be sought. Unfortunately, despite a letter being placed in the Teesdale Mercury courtesy by the CAB, no users have come forward to share their experiences.

5.0 STATUTORY CONSIDERATIONS

- 5.1 Financial Implications:

- 5.2 Risk: None

Risk	Category	Implications
The Council unable to influence policy of the JobCentre Plus	Reputation	The alleged difficulties of clients continue

- 5.3 Equality and Diversity: Overview and Scrutiny has a role in ensuring the Council's compliance with equality and diversity requirements.

- 5.4 Human Resources: None

- 5.5 Community Safety: 5.3 above

- 5.6 Legal Issues: Overview and Scrutiny is a statutory function defined by Local Government Act 2000.

Background papers:

1. Meeting Notes

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TEESDALE DISTRICT COUNCIL

**Report To: OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
27 SEPTEMBER 2007**

From: Councillor Ken Hodgson, Chair, Overview and Scrutiny Services Panel

Lead Member: Councillor Jo Fergus, Lead Member for Regeneration

Ward Member: ALL

Subject: FEASIBILITY STUDY INTO JOB SECTOR – EMPLOYMENT CLAIMS

1.0 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This review is part of Overview and Scrutiny's annual work programme and has been agreed for the Panel to undertake this review. Councillor George Richardson and I have undertaken research into reasons why this review should go ahead and information is listed in section 3.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION(S)

- 2.1 It is recommended that

2.1.1 The report be noted and a scoping exercise take place

3.0 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Approximately one year ago the job centre in Barnard Castle closed down. People claiming an allowance for jobseekers now have to travel to Bishop Auckland in order for them to sign on. This round trip is at least 35 miles.
- 3.2 The return fare from Barnard Castle to Bishop Auckland is about £8.00 and this is a big financial problem for some unemployed people, those living in the upper dale face an even longer journey.
- 3.3 Many clients do have the facility of being able to claim via a postal service but I have been informed that there have been some administrative difficulties in getting forms sent to clients.
- 3.4 The CAB raised concerns in respect of postal forms for clients with literacy problems and those with chaotic lifestyles. Vulnerable and socially excluded clients often need support from jobcentre staff face to face.

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3.5 A representative from the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) has indicated that staff there have encountered many problems when trying to contact the new administrative centres on behalf of clients. This is frustrating for CAB employees and is a waste of time and resources.

3.6 In Teesdale figures reveal that there are 145 males and 53 females who sign on for jobseekers allowance and this is broken down into the following areas in Teesdale:-

Barnard Castle	40
Cockfield/Lynesack/Hamsterley	34
Gainford	5
Starforth/Greta/Barningham and Ovington	13
Evenwood	35
Ingleton	5
Streatlam	3
Etherley	28
Dales	18
Staindrop	17

3.7 We feel that the Overview and Scrutiny Services Panel should meet with the Manager of the Job Centre, a representative from CAB and the local MP, Mrs H Goodman in order to discuss this problem.

4.8 At this stage Councillor Richardson and I feel that the jobcentre should meet their clients:

- one day a week or one day every two weeks at Village Halls;
- operate a bus service to travel out into the community;
- provide tokens to clients in order that they can travel on allotted signing on days; or
- have a satellite jobcentre administrator

Background papers:

2. Employment Statistics

Author: Councillor Ken Hodgson
Chair, Overview and Scrutiny Services Panel

**Overview & Scrutiny Report
Issues around claims for Jobseekers Allowance
from Residents of Barnard Castle and Surrounding Areas**

1. The Citizen's Advice Bureaux (CAB) in Barnard Castle had reported a number of issues surrounding claims for Jobseekers Allowance following the decision to close the Jobcentre in Barnard Castle. The problems being reported were:
 - Jobseekers now have to travel to Bishop Auckland or Darlington to sign on;
 - administrative problems for those jobseekers claiming by post;
 - CAB having difficulties trying to contact the administrative centres on behalf of clients;
 - vulnerable and socially excluded clients preferring one to one interviews and help;
 - the bus fare to either Bishop Auckland or Darlington jobcentres can be as much as £8.

At this point it should be pointed out the major functions of jobcentres and claims for Jobseekers Allowance is set in legislation which leaves little or no room for individual offices to operate outside of the regulations in place.

2. During this scrutiny I have spoken to Bishop Auckland and Darlington Jobcentre Plus offices; South Tyne and Wear Valley District Office and the Jobcentre Plus Products & Services Management Division at Rockingham House, Sheffield (Head Office).
3. The decision to close the Jobcentre in Barnard Castle was made as part of a national spending review, and was made on the basis of cost and volume of business. Due to the concerns raised at the time, a decision was also taken to operate a Jobcentre Plus office within Enterprise House in Barnard Castle two days a week, staffed by advisers from Bishop Auckland Jobcentre Plus Office.

The liability of staff working in outreach sites has meant that these customer contacts can only be by appointment and concentrate on Work Focused and Caseload interviews. This office is currently seeing on average of only around only 8 customers per week. There are no plans for further outreach services in the area.

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4. Jobseekers are given the choice of claiming at Bishop Auckland or Darlington Jobcentre Plus Offices. Jobseekers are required (*under legislation in place*) to travel up to one and half hours each way, therefore most living in the immediate area of Barnard Castle would be expected to attend fortnightly. Both offices have co-ordinated appointment times with bus timetables but they cannot reimburse the cost of attending on the normal fortnightly cycle for jobseekers. If occasionally a jobseeker is called in for a work based interview other than on their normal signing day, fare reimbursement is considered. That said it is rare for clients to be called in out of time.
5. Customers who live further into the Dale sign each fortnight by post. There are currently 10 postal customers registered at Bishop Auckland and 20 at Darlington. The postal *coupons* they are required to sign are computer generated each fortnight following receipt of the previous fortnight's *coupon*.
6. For those identified as being vulnerable due to literacy problems they are offered the option of receiving a telephone call interview to record their jobsearch activity and to deal with any issues arising from it.
7. In the last 12 months a programme of centralisation of benefits has taken place with greater emphasis being put on reducing call waiting times for all who require their services. A direct line contact number has now been issued to Barnard Castle CAB so that they are able to contact the offices directly when they have a customer with difficulties. They have also been given the name of each Benefit Delivery Manager for the Bishop Auckland and Darlington offices as a further escalation route if matters have not been resolved. This service enables CAB staff a direct route contact to both Jobcentres.
8. Having reviewed all the information I cannot see any further action required by the Overview and Scrutiny aside from monitoring any further issues raised in the future by Barnard Castle CAB.

Cllr Martin Clark