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Thank you for your letter of 7th February, in response to my letters of the 25th and 27th January.

I note your offer to maintain an open channel of communication on the Jobcentre Plus closures and other issues of common interest. In this regard I would seek urgent clarification on your plans for publishing the outcome of the consultation responses for Maryhill, Castlemilk, Bridgeton and Broxburn Jobcentres, particularly given your assurance that a final decision will not be made until you have an opportunity to consider the full implications of your plans.

On the 8th February the Scottish Parliament voted overwhelmingly to halt the closures of the Jobcentre Plus sites in Scotland until further consultation has taken place with the communities affected. Once again, serious concerns were raised on the impact on people who access Jobcentre Plus services, particularly single parent families and people with health conditions and disabilities. Despite our recent correspondence and recent UK and Scottish Parliament Committee appearances, no reassurance has been forthcoming on these matters from the UK Government. The full transcript of the debate can be found at the Official Report of the Scottish Parliament at <http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=10780&i=98842>

Significant cross-chamber concerns were raised around the latest closure announcement on the 26th January which included a number of back of office locations. As I have already said, the lack of consultation with SG and locally elected members on these plans is unacceptable and further demonstrates the need for you to commit to visiting the communities and people affected so you can truly understand their concerns.

The redeployment options for staff in these back of house locations is a real concern particularly given the lack of alternative Government estate in locations such as Paisley, Wick and Cumnock. I would urge you to share you plans on the alternative options available and any redundancies which are likely to arise from these closures as soon as possible.



The lack of detail around your plans for co-location where sites are earmarked for closure was a key focus of the debate discussion and I would press you to involve SG and elected members more as you develop these plans to allow local knowledge of potential solutions to be considered and fully impacted.

I have since been made aware of a discussion at the DWP/SG Joint Senior Officers Group on devolution on the 13th February of your plans to co-locate with SDS in Wick, Fort William and Lanark and I look forward to hearing more about these plans and how the Scottish Government can be involved in and support the discussions.

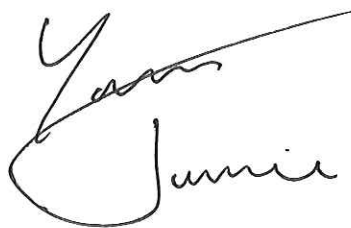
I note your appearance at the Scottish Affairs Committee on the same day as our debate in the Scottish Parliament where a number of the issues I have outlined above were also discussed. I look forward to discussing how we move forward on these matters together at our meeting on Monday prior to the Joint Ministerial Working Group on Welfare.

In recent weeks I have visited communities that are likely to be impacted by the closure of their local jobcentre along with Parliamentary colleagues. Compelling evidence has been gathered during our discussions with local people regarding the difficulties they will face which include:

- An increased risk of sanctions for failing to engage with their workcoach as specified times, a particular concern for people with young children and caring responsibilities.
- People currently engaging with their Jobcentre are already under stress and these changes are likely to further affect their mental health.
- The knock-on impact on Third sector organisations of these closures where there will be an increase in demand for their services but no corresponding increase in funding.

As you have referred to in your letter, we have indeed made some progress through the Bilateral Working Group comprising of DWP and SG officials to agree better ways of working between UK and Scottish Government as we move forward in to the new joint delivery landscape. We will hear more about the progress of this group at next week's JMWGW.

I am copying our correspondence to all Members of the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Members of Parliament for their constituency interests.



JAMIE HEPBURN