

SUB/XXXX/2020

From: Paddy Rooney
Director Universal Credit Options

Date: 20 April 2020

To: 1. Colum Boyle
2. Special Adviser
3. Minister Hargey MLA

Planned Reopening of Jobs & Benefits offices

Issue: Planned reopening of Jobs & Benefits offices for limited face to face services from Tuesday 5th May 2021.

Timing: Urgent.

FOI Implications: In the event of a request for disclosure of information contained in this submission under the FOI Act, the request would be considered in the context of the relevant provisions of the legislation, including any relevant exemptions that may be applicable.

Presentational Issues: There will be low key customer and stakeholder facing messaging. The re-opening of offices for those people struggling to access services via telephony and digital channels is likely to be welcomed.

Financial Implications: None at this stage. However, any further increase in face to face services is likely to necessitate additional cleaning in the offices to reduce the Covid-19 risk with associated increased expenditure. A bid for additional funding for cleaning in the 21/22 year has been approved.

Legislation Implications: None.

Equality implications: None

Executive Referral: Not required.

Communities

Committee: Not required.

Recommendation: Minister is asked to note that the Jobs and Benefits offices will re-open for limited face to face services from 5 May.

Background

The Department's network of Jobs & Benefits offices have been closed to the public since mid-March 2020 as a result of restrictions instigated due to the Covid 19 pandemic. Since then, services have been primarily delivered via telephony and digital channels.

Office Closure Impacts

2. While telephony and digital channels have been relatively successful for many people, there are some that we know are struggling with these alternative channels as a result of cognitive or health conditions or due to lack of access to appropriate mobile devices. We are also aware of a number of people who are simply not willing to engage through these channels and may need additional help and support.
3. There are also particular concerns about the wider impact of this pandemic on young people and the urgent need to engage with them directly to ensure they are helped and fully supported into/back to work. Face to face services will provide an invaluable additional channel to help match them to the new Job Start and Opportunity Guarantee opportunities.
4. On that basis, the re-introduction of face to face services is needed to support vulnerable people and enable responsive engagement with those unable or not responding to digital and telephony channels.

Approach

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5. The resumption of services is planned in a phased and controlled way in order to safeguard the health and safety of staff and those attending our offices, given the continued risk of Covid-19 infection.
6. Stage 1, planned from 5 May 2021, will reintroduce face to face appointments in each office on a one in one out basis. The appointment will be conducted using screened interview rooms or booths in the offices. Limited appointments will be offered initially to build confidence in the approach. This will be carefully managed and monitored by office managers.
7. Staff will have access to masks and sanitiser and interview facilities will be cleaned between appointments. People attending the appointments will be required to wear face coverings unless exempt. Masks and hand sanitiser will be available for public use.
8. Those needing appointments will be identified by UC Operations' Trusted Partners, by individuals themselves or by UC front office or Service Centre teams. External public communications about the re-introduction of face to face services will be published on niDirect and using social media. It will be made clear that appointments are available only for those struggling with telephony and digital channels and for those individuals with whom UC Operations need to discuss their claims.
9. The re-opening of offices will mean that some front office staff will need to return to the office to conduct appointments. However, all staff will continue to have the opportunity to work remotely where this is possible. While face to face services will be a vital channel for some people, telephony and digital services will continue to be important and fully utilized primary channels.

Trade Union Consultation

10. TUS colleagues have been consulted about the re-opening plans and communications. They have confirmed their agreement with the approach outlined above.

Next Steps

11. Assuming the resumption of services in this limited way is successful and there is no deterioration in the Covid-19 restrictions, we intend moving to Stage 2 of our re-opening plans by increasing the number of appointments available and conducting these simultaneously in screened interview areas. Offices have varying numbers of screened facilities ranging from 6-7 in larger offices to 2-3 in smaller offices.
12. Additional cleaning to ensure that screened interview points are cleaned between appointments will be needed. It is likely to be a number of weeks before increased services are implemented. The current outline planning assumption for Stage 2 is late June/early July.

Recommendation

13. Minister is asked to note that the Jobs and Benefits offices will re-open for limited face to face services from 5 May 2021.

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