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I am writing in response to yesterday's letters addressed to Keith Brown MSP, Cabinet Secretary for the Economy, Angela Constance MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Jeane Freeman, Minister for Social Security and me notifying the Scottish Government of the Department of Work and Pension's (DWP) plans for their estate in Scotland, and attaching a list of Jobcentre Plus facilities in Scotland to be retained.

I must say that I am, once again, deeply disappointed in the way this vital news has been communicated with the Scottish Government. Particularly in view of our recent dialogue and correspondence on the question of proposed closures in Glasgow, I had expected a more collaborative approach. And even now the information being provided by DWP officials does not provide sufficient clarity about your plans for individual offices and customers.

I refer you once more to the terms of Smith Agreement, and in particular paragraph 58, which while recognising Jobcentre Plus would remain reserved, calls for our Governments to work together to "identify ways to further link services through methods such as co-location wherever possible and establish more formal mechanisms to govern the Jobcentre Plus network in Scotland."

With the devolution of employment support programmes, we have a clear and strong opportunity to deliver a new level of joint working between Scottish Government and UK Government in the interaction of devolved and reserved areas. I know you will share my aim of working collectively for the benefit of those who use employability support services, including Jobcentre Plus. I now urge DWP to work more openly and collaboratively with Scottish Government on these proposals for the Jobcentre Plus estate in Scotland.

We now understand that a total of up to 23 Jobcentre and back office sites are set to close across Scotland, and others to be relocated. I remain deeply concerned about the impact of these disproportionate cuts to Scottish services especially those in rural areas, with those who rely on Jobcentre Plus services facing increased transport costs and additional travelling time. The closures will affect vulnerable people who already face challenges to accessing services, including those with health and mobility problems. I am particularly concerned at the increased risk of benefit sanctions, pushing people into crises and desperation, and making it more difficult for them to find employment.

As we move towards the launch of the Scottish Government's transitional employment services this year, we need to be in a position where we can offer people support and work that aligns with Jobcentre Plus; not see the UK Government take services away and make them harder to access.

I request that you provide the following information needed to enable us to better understand the potential impact on people across Scotland, specifically:

1. What is your timetable for implementing these planned changes and potential closures?
2. I note you intend to run local public consultations in some areas, commencing Monday 30th January. Can you please clarify: in which areas will these be run; for how long; how will the consultations be publicised; and that you will ensure that DWP officials continue to engage with each of the Jobcentres during the consultation process?
3. Can you provide a robust rationale for not consulting on some areas?
4. When will the planned Equalities Impact Assessment begin, and what plans are there for sharing this with the Scottish Government?
5. Your written statement to the House of Commons indicated that redundancies may be required. Can you please provide detail of how many staff in Scotland will be affected and what assurances can you provide for those staff?
6. Can you please provide the analysis that shows those offices remaining open can absorb and accommodate the significantly increased service demand/ footfall these changes will require and clarify whether these offices will provide continuity in support, and will they provide an improved service or enhanced performance? Can you also clarify what will the impact on staff be?

This week I spoke with Damien Yeates, Chief Executive of Skills Development Scotland, who informs me that SDS officials will meet DWP officials next week and will discuss the potential co-location of services. Can you also outline the efforts DWP have made to establish alternative arrangements to provide continuity of service in local areas through closer working with partners? And can you give me your assurance that this will be given high priority?

I would welcome a response by 2nd February, and would be obliged if you would direct future correspondence to me as the Scottish Government Minister with responsibility for these matters. I would reiterate that I intend that there is a discussion of these issues with DWP Ministers when we next meet at the Joint Ministerial Working Group on Welfare, presently scheduled for next month. It is my sincere hope that by that stage there will be a genuine willingness on the part of the UK Government to engage in constructive dialogue on these matters, with particular reference for the meaningful implementation of the terms of paragraph 58 of the Smith Agreement.

I will be writing to all Members of the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Members of the UK Parliament to update them on the action the Scottish Government will take to protect the interests of those people in Scotland who will be impacted by these proposals.

I look forward to receipt of your timeous response.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jamie Hepburn', with a large, sweeping flourish above the name.

JAMIE HEPBURN