It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens). I congratulate him on securing the debate and, like him, I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us this opportunity today.

Lewisham jobcentre, which is based in my constituency, is one of the jobcentres earmarked for closure. In my borough the unemployment rate is higher than average. We have 3,100 people in receipt of either jobseeker's allowance or universal credit, who have a reason to visit the jobcentre once a fortnight. Another 15,000 people in the borough of Lewisham receive employment and support allowance or income support. Although they visit the jobcentre less frequently, it is estimated that between 100 and 200 of them use the jobcentre in Rushey Green every week.

At the moment the jobcentre is located in the heart of the borough of Lewisham, on a busy street between Lewisham and Catford. It is easily accessible on a number of different bus routes and from five different overground railway stations. The Department for Work and Pensions proposes to close that much needed, busy jobcentre in my constituency and relocate it to another office that it has in Forest Hill. That office is small, and although there is a proposal to expand into some of the space available in that building, my fear is that we will squeeze staff from the main jobcentre in Lewisham into unsuitable, smaller premises in Forest Hill that are less accessible.

I know that the DWP is exploring taking up some space in a council-owned building called Eros House. I ask the Minister to do everything he can to ensure that the local presence of the DWP is able to pursue that option. It is no good sending people down to Bromley from Lewisham or trying to run those services from a constrained site in Forest Hill. It is vital that we can have that easily accessible location at Eros House in Catford.

Let me take a minute to reflect on how we got here. The lease arrangements for the DWP have been in place for 30 years and they are coming to an end. For the last six months an agent has been looking to secure space in a central Lewisham location, but has been unable to find any. I do not know whether the process should have started sooner, so that consideration could have been given to the new developments in the borough of Lewisham to ensure that appropriate space could be found. We find ourselves in this situation partly because of the Government’s
changes to permitted development rights and the planning system in the last few years. The owner of the building that the jobcentre is currently located in has decided to convert that office building to residential under permitted development rights, and there is a real problem sourcing office space in central locations, particularly in London.

I am concerned about the impact on people who rely on the jobcentre to access the help, advice and support that the hon. Member for Glasgow South West talked about. As politicians, we spend a lot of time talking about how much money is paid to individuals in benefit and less time on exactly what support is provided to help people back into work. It goes without saying that people need to be able to get to that help and support easily. I know that the consultation process and equality impact assessment might not kick in for some jobcentres in London because of the issue of being within 20 minutes to the next jobcentre, but anyone who has sat on a bus on the south circular in south London trying to get from one place to the next will realise that 20 minutes in theory is not always 20 minutes in practice.

I agree entirely with what the hon. Gentleman said about the move to digital services. Some of the people in my constituency who use the jobcentre frequently will want to see somebody face to face. At my own advice surgeries every fortnight I see between 25 and 40 people, which is testament to the fact that people want to speak to somebody directly.

We need to provide tailored support to individuals trying to get back into work. I was interested to read an article in the Evening Standard on 31 January by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions about the disability unemployment rate in London, in which he wrote:

“The gap between the number of disabled people in work compared with the employment rate of non-disabled people in London is around 28 percentage points—a figure that is frankly unacceptable in 2017.”

I agree with the Secretary of State about that, but it is a bit rich for him then to say:

“We’re building a locally-based system that works with businesses in the area and can offer people intense support”.

I think that is a bit rich, because in London the DWP is proposing to close one in three jobcentres: 22 of the capital’s 73 existing jobcentres. Of the 22 that are closing, 15 are located in boroughs with a higher than average claimant count, and, as we know, London has a higher than average claimant count than the country as a whole.

I am also concerned that the rate of unemployment among young people, the
disabled and those from black and minority ethnic communities is higher in London than the national average. In fact, Office for National Statistics data from last September showed that BME unemployment in London stood at 9%. Ministers should review the criteria they use to determine the closures.

**Stephen Timms MP**

I am listening with great interest to the case that my hon. Friend is making. One of the puzzling things about the closure programme is that the Government also want to increase the workload of jobcentres and want some people to go more frequently. They also want to introduce conditionality for people who are in work. It is difficult to see how those additional tasks can be managed at the same time as shutting down so many jobcentres.

**Heidi Alexander MP**

I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend, who has huge expertise and experience in this area. Ministers need to review the criteria that they use to determine which closures are subject to full public consultation processes. We have not yet seen an equality impact assessment of the closures, which is absolutely critical in a London context, for the reasons that I have set out.

I urge the Minister to have an eye to the future as opposed to the past. The Government might pat themselves on the back over employment rates—we could have a discussion another time about the nature of the employment that has been created in recent years—but they need to think about what might happen over the next couple of years. I detect some complacency among Ministers about Brexit and its economic consequences. In my constituency, we are heavily dependent on jobs in the financial services industry and in professional services that support industry such as cleaning, security and employment agencies. Some of my low-paid constituents work in retail and hospitality.

I am concerned about the prospects for employment should we see the movement of financial services from London to other cities in Europe. If we are likely to see an increasing caseload in jobcentres, allied to the issues that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) has set out about how individuals’ interaction with jobcentres is changing, then the Government’s proposal is short-sighted and could have serious long-term consequences for people’s ability to get back into employment. I ask the Minister to review the closures across London and to look in detail at what provision can be made in central Lewisham for my own jobcentre.

**Heidi Alexander MP**
The claimant count in my constituency went up by 50 in the last month. Although that may be a monthly blip, I am concerned about the overall strength of the London economy moving forward. The Minister talked about the space being under-occupied by a fifth, yet in London he is proposing to close a third of jobcentres. Will he explain that for me?

**Damian Hinds MP, Minister for Employment**

I can. I was going to come on to Lewisham and some of the points that the hon. Lady raised on London, but I will address it now. Overall, the estate is 20% under-utilised, but that does not mean to say that in every individual jobcentre there is exactly 20% of unused space. In terms of the utilisation rates, there is a wide range in individual jobcentres and between cities, when we take the total estate in that city into account. There is no complacency at all about the strength of the labour market in London, Sheffield or Glasgow, or in any other place. In all of the locations that we operate from throughout the United Kingdom, jobcentre staff are focused night and day on helping people to get into work.

In the case of Lewisham, the landlord did not want to re-lease and we believe that 2.1 miles to the Forest Hill location is a reasonable distance to ask people to travel additionally. As the hon. Lady will realise, the London property market is an expensive place to have real estate and there are particular challenges with finding premises in London. We think that the estate we have across London is reasonable in terms of asking people to get around.

**Heidi Alexander MP**

The DWP is exploring the possibility of taking on space in Eros House, which is an accessible, central location. If that costs a little bit more, would the Minister commit to exploring that option, given the additional benefits it can bring?

**Damian Hinds MP, Minister for Employment**

The hon. Lady will understand that I am not going to stand up in Westminster Hall—nor should I—and talk about detailed proposals and plans for sites that she or others may put forward, but we are always open to talking about the range of opportunities. I am happy to follow up with her on the specific points she raises.

In every case where change is proposed, we have sought to minimise disruption and listen carefully to those who might be affected, but as a result of modernisation, the Department’s services are demanding fewer people to deliver. It is only right that we consider our options going forward. Delivering a modern and dynamic service to claimants requires modern and dynamic working environments, and that is what we are striving towards as part of our vision for DWP in 2020. Our aim is to maintain and
improve the services offered across the country.

We recognise, of course, how important the DWP’s staff are to achieving that aim. They are our most valuable resource. It is as a result of their immense effort that the Department is able to provide such a high level of service to our customers. My colleagues and I have been clear that the proposals for the DWP’s redesigned estate do not mean a reduction in the number of frontline staff. In fact, we are recruiting and we expect to have more work coaches in every nation and region of the United Kingdom at the end of this process in March 2018 than we do today.

For staff across the DWP network who may be affected by the estate changes, we are currently working through options with each individual, identifying relocation opportunities in the event of closure, but most of all we are listening carefully to understand fully the impact on staff.