

Civil service working

The government is asking the question again, should more of the civil service work outside London? It is a good time to review this, given the larger changes being discussed about the balance to be struck between working in an office and working from home.

The case for more civil servants in future working away from the capital is based on the proposition that it would be fairer to spend more of the pay bill around the country, and better for taxpayers to employ fewer people in very expensive central London accommodation. Change of course should be carried out at a pace and in a manner which respects the needs of existing staff who have based their lives around the current pattern of office provision. The large size of the service and the turnover of staff means there is considerable scope for change.

There is also a case for recognising the wish of many to have more time working from home to save the travel cost and time it takes to get into big cities, especially London. The modern computer allows people to be set up with good means of carrying out many tasks. Some worry that some might abuse the privilege and not work as much as they do when supervised in an office. Modern computers can be tougher managers than a person in the office, as they know exactly how many emails a person has done, how many page views they have managed, how long they have been active on their machine. The civil service could move more towards an output oriented approach to working. Sitting for 40 hours in an office is not a particularly useful skill unless you are there to provide cover for client and customer enquiries. Getting specified work done is.

The number of civil servants who need to be in central London is quite limited. Minister's private offices can best support the Minister in person. Senior officials who mainly advise Ministers might well find it more convenient to be in the heritage buildings at the core of the central London public estate. Any Central London based public service of course needs to be there. Otherwise many officials can be based around the country, with good computer, email and video conference links to the centre.

There is considerable scope for a better balance around the country, with economies on office costs. The government can also now consider how much work can be done without an office at all.