

16 November 2023

PCS condemns government home-working announcement

PCS has condemned announcements by government departments this week that civil servants who are office workers will be required to attend workplaces for a minimum of 60% of their working time.

We believe that there should be no headlong rush to return people to workplaces and the government should be held to account on its promise to 'build back better.' The post-pandemic world should be fundamentally different from what went before and workers should enjoy maximum flexibility and choice over how and where they do their jobs.

We do not believe that there is any need for this kind of 'blanket' directive and that there are equality and caring issues which still need to be considered. The timing of this announcement is also appalling as tens of thousands of low-paid staff, already struggling financially, will face additional transport costs during a cost-of-living crisis. We are concerned that offices will also face unnecessary strain as a consequence of the move.

This initiative is clearly driven by Tory politicians acting in the interests of their commercial landlord backers, who have seen their revenues reduce drastically, with commercial tenants vacating properties as demand for city centre restaurants, bars and coffee shops has dried up since the pandemic.

If the government was serious about value for money for taxpayers, we should have a conversation about the government's estate strategy in the context of the changed world of work.

The Cabinet Office has not provided any rationale about how they arrived at 60%, other than to say they simply they "felt" the 60% figure was the right one. We strongly believe there is a need for a nationally-agreed framework for hybrid working with any framework governing attendance at workplaces also taking place in the context of the national talks already agreed with the Cabinet Office on pay and jobs.

In many areas, there are explicit contractual terms conferring a right to homeworking and, in other areas, now well-established custom and practice might well confer implied contractual terms. We will consider legal action in the event that contractual rights have been interfered with.

We believe that the value of home working as a redundancy avoidance measure should not be underestimated and we are seeking an agreement on that.

PCS General Secretary Mark Serwotka says:

"Hard-working civil servants helped to keep this country moving during the pandemic, some in the workplace and some adapting to working at home. Homeworking brings huge benefits. It cuts down the amount of travelling time and expense unnecessarily incurred by workers and reduces the nation's carbon footprint.

"The government's arbitrary introduction of a 60% attendance requirement, based on zero evidence whatsoever, is an indication of just how regressive this administration is. It has no vision for the future world of work; nor anything else for that matter.

"Instead of acting in the interests of corporate landlords and chasing culture war headlines, it should be sitting down with the trade unions to negotiate collectively bargained agreements that enable our members, and society in general, to realise the full benefits, of a changed world of work."

We will continue to engage with the Cabinet Office and individual departments, and in doing so, we will seek to persuade them that genuine, properly managed hybrid-working, underpinned by a collective agreement, continues to offer the best possible approach.