

9 February 2024

# Update on 'Return to Office' talks in HMRC

PCS continues to meet with HMRC over the government's 'return to office' edict, amidst our concerns about available desk space. Additionally, PCS is issuing advice to members currently able to work from home for more than two days

PCS is continuing to meet with HMRC, to discuss the plans to increasingly restrict hybrid working by introducing a general restriction of two days per week working from home.

Across Whitehall, permanent secretaries are proclaiming it was their idea, that there really is such a thing as 'delegated authority', and [ministerial edicts on the government's own website](#) instructing departments to get everyone back into the office are clearly just figments of our imagination.

## **'Make Room! Make Room!'**

Since the end of 2023, HMRC has repeatedly said that their 'return to office' plans would be predicated on the capacity of the various offices; and in our latest meeting with the department, they showed us some nice bar charts based on 60% occupation, complete with a big red line showing the 'safe' capacity of the office.

However, when we did a bit of digging, it transpired that these bar charts weren't based on the number of desks, they were based on staff utilising a wide range of work areas, including break-out areas and pods. So clearly, when we get to the point where two-thirds of us are back in the office, the prospect of everyone actually having a desk to sit at, is suddenly looking a bit more remote.

Additionally, they're still working on how they can distribute the available accommodation, covering the various permutations of three days that people will be expected to be in the office (it's called "smoothing", apparently).

With so many key things still to be worked through, and with the 2 April deadline being just 7 weeks away, we asked HMRC if they had considered pushing-back

the planned start date (other departments have targeted May 2024 or even later). They've responded that they are sticking to their deadline. So, in a couple of months' time, if you're working on your own, in a pod three floors away from the rest of your team, and they're still calling it "collaborating", you'll always have the satisfaction of knowing that HMRC have stuck to their deadline.

PCS will obviously continue to monitor progress, and to push for all the outstanding issues to be resolved.

### **The cost of getting there**

When PCS ran our pay survey in October/November last year, one of the questions we asked was **"Are you struggling to meet any of the regular costs you have?"**. After meeting the cost of utility bills, you told us the second greatest struggle you face is the cost of getting to and from work. This isn't particularly surprising, given the number of local offices that have closed, and the move to regionally-based offices, meaning many more of you are now commuting greater distances.

In the department's 'Frequently Asked Questions', they're suggesting that if you're struggling to meet travel costs, you can discuss the matter with your line manager; but when we asked if those line managers will have the ability to take any material decisions, HMRC's answers became a little vague.

### **What you can do**

We've already made the point to the department, that there are bound to be many HMRC members of staff who are able to balance work and home responsibilities, without a Special Working Arrangement (SWA), just by being able to work from home for that third day each week.

If you currently have the ability to work from home for three days, and you have those specific responsibilities (it could be childcare, caring for an elderly relative, or it could just be something as simple as you're low-paid and struggling with the inflated cost of living and commuting); you should take the following steps:

1. In the first instance you should raise the issue with your line manager and explore the possibility of retaining the current arrangements. You're advised to set out your request in writing, explaining the reasons why you need to retain the current arrangements.

2. If your manager says that they cannot meet that request, then you should make a formal written request for an SWA, seeking the working pattern that will allow you to balance your work/home responsibilities. Again, set out the reasoning in detail.
3. If the formal written request for an SWA is rejected, you should submit a grievance using the department's 'Raising a Concern' process. Make sure that you are clear in your submission that you have already tried to resolve the matter informally through contact with your line manager, and formally through the SWA process.

Your local PCS can advise and support you through the 'Raising a Concern' mechanism, so if you need help, don't hesitate to get in touch with your union.