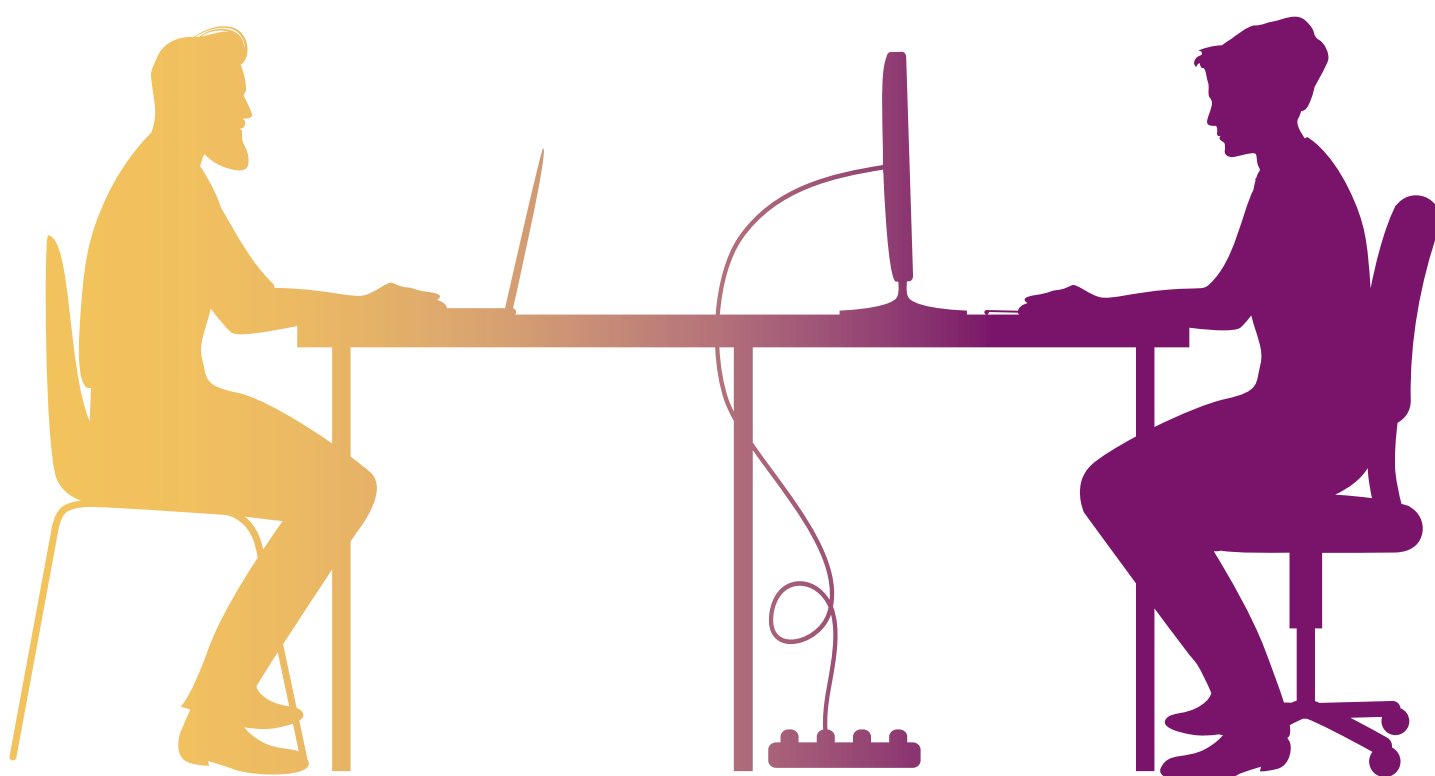
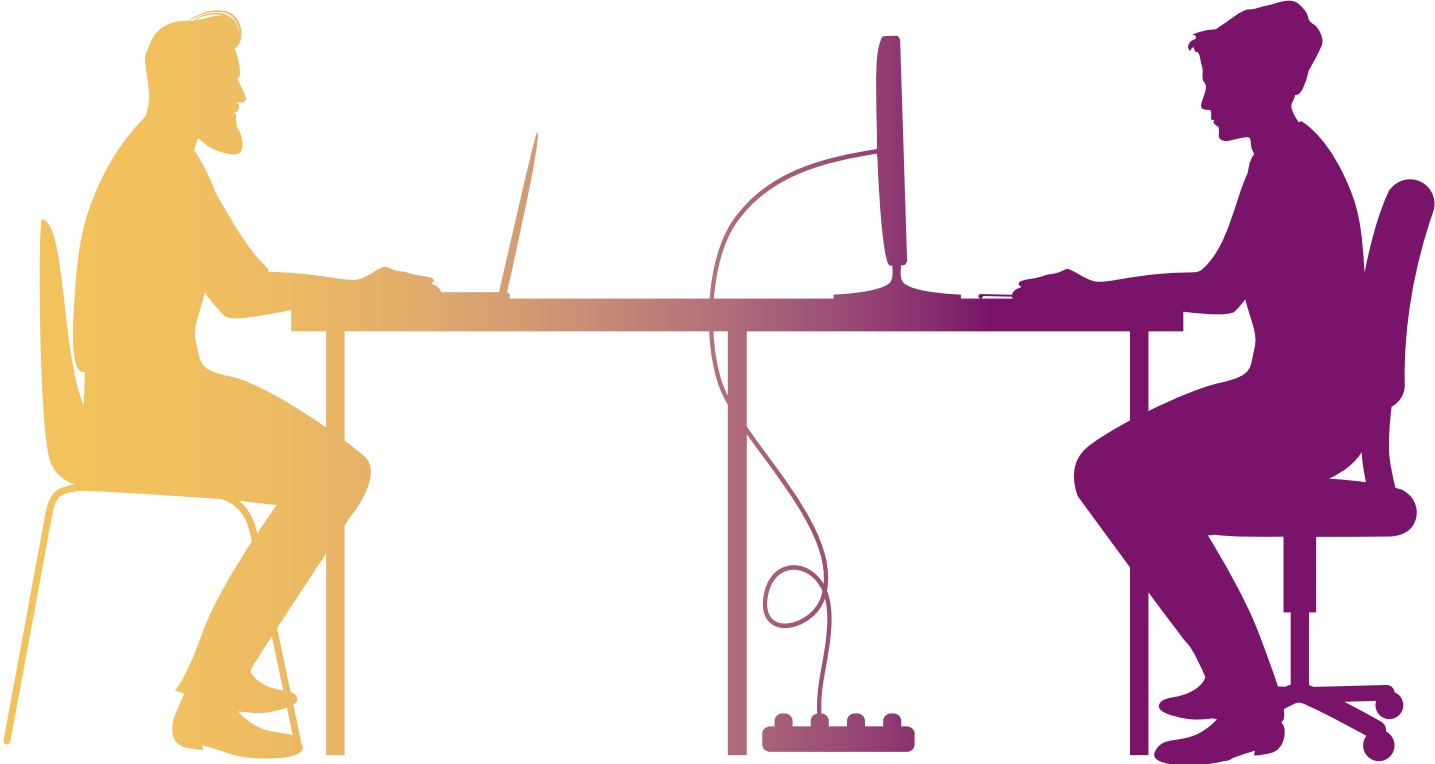


The future of office work in the civil service





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Executive Summary

Despite the widespread approval of hybrid working among civil servants, in late 2023 the Cabinet Office implemented a blanket 60% office attendance mandate, requiring civil servants in UK government departments to spend most of their working time in the office or on official business.

This mandate has been met with strong opinion among civil servants. This is evidenced by our survey, which received more than 7,000 responses from civil servants – the highest number of responses in the FDA’s history.

This report seeks to use these insights from civil servants working across the UK government and devolved administrations (which have their own hybrid working policies) to inform an evidence-led approach to office work in the civil service.

These survey results find that the 60% attendance mandate fails to deliver on its goal of improving “collaboration, innovation, and fostering a sense of community” among civil servants¹.

Our survey reveals that the vast majority of respondents working under the mandate (78%) across all grades do not believe that the policy has been beneficial. 61% of those working under the 60% rule believe the mandate has decreased their productivity, with 61% also reporting no improvement in team collaboration due to the mandate. Perversely, disabled employees are particularly adversely affected by the 60% rule. The survey also provides no evidence that the mandate has helped young workers at the beginning of their career.

Responses also demonstrate that civil servants are not opposed to office work, instead they favour it where it is purposeful and fosters collaboration – which the current policy fails to do.

These survey results find that the 60% attendance mandate fails to deliver on its goal of improving “collaboration, innovation, and fostering a sense of community” among civil servants.

¹Civil Service World (2023), <https://www.civilserviceworld.com/professions/article/civil-servants-home-remove-working-60-in-office>



The survey results show there is a need for the Cabinet Office to conduct a comprehensive review of the 60% mandate to fully understand the impact it is having on civil servants. The Cabinet Office needs an evidence-led and flexible approach that allows all civil servants to reach their full potential by balancing the need for purposeful office work and the benefits of remote working.

It is also clear that, generally, the current government estate is in need of improvement, with limited desk space a common concern raised by respondents in the survey. The need to ensure office space is conducive to collaboration, and innovation was also raised. There is a need for departments to carry out assessments of their buildings to understand where improvements can and need to be made.

Technological advancements, particularly the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) are also considered in this report, having been hailed as an opportunity to enhance productivity and work engagement. However, the adoption of these technologies remains limited, with 72% of survey respondents indicating no interaction with AI tools in the workplace. Embracing these technologies more fully may help support employees to improve efficiency in the future of office work.

If AI can automate repetitive tasks – as the current government hopes – this may offer civil servants the opportunity to focus on more strategic, in-person activities that benefit from face-to-face interaction.

This report highlights the urgent need for a nuanced approach to hybrid working, balancing flexibility with the benefits of in-person collaboration. By addressing the concerns raised and capitalising on technological advancements, the civil service can enhance employee wellbeing, inclusivity, and productivity.

The report's recommendations aim to create a modern, efficient, and supportive work environment, positioning the civil service as a leader in workplace innovation and employee satisfaction, and ensuring a future of office work that is adaptive and efficient.



The Cabinet Office needs an evidence-led and flexible approach that allows all civil servants to reach their full potential by balancing the need for purposeful office work and the benefits of remote working.

Introduction

The nature of office work within the civil service is at a critical crossroads, influenced by the profound impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, rapid adoption of online team collaboration technologies, changes to the civil service estate and the government's push to adopt artificial intelligence. This report aims to explore and address these changes, providing a comprehensive analysis of the current state and prospects of office work in the civil service.

This report is based on the results of the largest ever survey conducted by the FDA, with more than 7,000 responses. These respondents also provided tens of thousands of comments sharing their thoughts. It should be noted that for each comment reproduced below there were hundreds – if not thousands – of similar comments. This provides a significant evidence base for the experiences, challenges, and views regarding the future of office work in the civil service.

A significant focus of this report is on 'hybrid working' and the application of policies across the UK civil service and devolved nations. In the UK civil service, hybrid working pre-dated the pandemic, however it was accelerated during 2020, becoming the new 'normal.' A 2022 FDA report indicated broad support for hybrid working among civil servants. However, in November 2023, resulting from political pressure, the then-government implemented a policy mandating civil servants to spend at least 60% of their working time in either the office or on official business. The key rationale was that this mandate would allow employees to experience the advantages of face-to-face office working whilst reaping the benefits of home working.



This report is based on the results of the largest ever survey conducted by the FDA, with more than 7,000 responses.





The FDA warned then that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ policy across the civil service was not fit for purpose. As this report will highlight, there is a significant lack of evidence to support the 60% policy, with no clear increase in productivity, team collaboration or support for younger employees. Instead, it has led to increased personal challenges such as less work-life balance and even lower productivity. There is also a strong scepticism among line managers that this policy has ‘managerial benefits.’ Across all grades, the majority of those surveyed believe the decision to implement this policy has not been beneficial.

Unfortunately, the new Labour government has so far refused to review this policy, with the Cabinet Office reaffirming support for it in October 2024. In response to the significant evidence presented in this report, the FDA strongly urges the Cabinet Office to engage in a meaningful and comprehensive review of the office working mandate, to ensure a policy that is evidence-based and truly supports employees to achieve their full potential.

Alongside hybrid-working, this report will also consider challenges facing civil servants on office design, ensuring office spaces are properly equipped and meeting the needs of employees. It will also consider the adoption of new technology, including AI, and consider how it can be deployed effectively.



The FDA has previously warned that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ policy across the civil service is not fit for purpose.



Recommendations

The findings from this survey, highlighted above, paint a stark picture: civil servants do not support the imposition of a 60% office attendance mandate, with the perceived benefits of this approach not borne out. The one-size-fits-all approach to more than half a million workers simply does not work.

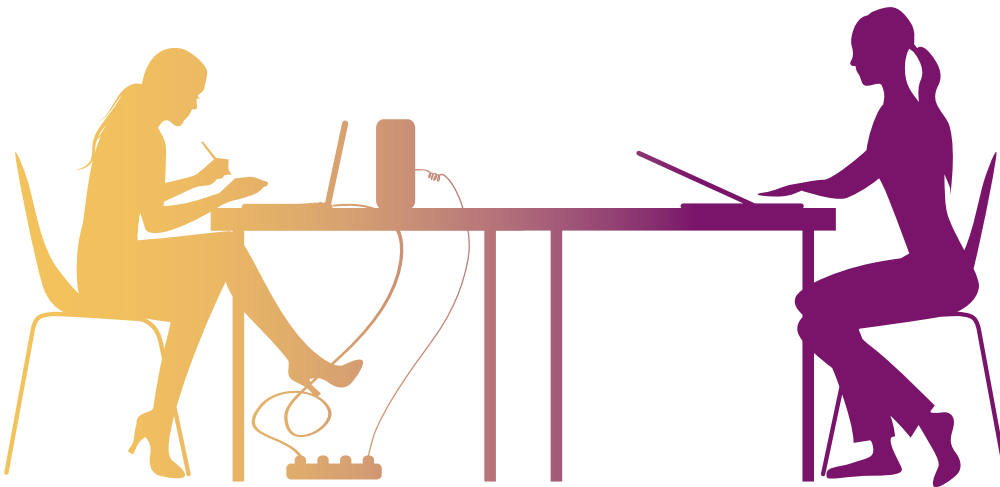
We are therefore calling for the Cabinet Office to consider the following:

Comprehensive review of the 60% mandate

Considering the evidence in this report, the Cabinet Office should conduct a comprehensive review of the 60% mandate and its impact on employee performance. This review should be carried out with a view to creating a more flexible approach which takes into account whether a piece of work can be best completed in person or remotely, rather than a blanket mandate.

Equality Impact Assessment for under-represented civil servants

One of the most shocking aspects of this report is the disparity in experience between disabled and non-disabled respondents. Disabled employees are much likelier to face difficulties associated with the 60% mandate, which is clearly not acceptable. The Cabinet Office should undertake a robust Equality Impact Assessment as part of the review to consider the impact the mandate has on under-represent groups including disabled employees and those with caring responsibilities. It is imperative that all civil servants can fulfil their potential and this requires a flexible approach, not a top down mandate.

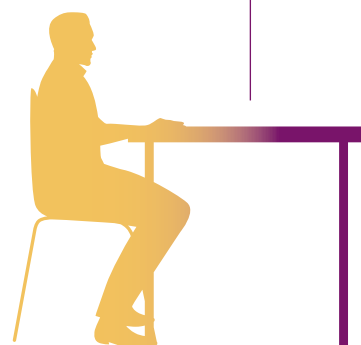


Purposeful office use

This review should consider the promotion of ‘purposeful office use’, with a view to ending the ‘culture of presenteeism’ and ensuring that when employees are in the office, it is for activities improved by in-person presence, such as team-building, strategic meetings and collaborative work. As evidenced in this survey, social events and team building are popular incentives to encourage people to come into the office and these activities should be encouraged. Anchored team days also have broad support amongst survey respondents. Departments should be allowed to trial anchor days subject to the location and requirements of their teams to assess how well this policy fosters team cohesion, supports professional development, and improves overall productivity. The trial can provide valuable insights into how best to balance the flexibility of homeworking with the tangible benefits of office working.

Departmental building assessments

The survey shows that there are significant issues regarding building capacity and availability of quiet rooms, meeting spaces and other equipment needed to support modern ways of working. For this reason, we are urging each department to carry out building assessments to identify specific improvements needed, including fully understanding the constraints of desk availability facing employees and creating more quiet rooms and meeting spaces where possible.





The future of office work in the civil service

Context and evidence

Hybrid working in the civil service pre-dates the COVID-19 pandemic, however this was accelerated during 2020.

The 2022 FDA report on hybrid working demonstrated that this new way of working enjoys broad support amongst the civil service, with 92% of members surveyed agreeing with the view that hybrid working has worked well for them². Despite this, there has been intense political pressure from the previous government in instructing civil servants back into the office.

In November 2023, this culminated in the Cabinet Office implementing a mandate that requires civil servants working for the UK government to spend at least 60% of their working time in either the office or on official business, with senior managers expected to set an example by spending more than 60% of their time in the office³. The new Labour government declined the opportunity to review this policy, and in October 2024 heads of departments reaffirmed their commitment to the policy⁴.

The Cabinet Office had argued that this move towards a 60% mandate was justified as a necessary balance that would allow employees to experience the advantages of face-to-face office working whilst reaping the benefits of home working.

However, the evidence from the Cabinet Office to support the arbitrary 60% number appears to be very limited.

Having a one-size-fits-all approach for 500,000 civil servants working across 200 organisations remains unevidenced and unworkable.

Views on the mandate and its effectiveness

Mandatory office attendance appears to be an issue which has ignited much passion amongst civil servants, demonstrated by our survey attaining 7,275 responses. 5,121 of the respondents stated that their workplace has implemented a 60% in person office attendance mandate. Thus, they were able to provide their views on how this mandate has affected their performance and wellbeing. The other 2,154 will be working for devolved administrations or departments and agencies that have not implemented the mandate (such as the Crown Prosecution Service).

One of the more conventional views on increased office working is that it boosts productivity. However, our survey finds that 61% of respondents

² FDA Union (2022), <https://www.fda.org.uk/news/launch-of-is-hybrid-working-an-fda-report/>

³ Civil Service World (2023), <https://www.civilserviceworld.com/professions/article/civil-servants-home-remove-working-60-in-office>

⁴ GOV.UK (2024), <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/civil-service-continues-commitment-to-minimum-60-office-attendance>

who are working under this mandate believe that it has decreased their productivity, with just 11% of respondents stating that the mandate has helped improve their productivity. This perspective is consistent across various grades, with a majority of respondents in every grade indicating that the mandate has “somewhat or significantly” reduced their productivity.

Another benefit of the office mandate that was cited by the Cabinet Office to support their decision is the potential for increased team collaboration. Our survey finds that this benefit has not materialised amongst civil servants. Of the 5,121 respondents working under the mandate, 61% stated that they believe it has had no impact on their level of team collaboration, while only 24% feel it has somewhat or significantly improved their team collaboration.

Overall, the survey results paint a bleak picture concerning the perceived effectiveness of the 60% in person office attendance mandate. A colossal 78% of the respondents who have been working under this mandate stated they believe the decision to implement it has not been beneficial. This is consistent amongst workers across all grades.

One of the arguments for implementing this mandate was its potential benefits for younger workers. However, our survey results indicate that this has not been the case. Although the Fast Stream program is open to all ages, the vast majority are young workers. According to our survey, a significant 77.5% of Fast Streamers believe the mandate has not been beneficial. The only group showing notable support for the mandate were SCS workers, even then with just 30% expressing a positive view – this is still a long way off a majority. This data contradicts the initial hypothesis that the mandate would be more advantageous for younger and less experienced employees.



A colossal 78% of the respondents who have been working under the 60% mandate stated they believe the decision to implement it has not been beneficial. This is consistent amongst workers across all grades.



Views of line managers

Another reason the Cabinet Office implemented the 60% office mandate is its supposed managerial benefits. It argued that increased office attendance is expected to enhance pastoral care by allowing managers to provide more empathetic and supportive interactions face-to-face, as well as allowing managers to better mentor younger staff⁵.

Our survey received more than 3,600 responses from employees who are line managers working under the 60% mandate. Half of these respondents stated that they have been finding it challenging to manage their staffs' attendance within this mandate. A common theme expressed by respondents was worries about being perceived as micromanaging.

Line managers also feel that the mandate has had no real effect on their ability to support their team members. 72% don't believe that greater office attendance enhances their management responsibility and 62% believe it's misaligned with the needs of their team.

WHAT OUR MEMBERS SAY

“Senior leaders should be empowered and supported to choose what works best for their teams and held to account for the quality and efficiency of the work that they produce - not adherence to an arbitrary attendance target which in many cases actively harms productivity.”

“The policy creates unnecessary micromanagement. I have no concerns about my team's ability to do the work but am forced to monitor attendance.”

“The blanket rule is absurd and inevitably produces arbitrary micromanaging of attendance.”



72% of line managers don't believe that greater office attendance enhances their management responsibility and 62% believe it's misaligned with the needs of their team.

⁵ Civil Service World (2024), <https://www.civilserviceworld.com/professions/article/civil-service-leaders-should-make-stronger-case-for-officebased-working>



Purposeful office work

The results of our survey show that civil servants are not opposed to office work, instead they favour office work where it is purposeful. 69% of respondents indicated a belief that in-person working can bolster better relationship building and networking, with 59% agreeing that it can help create a stronger sense of community and belonging. However, 37% of respondents feel their office work is only ‘sometimes’ purposeful.

It is important to understand how increased time spent in the office is being used. Three quarters of respondents stated they are spending additional time in the office participating in virtual meetings that could be done from home. 52% of all respondents and 65% of Fast Streamers indicated they were spending additional time on administrative tasks that could be handled remotely.

Further discussion carried out with our representatives found the mandate has fostered a “culture of presenteeism” with employees in the office because the mandate requires it, rather than for meaningful reasons to add value to their work.

The FDA asked respondents to consider steps to promote purposeful work, with 64% of respondents choosing “sufficient space and resources”. 45% expressed a desire for their employer to host team-building events and social gatherings, this was higher among younger cohorts with 59% Fast Streamers expressing social events and team building as an incentive to return to their office. 44% selected the option that they would like assurances that office days are reserved for activities that require in-person presence, rather than routine tasks that can be handled remotely.

WHAT OUR MEMBERS SAY

“There should be purposeful visits to the office, not mandatory days just to show your face.”

“I think visits to the office should be purposeful (in-person meetings, events, conferences, brainstorming sessions, appraisals). As it is mandatory some days I go into the office and speak to no one as no one [is there] in person. Most people I work with are in other countries, I am constantly on virtual calls.”



Desk space and capacity

Since 2010 and the programme of government austerity, the civil service looked to make savings by reducing their estates, often leaving staff with significantly longer commutes and without their own desks. For example, since 2012 the Crown Prosecution Service's estate has shrunk by more than 50%.

Despite the UK government's recommitment to the 60% mandate, this trend has continued. Early in 2025, the Department for Work and Pensions announced its intention to close two of their larger London offices Caxton House in 2026, and at 102 Petty France in 2028 – relocating staff to nearby Department for Education offices⁶.

In 2014, HMRC launched its Building our Future programme, which aimed to reduce its estate from 170 offices down to just 13 "hubs" and modernise their workplaces. So far, the department has closed more than 100 offices and is projected to save over £90 million annually after 2028⁷.

However, these changes to the availability and location of desk space hindered the ability for teams to interact in-person, with members of the same team unable to sit with one another. Many staff end up frustrated while commuting to the office only to sit on Teams calls and do the same work they would have done at home, or unable to hold meetings in suitable spaces.

WHAT OUR MEMBERS SAY

“Insufficient desk space, due to a policy of reducing numbers of desks over the past 5 years.”

“Lack of available desk space which means a large majority of staff cannot sit with their team members therefore the argument of being together with team members to collaborate falls down.”

“I am concerned that my department doesn't have enough desk space to enable me to work full-time in the office (which is my preference) while requiring everyone to attend the office 60% of the time.”

“Limited desk space means I am rarely sitting near people working on the same policy area.”

These issues call into question the usefulness of the office, “our division is very short of desk space, meaning we are spending more time in the office but often do not see our team members / cannot sit nearby those we work with. If you are unable to get a desk but need to be in the office, time is spent sitting in corridors or other spaces away from colleagues.”



⁶ Civil Service World (2025), <https://www.civilserviceworld.com/professions/article/dwp-caxton-house-hq-close-sanctuary-buildings-gpa-business-plan>

⁷ Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (2023), <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmpubadm/793/report.html>

Office suitability

With these significant changes to the size, shape, and spread of civil service offices, many civil servants have also expressed their dissatisfaction with the suitability of the current estate to facilitate in-person office work. For example, one participant remarked - “meeting spaces in offices is limited and trying to conduct online meetings in an open office is very difficult due to noise and disturbances.” 47% of respondents said the office environment wasn’t conducive to collaboration and innovation, one of the main drivers cited for office attendance.

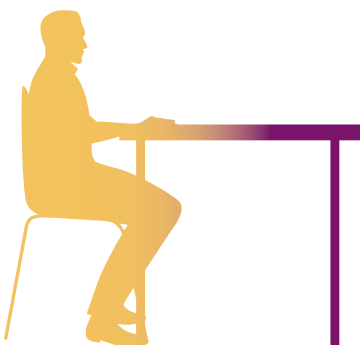
For many civil servants, confidentiality is essential for their line of work. A lack of private quiet spaces can be disruptive towards their work, as one respondent expressed: “lack of quiet spaces mean lack of privacy, which can cause issues when working on sensitive or highly confidential matters.”

It’s no surprise therefore that when asked what could improve hybrid working in the office, 69% said designing quiet zones for focused individual work and a similar percentage wanted improved meeting room availability.

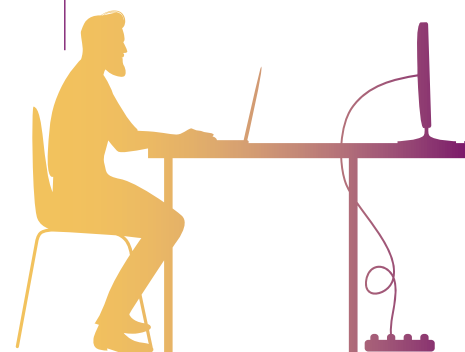
Some respondents have expressed the view that technology in the office remains inadequate at times.

WHAT OUR MEMBERS SAY

“Technology for hybrid meetings in the office is unreliable and often doesn’t work and you don’t have the skills, knowledge, or permission to fix things.”



47% of respondents said the office environment wasn’t conducive to collaboration and innovation, one of the main drivers cited for office attendance.



This underscores the pressing need for improved technological infrastructure to support in-office work.

It is key to recognise that the civil service has made significant progress in improving many of its buildings and making them more suitable for the new way of working. A prominent example is the new Blackpool hub, slated for completion in 2025. This hub will feature a large reception lobby and a high-quality fit-out, including open-plan working areas, meeting rooms, quiet zones, and other flexible workplace settings⁸.

Nevertheless, civil servants in older buildings have conveyed their dissatisfaction with their current environment. These buildings are described as very traditional in design, lacking the flexibility and modern amenities of newer office spaces. They also lack key features essential for productive working, such as quiet zones and soundproof pods. This is also true of some government hubs that were built before the pandemic and struggle to facilitate hybrid meetings.

WHAT OUR MEMBERS SAY

“Personally I am happy to work in the office 60% of the time, and this would be my preference. However, since this has been mandated there has been a shortage of desks, meeting rooms and quiet working spaces making it harder for me to collaborate with my team in the office or to find spaces to take calls.”

“Lack of available meeting rooms means that it is difficult to have in person meetings when in the office, or to have confidential work calls when needed.”

“Lack of meeting rooms or useable communal space means that I rarely speak to colleagues, even when we are in.”

Anchored team days

A widely adopted policy in the private sector and wider public sector is the use of “anchored team days.” On these days, every team member is expected to be in the office unless they have specific circumstances preventing it. An example is The Financial Services Compensation Scheme, who designate one day a week for teams to be in the office, with rotas established well in advance to give employees time to plan. These anchor days are designed to foster purposeful office work, including face-to-face meetings with line managers and organised social events. This approach not only ensures consistent team presence but also enhances collaboration and strengthens team cohesion.

Our survey results show that civil servants are generally receptive



⁸ Place North West (2024), <https://www.placenorthwest.co.uk/blackpools-100m-civil-service-hub-on-track-for-2025-completion/>

to the concept of anchored team days, with 60% of participants expressing strong or moderate support for this policy. Additionally, respondents recognise the potential advantages, with 47% believing it would somewhat enhance team collaboration and 37% expecting it to somewhat or significantly improve their productivity.

However, there was no consensus among respondents on the frequency of ‘anchored team days’ suggesting that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach would not be effective, and flexibility should be given to specific circumstances and the needs of each team.

WHAT OUR MEMBERS SAY

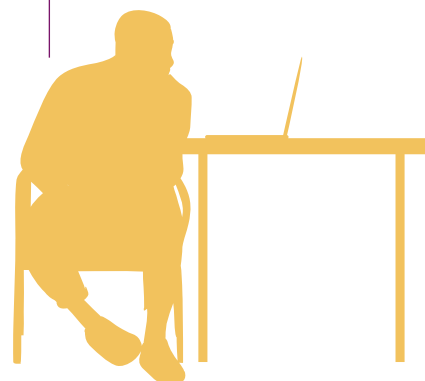
“Working together is a social activity which generates by-products beyond the outcomes we are all aiming to deliver. I strongly believe it enhances wellbeing as long as the time is purposeful e.g. anchored team days rather than staff working individually in an office rather than at home just to meet the target.”

Diversity, Equality and Inclusion

The FDA’s 2022 ‘Is Hybrid Working?’ report had illustrated the positive impact that hybrid working has had on improving diversity, equality and inclusion within the civil service. The report had noted how hybrid working had been perceived to be beneficial for disabled workers.

Our survey reveals that disabled workers express greater concerns and report more negative experiences related to the 60% office attendance mandate. 45% of disabled respondents report that working under this mandate has significantly worsened their work-life balance, compared to 34% of non-disabled participants. Notably, 32% of disabled respondents indicate that the mandate has significantly worsened their productivity, compared to 18% of non-disabled respondents. Regarding personal challenges stemming from the implementation of the mandate, 37% of disabled respondents report significant difficulties with health and safety issues, compared to 16% of non-disabled respondents.

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WHAT OUR MEMBERS SAY

“I struggle to use my assistive technology in a noisy open plan environment.”

It is also imperative to acknowledge the impact that office design has on inclusivity. Our survey finds there are specific features which disabled employees feel are imperative. 74% of disabled respondents stated that quiet zones are one of the most important features of an office. This is compared to 68% of other respondents, which was still one of the key improvements respondents said would enable better hybrid working.

Additionally, many neurodivergent respondents highlighted the necessity of quiet spaces. One respondent remarked: “I am neurodivergent, and the completely open office plan makes concentrating extremely difficult during busy periods. The constant chatter makes it hard to focus and tune into my own virtual discussions.” 49% percent of disabled respondents indicated that ventilation and natural lighting are important office features.

A different approach: devolved administrations and other bodies

It should be noted that the 60% office attendance mandate does not apply to Welsh, Scottish, and Northern Irish government employees. These devolved administrations have adopted different approaches to hybrid working since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Scottish Government has opted against implementing 60% office attendance mandate, instead the employer is currently undergoing a hybrid working trial period that was confirmed in April 2023 and set for review in early 2025⁹. This policy allows colleagues to work from home while maintaining a presence in the workplace each week. FDA National Officer for Scotland Allan Sampson expressed his belief that in-office attendance is encouraged but not strictly enforced. Consequently, occupancy rates in Scottish Government buildings are relatively low. For instance, the average occupancy rate of St Andrew’s House (SAH) in July 2023 was 33%, compared to 83% on 3 March, 2020¹⁰. However, it is worth noting that some buildings have seen improvements in occupancy rates recently. For example, Atlantic Quay in Glasgow has been achieving consistent occupancy rates of around 40%.

Similarly, the Welsh Government has opted not to implement a 60% office attendance mandate. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the First Minister at the time, Mark Drakeford MS, resisted pressure from the UK Government to get civil servants back into the office as the pandemic waned.



⁹ Scottish Government People Directorate (2023), <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-government-public-servants-who-are-still-working-from-home-foi-release/>

¹⁰ Scottish Government Corporate Transformation Directorate (2024), <https://www.gov.scot/publications/foi-202300381864/>

Additionally, Drakeford argued that imposing a mandate would nurture a “culture of presenteeism,” where employees come into the office merely to be seen, rather than for any meaningful purpose. He believed that homeworking had been successful in meeting government objectives related to sustainability and employee wellbeing. This approach reflected several key factors: the Welsh Ministers’ policy position on hybrid working across the broader economy, the Welsh Government’s commitment to being an inclusive employer, its status as an all-Wales organisation with employees located throughout the country, and a strong focus on delivery.

As a result, the Welsh Government – which, notably, already had a “smart working” policy before the pandemic – has adopted an evidence-based approach to understanding how the switch to remote working affects and supports productivity and wellbeing of staff and effective team working. It has undertaken an extended hybrid working pilot based on an underpinning statement, a set of principles and a series of in-depth surveys of staff. The underpinning statement indicates: “Our highest priority as a civil service is delivering the programme for Government so that we can make life better for people and communities in Wales as quickly as possible. We believe that what we achieve is more important than where we do our work. Different work calls for different environments where we can connect, collaborate and concentrate. SmartWorking is about working flexibly in ways that help us deliver our priorities as effectively as possible”

The most recent Welsh Government internal hybrid working survey conducted in March 2024 indicated that staff consider remote working to be more conducive to productive work and effective collaboration, with very limited situations where in-person attendance is considered more effective than remote working. Respondents to this survey reported feeling more connected to colleagues and the organisation, better able to collaborate and concentrate, and more productive when working remotely compared to working in the office. However, 84% agreed that they are able to initiate social interaction when in the office compared to 73% when working remotely.

In Northern Ireland, there is no current mandate for hybrid working with line managers encouraged to determine needs within their team. However, the policy is being reviewed imminently.

We believe that what we achieve is more important than where we do our work. Different work calls for different environments where we can connect, collaborate and concentrate.



New technologies

Successive governments have placed hope in the potential advantages that the rapid advancement of AI holds for civil servants and the performance of public services, including enhanced productivity, time savings, and reducing bureaucratic workload and backlogs. This would provide an opportunity to rethink how civil servants spend their time in the office.

When launching the government’s AI Opportunities Action Plan in January 2025, Prime Minister Keir Starmer set out how their plan to embrace AI will help the government to deliver “much bolder” public services¹¹ and that the government will be “[t]hrowing the full weight of Whitehall behind this industry”¹².

For employers there are also a whole range of potential tangible benefits. Cost savings, data-driven decision making, opportunities for skill development, and improved efficiency are just some of the benefits that could come to fruition if employers successfully tap into technological advancements. Most importantly, it provides the opportunity for the future of office work to be redefined. As we have already seen, many civil servants feel frustrated that their time in the office can lack purpose. The proliferation of AI should be used as an opportunity to change this.

AI promises the potential to be used to support employees by automating repetitive tasks such as: data entry, email composing, speech writing, diary scheduling, managing customer inquiries, analysis of large volumes of information – with a number of on-going trials within the civil service.

This shift could redefine the time civil servants spend in the office, increasing time available to be spent on activities that benefit from in-person interaction, such as collaborative projects, strategic discussions, and training sessions. Consequentially, the future of office work with the utilisation of AI is one in which office work is purposeful, featuring genuine face-to-face interactions that enhance productivity and make the office a more appealing and engaging place to work.

In November 2023, the government announced the creation of an AI unit, to push the use of AI across civil service departments. This unit is staffed with AI experts who are devising ways to leverage the potential of AI to enhance lives, stimulate growth, provide superior public services and support the work of civil servants.

One project which the unit has been working on is the Redbox Copilot trial¹³. The Cabinet Office has been trialling this AI tool which is designed to search and analyse government documents and quickly summarise them into briefings. The tool also allows civil servants to partake in interactive discussions with the chatbot and ask questions about letters, briefings, meeting minutes, speeches, and other internal documents. This tool can theoretically greatly enhance efficiency and save significant amounts of time for civil servants. The Cabinet Office has expanded its trial of this AI



¹¹ Gov.UK (2025), <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-on-ai-opportunities-action-plan-13-january-2025>

¹² Gov.UK (2025), <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-sets-out-blueprint-to-turbocharge-ai>

¹³ Ai.Gov.UK, <https://ai.gov.uk/projects/redbox/>

tool, and the aim is for every civil servant to have access to this in the near future.

The Incubator for Artificial Intelligence’s project “Consult,” trialled in the Department of Health and Social Care, is an AI tool which automates the processing of public consultation responses by using AI and data science techniques to automatically extract patterns and themes from the responses and turn them into dashboards for policy makers. According to the Incubator, consultations cost the government around £80m a year. A consultation attaining around 30,000 responses would require manual analysis from 25 staff members over a period of 3 months¹⁴.

Other departments have piloted the use of Microsoft Copilot. For example, the Ministry of Justice has allowed some employees to opt into accessing the Microsoft Copilot tool. In this case the AI tool is being used primarily for tasks like minute-taking and summarising research.

Automating these more administrative tasks could save the civil service millions of pounds and free up time for employees which they could use for more strategic and collaborative policy work, rather than being mandated to spend time in the office conducting manual analysis by themselves.

Although the government has taken steps to incorporate AI into the workplace, at this stage these examples remain limited. According to a National Audit Office (NAO) report, just over a third of the 87 government bodies that responded to their survey had deployed AI by Autumn 2023¹⁵.

The government’s own AI Opportunities Action Plan stated that “[w]hile there are instances of AI being used well across the public sector, often they are at small scale and in silos”¹⁶.

The vast majority of civil servants have not yet had the opportunity to use these tools to enhance their work. In the same NAO report, departments identified a lack of AI skills and an inability to retain staff with AI skills as a key barrier to adoption of AI in government.

As we have already seen, many civil servants feel frustrated that their time in the office can lack purpose. The proliferation of AI should be used as an opportunity to change this.

¹⁴ Ai.Gov.UK, <https://ai.gov.uk/projects/consult/>

¹⁵ National Audit Office (2024), <https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/use-of-artificial-intelligence-in-government/>

¹⁶ Gov.UK (2025), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ai-opportunities-action-plan/ai-opportunities-action-plan>



This was corroborated by our member survey, with 74% of our survey respondents stating they have never interacted with AI tools or systems in their workplace. Notably, employees in higher grades are more likely to report that they have worked with these tools. For example, 27% of SCS respondents expressed that they had interacted with AI tools or systems in their workplace compared to just 13% of HEO participants. New opportunities to use AI in the workplace should be made available to all employees ensuring there is no skills gap in this area between different grades.

In his foreword to the AI Opportunities Action Plan, Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology Peter Kyle stated that “the increasing of prevalence of AI in people’s working lives opens up new opportunities rather than just threatens traditional patterns of work”¹⁷.

Kyle and his department have also previewed a new suite of AI tools for civil servants called “Humphrey”, named after the character from BBC comedy *Yes, Minister*.

Our survey finds that there is little reluctance to embrace new digital skills or to effectively use new AI tools. 76% of respondents are keen to gain skills in AI. Just 4% of participants expressed opposition to AI training.

The implementation of AI may necessitate more time in the office for initial training sessions and hands-on workshops. When asked what type of resources civil servants would prefer to help them develop new skills, 72% expressed a preference for hands-on workshops or seminars. Additionally, 66% of respondents requested formal training programs, and 65% indicated they would like access to AI tools and software for practice.

Overall, if the integration of AI in the workplace transforms civil service operations and processes as the government hopes, this also creates an opportunity to reimagine the future of office work. If AI fulfils the promise of reducing administrative tasks, this should be used as an opportunity to make civil servants’ time in the office purposeful – with time spent on collaborative and strategic work.



Conclusion

The future of office work in the civil service stands at a critical juncture, with hybrid working policies shaping employee experiences, productivity, and workplace culture. This report highlights the widespread dissatisfaction among civil servants regarding the 60% office attendance mandate, which has failed to deliver the benefits of increased productivity, improved team collaboration, and stronger managerial oversight. Instead, it has negatively impacted work-life balance, particularly for disabled employees, while fostering a culture of presenteeism rather than purposeful in-office engagement.

The survey responses indicate a clear preference for a more flexible approach to hybrid working, where office attendance is driven by meaningful activities such as collaboration, team-building, and strategic discussions rather than rigid mandates. Purposeful office use is key to ensuring that employees feel their time in the workplace is valuable, rather than an obligation that disrupts their productivity and wellbeing. Anchored team days, widely supported by respondents, could offer a structured yet flexible alternative, fostering team cohesion without imposing unnecessary burdens on employees.

In addition to revising hybrid working policies, attention is needed to improve the government estate. Limited desk space and a lack of quiet zones and sufficient meeting rooms hinder effective in-person work. Departments should be supported to assess their office environments to ensure they support collaboration and focus.

Finally, the integration of AI presents a significant opportunity to help ensure time in the office is spent on collaborative work.

By addressing these issues, the civil service can establish a modern, inclusive, and adaptive workplace that meets the needs of its workforce while maintaining operational effectiveness.

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Centenary House
93-95 Borough High Street
London, SE1 1NL

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