Working smarter: setting new office standards for civil servants

The Government Property Agency brought together Civil Service leaders to exchange ideas, debate trends and inform how the GPA delivers its property services.

*Government Property Agency*

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The Government Property Agency (GPA) is leading one of the country’s biggest and most ambitious workplace renewal programmes for its clients – delivering a smaller, better connected, better quality, and greener property estate to support the work of Civil Service teams and bring them closer to the communities they serve.

The world of work has transformed dramatically since the GPA was set up in 2018. Hybrid working has grown significantly, while the technology needed to underpin this way of doing things has advanced at pace. Against this backdrop of change, the GPA wanted to understand even more about how it could support clients and deliver an innovative and quality service. Recently, it brought together leaders from across the Civil Service as well as industry experts at Central Hall in the heart of Westminster to exchange ideas, debate current trends and inform how the GPA delivers its property services in future.

The debate focused on three core themes: partnership working; the workplace experience; and leveraging data.

## Better together

There was a common thread through all the discussions at Central Hall: the importance of partnership. The GPA’s Chair, Pat Ritchie and interim CEO, Mark Bourgeois explained how the agency is building on foundations put in place since it was established to look at how it can deliver the next phase of its complex programme – working hand in hand with clients. Freya Guinness, Director General for Corporate Services and Chief Operating Officer (COO) at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), gave the client side of the story.

As traditional ideas about the workplace are disrupted, it was acknowledged that regular dialogue is paramount to help the GPA understand the evolving needs of government teams and any areas for improvement – ensuring the basics are in place to pave the way for more ambitious change. Equally, it was recognised that clients should engage the GPA in their long-term workforce strategies so that it can plan better on their behalf.

There was agreement that this open and honest conversation between partners should not just be about highlighting issues, but celebrating successes too so that these can be replicated. Tackling siloed thinking was also seen as crucial.

The GPA’s relationship with its clients is unique compared to others in the world of real estate – its clients don’t choose who they work with, but they have a closer, shared interest with the agency than a purely commercial agreement. An interactive session led by the GPA’s Non-Executive Director, Helen Gillett and the Department for Education’s COO, Jane Cunliffe, explored how this mutually exclusive partnership could work to both parties’ advantage. Shared missions around transforming the Civil Service, investing in regional growth and delivering net zero goals can form the bedrock of a fruitful and productive working relationship. But attendees felt these values should be backed up by tangible delivery commitments too.

## Understanding the workplace as experience

From the specific needs of government clients to the wider world of work, Lohan Presencer, Chair at the Ministry of Sound, and Despina Katsikakis, Global Head of Total Workplace at Cushman & Wakefield, gave the audience a window into best practice in the private sector. Both discussed how office planning, design and management is borrowing from hospitality as the emphasis becomes less about desks per square foot, and more about the experience that employees get in the workplace.

The office is no longer just a place to sit at a computer – arguably, that can be done from any location now. It has become an enabling space for creativity, ideas sharing and collaboration between teams. It should be a place for making connections and establishing communities, bonding people to their employer and to each other. The best projects in the private sector are putting these objectives at their heart.

The conversation centred on how government offices could compete with this new focus in the race for talent. It was recognised that it would be easier for modern government hubs but how could older, existing assets, which might have design constraints, keep up? Lohan stressed that it was more about the mindset than the specifics – every space can be improved, he argued.

Interesting questions were posed about how the model could be adapted for different people’s needs, particularly those who are neurodiverse. Providing a variety of working spaces within a building is important. Discussion also turned to how the success of this model should be measured, tracking the impact on employees’ productivity, motivation and engagement. The answer lies in data, but just counting work stations isn’t enough.

## Unlocking the power of data

Technology is underpinning the workplace’s transformation – with new tools allowing teams to stay connected across places like never before and removing barriers to productivity. The GPA is rolling out the GovPass system across the buildings it manages, making it easier for civil servants to work from any office. And to get online quickly with GovWifi when they arrive.

With this new tech comes vast data and in turn the potential to learn about how office use and people’s habits are changing and why. Clients were keen to explore the possibility of working with the GPA to leverage this insight for their own planning, as well as to guide future decisions for the estate.

Despina talked about the importance of gathering information from a mix of datasets – both to gain a better understanding of what’s really happening on the ground, and also to maintain employees’ trust. Data gathering should be done with, not in spite of colleagues, she argued. Tell people why you are tracking trends and ask for their anecdotal experience too. This ultimately leads to better results and helps people to understand how the process can benefit them by delivering spaces which meet their needs in the long run.

## Keeping the conversation going

There was fantastic engagement at the conference as intended, but with the world of work evolving so quickly, it was clear to all that the conversation shouldn’t stop here. The GPA will continue to discuss, share ideas with and learn from its clients, as well as from the wider property sector, to deliver better outcomes for the Civil Service and ultimately the people it serves.