Business Secretary wants staff in ‘at least’ two or three days a week

A minister has told Sky News he would like staff in his department to be coming into the office “at least” two or three days a week, after the government insisted it would follow a “cautious” approach to civil servants returning to their desks.

Business Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng was asked about his views on people working from home amid the **COVID-19** pandemic.

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It comes after an unnamed minister was quoted by one newspaper as saying officials should have their pay reduced if they refuse to come back to the office.

Speaking to Kay Burley, Mr Kwarteng said: “I think we should try to come in maybe 2-3 days a week at least.

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“But it’s a gradual process, no-one is being forced back against their will.

“You’ve got to make the environment very safe but I think it is probably quite a good thing to spend more time in the week at work, that’s just a personal view.”

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Mr Kwarteng added that ministers would not “dictate” to businesses when it comes to working arrangements, but stressed the benefits of “flexibility” and being able to go into the office or workplace.

“I think if you’re trying to make a career it probably makes sense to actually meet colleagues and build a network and learn from other people and I think that’s probably best done in the workplace,” he added.

Chancellor Rishi Sunak last week **spoke of the benefits of**

working in an office, stressing the positive impact it had on his early career.

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Current government guidance, which came into effect when most COVID restrictions were lifted on 19 July, states that ministers are "no longer instructing people to work from home if they can, so employers can start to plan a return to workplaces".

"During this period of high prevalence, the government expects and recommends a gradual return over the summer," it adds.

"You should discuss the timing and phasing of a return with your workers."

But a minister quoted by the Daily Mail advocated a more hardline approach to ending home working.

"People who have been working from home aren't paying their commuting costs so they have had a de facto pay rise, so that is unfair on those who are going into work," they reportedly said.

"If people aren't going into work, they don't deserve the terms and conditions they get if they are going into work."



Image:
The chancellor has recently spoken of the benefits of working in an office

The minister also suggested that “people who want to get on in life will go into the office because that’s how people are going to succeed”.

A union leader criticised the comments, describing them as “insulting” and a demonstration that ministers are “out of touch with modern working practices”.

Dave Penman, general secretary of the FDA civil service union, said: “What should matter to ministers is whether public services are being delivered effectively, not where individual civil servants are sitting on a particular day.”

At the weekend it was reported that plans to require staff at the Department of Health and Social Care to be based partly in the office from next month have been scrapped.

According to The Guardian, the department had put staff on notice that from September the “minimum expectation” would be that they should be in the office for a minimum of four and maximum of eight days a month, unless there was a business or

wellbeing reason.

But the department’s director of workplace and director of HR told staff on Thursday that “it’s clear that we cannot proceed with this phase on the planned timescale”.

A government spokesperson said: “The Civil Service continues to follow government guidance, as we gradually and cautiously increase the number of staff working in the office.

“Our approach, which builds on our learning during the pandemic, takes advantage of the benefits of both office and home-based working across the UK.”