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Welsh Government Warns Staff: Use the Office or Risk Losing It

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The Welsh Government has issued a firm warning to its civil servants: if office attendance does not improve, some sites could be shut down. With daily in-office attendance falling well below targets, ministers are launching a review into the future of government buildings, particularly in Powys, where office use is especially low.

The Welsh Government, which employs roughly 5,700 staff across 20 locations, has set an internal goal for employees to work from the office at least two days a week or 40% of their time. But recent figures show that in March, the actual average attendance across government sites was just 16%. At one of its key hubs in Merthyr Tydfil, that number dropped to a concerning 9%.

First Minister Eluned Morgan made the government's position clear: "We are encouraging people to come in. But clearly, there will come a point where you have to say, 'if you don't turn up, we cannot justify keeping this particular office open.'" The government is reviewing its estate, particularly offices in Llandrindod Wells and Newtown, to determine whether they remain viable in the current working landscape. That review is expected to be completed by the end of September.

The broader implications are significant not only for public sector efficiency, but for local economies. Speaking in the Senedd (Welsh Parliament), Independent Member of the Senedd (MS) Russell George raised concerns about the potential closure of the Newtown office, which had the highest average daily attendance in March, albeit still low at 22% (or 17 staff). George highlighted that the presence of government offices helps sustain local businesses and encourages regional employment, making the government more reflective of communities across Wales.

The Welsh Government's "State of the Estate" report for 2023–2024, published in May, admitted that offices remained "under-occupied" throughout the year as hybrid and remote working continued. The report emphasised that while efforts are being made to make better use of spaces, such as hosting other public sector bodies, including the Welsh Language Commissioner and the Food Standards Agency, office closures are under consideration where viable, especially when leases expire.

Running costs for the 15 "core offices," including hubs in Cardiff, Merthyr Tydfil, Aberystwyth, and Llandudno Junction, total £24.5 million annually. Additional offices located across Wales were originally intended to ensure regional coverage, but their future is now uncertain.

The Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), which represents many civil servants, remains supportive of the current hybrid working model. General Secretary Fran Heathcote said the arrangements were developed in partnership with unions and added, "We have no reason to believe the current arrangements are not working." Similarly, FDA national officer

Jane Runeckles defended the flexible model, stating: “Work is what you do, not where you do it.”

Still, from a cost-efficiency standpoint, many will question whether maintaining half-empty offices is sustainable. The government has already vacated at least one building, Grosvenor Road in Wrexham, relocating staff to a smaller nearby unit after the lease ended in January 2024. Another office block, Picton Terrace in Carmarthen, is now being marketed after being deemed surplus to requirements.

The Welsh Government says future decisions on office space will involve business case development, consultation with staff and unions, and consideration of opportunities such as lease breaks. But the direction is clear: in an era of tight budgets and changing work habits, physical presence matters. The expectation is that public servants show up at least part of the time or risk losing the very infrastructure meant to support their work.