

The estate we are now in – public sector land and buildings

The public sector has collected much land and many buildings over the years. Managing this well can provide better conditions for employees and better results for taxpayers.

I am not one who thinks we should sell off our core estate, or go in for expensive financing through sales and leasebacks. I was critical of Gordon Brown doing some of this. It is cheapest and best to own the freehold of the core estate, and to take direct responsibility for the maintenance and replacement of the buildings on the core estate. The UK government still has crucial sites with heritage buildings in Central London and elsewhere. Most Councils have good central sites, some with heritage buildings. Lets use them and look after them in the public sector.

In central London the Foreign Office, Downing Street, the Treasury, Parliament, the Scottish and Welsh Offices, the Banqueting Hall, the Queen Elizabeth Conference centre are all important sites and heritage buildings of varying ages. Keeping a strong central estate around the palaces of Westminster and Whitehall makes sense. Beyond the historic core it is good to have some other sites close to the action. The buildings for departments like Education, Business, Culture Media and Sport, Transport and the Home Office do not have the same architectural and historical significance as the heritage buildings. Some of this space may become surplus to overall Whitehall requirements, and some of the properties where the state is freeholder may be suitable for substantial redevelopment. Sub letting to other users in some cases may be a good source of revenue whilst keeping land holdings that could be useful. The further from the core, the better the case for disposal of surplus accommodation.

Beyond central London there are huge MOD holdings. There is some move away from the most valuable areas. In my own constituency the army has moved out from its large Arborfield base so that can be sold for the taxpayers and transformed into private housing. There needs to be suitable forces housing supplied elsewhere. I continue to campaign for a home base approach for all three services where single or family accommodation is provided for service personnel at a constant place where their children can go to school and their loved ones can live or be nearby without constant change.

There is some movement down in total numbers of public service employees, as various services come to rely more on computing power. This over time frees space for disposal or re letting. As a general policy aim those officials who need regular and easy access to Ministers should come to live on the heritage estate near to Parliament. Major centres of public sector employment should be away from highly stressed and expensive parts of the country. As more comes to be done on line so there will be more scope to streamline local offices, and to create more one stop shops incorporating more than one government function or department.

The government is going over to a system of centrally managed estates with rental charges to departments for use whether the state is paying rent to a third party or owns the building. This should inject more discipline into property use, and could also lead to a demand for higher standards of services and interior fitment from client departments. This would be good for morale.