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Relocation, Relocation, Relocation - A Look at Channel 4's new HQ

Written by Andy Frain, Political Consultant on 13 June 2018



Channel 4 recently revealed the 7 city-regions that could become the home of its new national headquarters. Bristol, Cardiff, Glasgow, Greater Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool and the West Midlands are all in the running for the new HQ, and Channel 4 has committed to greatly expanding its commitment to what it refers to as "the Nations and Regions".

Following the BBC's relocation to Salford in 2010, it could be tempting to see this as part of a wider movement away from the capital. Indeed, it is even possible to tie it into the "Northern Powerhouse" and the wider movement of decentralisation of national institutions - it is likely no coincidence that four of the seven candidate regions for the new HQ have recently been granted "Metro Mayors", with another two having their own devolved administrations.

But to declare Channel 4's new HQ as a major move step towards a London-less future would be an exaggeration. The new location, wherever it may be, will have a new studio with "the potential to be a base for daily programmes", a statement which falls short of a concrete commitment to widespread programme making. Channel 4 have said that the new bases will host around 300 staff, but the effect of this figure is mitigated somewhat by the fact that the broadcaster already employs around 800 in the London area, effectively meaning that London will retain a majority of the workforce regardless of

any staff relocations.

Whilst the new HQ is expected to grow in prominence and influence over time, it is clear that this should not be misinterpreted as a wholesale move away from London. And on a wider level, it will take more than totemic moves like this to spread public bodies across the country.

Channel 4 may be an eye-catching name, but the bulk of the public behemoth's less glamorous branches are firmly entrenched south of Watford. Research from the Institute for Government found that the proportion of Civil Servants employed in London actually rose between 2010 and 2015, with areas like the East Midlands and the North East hosting a paucity of public servants in comparison. London's dominance extends to seniority as well as headline figures, with a vast majority of high level civil servants still based nearer Hackney than Huddersfield.

This shows little signs of changing in the immediate future; the newly announced Trade Remedies Authority will not be based in London, but its presence in Reading will do little to subvert the existing narrative that public bodies are too focused in the South East of the country.

Defenders of the current arrangement point out that London is in many cases the best place to base any organisation, with a skilled, educated workforce and outstanding transport links meaning that the best talent is always available in the capital. But critics argue that this is a self-fulfilling prophecy, which serves only to create a "black hole" in London, drawing away graduates and skilled workers away from the rest of the country.

Channel 4's partial relocation could be the start of reaching a happy medium between these points of view, retaining one foot in London whilst spreading to the rest of the country at the same time. As a broadcaster it maintains a higher profile than most public bodies, despite its comparatively small size and it does have the potential to act as a catalyst for further investment as a result. But in truth, it is unlikely to be able to do so alone and if substantive progress is to be made, it will need to be part of a wider movement.

The final location for the headquarters will be announced in October, along with the locations of two new "creative hubs", with the aim of being up and running by the end of 2019. The final decision over the specific location will be made by Channel 4, not by Government.

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