



THE FORCES  
SHAPING  
PUBLIC SECTOR  
WORKPLACES

*Kinnarps*®



# FOREWORD

As proponents of ergonomic design, we believe that spaces should always be built around the needs of their users. But, in any organisation, external pressures will also play a role in shaping the work environment. As a supplier with a long track record of working with local government bodies – as well as blue light and probation services – we recognise this is especially true in the public sector.

For years now, leaders have been looking to do more with less. But the need to find efficiencies is just one thread in the tapestry of drivers determining how organisations are using their spaces. While some of these factors are accelerating the adoption of more effective, agile practices, others present a considerable barrier to change.

To get a fuller understanding of the issues at play, we brought a selection of our public sector clients together for a roundtable discussion. Working from the insights these conversations elicited, this report outlines the challenges the sector faces in optimising its spaces – and what it stands to gain by doing so.

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- 2 Collaboration creates continuity
- 3 Expectations are changing all around
- 4 Risk aversion is a risk in itself
- 5 Innovation needs input from everyone
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# 1

## When change is constant, adaptability is essential



**In this sector, decisions can be made five years before they're implemented. In those cases, there's guess work required.**



Rebecca Drinkwater, Project Manager, London Borough of Lambeth

In the current political climate, there are precious few certainties for public sector organisations to cling to. Their leadership, focus and resources are all – to a greater or lesser extent – subject to change. Ironically, the product of all this change is often work environments that are static, undynamic and ill-suited to the needs of the organisation.

But that's hardly surprising. Whatever the project, achieving meaningful results usually hinges on being able to do two things: To formulate and commit to a long-term vision, then to adjust that vision as and when the situation demands. In the public sector, it's not always easy to do either.

Often, leaders have to set out plans they know they won't be around to fulfil. This means organisations can be left tasked with carrying out initiatives that, by the time they've come to fruition – may no longer make sense.

Our work has shown us that that to be truly effective, spaces have to be designed around the people that use them, their activities and their end goals. But when

none of those things are guaranteed to last, you need a different organising principle: adaptability.

By creating spaces that have the flexibility to respond to as yet unseen needs, the public sector can forge ahead in creating the sort of work places they need to be effective. Doing so will require partners who understand that their solutions must meet the demands of tomorrow as well as dealing with the present.

One thing is certain, if short-termism prevents organisations from adapting their spaces, they won't be fit for purpose in the long run.

**We can invest in hubs and buildings but what if departments don't like them? What if, after a few years they move and we're left with new spaces but no change?**

Alan Richards, Corporate Property and Asset Manager,  
Southend-on-Sea Council

# 2

## Collaboration creates continuity



**Silos are often reinforced by politicians. Working together is one of the vehicles which allows us to navigate around the politics.**



DGMI 'State of the Estate' Roundtable

Siloed thinking can be hugely detrimental to an organisation's success. Oversight from the leadership level can help ensure that the left hand always knows just what the right is doing. But, as we know, in the public sector the things that provide organisations with direction and stability – leadership, strategy and goals – aren't always there for the long term.

That means collaborative working practices aren't just important for increasing productivity – they can also create greater cohesion and continuity too.

Of course, organisational structure is important in determining whether individuals or departments will work in silos. But the physical space also has a hugely influential role to play.

To a large extent, it dictates how people will move throughout the day, who they will interact with and the form those interactions will take. And, according to a recent ISS report, the key to combating public sector silos is "connecting people, creating dialogue and reorganizing".

**The average office worker is only spending around 10% of their day interacting with other people. They hold a lot of information, and it's really important that knowledge gets shared outwardly.**

Kevin Kendall, County Property Officer, Lincolnshire County Council

Naturally, a space can encourage the flow of information and ideas between teams, or contribute to a culture in which employees have no real view of the bigger picture.

The use of activity-based workstations as opposed to fixed desk spaces gives greater opportunities for employees who might not otherwise come together and is just one of the ways smarter office design can enable collaboration.

# 3

## Expectations are changing all around

In an increasingly digital world, the public's expectation of smart, simple services is constantly rising. When they can find new music, a lift or an apartment with a few swipes of their smartphone, why should renewing a passport or filing a tax return be any less intuitive?

Matching the standards of consumer-grade offerings requires a raft of top talent – and that's hard to attract. It's thought that the digital skills gap is costing the UK economy £63 billion a year . This is keenly felt in the public sector, with 40% of organisations lacking the necessary skills to adapt to digital transformation .

Correcting this situation means bringing in the best and brightest of the next generation. But, just as citizens' expectations have shifted, so have workers'. Few millennials are entering the workforce with any idea of being tethered to a desk – let alone an organisation. Given that the public sector can't always rely on using financial incentives to attract top talent, providing a flexible environment is an important point of differentiation.

This is especially important as – for all that's been made of the difficulties the sector faces in addressing the skills gap – they do have some advantages over their private sector rivals. Millennials are highly purpose-driven, with only one in five saying they would

spend an extended period working for a solely profit-driven company . The public sector can offer these young people the chance to make a positive impact on society, free from the restraints of the market.

This advantage is being eroded by the perception that, in terms of working practices, the public sector lags behind the private. There are a huge number of ways reimagining the work space can benefit the sector – changing this perception is one of the most important.

To quote a recent Forbes article: "A collaborative and inclusive workplace where groups of people regularly work together to solve problems is one example [of what matters to millennials]. The physical manifestation of this could be an open office layout where colleagues interact easily and frequently."

**Millennials coming out of university have a completely different way of thinking. Workplaces need to adapt to this.**

Colin Stuart, Managing Director, Baker Stuart Limited



**There are vacancies, but people aren't taking up public sector jobs. They get a bad press.**

Andrea Winders, Managing Director, Disruptieve



# 4

## Risk aversion is a risk in itself



**Public money problems mean local authorities are risk averse. But of course, when you do take risks, there can be rewards.**



Steve Atkinson, Head of Local Government, DGMI

Organisations have a responsibility to make sure the risks they take are well managed and proportionate to the potential rewards. At the same time, they can't become paralysed by caution. But when your stakeholders include the entire population – and when the political context has put increased pressure on public spending – striking the right balance is difficult.

Increasingly, businesses of all sizes and sectors are adopting the thinking of Silicone Valley, where developers are encouraged to 'fail fast'. Understandably, there are deep-seated cultural barriers that make such thinking harder to adopt in the public sector.

The mantra 'move fast and break things' sounds like a provocation to push limits coming from the founder of a tech start-up. In the mouth of someone managing estates on behalf of the NHS, it's more likely to sound cavalier.

Governments recognise that risk aversion is a problem. As far back as 2014 Cabinet Office Minister, Francis Maude, was putting forward the need for a less conservative approach:

"We must encourage people to experiment and take risks to find new and better ways of doing things, even if they don't always work. The greatest mistake is to never try anything new or to stick to something that doesn't work."

**We missed the time for cultural change and the appetite is no longer there.**

Murina Kachwala, Head of HR Commissioning, Harrow Council

When it comes to reimagining their workspaces, it's clear that public sector bodies will need the help of partners who can satisfy their appetite for innovation, while respecting the need to present a cast-iron, outcome-based case for the change.

If partners cannot provide assurance their projects will be effective and timely – or a solid rationale for undertaking them in the first place – the impetus to act will never be there. As a result, nothing will change.

# 5

## Innovation needs input from everyone

A work space is so much more than four walls and an arrangement of furniture – it's the physical manifestation of an organisation's culture. That remains equally true irrespective of how much thought has gone into it...

A well-designed space is built around an intimate understanding of the ways in which people work. A badly designed space dictates how people will work and demands they adjust accordingly. Either way, it informs the way they function.

That suggests the best policy is to take a bottom up approach – to understand what people on the ground need from their space and to build around those needs. But what if this clashes with the management culture?

Unless leaders can see clear strategic value in changing the way they operate, leaders are unlikely to buy in to any kind of significant change. And without their support, such projects are likely to fail – if they ever got off the ground at all.



**From a design point of view, nothing should be done in isolation – it needs to be collaborative. People are the crux.**

Paula Ashford, Design Team Leader, Hampshire County Council

**We need to know why we want to change our structures and culture. Once we do, change stems from the top.**

Aiden MacManus, Director of Property and Asset Management, Waltham Forest Council

Clearly, there is need for input from both ends. While the results of a refit need to be people-centric, it's vital they address the strategic concerns of the organisation's leaders. In an ideal world, there would be perfect alignment between the two.

This isn't a perfect world. But, with a carefully considered, consultative approach, partners can help public sector bodies create spaces that work beautifully on a day to day basis while pushing the organisation forward.



# 6

## ROI comes in many forms



WWF UK Living Planet Centre near Godalming



Peaks & Plains Housing Trust office in Macclesfield

We've seen how, if public sector organisations are to transform their spaces, they need to find ways of creating comprehensive buy-in throughout the organisation.

Without a clear vision of how spending in the short term will create greater savings down the line, this simply won't be possible – especially at a time when many departments are facing cuts.

Whilst some of the benefits of a modernised, ergonomic workspace will be clear in an immediate way (such as increased productivity, better employee engagement and reduced absenteeism) others are less tangible.

In this document, we've discussed issues such as the role physical spaces can play in creating a fresh influx of talent or breaking down organisational silos. Attributing a precise cost to such phenomena can be extremely challenging – delineating exactly how much that cost can be reduced by rethinking your office layout is practically impossible.

There is, therefore, a burden of proof on design partners. They need to be able to demonstrate an ability – not just to produce great end results – but to work from a comprehensive understanding of the pressures the sector faces.

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