

The agile office – building on the COVID experience

COVID-19 has forced many businesses, some almost overnight, to embrace home working.

Our real estate expert **Amy O’Gorman** talks to **Sue Cleverdon** of Cleverdon Associates about opportunities for future resilience through agile working.



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I am a general commercial real estate practitioner, helping companies, entrepreneurs, individuals and other entities buy, sell, take an interest in, lease or occupy a wide variety of commercial property. My main practice areas include investment, landlord and tenant, secured lending and development work.



Sue Cleverdon, Director
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Sue Cleverdon established Cleverdon Associates Ltd in 2002 specialising in the effective use and management of charity property, unlocking potentially under-used existing charity space and resources.

CHARITY AND SOCIAL ENTERPRISE
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With the projected £4bn loss of income due to the coronavirus crisis, charities may need to review their property options to reduce overheads or in some cases generate income. Sue Cleverdon answers our questions about agile working.

Q: You have helped many charities move towards agile working. What are the main reasons for charities making this choice?

A: Cost and organisation of the workplace is a core issue for all charities large and small. Agile working is about doing the right task in the right space from a wider choice of work settings in the office, at home or on the move. Cleverdon Associates has helped many organisations to reduce costs through flexible working within a smaller property footprint. Far-sighted charities have freed up whole floors for income-generating activities such as subletting, serviced desks or conference hire businesses; others have downsized or managed a charity merger within the existing space. Agile working brings resilience and flexibility to grow or shrink the workforce without costly office moves and consequent disruption.

Younger staff and those with caring commitments are particularly attracted by greater flexibility in how, when and where they work. Organisations which manage this change well are seeing improved productivity, increased staff satisfaction, less silo working and more common purpose.

Q: What factors will make the move to agile working most successful?

A: Four factors have emerged as critical to success from our experience.

- Consider and clarify future business plans so that property decisions support the business requirement rather than the other way around.
- Consult both employees and experts – timely expert advice can result in substantial benefits and often pays for itself in cost savings.
- Change the way people work – this requires careful planning and there is no

‘one size fits all’. Senior leadership and staff representatives need to be deeply involved in developing the plans and championing the change.

- Communicate the plan, crunch the decision and make it happen, investing and training staff in the best IT and communications technology.

Q: So, what are the implications for the physical offices run by the charity sector?

A: It seems doubtful that we will return to the arrangements of the past. But enforced lockdown has highlighted that we are social animals and the office is unlikely to be completely replaced by home working. Now is the moment to review your future plans and assess whether the office space and layout still serve your organisation’s needs. If you have surplus space, consider options such as sharing, subletting, assigning, exercising a break right or negotiating a surrender of your lease back to your landlord. Alternatively, using your space more productively with greater agile working for staff might be what is required.

When reviewing the best options for your organisation, it is important to check the terms of your lease to understand your rights and obligations – this will have an impact on which route you choose. In particular, landlord’s consent will often be required for alterations and dealings (assignments, underlettings or sharing) and there may be specific conditions that you need to comply with in advance.

Bates Wells’ expert advice will ensure that all conditions and obligations within your lease (and any Charities Act 2011 disposal requirements) are complied with in a timely and efficient manner.

FIND OUT MORE

There’s more information on reviewing your property needs in the Winter 2019/20 edition of our Real Estate update at https://bateswells.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/BW_RelEstUp_PropertyNeeds_Winter2019.pdf