

# How modern working helped the city of Bristol unlock opportunities to repurpose challenging real estate

**Richard Billingham\* and Alison White\*\***

*Received (in revised form): 13th December, 2016*

\*Service Director — Human Resources, Bristol City Council, City Hall, College Green, Bristol BS1 5TR, UK

Tel: +44 (0)7966 363882; E-mail: richard.billingham@bristol.gov.uk

\*\*Founder — PLACEmaking, 18 Boxworks, Clock Tower Yard, Bristol BS1 6QH, UK

Tel: +44 (0)7768 081242; E-mail: awhite@placemaking.co.uk; Website: www.placemaking.co.uk;

Twitter: @PLACEmaking\_uk; Facebook.com/PLACEmaking.uk

**Richard Billingham** is currently Service Director — HR, Change and Communication at Bristol City Council, responsible for the Bristol Workplace Programme (BWP), transforming the office estate and bringing about service improvement. Richard is leading a system-wide programme of complex organisational change, championing innovative approaches and translating the energy and willingness of high-performing individuals and teams at all levels to be the best they can and change the way the organisation works for the better. He has extensive experience working with leaders and organisations across public and private sectors, both in the UK and internationally.

**Alison White** is a co-founder of consultancy firm PLACEmaking, workplace designers and change advisers. She has been at the centre of knowledge on the changing demands on the working environment for over 20 years, is co-author of *Working Beyond Walls* (Office of Government Commerce, 2008), contributes to professional journals and is a regular speaker on implementing workplace change projects. In 2013, PLACEmaking and AFA architects formed 'ADAPT', a multi-skilled collection of specialists commissioned by Bristol City

Council to undertake their Bristol Workplace Programme (BWP). PLACEmaking led on all workplace strategy, interior architecture, design and cultural change aspects for the three-year programme.

## ABSTRACT

The way we work has changed. The public sector is required to reduce costs and improve its delivery of services and respond to changing citizen demands. Under pressure to rationalise its real estate portfolio, the challenge is where to invest limited resources within constrained budgets and under public scrutiny, all in a risk-averse sector. Bristol City Council has reduced its office estate from 38 buildings to two; forced to retain the Grade 2★ City Hall and with heritage constraints precluding remodelling, the council faced failing to deliver its business case objectives. A step change in design approach and commitment to adopting agile working transformed those constraints to the council's advantage. Now with a flexible and adaptable portfolio, the council is well positioned to deliver its service redesign objectives, embrace future work style changes, support the wider public sector's integration agenda and secure a sustainable income from its dramatically reduced estate.



Richard Billingham



Alison White

Corporate Real Estate Journal  
Vol. 6 No. 3, pp. 259–275  
© Henry Stewart Publications,  
2043–9148

*Keywords: Bristol workplace programme, real estate rationalisation, service collocation and integration, service redesign, smart working, desk sharing, workstyles, collaborative working, space utilisation, space standards, presenteeism, mobile computing, wifi, workplace engagement plan*

## INTRODUCTION

Rapid and continuous change in the way we work conflicts with the traditional pace of real estate adaptation. Under continuous pressure to make ongoing and significant cost savings and improve service delivery, the public sector must consolidate and rationalise its real estate portfolio. The challenge is where to invest precious resources to satisfy emerging workplace trends, recognising that over time these will be less and less building-dependent.

This paper provides a detailed case study of Bristol City Council's journey to embracing modern working, reducing its office estate and ensuring what it retains is responsive to future demands. In Bristol's case the challenge appeared great, as the reduced estate would need to include the Grade 2★ City Hall — a building of national architectural significance and the constitutional home of the council. This heritage view conflicted with how the building was regarded: as a workplace outdated, inflexible and impenetrable to the majority of citizens of Bristol.

A previous property-focused attempt at workplace modernisation had failed, regarded as a costly distraction and abandoned. Business as usual resumed and a fatigue for initiatives labelled 'change' set in. In 2012 a revised business case rekindled leadership interest and political commitment: identifying estate savings if a universal 7:10 desk-sharing approach was adopted and recognising that desired benefits were only achievable if a change of

working culture was adopted and resistance to 'new initiatives' addressed. The organisation needed to challenge itself: becoming comfortable with being uncomfortable and accepting and expecting change as a normal feature of modern working in Bristol City Council.

With some external help, the retained estate target was reduced to two buildings. With desk-sharing solutions implemented in building 1, confidence grew and signs of change reassured project leadership that past failures need not be repeated. However, planning constraints vetoed the removal of internal walls to create 'open plan' in building 2, the Grade 2★ City Hall. Meeting the business case objectives was at risk and capacity increases now limited to +25 per cent, unpopular after 18 months' restoration investment.

A new approach was needed. Delivering services better plus better services required new dynamic ways of working: encouraging innovation, enterprise and multi-agency integration. The designers focused on more diverse and innovative workplace solutions, reflecting changing dependencies on space and technology resources. Detailed analysis of emerging work styles and work patterns highlighted that the universal 7:10 desk-sharing strategy in the business case was outdated. The 'deal' with staff had to change — becoming dynamic consumers of a wider variety of more interactive, connected, business-focused and technology-enabled facilities in exchange for static desks. This turned the unexpected and unwelcome heritage constraints into an advantage. The results: 70 per cent of City Hall designed for shared collaborative and innovative working, 30 per cent including shared desks. Driving greater utilisation through intelligent management increases capacity to +250 per cent. Civic use of the building has increased with greater access to heritage areas of the building and independently accessed, income-generating modernised event spaces.

Four years on the objectives of the 2012 business case have been exceeded. Through a step change of solutions the council is now well positioned to host future work style evolutions and increased mobility; by focusing on actual utilisation and performance, managed intelligently, the radically reduced estate will serve Bristol as a core city, with the council facilitating the wider public sector's integration agenda, driving service improvement and property rationalisation agenda.

## HOW THE 'WAY WE WORK' IS CHANGING

The way we work has changed. Even the word 'work' has a different meaning now than it did in the recent past, when working in an 'office' conjured up images of Monday to Friday 9 to 5, daily commuting and filing cabinets stuffed with paper. Pre the arrival of the computer, things generally didn't change much in terms of office design; layouts and equipment could remain the same for many years. Post the computer and automated copy machines generating vast quantities of printed paper, larger organisations imported from the US new methods of getting some sort of 'order' in their business practices and in their office layouts. Clever designers developed 'space standards' — military-style allocation of space entitlement by grade, seniority and strict organisational hierarchy. Senior people would sit in their own offices overseeing their subordinate teams in supervised open-plan office space. Attendance at the desk was the dominant measure of productivity and rigid timekeeping suggested the office was more akin to a factory than a place of creativity and innovation. In fact innovation was generally not encouraged; that was the role of specific people who had a label on their office door that made it clear innovation happened in that room only, it was their territory and their right. While the personal computer may have heralded

the beginning of the end of all of that, it is undoubtedly the consequence of mobile computing and wireless connectivity that has enabled people to truly work beyond physical walls and shrug off those traditional grade-based boundaries. Social expectations are different too; younger generations are baffled by their senior colleagues' acceptance of what they consider are outdated practices, poor quality workplace environments, e-mail regarded as a modern form of communication and significantly worse technology than they have at home. They make it clear that with their education debts and long-term loan repayments, they have no patience with or loyalty to organisations that won't modernise and adapt to changes in ways of working and social expectations. With five generations of staff working alongside each other in the workplace, organisations need to ensure they understand and respond to a wide range of values and expectations.

In the past, working practices in the public sector were regular, somewhat predictable, and the general assumption was that a job was 'for life'. Change may have been slow to gain momentum, but more recent political and economic pressures accelerated government demands for cost reductions generally and property-related costs specifically by government departments. It wasn't long before the same pressures were extended to the wider public sector and councils soon recognised they too needed to do better, do more and at significantly less cost. Transforming the way they work would be a fundamental contributor to achieving these efficiency targets; having achieved citizen acceptance of a digital-based relationship for transactional services, citizens were not unreasonably expecting service improvements from their council. If they were to be directed to online services, they came to expect the same level of response as from other online providers. The council needed to innovate and they needed more tacit skills<sup>1</sup> such as problem solving, judgment, listening,

data analysis, relationship building, collaborating and communicating if they were to achieve their cost-cutting targets and at the same time meet citizens' emerging demands.

### **BRISTOL CITY COUNCIL: THE LOCAL AUTHORITY CONTEXT**

Bristol has an estimated population of 450,000. Measured by size of population, it is the UK's eighth largest city, and the largest city in the south of England after London. Its economy is built on the creative media, electronics and aerospace industries and it has two universities: the University of the West of England and the University of Bristol. In 2014 it was named as the best city in Britain in which to live, and also awarded the EU's European Green Capital award in 2015. Bristol is both a city and a county, having been granted county charter in 1889. Formerly a local government district of the county of Avon, the city regained its independence and county status when Avon was abolished in 1996 and Bristol became a unitary authority.

The council has long been dominated by the Labour party but the Liberal Democrats have gained and then lost control in several elections since 2005. In a referendum held in 2012, Bristol voted in favour of a directly elected mayor replacing one elected by the council. Decision making in any local authority is complex and with multiple stakeholders, both internal and external, and with media all influencing the opinions of councillors, addressing internal issues such as investing in the council's own office estate is difficult to prioritise in competition with pressing social issues; administration continuity being short-lived brings added complications. Without pressure from central government and year-on-year reduction of central government funding forcing the council to prioritise cost savings and service improvements, the prospect of major upheaval caused by changes to the workplace would have continued to be regarded as too

difficult and disruptive and possibly put off indefinitely.

The council's Bristol Workplace Programme (BWP) 2012 business case therefore had to set out clearly defined benefits to justify the investment needed to rationalise the office estate, upgrade the ICT solutions and infrastructure and invest in people-focused change management. Any investment would need to directly support the implementation of wholesale service redesign and cost savings. Under constant budgetary pressure, justification for any agreed investment would be scrutinised and with a programme plan estimated to take four years to deliver outcomes, holding on to the original vision and benefits was essential if the programme had any chance of successfully delivering its objectives. Since commencing the programme in July 2013 things have evolved, but the programme has delivered its original key objectives. With those in place, it is now possible to reflect on those pressure points when some programme objectives were at risk and when the programme team were challenged by events, some of which were outside their control. Those key risks include:

- Changing leadership — securing continuous commitment to the vision and objectives.
- Rigid business case space targets — can constrain desired changes in ways of working.
- Transferred case studies findings — need assessment of relevance before adoption.
- Rotation of programme leadership — potentially disruptive, impacts on progress and team well-being.
- Inconsistent governance — can leave programme team isolated from decision making.
- Generic project management skills — need supplementing with technical expertise to reflect the dominant phases of the programme.



- Rotation of programme team members — should coincide with key milestone and an exit/induction process implemented.
- Programme knowledge — needs to be protected and legacy planned and implemented from outset.
- Dependencies on peripheral services — commitment required and continuous appraisal of outcomes to avoid negative impact.

Looking back at the office estate pre-BWP, it is now impossible to imagine how the council would have achieved its service transformation objectives without changing the physical estate. A visit to one of the remnant buildings is a useful reminder of how things were: defined team boundaries of encircled filing cabinets emphasising ownership and demand for isolation, cluttered workspaces defying heroic attempts at some sort of order, and uninspiring spaces where innovation and new initiatives were considered an unwanted distraction from predictable work patterns (Figure 1).

In the earliest stages, there was considerable resistance to accept that the BWP programme would have anything but a negative impact on the day-to-day. Previous initiatives had failed and the assumption was that this one too would soon run out of steam and things would just go back to normal. However, the council was committed to the programme, and with a structured engagement plan in place and internal resources systematically targeting teams to prepare them for the physical move and upgrading their technology skills, there was no denying that things were changing. While in the early stages formal classroom ‘training’ dominated the way the council engaged with staff, transitioning staff to becoming more self-motivated and taking responsibility for themselves fits better with the objectives of agile working. Understanding their own learning preferences and communications style forms

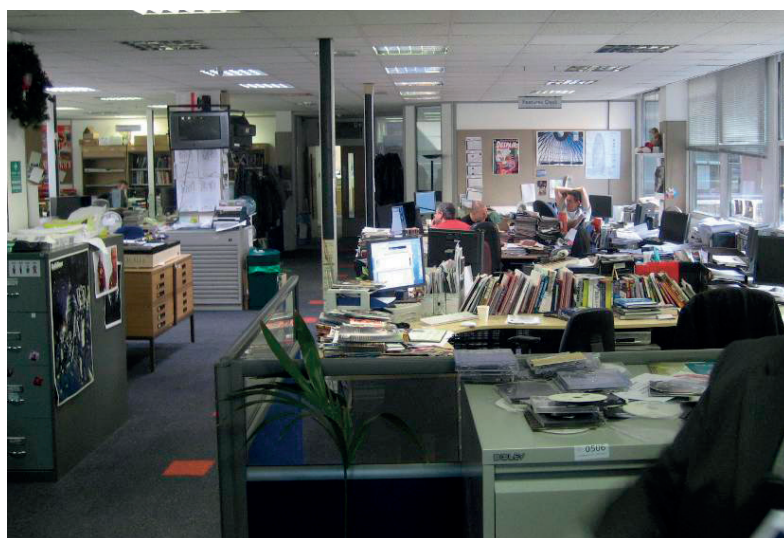


Figure 1 Example of an uninspiring office space

the basis of development of online and self-navigating engagement tools. Users of City Hall are offered a selection of work setting options that suit their specific needs, with detailed information on the functional options and facilities available based on their self-assessment work styles and team profiles. Users are encouraged to take responsibility for their choices and challenge themselves to innovate, exploring a different space each time they use the tool, and a digital map helps them navigate their way to discover new places and spaces.

### **PREBWP: BUSINESS AS USUAL — BRISTOL CITY COUNCIL'S JOURNEY EXPERIENCE**

In addition to City Hall (formerly known as the Council House) the council had acquired 38 office buildings over many years with an estate of circa 650,000sq ft. Specific departments ‘owned’ them, or at least dominated the building occupancy. As with other councils, interaction with citizens often happened in duplicate ‘Customer Service Points’, with trips to multiple building for meetings with separate departments a common



Figure 2 Marginally acceptable office with a low ceiling

and time-consuming activity for often the most ‘in-need’ citizens. Mass form filling was the common feature of day-to-day for both members of the public and staff, generating volumes of paper to be processed, shipped across the estate in a fleet of vehicles, re-processed and filed. The 38 office buildings where all this went on varied in size and quality. The majority were freehold and included former ‘bonded’ warehouses, unsuitable for any other use due to low ceiling heights, which had been converted into marginally acceptable offices in the 1980s (Figure 2). Two buildings of significant size leased in the city centre supplemented what were, with the exception of City Hall, mostly small-scale and spatially inefficient buildings, costly to run, manage and maintain.

In better times the ‘cost’ of this estate was tolerated. While there were costs associated with such a dispersed estate, with limited annual budgets for upgrades, it all appeared low-cost. Departments were in control and had adapted and adjusted ‘their’ buildings to suit their own needs, and ownership of what was actually a corporate asset had largely been devolved. Budgets too were devolved,

so there was no incentive to share anything — paper clips, buildings or even information. Complex space allocation and cross charging was managed centrally and rigid team and directorate boundary lines on plans was the method used to somehow manage occupancy across the estate. Aside from larger meeting rooms, corridors and the odd breakout space, every bit of available space was owned by someone. When team headcounts changed, removal firms were contracted to shunt furniture around buildings to make space for team expansion. One team expansion could send shock waves of packing and unpacking across a floor or even throughout a building. It was an industry: inefficient, ineffective and disruptive.

Staff were allocated their own desk, chair and filing cabinet and with multiple generations of furniture styles, matching up furniture by size, style or colour to create anything like a cohesive, efficient working environment had long since been abandoned. Senior managers expected their teams to all be in one building, which inevitably left pockets of space unoccupied across the estate. Managers quickly learned that if they didn’t report team size variations, disruption to them would be minimised and so they would ‘hold on account’ space for if/when their team grew again. This became common practice and with no actual occupation data gathered or any linkage to HR ‘leavers and starters’ records, the property team relied on volunteered information on which to base their capacity assumptions. As a result, the estate always appeared fully occupied and with no slack apparently available, the number of buildings in the estate simply increased. It was assumed that larger floor plates of open plan in the leased buildings would help resolve this, but in reality, without a change of attitude towards ‘ownership and entitlement’, all that did happen was that the same practices were transferred from smaller buildings to larger buildings. The impact was the same. The total estate was too big and the way the council was using it was too inflexible.

In 2009 political pressure to relocate large numbers of staff from the city centre to an investment zone in a more economically deprived area south of the city appeared to offer the first opportunity to change things. One floor of a shallow-plan building, formed in two interlocking quadrants, totalling 53,000sq ft was leased. An internal property service design team did their best to create what they considered an efficient open-plan office layout. It was a simple 'one size fits all' solution, lacking the clarity of a fully considered workplace strategy. There was a limited budget, the tangible benefits were ill defined, and there was no direct linkage between the spatial solution adopted and any desirable change of behaviours. The outcome was predictably diluted. The location was unpopular, the building footprint difficult to work with and the workplace solution uninspiring through lack of any design vision and limited coherent project leadership. Selection of occupiers became a political football, resulting in generally desk-based internal transactional services (HR and Finance) being isolated there from other services, which remained

in their own city centre building silos. The project was disbanded with limited analysis of the lessons that could be learnt. The project team was frustrated by how its efforts were regarded and 'business as usual' resumed.

### FIRST STAGE OF BWP: 100TS PHASE 1

By 2012 the council had reconsidered. Aware that other authorities had already implemented their own estate reduction programmes and that near neighbour councils (BANES (Bath & North East Somerset), South Gloucester, North Somerset and Somerset) were well on their way with their initiatives, a renewed Bristol Workplace Programme (BWP) business case was drafted. With senior leadership backing, a new programme team set out the case for more ambitious objectives and defined benefits. Recognising the shortcomings of the previous attempt and with good public sector case study examples now delivered, the programme focused on the four P's of change: PEOPLE, PLATFORMS (Technology), PLACE and PROVIDERS (see Figure 3).

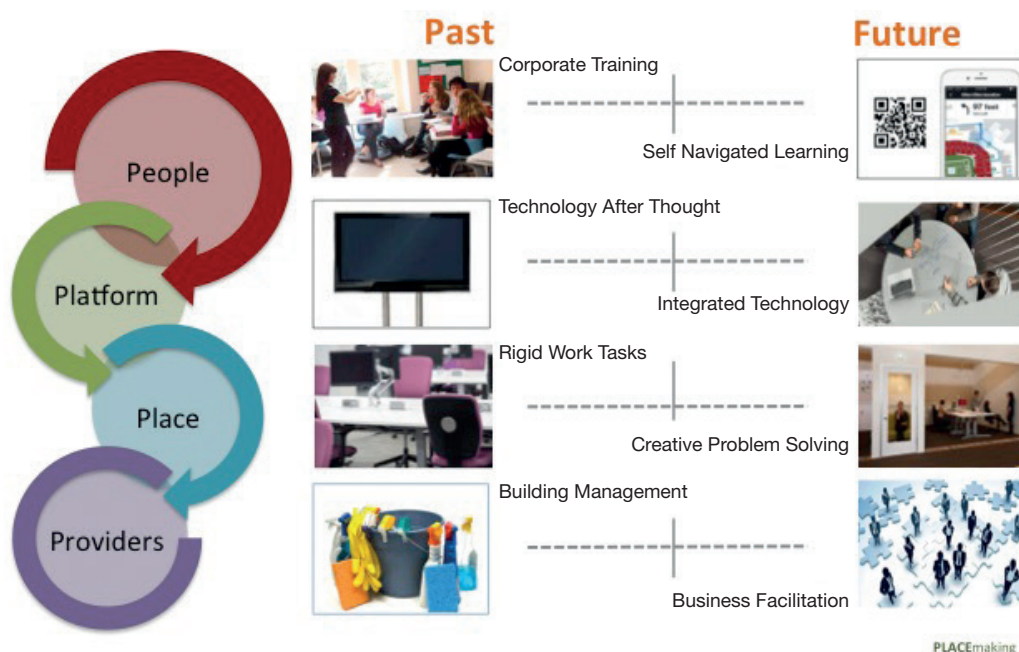


Figure 3 The four Ps of change



Over several months the team set out a programme vision and objectives and the core pillars of an approach. The council's preferred project management methodology, Prince 2, was adopted for programme planning and the team developed a detailed programme plan with project manager-led workstreams and identifiable product outputs, highlighting cross-workstream dependencies and responsibilities. They mapped out programme costs and financial as well as organisational benefits. Following appraisal of their skills and expertise, the programme steering group recognised they needed external help if this time they were to successfully deliver the desired outcome. The council's cabinet approved the business case and an external multi-disciplined design team was appointed in July 2013.

While all this was going on, the council had bought the freehold of another city centre building, 100 Temple Street (100TS) (Figure 4). Built in the 1980s as an insurance company's headquarters and well positioned on the edge of the city's Temple Quay development area, the premises offered large and deep open-plan floor plates totalling 150,000sq ft (GIA). The intention was to occupy this building and City Hall and vacate all other office buildings in the portfolio. With existing tenants occupying 50 per cent of the building, the council planned a phased



*Figure 4 The city centre building at 100 Temple Street (100TS)*

refurbishment and occupation, coinciding with tenant lease breaks and other council building lease ends. With City Hall in dire need of refurbishment, 100TS would offer decant accommodation to the occupants, including the council's leadership team and their various support teams. With the design team on board, the updating of 100TS had to commence quickly if the council were to occupy from October 2014 and the refurbishment of City Hall commence. The council wanted to pilot new ways of working and by October 2013, teams of staff moved in to parts of 100TS that had been hastily fitted out. Lessons learnt from the pilot included recognition that different skills and new energies were needed now that the programme had moved into implementation and the internal project team was restructured.

While many aspects of their attention to detail were valuable, the internal project team had used the same occupancy targets for the 2012 BWP business case as those used in the previous failed south-city project. This dictated how the rationalised office estate would be designed and occupied four years into the future. By the time the business case was approved and the design team brought on board, this approach was already out of date and too inflexible to meet the changing needs of the council and their plans for significant service redesign. It also proved to be a millstone for the design team, who felt the programme team were resistant to their professional advice that a rethink was needed. The designers also discovered that the project team had under-measured City Hall. It was in fact 20 per cent bigger than they had reported in the business case. When Heritage England made it clear that they would not approve the business case assumption that included the removal of all internal walls from the Grade 2\* City Hall to create large open-plan floors, it was clear to all that the original occupancy strategy would need a complete rethink. The programme steering group accepted that the original 'one size fits



all' desk-sharing solution could never apply to two such different buildings and continuing with that approach would constrain the council's organisational change objectives.

Regarded as Phase 1 of the desired transformation, 100TS's regular and deep floor plates were ideal for efficient space planning. Filling it full of shared desks, as originally assumed in the business case, was however neither desirable nor practical. The designers' analysis of the council's emerging work styles and team profiles highlighted the need for a change of approach. They developed a solution that made the most of the building's efficient floor plates — one which would enable the council to move forward with their phased service redesign and be flexible enough to respond to incremental change. These changes would see typical teams who had once been largely desk-bound becoming increasingly less dependent on fixed work settings and more agile in how, when and where they worked. With realistic investment available and a design philosophy approved at senior level, the quality of the workplace design fit-out, the facilities and the technologies all exceeded anything the council had achieved or experienced before. Efficient space planning ensured the

performance targets set within the business case (65sq ft per person) were met and the tangible benefits demanded were starting to be delivered (see Figure 5).

With no previous history of delivering workplace change on this scale, the council was not really sure what to expect from the Phase 1 outcome. Delivery of Phase 1 was a massive time challenge and the combined restructured internal BWP team and the external design team merged their efforts and skills to ensure the promised solutions were in place on time and on budget. Teams began to occupy Phase 1 and with pre-move comprehensive shedding of clutter and laptops already deployed, their phased occupation was well-planned and well-executed. With a few glitches, teams settled in quickly and initial feedback was favourable; indeed it was positive and constructive. The first teams moved included contact centre and help desk staff whose work styles were understandably more static, but staff decanting from City Hall brought with them different expectations and requirements. They quickly explored and exploited all of the collaborative work settings and investigated how the more interactive technologies



Figure 5 Efficient space planning ensured performance targets set within the business case were met

available could help them with their service redesign ambitions. The council had successfully transitioned to mobile technology and telephony: no fixed desktop devices in place, remote access available and the tools and facilities for remote working delivered the travel reduction objectives. Phase 1 was what it was intended to be. It was a quiet triumph, but with some significant lessons to be learnt ahead of the bigger challenge of Phase 2.

The design team had developed a toolbox of engagement methodologies and communication content for Phase 1 pre-move interaction with staff. In an attempt to keep a legacy of skills and experience in-house, the council wanted an internal team to lead on actual staff engagement. This proved only partially successful due mainly to their inexperience in a change process; challenging embedded behaviours proved difficult, and their tendency to compromise on some key programme objectives made their lives easier but proved a longer-term problem for the programme. Shifting staff attitudes to regarding themselves as consumers of a wider spectrum of space and facilities from their previous expectations of ownership of a desk was often abandoned. Without clear direction and an understanding of the risks resulting from such compromises, some teams were left to reinterpret the programme objectives and regarded buy-in as being optional. That inconsistent application of the engagement objectives resulted in the combined programme team having to undertake post-Phase 1 repeat engagement, eating into time needed to prepare other staff for Phase 2. All the facilities and technologies were in place but a sustained focus on behavioural change was missing.

The moves process proved complex too. Without controlling access to partially emptied buildings, some teams took it upon themselves to make full use of their laptops and mobile phones and drift back to their old workplaces; for them it seemed they were getting the best of both worlds: new technology and familiar old workplaces.

Until a more rigorous approach to shutting buildings was in place, the council was slow in delivering its building reductions objectives and indeed the estate technically increased in size for a period. The promised improvements in operational support were slow to materialise too; the new workplace host service designed to offer front-line support to users and actively help them with the transition from old behaviours to new was not in place in time for Phase 1 occupation, and reliance on 'same old' facilities management levels of service and standards fell well short of promised user expectations.

Post-Phase 1 lessons learnt highlighted the need for improved pre-move staff engagement and improvement in the provision of post-move operational service support. But what also became clear was that the organisation was more comfortable with what the BWP programme was delivering than it had anticipated. In the past every workplace change project had been diluted, often by lack of senior management support and too much interference by internal 'experts'. Confidence in ambitions set out at the commencement of projects being actually realised was more often than not eroded and people had become weary of optimistic language around the topic of change. The feedback from BWP Phase 1 was that people were genuinely surprised that what had been promised was not only delivered but had exceeded their expectations. While it was true that some things had not gone to plan, the programme had largely delivered on its promise. The workplace was elegant, the technology worked, mobile devices had been deployed and the ICT infrastructure enabling mobile working was in place. Staff facilities were better than anything they had had before (see Figures 5 and 6).

People previously distributed across many buildings were now collocated and with visibility enhanced by large open-plan floor plates, they could quickly meet and actively resolve issues that had previously taken weeks



Figure 6 'Staff facilities were better than anything they had had before'

to sort by e-mail. Managers started meeting informally and without depending on meeting schedules, ad-hoc sharing of knowledge and experience was seen to be enhancing their abilities both individually and collectively. Cross-team special project workshops became easier to facilitate and greater awareness of what teams were achieving incentivised others to learn from them and share their new initiatives. People were bumping into people they had previously spoken to only by phone or e-mail and as a consequence interaction was easier and things were dealt with quicker than had been possible before.

## STEP CHANGE: CITY HALL AND 100TS PHASE 2

City Hall was designed between the wars and completed in 1952. The architect, Vincent Harris, was classically trained but his work was influenced by art deco. The elegance and simplicity of the building and its internal

arrangement had changed little and so City Hall is regarded by the architectural conservation community as one of the best remaining examples of his work. However, with its 1950s interior updated in places but only to 1980s standards, as an effective workplace and as a resource for the city it was less well regarded and for many it had outlived its usefulness (see Figure 7).



Figure 7 City Hall 1950's office space



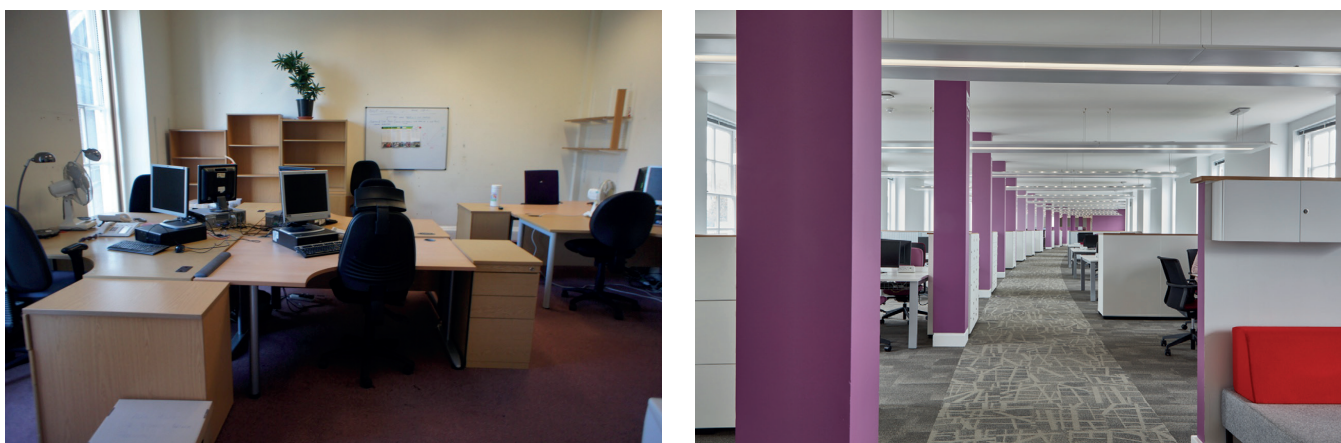


Figure 8 (left) City Hall 1980's 'upgrades' and (right) City Hall gently curving and shallow floorplates

With no apparent option to dispose of it, investment in this c. 125,000sq ft Grade 2★ building would need to be fully justified and the council was very conscious that its actions would be scrutinised, especially at a time of public funding cutbacks. Taking risks with this high-profile building would not be entertained. City Hall is a very different design challenge to 100TS — gently curved with a radiating grid and long shallow-plan floor plates (Figure 8). Yet the BWP original business assumed that permission would be easily granted for City Hall to be gutted and, similar to 100TS, an open-plan workplace solution adopted. Early engagement by the design team, including specialist conservation advisers, with the planners soon reported that permission for that level of demolition would not be granted. After many months of exploration on what was actually possible, Heritage England advised that as the building was of such heritage importance, they would agree to walls being removed on three floors if the main internal dual corridor walls running the full length of the building were retained on the other floors. While some individual office walls could be removed, retention of the corridor walls effectively split the floors into multiple long thin sections. Filling these awkward curved spaces with desks would

be an inefficient use of available space. As a consequence the designers reported that if continuing with that solution, utilisation would only be increased by 25 per cent. Having moved 575 people out of the building for the 18-month refurbishment, the programme was in danger of only moving 720 back.

By this time City Hall was already being emptied. The logistics involved in decanting teams across the estate was of course complex and care needed to be taken to ensure disruption to service delivery was kept to a minimum. Mixed messaging of whether teams were or were not actually to vacate City Hall and confusion of when they would be moved would have been damaging for the teams and for the credibility of the programme. Since the very public process of removing and recycling decades of old equipment, generations of old furniture and vast quantities of unclassified paper files had already commenced, leaving the building intact was not an option. A change in strategy was required. Without clear leadership and without commitment to the designers' updated vision, the programme was at risk.

The outcome of the council's service redesign process and analysis of the future work styles and team profiles had highlighted a significant step up in its requirements.



The council was now more focused on the future and whereas analysis of the teams destined for 100TS Phase 1 had informed the design, allocating 40 per cent of the space for collaborative working and 60 per cent desk space, the profile of teams destined for City Hall was different. If services were to be redesigned and stay fluid enough to respond to ongoing citizen demands, then the council recognised it needed to innovate more. Innovation needed to be at the heart of team thinking and in order to put value on the desirable activities that feed innovation; space, facilities and technologies had to be an integral part of what was on offer in City Hall. The designers developed a new cost benefits strategy for the building and presented it to the steering group. With the council's confidence gained from Phase 1, the designers reassured them that what had first appeared to be Heritage England constraints could be turned to the council's advantage if it would accept that the original desk sharing solution used in 100TS was not the solution for City Hall.

The designers proposed that 20 per cent of the space be designed to facilitate innovation, 50 per cent to promote collaboration and interaction and only 30 per cent to support concentrated individual working, ie shared desk space. With confidence increased after the success of Phase 1, the steering group agreed the principle and the designers looked afresh at the building and its constraints. Where the planners agreed internal walls could be removed on the top two floors, the designers maximised open-plan space with desks and localised collaborative settings introduced in harder-to-plan areas. But where walls had to be retained, the designers focused on more innovative solutions. Challenging conventions that furniture layouts should be fixed, the solutions encourage users to reconfigure work settings themselves to suit their needs. With all staff allocated laptops and mobile phones, mobile furniture is available where desks would have

once dominated and functional work settings in a wide range of different sizes and shapes are created, with adaptability the key ingredient. Furniture can be moved around to expand or contract spaces or moved out of the way entirely if desired (see Figure 9). Writable surfaces are added wherever possible to walls and furniture elements and easy-to-use interactive technology included in open project spaces, not just in enclosed project rooms. Large bookable meeting rooms are concentrated on the first floor (public access area) and kept to a minimum across the workspace, with greater emphasis on quick access briefing rooms and project areas with open meeting spaces and multiple meeting pods freely available throughout the building to use on an ad-hoc basis.

Phase 1 had included a large multi-functional space adjacent to the main conference facilities and an external terrace, popular with staff during lunchtime but used throughout the day for a mixture of informal working activities and out-of-hours events. The type of facility and relaxed style of use was entirely new to the council and was initially regarded with caution. However, it quickly became a busy and popular place and at the heart of planned and unplanned



Figure 9 City Hall innovative workspaces

activities in 100TS. City Hall was to have a facility that built on that. The former ‘Cash Hall’ — an impressive double-storey-height hall originally designed by Harris for the public to pay their various taxes in cash — had been converted over the years into a rather bleak traditional council office space complete with a mezzanine level (Figure 10). The designers proposed the complete repurposing of this large 11,000sq ft space. Re-establishing the hall into one huge double-height space means it can accommodate a high street-style café, multiple work and meeting settings, a stepped auditorium with retractable projection facilities and high-quality audio-visual and sound systems (Figure 11). With furniture that can be easily moved or cleared away and with all mobile technologies and use of WiFi, the space can be transformed for a wide variety of activities (Figure 12). During the day the Cash Hall is a dynamic meeting place, a



Figure 10 Cash Hall bleak workspace



Figure 11 Cash Hall during demolitions



Figure 12 Cash Hall Now

place of exchange and a central hub for the whole building. It is an entirely shared space with no one ‘owning’ any part of it. Many staff report never actually having to leave the Cash Hall; they can work alone or in a group



and do everything they need to do in the various settings within this one space. Out of hours the space is independently accessed and secure so it can be let for community or commercial events (see Figures 13 and 14).

The building is now more accessible and with upgraded toilets, showers and changing facilities the staff facilities are modern and welcoming. Removal of redundant areas of the building cores and circulation areas has increased usable space by 13 per cent. Making use of every part of the building and maximising space, no matter how small or quirky, and converting former stores and vaults has increased the occupiable area of the building by 15 per cent. Adopting agile working and with all facilities now shared and not owned, having moved 575 people out of City Hall, the occupancy capacity is now increased to over 2,200. The council has the space, facilities and technologies to fully embrace agile working. The original business case called for density planning of

75sq ft per person (NIA) based on a smaller measured area of the building and fewer people. Even with the constraints imposed by Heritage England, the council is now achieving 58sq ft per person (NIA).

The business case called for the investment in City Hall to directly benefit the citizens of Bristol and increase its reputation and role as a resource for the promotion of the city. The first floor council chamber, conference hall and committee rooms had always been accessible and well used by the public, but several other rather grand former cabinet and member administrative rooms had over the years been converted into private offices. When built, architect Vincent Harris had used West Country materials and local craftsmen with the intent of connecting the building to the community of Bristol. He had created a building of extraordinary elegance and understated beauty, but over many years interior features and artefacts had been removed or covered over, possibly



Figure 13 Cash Hall Now



Figure 14 Cash Hall Now

regarded as a cleaning and maintenance liability. Through investigation and help from the main contractor, the designers discovered that many of these original elements still existed, including fruit wood parquet floors hidden beneath modern carpet tiles, boarded-up fireplaces and original items of furniture and fittings randomly distributed across the estate. While Heritage England had no influence on how such furnishings, finishes and furniture should be restored, the designers worked hard to balance restoration with the need to update these spaces and increase utilisation and accessibility generally. The entire first floor is now accessible to the public and the investment made in the restoration is now generating increased use and income; the quality of restored spaces available and new restaurant standard catering facilities has expanded the range of events attracted to City Hall. Extended opening hours have resulted in a greater proportion of the building operating as a corporate,

community and citizen event space and with upgrading facilities and technologies, it forms the centralised corporate meeting and conference resources for the entire building.

### LEVERAGING ONGOING CHANGE — OPPORTUNITIES

Bristol City Council's original objective was to rationalise the office estate from 38 buildings to two and as a consequence reduce property costs. The reduced estate was to be repurposed to better facilitate the emerging redesign of citizen services and, by putting greater emphasis on innovation and collaboration, ensure the council was better able to adapt more quickly and cost-effectively to ongoing demands for change. In July 2013 the council's official in-scope staff headcount was 4,000 and the planned end state two city centre office buildings would accommodate 3,500 people, the remainder working from five distributed public facing locality



buildings. That was initially compromised by the constraints on City Hall. But with the designers on board and reporting that the planned service redesign suggested typical work styles being increasingly less office-dependent and with more capacity in the two buildings than originally assumed, the case for how much and what type of space the council actually needs for its own use had changed. Furthermore, as more transactional services shift to digital platforms, fewer administrative posts are required and with budgets under increasing pressure, headcount reductions have resulted. The retained estate will no longer include the five locality buildings originally planned, requiring the two retained buildings to be far more adaptable if the council is to continue to respond to these consequences of change.

Pressure continues to be put on the public sector to reduce costs and improve public services. Where rationalisation was emphasised before, collocation and indeed integration is now being called for. Land and buildings in cities like Bristol have been owned and occupied by multiple public sector bodies — often a council building with a full range of facilities and resources sitting next door to government, with duplication of the same facilities and resources. With agile working enabling people to work effectively from a variety of locations, it is uneconomic to have underused and duplicated facilities ‘owned’ by different parts of the public sector. While there will always be ‘security’ challenges to sharing some parts of the estate, the government’s One Public Estate ambitions challenge councils,

blue light services, health and other bodies to consider what they collectively own and where efficiencies can be gained through collocation. Better still, where public services can be improved, integration and not just collocation is to be pursued.

Bristol City Council’s agile working environments can be accessed and used by collocating partner organisations, but the refurbished City Hall is not just a modern, efficient and effective workplace, it is an additional benefit for the city. It has been reinvented as a hub for the leaders of Bristol to help make the city flourish — not just the council, but all primary institutions, universities, businesses, voluntary sector and community-based groups. For the council, it promotes its role as an enabling and facilitating organisation and for the citizens of Bristol it is more welcoming and more inviting, with larger parts of the building freely accessible and a wider spectrum of upgraded areas available for hosting city events.

What we expect from our civic buildings may have changed since Vincent Harris designed City Hall, but ambitious refurbishment and thoughtful restoration has given the building a new lease of life and provided the council and others with the creative and collaborative facilities they need to work beyond traditional boundaries of space, culture and time.

## REFERENCE

- (1) Jeanne C. Meister and Karie Willyerd (2010), ‘The 2020 Workplace’, Chapter 1, *Ten Forces Shaping the Future Workplace Now*, p. 20.