



What is the 'New Normal' for Facilities Management

A very difficult question to answer with the future uncertain and the Government doing more U-turns than a learner driver. This is mainly due to the conflict between Health, Economics and Well-being but leadership and a strategy is sorely lacking.

How do we return to work safely? And what will that workplace look like?

Despite the Government's drive to get us back to the workplace, the reality is that the number of workers heading back to the office has increased in fewer than half of the UK's biggest cities and town centres, using data from the Centre for Cities High Street Recovery Tracker. Early August weekday footfall rose by just one percentage point compared to the early July in central London and Manchester. While Leeds, Bristol and Nottingham all saw no change and in Birmingham city centre the number of workers has fallen this summer.

This is supported by analysis from US bank Morgan Stanley's research unit AlphaWise which shows that almost three-quarters (69%) of employees in the British capital have not returned to their workplace and that about half (49%) of London office workers are working from home for five days a week.

The persistently low numbers of workers going back into city centres is driving the Government's 'back to work' policy due to its concerns for the future of shops, cafes, restaurants and bars that depend on office workers for custom.

However, this drive to return is not mirrored by many. For example, Alex Brazier the Executive Director for financial stability at the Bank of England and a member of the Financial Policy Committee (FPC) said: "A sharp return to dense

office environments should not be expected. Instead, we should expect a more phased return." Additionally, he said: "I feel safe coming to work, but I quite understand why many people might not." and "It's not possible to use office space, particularly in central London and dense places like that, with the intensity that we used to use it."

This aligns with the Premises and Facilities Management (PFM) Editorial Advisory Board, with several members stating that their facilities were reopening on a gradual basis. The majority were reopening to a small percentage of the workforce initially, allowing Facilities Managers (FMs) and service providers to assess where any changes needed to be made, either to provide colleagues with more reassurance or address any areas to improve social distancing.

There have also been announcements from companies stating that their workers would be allowed more flexibility in their working arrangements. Others have stated that they are not expecting workers to return en masse until the beginning of next year.

PwC's latest CEO pulse survey indicates that over two thirds (68%) of UK's CEOs believe there will be an enduring shift towards low density office usage, with the move towards remote collaboration resulting in long-term changes to office accommodation strategies. Against a backdrop where major organisations and retailers are considering repurposing or closing properties within their portfolios, the survey reflects how changes in how we live and work will impact the business models of construction, infrastructure, real estate and housing organisations as they respond to this 'new norm'.

In summary, companies are unwilling to put their employees at risk with

home working currently the new norm and visits to the office only when necessary until they consider the working environment safe for full time occupation. The lockdown has shown that remote working is feasible for the majority of the office population and that the consequences of home working are starting to fundamentally filter into long-term thinking about existing office accommodation models. There was already a gradual but significant shift in the way people chose to consume – physical retail assets versus online, served via logistics warehousing for example – but with lockdown this home delivery trend has swiftly accelerated into food and perishable items with a new, often more elderly, buyer group joining the younger, tech-savvy generation.

The result is likely to be different looking town centres and suburban areas in future which has larger real asset implications for the built environment with developers and investors needing to navigate this changing landscape.

In short-term, this puts a greater strain on the FMs who have to adapt their buildings to be COVID-19 safe against a background of cost control due to lack of revenue streams and occupying organisations looking to downsize their square meterage or go completely to remote working. The good news for the environment is that reduced occupancy will in the short-term give reductions in energy usage both at building and transport infrastructure level – but this is probably just an illusion and in the long run will probably just be a blip. However, with the current Government adopting a 'Roosevelt approach' of supporting large infrastructure projects to stimulate the economy, it will probably help accelerate progress in the journey to Net Zero Carbon.

So, in order to safely re-occupy buildings and give staff confidence in the environment they are re-occupying, a number of issues need to be considered (the Government's guidelines should be followed - see government websites for the most up to date information).

This requires a number of steps such as those in CIBSE guidance:

- Plan a timeline and scope of works required, taking into account new working practices needed to accommodate specific guidance on minimising the risk of viral transmission.
- For multiple occupancy, the FM will need to hold detailed discussions with the occupiers to find out what their own plans are with regard to re-occupying their working space.
- All activities need to be reviewed as tasks which were previously considered low risk, with straightforward methods of working, may now present new risks and new ways of working.
- The occupier's plan should identify which activities may involve additional health risks in the current circumstances and establish how to avoid or minimise such risks.
- The FM should review the occupier's plan to carry out their activities within the building and consider the impact this will have on the usability of the building and its building services.
- The FM will need to ensure all activities carried out to prepare a building for re-occupation are risk assessed

and carried out following a safe method of working.

- The FM should carry out a pre-occupancy inspection in order to inform and define the extent, timing and order of maintenance and cleaning activities and new cleaning regimes which will need to be put in place.
- Training will be required for the maintenance and cleaning teams on good hygiene practice, to establish activity schedules and to explain the availability and requirements relating to PPE. It is likely that increased supervision and checking of cleaning work may be needed to build staff confidence, including providing obvious evidence that regular cleaning has taken place.
- The FM will need to implement an enhanced cleaning regime, especially where workspaces may need to be used by more than one person during the day, and in 'common areas' or for commonly touched surfaces such as door handles, with more frequent, thorough cleaning following.
- Building managers and occupiers need to consider who will be asked to return to work, activities to be undertaken, working hours, travel plans and the intended occupancy density.

Once the planning is complete you can determine the requirements on building systems, including the supply of domestic hot water, life safety systems and provision of appropriate ventilation rates, as well as entry and exit plans. Although

some services will require more energy, for example for the provision of high levels of ventilation in all occupied areas of the building, there are going to be opportunities for energy saving. For example, if hours of occupancy are to be reduced or less space is used, this will allow optimisation of the Building Management Systems to the new occupancy period and zoning of services to the occupied areas.

Going forward, measuring the performance of a building is going to be difficult with the traditional kWh/m² becoming redundant until some normality is restored, probably around early 2022. Therefore, an option is the use of tailored Energy Performance Indicators (EnPIs) such as kWh/m² occupied, kWh/person and kWh/ no. of hours occupied.

In a lot of ways, things will be different, but some things will remain the same, such as the requirement to do more with less!

Author's profile:

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