



VIEWS

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Is it the end of the traditional 9 – 5?

– *Sam McGrady, Director, DTP*



At DTP, we talk to Registered Providers on a daily basis, and there's one topic of conversation which seems to be cropping up a lot lately: asset management. Many organisations are approaching us for advice on making their assets work better for them. How can we 'sweat our assets' is a question we're asked a lot of late.

How to get more value from your property portfolio is rising up many people's 'to do list'. It's just one part of a growing focus on efficiency savings, as organisations wrestle with some of the challenges forced upon them by reduced rental income, welfare changes and the loss of grant for building new rented homes.

The emphasis is understandably on the homes which RPs already own and manage – the core housing assets where much of the value of their organisation lies.

But in the last six months, almost every RP we have worked with has also been undertaking a review of its office accommodation – and how staff work. I'm seeing encouraging signs that many RPs are 'getting' this and are starting to rethink how this part of their asset base can be re-designed to work harder and smarter.

Here's a few things I've noticed in respect of 'non-core housing' asset management:

Many RPs are shutting area and regional offices where these are no longer economic. This is in part running alongside a 'channel shift' in the way associations engage with customers. The move is away from face-to-face and in some cases even telephone, in favour of online interaction. Cost benefit analysis of these options is throwing up some interesting data. For example, one RP told us they had estimated every face-to-face visit with a customer at a public office cost them £14.

Closing offices, where it's feasible, saves money whether you rent or own the property. The former takes a chunk of outgoings (rent) off the expenses spreadsheet, while selling an office you own, of course, gives you a capital boost which can be invested in new homes. An alternative, if you own the asset, is to rent it out commercially and create a new revenue stream.

Mobile-enabling staff is the other trend we've noticed. This means getting staff out of the office and working remotely in communities, on estates and/or at home. This really can be a win-win for employees, organisations and customers if done properly. And ultimately, it can reduce your need for office space, helping you to further drive down costs.

In some respects, this requires a culture change from managers. It is far from being universally embraced at present. Many managers tell me, "if I can't see staff, I don't know they are working." This is what has to change and requires a complete rethink of performance management to focus on outcomes and outputs. The days of 9-5, office-based working for many housing staff may be numbered. And there are many roles which could thrive from a different way of working.

The benefits of flexible working have to be sold to staff. Do you need to take a couple of hours out of the day for the school run? With flexible working you can do that. You can then put a couple of hours of work in during the evening chasing rent arrears – at a time when you are more likely to find tenants at home. It's another win-win.

When staff do need to go into the office, they are more likely in the future to use a 'hot desk' station than a dedicated work space. Also, what's there not to like about taking the commute out of the working day?

For staff, it's the shift in emphasis to outcomes which will really drive change. There needs to be a change in thinking that moves beyond the traditional office-based working day. Lowering rent arrears, reducing anti-social behaviour, bearing down on re-let times – these have to be the things we focus on, not where our staff are at every hour of the day. Is the job getting done, and is it getting done well, have to be the critical questions asked by managers in the future.

Taken together, these new approaches offer enormous potential for RPs to overcome some of the many challenges they currently face. They show it is possible to have a better run organisation, whose assets work better for the business, its people and its customers – by rethinking our whole approach to assets. In a world of opportunities and threats – I'd surely see this is an example of the former.