

BCO report calls for new approach to space planning as office use reaches critical shift

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[The British Council for Offices](#) (BCO) has published new research revealing a fundamental shift in how UK offices are used, with major implications for developers, investors and occupiers.

The report, authored by Nigel Oseland of Workplace Unlimited, shows that the long-standing benchmark of 80% office utilisation may no longer be fit for purpose. Post-pandemic data suggests a more realistic, but nevertheless conservative, figure of 66% equating to an effective density of 15 m² per occupant, up from the previous 12.5 m².

This recalibration reflects a maturing flexible working model that empowers organisations to right-size their space, reduce waste and enhance employee experience. With high-profile organisations in financial services and the public sector under the spotlight for space misalignment, the report offers timely, evidence-based guidance for the sector.

The study draws on sensor data, observation studies and swipe card access records from across the UK.

Key findings include:

- Utilisation has shifted from 80% to 66%, redefining the amount of space needed per person.
- Mid-week peaks dominate, with Tuesday to Thursday (TW&T) occupancy averaging 40% in UK offices, compared to 30% across all weekdays.
- Corporate occupiers lead the return, with desk utilisation 13% higher than in the public sector.

- Regional offices outperform London, with desk utilisation around 7% higher outside the capital.
- Finance and legal sectors show the highest engagement, with above-average space utilisation.

The findings have significant implications for office design and infrastructure planning. While escape routes are fixed by legislation at 6 m² per occupant, services like lifts and toilets are based on assumed maximum occupancy. The report suggests providing services via incremental modular units and mothballing floors or deactivating surplus toilets and lifts, to align operational costs with actual usage.

The report underscores that low-density, high-utilisation offices are more sustainable than high-density, underused spaces. This balance not only reduces energy consumption but also supports employee wellbeing and workplace satisfaction.

“This shift in utilisation isn’t a setback. It’s a signal,” said Nigel Oseland, author of the report.

“Organisations now have the opportunity to design smarter, more agile workspaces that reflect how people actually work today. A well-utilised, lower-density office can not only be more sustainable – it can also be more productive, more engaging and better aligned with employee needs and expectations.”

As working patterns continue to evolve, the BCO’s report provides critical guidance for occupiers and landlords navigating changing trends. It calls for updated benchmarks and more consistent terminology and metrics to inform future office design, fit-outs and sustainability strategies.

Eric Chong, Director of Research & Policy at the BCO, said: “This report lands at a critical moment. As organisations rethink their space strategies, the data offers vital clarity to help ensure the sums add up. But beyond the numbers, it’s about understanding how today’s workforce — the customers of the office market — actually use their workspaces. Misjudging utilisation is costly, leading to wasted space and poor user experience. This insight helps the sector make smarter, more agile decisions that reflect how people really work — and what they truly need from the office.”