

Outcomes 2024/25

Transforming office space through hybrid working – the SQA experience

Background

In 2021, SFT's Asset Strategy and Workplace team began tracking how the **Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)** was adapting its workplace strategy in response to the pandemic. Fast forward to today, and the transformation has been nothing short of remarkable.

With a workforce of over 1,000 employees, SQA operates from two main locations: **Optima** in Glasgow and **Shawfair** in Dalkeith. As an organisation whose activities ebb and flow with the academic calendar, space usage has always been dynamic. However, the real shift came with the widespread adoption of **hybrid working**.

The challenge

SQA's operational model is uniquely shaped by **seasonal peaks** due to exam cycles. On top of its full-time staff, some 15,000 appointees (teachers, lecturers, subject experts, markers, invigilators and other roles) support the development, delivery, and certification of SQA's qualifications.

This fluctuation in workforce and activity presented a challenge: how to manage physical space efficiently while still supporting collaboration, meetings, and large-scale events.

PRIMARY OUTCOME

8

Effective public assets driving transformation or re-deployment



CORPORATE PRIORITIES



NET
ZERO



SUSTAINABLE
PLACES



INCLUSIVE
GROWTH

The hybrid opportunity

Post-pandemic, hybrid working became more than just a trend, it became a catalyst for real-estate transformation.

SQA saw a significant decline in the need for full-time desk space. Where once 700 people worked in the Optima office daily, now **only 234 workstations** are required at any given time. This opened the door to rethink and repurpose the space to better serve the evolving needs of the organisation and its stakeholders.

Drawing on guidance by our **Asset Strategy and Workplace team**, the SQA took bold steps to transform its working environment.

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The Solution: reimagining Optima

SQA undertook a major reconfiguration of their **Optima office**, vacating two entire floors and reimagining the space as a flexible, multi-purpose environment that better aligns with their hybrid work culture.

New space allocation at Optima:

- **Level 3:** A modern, fully equipped **Conference and Meeting Suite** that supports both hybrid and in-person collaboration
- **Levels 4 & 5:** Core **SQA workspace** for daily operations
- **Level 6:** Transformed into an **event space**, utilising the existing desk infrastructure to host appointee-focused sessions
- **Level 7:** Completely reconfigured into two large **flexible event areas**, outfitted with display screens and advanced tech to support varied events and training sessions

Impact and benefits

For SQA:

- Freed up two floors of office space for strategic use
- Avoided significant costs previously spent on **external event venues**
- Delivered **enhanced support for appointees**: over **10,000 appointee days** have now been supported onsite on an annual basis - an impressive increase from previous years

For the public sector:

- The event spaces are also available to other public sector organisations, reducing **cross-sector dependency on costly commercial venues**
- A clear example of **efficient public resource use**, supporting financial savings and increased collaboration

Conclusion

The SQA's transformation of the Optima office demonstrates the powerful synergy between hybrid working and strategic asset management. Through creative thinking and collaboration with guidance from SFT, they've turned a logistical challenge into a high-impact success story, maximising space, cutting costs, and enhancing service delivery.

Optima now stands as a blueprint for the future of public sector workplaces flexible, efficient, and designed for purpose.

Simon Parsons, Facilities Manager at the SQA, said:
"This project has seen a significant shift in how we approach the utilisation of our estate. The tangible benefits of cost savings have also realised intangible benefits that have made a huge difference to key processes that support our ongoing delivery to the learners of Scotland."