

Open spaces, supple bodies? Considering the impact of agile working on social work office practices

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Keywords: child protection (policy and practice), ethnography, methods and practice, social work (administration)

Accepted for publication: January 2014

ABSTRACT

There has been a shift towards social workers in many areas of the UK being based in large open plan offices and working more flexibly and remotely in space. This approach is commonly referred to as 'agile working'. The paper explores the impact of agile working on social workers' practices and experiences in office spaces. It discusses data from an ethnographic study of children's safeguarding social work teams in two locations. One team was based in a large open plan office and was engaged in agile working, the other team was located in a much smaller office and was not using this approach. Data from observations of practice, analysis of material spaces, and interviews with social workers and those responsible for planning office space are examined. The paper concludes that there are qualitative differences between such spaces which are due to agile working arrangements and which are likely to impact significantly on social workers' experiences of practice, interactions with colleagues and development of practice knowledge. The data also suggest a lack of understanding in social work of the spatial requirements of practitioners and the significance that private and open space has for children's social work in the current UK context.

INTRODUCTION

A spatial shift has recently occurred in children's social work in the UK. Many social workers have moved from relatively small offices in older often converted buildings to much larger open plan offices where they have to 'hot-desk' or use shared workstations. With this shift have come expectations that practitioners work in more 'agile' ways, signalling changes in terms of where social workers do their work, the ways that they use office space and their proximity to colleagues and supervisors. This paper draws on findings from an ethnographic study of children's social workers to explore the potential impact of such changes to social workers' experiences of the work that they do in offices.

While agile working is said to be about working more flexibly across time and space, the shift is not simply about where and when work occurs. Rather it is claimed to be about *working differently*: through

trust-based rather than hierarchical relationships and innovation rather than bureaucracy (Tims 2010). Agile working is said to involve practitioners working more independently and being able to respond to changing demands of services, including changes that cannot be fully anticipated. It requires flatter organizational hierarchies and works best in 'edge' organizations, in which the capacity for making decisions is pushed to those points where frontline practitioners interact with service users (Gillies 2011, 210). Its proponents suggest that it involves focusing on achieving core aims, rather than artificial targets. Agile working is claimed to bring 'people, processes, connectivity and technology, time and place together to find the most appropriate and effective way of working to carry out a particular task' (The Agile Organisation 2010).

All of these things might make agile working seem an attractive prospect for both social care practitioners and users of services. However, there is currently a lack

of critical literature on the subject and that which does exist raises some questions about the reasons for agile working's popularity and its effects on services and practitioners. Gillies (2011) sees it as grounded in a neoliberal conceptualization of the 'entrepreneurial self', where organizations and individuals are required to be ever more agile in order to survive in a harsh environment, eroding concerns for the greater good or for a balance between practitioners' productivity and the impact of work on other aspects of people's lives. There is also a lack of clarity about what agile working actually is, which means that diverse practices are claimed as agile and this helps to explain its increasing popularity in the public sector organizations in which most social workers in the UK are based, where a shift to 'agility' rarely involves a reduction in bureaucratic systems or practitioners having a greater role in making decisions about, e.g. resource allocation. While there has so far been limited attention to these phenomena in academic social work research, agile working and hot-desking have been the subject of frequent discussion on online forums such as CareSpace (<http://www.communitycare.co.uk/carespace/default.aspx>) and in recent articles in *Community Care*, the magazine for social workers in the UK (e.g. McGregor 2012). Most of the discussion suggests negative experiences such as a reduction in opportunities for reflective discussion amongst social work teams and practitioners working in more isolated ways.

The study that this paper discusses should be seen in the context of the small but rich history of ethnographic research in children's social work. While most of this research has been concerned with language and/or interpersonal relations, some studies have also considered spatial practices in social workers' offices and meetings (de Montigny 1995; White 1997; Pithouse 1998; Scourfield 2003; D'Cruz 2004). Ferguson (2011a), in particular, has explored space and mobility in children's social work, although his work has been more concerned with spaces outside of social work offices such as service users' homes and social workers' cars. This paper draws on data from an ethnographic study concerned with children's social workers' ways of understanding, negotiating and talking about the spaces and places in which they worked. It deals specifically with offices and so, while there are some similar themes to previous studies, it seeks to attend more specifically to the issue of space and social workers' practices in relation to it.

The study involved observation of and interviews with social workers over the course of 3 months at each of two sites. The author carried out around 240 hours

of observation in total, which took place in social workers' offices, during meetings with other professionals and in other spaces. Twenty-six interviews were also carried out with social workers, family support officers and other professionals who shared office spaces with social workers or who worked closely with them. Observations were recorded through detailed fieldnotes and, where anonymity could be assured, through photographs and sketches, while interviews were audio-recorded. Ethical approval was granted by a university research ethics committee and by a research ethics committee which covered local authorities across a geographical region. All the data used in this paper have been approved by participants.

Observations and interviews explored participants' experiences of and practices in space, so there was a greater focus on movement and spatial location than is likely to have been the case in most other social work ethnographies. Recently, there has been much discussion about the need for mobile methods in ethnography to attend more specifically to the experiences, processes and effects of movement (see e.g. Anderson 2004 and, in relation to social work, Ferguson 2011b). Others have identified problems with some such approaches, particularly those that assume that researchers' movements alongside participants can enable more direct insight into participants' experiences than a less consciously mobile approach (Housley & Smith 2010). While there isn't space here for a detailed discussion of mobile methods, it is important to raise the question of whether ethnography is ever static. Researchers move about, follow participants around spaces such as offices, and become more and less intrusive in the process. The effects of such approaches need to be considered by researchers whether or not movement is an explicit focus.

The two research sites are referred to here as Lumberton, a medium-sized town, and Alphaville, a large city. In Lumberton, social workers were based in a relatively small office and were not engaged in agile working or hot-desking. In Alphaville, social workers had recently moved to a large, purpose-built office building and were engaging with agile approaches, leading to marked changes in their experiences of practice. Data from the Lumberton site will be explored in more detail in forthcoming publications but are presented in brief here in order to provide an example of how conventional social work office spaces have worked to promote certain kinds of social relations and practices in space. Data from Alphaville are discussed in greater detail in order to provide insights into how a shift to larger office spaces, hot-desking

and agile working has been experienced there. These case studies outline some of the material features of each of the offices alongside description of how social workers move around spaces and what they say about them. In describing material spaces, I seek to develop a discussion that is sensitive to how spaces are produced through spatial practices, representation and lived experience (Jeyasingham 2013).

The paper draws on discussions in architecture and geography about the ways in which spaces such as large buildings influence social relations. Critical studies of architecture have examined how certain configurational qualities of space in buildings such as schools and prisons work to produce forms of subjective experience (e.g. Markus 1993). More recent writing has sought to develop a more attenuated approach to such questions, examining how power operates through aesthetic appeal and symbolic resonance as well as through the guiding of physical movement (Dovey 2010). Meanwhile, writing in cultural geography has questioned approaches to space which are primarily concerned with their representational or articulated meaning, drawing attention to how material spaces impact on and are affected by social relations and individual experience (Lees 2001; Latham & McCormack 2004). Much of this writing is concerned with affect. Adey (2007), for instance, is interested in how airport architecture is designed to produce different affective experiences at different points in people's journeys through the space. Feelings such as excitement, caution and anxiety are created through spaces and the numerous bodies of inhabitants together as they interact. Rose *et al.* (2010) develop these ideas to consider how buildings and individuals that move through them are *co-constituted*. Buildings are understood as 'performative events': while they appear to be solid objects they are actually 'held together' by the ways in which they are used and experienced by individuals inhabiting or passing through them (2010, p. 335). Experience and use are actively involved in the production of building spaces – in other words, spaces change through being used. Approaches such as these enable attention to the material aspects of buildings alongside the symbolic meanings and affective experiences of the space and its wider context.

CASE STUDY 1: LUMBERTON CHILDREN'S SAFEGUARDING TEAM

Lumberton children's safeguarding team deals with a range of short and longer term work relating to child protection and the safeguarding of children

who are 'in need'. It covers the whole of Lumberton, a town with a population of around 90 000 people. The team is made up of social workers, family support workers and one team manager (around 15 people in total) who are located together in part of a larger office space in a 1970s building in Lumberton town centre. They use the open space of their office and the manager's partitioned office next to it for most of their office-based work such as recording, phone calls, informal discussions, formal staff supervision and team meetings.

Lumberton office has particular atmospheric qualities. These stem from material features (e.g. the low ceilings, space dividers and large amount of material in cardboard boxes) that dampen noise, creating opportunities both for periods of quiet and for louder conversations to occur across the wider space while still feeling contained by it. The quietness or loudness of social workers' phone talk, conventions of holding conversations at varying distances, the rhythms of different kinds of work over the day and other actions in space all give meaning to and draw significance from material features of the space. Social workers' practices therefore draw on spatial features to create different atmospheres at different times.

Privacy and exposure in office work

At Lumberton, certain conventions of practice work to produce private, even intimate, time spaces in a comparatively open working space, while privacy is also often proscribed or limited in certain ways and equivalent practices and rituals can be invoked to produce greater degrees of openness or exposure. More private space plays an important role for social workers: it enables them to exercise discretion and sustain their own ways of working with and making judgements about families, and high degrees of privacy and autonomy are afforded to social workers' actions in relation to their own cases in the office. For example, on various occasions, I observed social workers having loud, conflicted phone conversations with service users which were always ignored by colleagues, unless the social workers involved indicated that they wanted people to listen. In such ways, comparative privacy and autonomy in case work practice paradoxically enable social workers to be conscious of a wider range of each others' working practices, even though they mitigate against directly challenging these same things when individuals disagree with colleagues' actions. Certain social rules or conventions operate in relation to this matter: during the research,

social workers discussed and raised questions about the practices of others with each other and with myself as an observer frequently enough for this not to be a social breach. However, I never observed or heard talk about challenges made directly to the individuals themselves, suggesting that if this does occur, it is understood to require discretion or to belong to private contexts such as supervision.

Urgency and interruptibility

While some spatial practices create zones of privacy around social workers, their desks and their cases, other conventions work to produce the office and spaces within it as more public. For example, certain social workers at Lumberton frequently call out questions to the office in general or shout across to admin workers to ask for advice about how to navigate computer systems. Conversations sometimes occur amongst groups of people who are sitting next to each other while at other times they include people located across the whole office area. Discussions about urgent matters or cases that have a high profile in the team often take place across some distance (I measured one interaction that occurred across 6 m, which isn't unusual). Such conversations are often held on the move or tail off while one participant moves away, not before. These kinds of practices are ways in which a sense of fast pace is achieved in the office. Certain kinds of cases acquire a high profile for the team more generally through the open discussion or fast-paced action that they are seen as requiring. They are not necessarily the most urgent complex cases or the ones that involve the greatest amount of work but other elements are important, such as a shocking behaviour by parents or other professionals, the presence of particularly appealing or sympathetic children, or the apparent need for immediate action to protect a child. These interactions serve as important focuses for the team to maintain a sense of itself as having shared values, aesthetics, understandings and priorities.

Some everyday practices are important for establishing the limits of privacy and autonomy in the office. Almost all forms of office work – screen work, conversations with colleagues, even most phone calls – are interruptible in the right circumstances. Participants respond to such interruptions as if they are acceptable (the only incident that I observed when this didn't happen, the interrupting person's face indicated that she viewed the refusal as a breach), and this seems to be an aspect of social work office practice which produces a sense of urgency and shared respon-

sibility for child protection work. This unites team members, especially when they face resistance from other professionals or hostility from service users.

Rituals of spectacle and affirmation

Regular exchanges about child protection and other priority work are important at Lumberton. These are not necessarily reflective discussions but they are powerful in affirming social workers' practices and offering examples to colleagues about how they should make judgements and act in practice. While some office work is seen as private, in other situations it is permitted or even expected that social workers will listen to colleagues on the phone and comment on what is happening, as shown in the following extract from my fieldnotes, recorded at the time of the incident. In this example, Janet has been contacted by a man with whom she worked in the past, who is concerned about his ex-partner's drinking and her supervision of her baby. Janet visited the woman's home earlier but wasn't able to get an answer and the case seems to be becoming one that requires a quicker pace of social work. She has already relayed the events so far to colleagues and there is a sense that the case is both of interest to colleagues and one that Janet can deal with in an authoritative way, because of her historical involvement and because the referrer contacted her directly. She is now talking to the woman on the phone while Naomi, Jonathan (two other social workers) and I have stopped what we were doing and are listening to the conversation:

Janet is on phone, talking to Eve about her drinking. 'I am telling you I will do something about this if you carry on drinking.' Eve appears to be saying 'You're fucking it up for me.' Janet: 'I am not f-ing it up for you, you're f-ing it up for yourself . . . You have a nine month old baby, Eve, I can't allow it. You did so well before . . . You know what you're like when you're drinking . . . I know you love your kids, Eve, but you have to learn to put their needs first.' Janet starts to say that she knew Eve was in when she visited earlier and no-one opened the door. Naomi and Jonathan start to laugh at this. Eve hangs up and Janet relays the conversation to other people in the office. 'I've got a life to live. You're f-ing it up for me.' Janet explains to me that she removed a 5 year old child from Eve earlier. He is now 7 and is placed with his dad. 'She got pregnant but didn't tell me, [the 7 year old's] dad told me she'd had a concealed pregnancy. She's drinking again.' Janet says that she is going to have to remove this child. Naomi asks whether she is bottle or breast feeding, because 'if she's breast feeding the baby's going to be out of it'.

Janet's activity on this case so far and her account of it to colleagues work to produce a sense of quick pace

and with it a higher profile in the office. Other social workers are told about the case and implicitly invited to listen to the phone conversation and comment. The responses of social workers (listening, laughing, Naomi's comment about the breastfeeding) are ones that acknowledge Janet's authority and confirm her judgment about the urgency of the situation.

The data from Lumberton suggest that office spaces operate in a range of ways. They provide private spaces in which social workers can practise with high degrees of discretion, while their practice is simultaneously visible to colleagues. Such offices are also open spaces, where social workers are able to model particular values and understandings of their role. Tacit knowledge about matters such as the nature of people and how to do social work in this particular place are conveyed through ways of talking and moving through space.

CASE STUDY 2: ALPHAVILLE WEST SECTOR

The second site for the research was Alphaville, a large English city with a busy children's social care service. Its West sector has three children's assessment and referral teams, totalling around 20 staff. Social workers in these teams carry out initial intensive assessments such as child protection investigations and establish plans for longer term work where required, before referring cases onto other social work teams.

Over the 2 years prior to the study, several hundred local authority staff from across the West sector were being relocated from various smaller office bases, often in buildings not intended for such use, to a single building that is referred to here as Forest House. The move was intended to address problems such as poor circulation, cluttered environments and overcrowding in the previous offices, while also enabling significant long-term savings for the council. Forest House is one of several large purpose-built or upgraded office buildings for council office workers across the city. The council's internal literature, intended to inform staff about the reasons for changes, highlights certain key principles in the design of the new spaces: security and well-being of staff, accessibility and inclusivity, adaptability, openness and interaction across workspaces and ecological sustainability. Such features are presented as promoting innovation and productivity generally, while enabling a shift to agile working and more efficient use of council office space. Case studies of council staff

engaged in agile working are provided as examples of its benefits. One social worker outlines her average day:

I get into work for about 9am. I log on and check my emails and messages and respond to them. At 11am I look at the reports I need to write up and in the afternoon I try and do my visits as this coincides with the time that children get home from school. This takes me through to the end of the day. I then log-on at home and write up what I have done until 6pm or 7pm where I shutdown for the day.

If I am in court I am usually there for the entire day. I tend to arrive there for 9am and I take my laptop along with me. This means I can work during long periods of waiting time

In this and other case studies in the council's literature, practitioners emphasize features such as flexibility, efficiency, and the opportunity to work outside the temporal and spatial confines of the physical office. Home and work, mobile device and mobile body are presented as merging together and tensions between work and home life disappear.

The council's agile working policy and the spatial qualities of Forest House were frequently debated topics in the Alphaville research, with areas of marked disagreement between participants about their effectiveness and suitability for an activity such as children's social work. Most participants who were based in Forest House were critical of the building, while those in the estates department talked about its advantages over the spaces that it replaced. In what follows, I explore some different ways of understanding space, mobility and the practice of children's social work, which are helpful in accounting for and evaluating the different views of office space that came up in the study.

With the social worker's body as the place of work, wherever it might be, the office building no longer has distinct purposes or qualities. Instead, it needs to offer flexibility – of form, utility, even identity (Braham & Emmons 2005). Buildings such as Forest House are presented as having organic and fluid qualities in order to achieve this. They are able to change their arrangement, even their shape, according to shifting requirements and there is a greater emphasis in promotional literature on the movements and flows which they enable than the building's own form and dimensions. Material aspects of Forest House show how such a sense of flexibility is achieved. Office areas in the building are characterized by horizontal planes of vision: storage furniture is featureless and low while windows are visible in all directions making spaces feel larger, more open and more connected to their surroundings than they actually are. Different zones of

the building – desk areas, kitchen facilities, certain meeting spaces – are incompletely separated from each other, suggesting flexibility about where activities can take place and providing opportunities for movement between areas. Some facilities are intended for a variety of purposes, e.g. the ‘village green’ zones are open to kitchen facilities and so well situated for breaks but they also lend themselves to less structured work discussions. ‘Touch down’ benches provide somewhere to have a break or work for short periods in less formal surroundings. It’s not just space that is constructed as flexible in this kind of architecture but also the bodies that will use it. The council’s promotional literature offers numerous images of the kinds of spaces that are proposed with its new buildings, featuring people interacting informally and others who are walking or engaged in activity on laptop computers. The general sense is of relaxed, mobile, productive workers who are comfortable in the spaces in which they work.

This kind of discussion does not necessarily reflect how a building is constituted through its everyday use. Material aspects of spaces matter in terms of how they interact with and are experienced by users, rather than through the resonances of architectural style *per se*. For example, the internal openness and flexibility of the building’s architecture are experienced in practice alongside requirements for security and seclusion from outside. The low planting that surrounds the building affords open views from the building but makes it difficult to see into it from outside. The reception area does not provide any views or clear paths into the interior of the building, while the reception desk is actually staffed by people who refer to themselves as security, not receptionists. The restrictions on visitors contrast with the freedom of movement of staff who are based in Forest House. They go in and out via a back entrance using their electronic entry cards rather than having to sign in or out. Meetings with service users occur either at home or at another council building a short drive away, making Forest House a space which is separated from these aspects of practice.

The wide pathways and open vistas inside Forest House make the building comfortable and easy for staff to negotiate. During my observations, participants moved around at Forest House without provoking the sense of hectic pace which I had often observed at Lumberton, while the longer distances, wider pathways and gradual transitions between zones seemed to result in smoother and more even forms of bodily movements at Forest House. But does the

sense of smooth mobility that is apparent to the visitor passing through reflect the realities of working in the building over time? Just a few unhurried walkers in a building that houses hundreds can convey such a feel, while most people are involved in quite different activities. Participants’ accounts of their experiences and my observations at the scale of workstations, rather than the building as a whole, revealed a different picture. These geographies consisted less of smooth, supple movements and more of participants who experienced the space as intrusive, felt restrained by it or were struggling to keep their positions in one place. Participants described less interaction between team members and a more solitary experience of practice than they had had elsewhere.

Sound is an important element of this. Office acoustics in Forest House differ considerably from Lumberton. Scale is one reason for this: the section of office space in which children’s safeguarding teams are usually located has almost 100 workstations while the Lumberton office has only 16 desks. Configuration also matters: the space is organized to provide open vistas, allowing social workers to see and locate each other and to identify empty workstations when they need one. The lack of seclusion also functions to prevent workstations being appropriated over longer periods of time while workers are away from the office. However, this openness causes some acoustical issues. Ceilings at Forest House have some sound absorption qualities but these are compromised by the low furniture and lack of partitions, which allow sounds to travel directly and speech to be intelligible across some distance (see Bradley 2003 for a discussion of such factors in large open plan office acoustics). At quieter times, this has the effect of limiting conversations themselves (because they seem more public when they do take place) and it therefore struck me as a quieter space than the Lumberton office. However, social workers generally found noise much more intrusive than I had expected. As Anne-Marie, a senior social worker, explained:

It’s very intense here. Everybody is trying to do stuff and you can’t help but listen in to other people’s conversations, especially if they’re interesting. Open plan is lovely, in the fact that it’s open and spacey and airy, but it’s not conducive to working at all.

One reason why social workers were more conscious of noise and demands for space was because Forest House is most likely to be overcrowded and noisy during periods when social workers most likely want to be there, such as the beginning of the working day.

The volume of speech rises as people find it more difficult to hear each other and levels of ambient noise become distracting. The problem, as many social workers saw it, was the 'agility ratio' (the ratio of workstations to staff), which at Forest House has been altered a number of times but, at the time of the research, stood at one desk for every three social workers and family support workers (team managers and administration staff had their own allocated desks). Having a high agility ratio led to certain times of the day when all desks and many phones were being used at the same time, creating a difficult working environment.

In order to be successful, agile working requires practitioners to embrace the idea of working differently, uninhibited by requirements to do certain kinds of work in specific locations, perhaps carrying out such work at home or at a different time of day. There was a view amongst the Enabling Agile Working (EAW) team in Alphaville's Estates Department that certain factors were impeding these kinds of changes. The following conversation between myself and Colin, Marcus and Amina, people who had central roles in the implementation of agile working across Alphaville, reveals that certain spatial practices in offices were seen as an obstacle to change:

Colin: A lot of people have been around a long time, are set in their ways and it's a case of 'We've always done it this way, and that's the way we do it.' That's the feeling I get.

Marcus: I agree

Amina: Talking to social workers – they were ready and willing to embrace it. But actually middle management, they say – 'I want to see you in the morning and at the end of the day'. So it was a disparity actually between what they felt they could do and what they were allowed to do, really.

Marcus: The biggest issue, and we keep saying it at every presentation, is trust. It really comes back to management. Management like presenteeism and that is basically what it is.

The EAW team recognized the need for close communication between social workers and their managers and they tended to understand this as a relatively predictable, and proactively and mutually sought element of practice. Because of this, they had suggested using systems such as videoconferencing as alternatives to social workers returning to the office simply to update their supervisors. The council also has an encryption system that enables social workers to upload confidential information securely to electronic records from a home or mobile Internet connection. However, in their view, these systems were not being employed to enable practice that was less tied to the social work office. In contrast, my conver-

sations with social workers suggested that they were being proactive and imaginative but with the aim of becoming more rooted in place, rather than less fettered by it. Ari, a social worker, told me:

I understand the logic around the fact that actually, if you're not going to be here all day, let someone else have your desk. I'm fine with that, but just to have nowhere to put things is quite frustrating. We're not allowed to leave things on our desk but, to be honest, we're all human and we're quite protective of our areas, so sometimes, if you go out and you know you're coming back, you might leave your stuff, like leave your laptop there. But I've had it, on a number of occasions, where I've come back and somebody's removed my laptop from the table and just sat and worked in my space. And I don't criticise people for it because it's something you have to do. It sounds like a really petty thing but you don't realise how hard it is until you don't have it.

Sarah also found the impact of agile working disruptive and contrasted it with a nostalgic recollection of her previous office in Edelman House:

There's no togetherness anymore. The very fact that you can go in and you don't know who's sitting next to you is bad enough. I mean I always sit where I sit and usually the rest of my team will be there, so we as a group of people are always over that side and have made that home. But when we were in Edelman House, where we were before, we were just all together and there was much more warmth and you knew what was going on with somebody's kids or somebody's mum. We'd go in and out of the kitchen and have our lunch in there. We don't do that now. We tend to work through our lunch hours.

Colin from the EAW team had a very different view of the same environment, which he saw as reflecting inflexible and hierarchical approaches to work:

I mean, Edelman House – when we took the leases on there, initially it was open plan space, but they created lots and lots of little cubby holes they could sit in, from admin, team managers, all the way through really. It wasn't just social workers, because they needed the confidentiality, it was people at relatively low grades. That's been part of the process through the [new buildings] policy, I think, breaking that down.

Much of my discussion with the EAW team was concerned with what they saw as a mismatch between the essentially mobile nature of social work and common attitudes and practices amongst the social work teams that worked against agile working and reduced social worker's flexibility in space. For the EAW team, this was a reflection of hierarchical team practices and a lack of confidence (of managers, of social workers themselves) in frontline practitioners' ability to work independently and engage with the external environ-

ment. Amina spoke of social workers behaving as if 'invisible walls' existed between what they viewed as their area and those of other teams. Marcus told me:

They like to be in their team. They won't even go with another team of social workers in the same building. That's one of the conversations we've had with [senior management] – the manager keeping his or her team together in an area that they can manage, supervise, oversee. I think, from our point of view, now, it's a bit more broad than that. They need to encourage more collaboration within a number of different teams rather than a kind of silo view.

The discussion amongst the EAW team was organized around persuasive ways of talking about good practice in terms of movement, flexibility, openness, autonomy, sharing, compromise and the unexpected benefits of proximity. This was contrasted with historical and residual practices that were hierarchical, inflexible, secretive and resistant to change, and which had sometimes been expressed through cluttered, compartmentalized physical spaces, sometimes through working practices that maintained divisions and immobility in apparently open spaces. Social workers' accounts of space differed in certain ways. Their talk about the office workspace also featured references to flexibility, reciprocity and connections with others, but these were linked to predictability, continuity and, sometimes, nostalgia. Too much openness was associated with disruption, a lack of cohesion and the potential for dangerous practice. For example, Graham, a team manager now based at Forest House, had this to say about the environment there:

I don't like it, I think it's too noisy and too busy. I've come from an office which was in a converted school. I had my own office, my team had their own room, I shared an office but supervision was never a problem – the other manager would leave and we would reciprocate. There's no team cohesion here, we're trying but it's difficult. And also, if you do want to disappear it's quite easy, I think.

Social work practitioners and those responsible for rolling out agile working in Alphaville conceived of social workspace in ways that were apparently only subtly different but in actuality were grounded in contrasting assumptions about practice. The EAW team were aware of the problems of scarce space and noise at Forest House but they saw this as a result of social workers spending time there out of habit, rather than for a purpose, and being less mobile than they needed to be in order to work effectively. In contrast, social work staff talked about office space as if it signified supportive collegial relationships and they seemed to have affection for office environments which, by objective standards, were not good but which they

associated with collaborative or supportive relationships and successful practice. The frustration for the EAW team was that, when they asked social workers across the city what kinds of spaces they needed for their office work, contact with service users and other professionals, the responses were either inconclusive or led to spaces being provided which were then underused. They told me that social workers were not able to articulate what they needed in ways that the estates department could translate into actual space.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Social workers in this study and many of those who have contributed to recent online debates about agile working and hot-desking have tended to frame social work office space as a valuable resource for discussion, reflection and collegial support. The data from the Lumberton observations suggest a much wider range of practices than these were occurring in the social work office. There was evidence of some reflection and debate but the office seemed to work most often as an indeterminately secluded and open space, one that provided social workers with a significant amount of autonomy about how they practised but enabled them to observe and evaluate the practice of others, develop and convey tacit knowledge about practice, affirm each other's actions and gain a sense of their work as an important and shared endeavour, even though much of it was solitary.

Some of the discussion about agile working in social work has suggested that social workers are rendered more isolated than before. When social workers in Alphaville were in the office, they were usually still sitting close to their colleagues, but those I interviewed said something from previous office spaces had been lost. The study raises questions about whether social workers can gain as much from proximity to colleagues in open offices, where their interactions are potentially observed by people whom they do not know. Do these arrangements promote more supple movements and effective practice or do they result in more inhibited bodies in environments that, while no less busy, are sapped of a sense of shared urgency?

There is a tendency in some current discussions to see previous social work offices in nostalgic terms but a more critical examination is probably useful, one that considers the spatial practices and cultural aesthetics of children's social workers as they constitute and are constituted by the material spaces of practice. Poor buildings have had an impact on service users' experiences of social work services as users of

buildings and also, perhaps, through their impact on social workers' practices. The fact that offices and other spatial features of practice are changing offers some potential for positive developments in social work, but this requires further consideration of what social workers need in terms of space. How much is social work a mobile activity and how much time do social workers need to be still and in the same place? How much do they need to be alone, interact with others or observe others at work? How can communal office spaces and communication technologies be used to promote intimacy, a sense of shared endeavour and greater critical reflection? The evidence from Alphaville suggests that social workers were not articulating answers to these questions in ways that could then inform changes in the use of space that was available. Space is important here, but even ideal empty spaces can come to be constituted as imperfect offices in the context of other influences on current practice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Sue White, Helen Dickinson and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments about earlier drafts of this paper.

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