

bicester brightside

One of the (many) great things about organising Mixology, is that we get to purvey all manner of great people, projects and products. A perfect example of this is the recently short-listed South Central Ambulance Service project, where the NHS, with not an inconsiderable amount of assistance from Metro Design, has showcased cutting edge workspace design.



case study

hmmm, public sector client in combination with design and build company. We think a trend may be emerging here!

Most businesses would consider it an emergency if their communication systems failed, but for the South Central Ambulance Service NHS Trust (SCAS), it really is a matter of life and death.

The need for failsafe communications was just one of the unique challenges faced

by Metro Design Consultants, who was responsible for the inspirational new SCAS premises in Otterbourne and Bicester.

SCAS was created in 2006 following the merger of four ambulance trusts in Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Hampshire and Oxfordshire. As an NHS Trust, the client had very specific objectives: Metro's design had to improve the efficiency of working practices and ultimately represent value for money to the taxpayer.

'The trust actually operates in three divisions,' SCAS Facilities Manager Mike Kerrigan informs us as we meet with him at the new Bicester centre. 'This is the Oxford and Buckinghamshire divisional headquarters, we also have one in Wokingham, Berkshire and one in Otterbourne – which covers Hampshire. There is an added presence here, over and above the divisional organisation, in that this is also our corporate headquarters – so a lot ▶▶▶▶



►►►► of our corporate functions are also based here.

‘In essence this is an emergency control centre, so when a 999 call comes in, it comes in here to one of our operators. We pick it up and as soon as the call is taken, the clock starts ticking. They have to diagnose what is going on with the patient, what is the best sort of response necessary and they will then dispatch the most appropriate ambulance, car or motorbike. This is a 24-hour operation and what we’ve had to do both here and at what we call Southern House (Otterbourne, with Bicester being Northern House) is put an awful lot of money and effort into the background stuff that people don’t see in the design – such as the air conditioning, the generators, the emergency standby equipment and the cooling plant. This is very heavily serviced.

‘Communications are absolutely vital for us. We’ve got two independent electric suppliers, we’ve got generator standby – we’ve got the two jumbo jets over Wembley on Cup Final day scenario. We’ve planned that contingency into our design. It’s not just the nice fluffy bits you see at the front end here. There’s an awful lot of thought gone into things like how people interact.

‘You’ve got to remember where these people came from. The people from this divisional sector, for example; one was based in an old hospital in Oxford and another in a headquarters just outside Milton Keynes. We’ve used this facility as an exercise in new ways of working and getting disparate groups to work more closely. The beauty of this is that it is designed so that people don’t just talk over the phone – you are seeing them as you walk around. You can grab informal chats and save on meetings. It’s a very efficient use of space. We’ve come away from the sitting in a little box mentality and become smarter in that way that we work.

‘We were used to working in silos. The call centre was always open plan, but the support facilities were all placed in different parts of different buildings, so it was all closed off. The effect we have here is open. This is very inclusive.

‘Of course, one of the things that people were worried about was noise levels – but we’ve built privacy into the scheme. We have small meeting rooms built into departments so that if people need total quiet or privacy they can come away from the open plan environment.’

The project at Bicester began in December last year, coming to completion►►►►





▶▶▶ this March. Mike is happy to praise Metro for their diligence – particularly in the face of such monumental IT and service requirements.

Metro beat off fierce competition to win the high profile SCAS contract. The result is cutting edge workspace that is not only visually stunning, but highly functional, energy efficient and cost effective. Little wonder then that the project was short-listed for a Mixology Best Public Sector Interior 2009 award.

As Mike explained, the reliability of SCAS’ infrastructure has been guaranteed with extensive resilience built into its electrical supply. Modern control rooms and a state of the art communications hub are complete with their own fire suppression system. Complex security door mechanisms are used throughout the building, which

have a manual override in case of fire. A sophisticated white noise system has also been installed to improve audio conditions.

At Otterbourne, the 1990’s building posed challenges of its own, but the original structures have been made into design features, with vaulted ceilings creating dramatic and inspiring spaces. Bold colours, glass walkways and effective use of light create a sense of space and tranquillity; an antidote to what can be a highly pressured working environment. The centre is situated on parkland around a reservoir, enabling plenty of parking for staff, who were previously used to the inconveniences of a cramped multi-occupancy building.

The Bicester centre, on the other hand, is situated on the edge of the town, in a small commercial park. “This is a 25-year old building which was essentially a dilapidated

empty shell,’ Mike recalls. ‘We’ve essentially done everything you see here.’

Not that this looks or feels a quarter of a century old. Clever use of glass and branding have transformed the exterior, whilst the modernistic feel is carried through to the interior, which, in the best possible way, says professional business rather than public sector fit-out.

The fixtures and fittings throughout the two centres are design-led, but have been carefully chosen to be fit for purpose and provide optimum safety and comfort for employees. The working space is also extremely flexible, with the use of glass screens to segregate or open up different areas as and when required, whilst gentle curves guide you through the open working areas.

What really catches our eye is the palette of finishes and colours used throughout. From the subtle greens of Miller’s Mirra chairs and the burnt yellow wall finishes, through to the large scale frescos and the delineating carpet design. Public sector? Let’s call it New Public Sector.

In just 14 weeks, Metro has transformed the working lives of over 300 SCAS employees who handle more than 400,000 emergency and urgent calls a year. Their stylish new workspace challenges commonly held conceptions about what it is like to work in a call centre environment and places the NHS at the forefront of workspace design. Now that’s a trend we’ll buy into any day of the week ●

essential ingredients

Client:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> South Central Ambulance Service
Design & Planning:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Metro Design 020 7928 9000
Systems Furniture:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Herman Miller 020 3077 0500 Wilkhahn 020 7324 2900
Carpets:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> InterfaceFLOR Christy Carpets
Seating:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Herman Miller, Humanscale, Offecct, Connection, Naughtone
Lighting:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Artemide, Flos, Clearvision
Flooring:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Amtico, Solus Tiles, Jaymart
Storage:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Silverline, Spacestor, Naughtone
Joinery:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Corporate Furniture Interiors