

DO YOUR HOME WORK



Leigh and Claire Adams bought a live/work unit in Coventry to plan

Can't stand the commute? A new breed of 'flexible accommodation' could be the answer, says **Lynne Greenwood**

Growing numbers of people work from home, some because they don't like commuting, some because modern communications mean they can, others because they want to be kinder to the environment. But doing work at home these days need not mean tapping away at your laptop on the kitchen table.

Developers are now addressing these needs, creating dedicated work areas

or flexible space in both purpose-built and converted properties. Some of the more sophisticated developments, particularly in rural areas, often share a central hub, with communal meeting rooms, administrative backup, even a cafe, to counteract any sense of isolation. And because of their ecofriendly credentials, they have won the backing of government, planners and environmentalists. The most recent census, in 2001, revealed that 2.17m people – or 9.7% of

people in employment – worked from home. Surveys since then suggest that this figure has risen, as more people try to improve their work/life balance. Leigh Adams, 30, is a committed convert to the idea. In 2004, he and his wife, Claire, 24, a recruitment executive, bought a two-storey flat at Electric Wharf, in Coventry, for £98,000. The former power station has 37 live/work units, 39 offices and 50 flats; a final phase will soon deliver 21 three-storey

eco-houses. For the past three years, Leigh and his business partner, Andy Dalton, have run their graphic-design agency, I-creo, from designated work space next to living and eating areas on the ground floor. The flats are open-plan, and Leigh and Claire chose not to have any dividing walls, allowing them plenty of freedom to be creative with the space. Leigh also has a workstation on the top floor, which includes a sleeping and games

area. "I had worked from home before we moved here, but I never had the feel of an office," he says. "Here, I am more disciplined and motivated about starting work early, and I'm able to forget that the bedroom ceiling needs painting." However, he admits he finds it difficult to switch off at the end of a day, and is tempted to check e-mails late at night. The business is expanding, so he and Dalton plan to buy one of the separate offices, although, Leigh says, "I will



Tenants of the live/work flats at the Mechanics Institute, in Huddersfield, are free to use the media centre next door



Jason Conway, top, pays £67 a week to rent one of six studios built over craft workshops at Burslem, above

always retain an office at home, and maybe spend a couple of days a week working from there". He and Claire are also thinking of buying one of the new eco-homes, as they are expecting a baby.

One of Britain's first dedicated live/work developments was created by Places for People, a property management and development company. In 2002, it converted the 19th-century, Grade II-listed Mechanics Institute, in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, into 21 live/work spaces.

Its open-plan flats are offered to local people with start-up businesses at affordable rents. The properties range from

single studios for £130 a week to two-bedroom live/work flats; all tenants can use the adjoining media centre, which houses 50 businesses, for meeting space and administrative support.

"The growth in homeworking is huge," says Dave Power, group head of neighbourhoods for Places for People. "We are looking at a range of sites, particularly in the southeast, where we could offer a range of tenures – some affordable, some low-cost ownership."

Early last year, Touchstone Housing, an affordable-housing association based in Staffordshire, completed six one-bedroom live/work studio flats in

Burslem, near Stoke-on-Trent. They are above three ground-floor craft workshops, and are part of the town's regeneration strategy.

Jason Conway, 35, a photographer and graphic designer, is a tenant. He pays £67 a week for one of the studios, all of which have a central kitchen with living and working space either side. "It's brilliant," says Conway, who has lived there for a year. "Only creative businesses are allowed here, so we have become quite a community, all helping each other. I have divided my flat so that clients step into the office area without having to walk through my bedroom."

Earlier this year, Mitchell Taylor Workshop, a Bath architectural practice, in conjunction with Spaceworks, a developer, gained planning approval for 29 carbon-neutral live/work units on the outskirts of Avebury, Wiltshire. To be called Hangar 45 (a second world war airfield stood on the site), the scheme takes live/work design a step further: all properties will have ground-floor work spaces with a separate entrance. There will be a communal hub, children's play areas and landscaping. Construction is due to begin at the end of this year.

"This is the first sizeable contemporary live/work scheme to gain planning

permission anywhere in the country," says Piers Taylor, a partner in the practice. "Successful live/work schemes are very much the way to go in creating sustainable communities."

Hangar 45 is the most sophisticated of several projects the practice is working on with Spaceworks. It is also developing West End Barns, a 17-house scheme on a brownfield site at Marshfield village, near Bath. Due to be finished by the end of the year, the range of one- to four-bedroom units will cost between £195,000 and £475,000. The team is also building a live/work village at Ross-on-Wye. The first phase consists of 45 homes, although there is an outline plan for 225.

Tim Dweily, a director of the Live Work Network, an information source for professionals in the field, regularly advises government, regional development agencies and local authorities. He gives two main reasons that live/work schemes are being officially encouraged: "One is recognition by government that business start-ups can be easier at home, especially with advances in technology, and can therefore boost the enterprise culture; the second is global warming. Increasingly, people prefer not to commute."

Dweily is advising the Duchy of Cornwall on 30 live/work units proposed for an 850-home, Poundbury-style housing development in Newquay, Cornwall. Meanwhile, in rural Lancashire, the property developer Gerald Hitman has been granted planning permission for 26 units at Brockhall Village, between Preston and Chitheroe. He also plans a 300-strong live/work village at Barrow, south of Citheroe.

Most high-street lenders will provide mortgages to live/work buyers, but many prefer the work space to be no more than 30% of the total floor area. Other factors that may affect their decision include how often the property may be visited by clients, what parking is required, and potential noise.

Live Work Network, 0845 324 5717, www.liveworkhomes.co.uk