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South Cambridgeshire
District Council's

Four day week trial:

How we ran the trial
and what we learned



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What we've done and why

In January 2023, South Cambridgeshire District Council became the first UK Council to trial a four-day week for desk-based colleagues. Approximately 450 colleagues took part in the trial.

Generally, the over-riding aim of a four-day week is to attract and keep talented colleagues. Not being able to fill vacant posts – or having to use agency staff to cover permanent roles – is both costly and disruptive to services for residents and businesses. For example, when case officers change during the process of a planning application, it can cause delays and frustration because a lot of context and institutional memory is lost.

Three months is too short a time period to establish whether or not recruitment challenges have been impacted. Instead, the initial phase of our trial has mainly been about testing whether we can maintain performance levels across the organisation and improve the health and wellbeing of colleagues by finding an innovative way of providing them with more free time. These two elements are key to establishing whether a longer trial is viable.

A four-day week is when colleagues deliver 100% of their work, in 80% of their usual contracted hours, for 100% of their pay.

Productivity

Four-day weeks require everyone to become more productive. We have said since last September when we announced proposals for the trial that it is about colleagues doing all of our work in 80% of our contracted hours.

It's definitely not about doing less work. It's about working smarter and being more productive at work. Since the start of 2023 and following a detailed three-month planning period at the end of last year, colleagues across the Council have been testing this new way of working.

The wider context

During times of growing economic and social challenges, the public sector plays an increasingly central role in protecting the wellbeing of residents, finding a path to sustainable economic growth and improving living standards.

Tighter spending controls have contributed to productivity gains in the public sector over the past decade, but cost savings are no longer enough and there must be new ways to achieve productivity improvements.

With that in mind, productivity can be achieved both by reducing the inputs, such as fewer hours worked, and by increasing the outputs, such as by raising the quality of services. While the trial obviously aimed at reducing the input, it simultaneously aimed at improving the output. The goal was to achieve this by ensuring that colleagues are more motivated, focused and committed in the context of the four-day week.

How individuals became more productive

- Shorter meetings. Sticking to meeting lengths and agendas, and not over-running. Colleagues have become much more confident to challenge lengthy, unfocussed, or unprepared meetings.
- Following the above point, everyone at a meeting is there for a reason, and they know what that reason is.
- Working in the right location for the task being done.
- Getting clarity at the outset of a task by asking the right questions and speaking to the right people.
- Trying new things, failing quickly, learning lessons, and trying again.
- Planning ahead and agreeing on realistic and appropriate deadlines at the start of a piece of work to cut down on urgent and last-minute requests or changes.
- Fewer emails – and carefully considering the number of others being copied into emails.
- Picking-up the phone rather than writing a long email or Teams message.
- Focus time, where you allocate work into a calendar to complete within a certain time rather than leaving it on a 'to do' list.

How teams became more productive

- Empowering the right people to make decisions.
- Ensuring that the job is being done by the right person at the right level.
- A greater focus on improving what we do and how we do it, in a much more efficient and effective manner.
- Ensuring there is no duplication of effort within teams, where multiple people say, 'but I thought I was doing that'.
- Having the opportunity to challenge existing processes and try new and better ones.

A snapshot of some of our key learning

What follows in this document is a snapshot of some of our key learning during these three months.

It is in no way an exhaustive list of everything that went well, and everything that went less well. It is however a series of observations based on our experiences, which we hope are useful to those who we know are interested in this topic, and other UK councils who may be considering testing a similar way of working.

The format for each observation is the same; what we did, what we learned and what we would do differently next time.



The non-working day



What we did

Based on business need and ensuring adequate cover across every weekday, we asked all colleagues to select Monday or Friday as their non-working day, unless there was a pressing business reason to select another weekday. This gave us 'core days' of Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday when colleagues could be confident that meetings can take place.



What we learned

As a result of colleagues taking either a Monday or a Friday as a non-working day, anecdotally we have found that Mondays and Fridays became very productive for those at work. Generally, there are few meetings on Mondays and Fridays which created 'quieter' time and space that was valuable in progressing more focused pieces of work, without distractions. For example, for a colleague who takes a Monday as a non-working day, they may find that their Tuesday can be a little busy as they are catching up, but by the time they get to Friday, and it is time for the other proportion of the workforce to take their non-working day, there is a clear space for work that requires more strategic thinking and focus.

What we would do differently

The discovery of this 'quieter day' came as a surprise to many colleagues and was not something that we had initially factored into our thinking. Had we known that this was likely to transpire, we would have encouraged colleagues to think about how they structure their week with this in mind.



Checking-in



What we did

We hosted an ongoing 'check-in' survey throughout the trial period. This was a simple Microsoft Form consisting of just a few questions that asked colleagues to convey how their week had gone, and how they are feeling, in relation to the four-day week trial.



What we learned

On average, we received 97 responses per week. We asked six specific questions during the trial. All the scores across every question improved as time passed.

The highest increase score came when we asked people to rate how they feel about the statement "I enjoy my time outside of work more". This scored on average 4.56 (on a scale of one to five, with one being strongly disagree through to five being strongly agree).

The remaining questions captured feedback around whether colleagues had enough time to do the role, how the trial made them feel, whether they think about work on days off, whether they complete work on days off and whether colleagues enjoy time at work more. At the ten-week stage, scores ranged from 3.58 to 4.12 for these questions (on a scale where one was the worst score and five was the best).

What we would do differently

Whilst the survey initially captured whether the responder was in a management or non-management role, the comments captured indicated that part-time colleagues did have a different experience during the trial. Subsequently, we therefore added a question to establish whether the responder worked a full-time or part-time contract. It would have been useful to have this in-place from the start of the survey.

Drop-ins



What we did

We hosted several drop-in sessions during the trial, led by our HR and Transformation colleagues who are part of a cross-Council project team.

What we learned

We hosted open sessions where colleagues could come and ask any question they had which was related to the trial. These sessions were advertised internally in advance and generally held using Microsoft Teams. They were well attended by colleagues from a range of different departments and of differing grades.

During the sessions we found that most concerns related to teams introducing bespoke arrangements on a more local level, which was outside of the guidance issued corporately, and not necessarily in-line with that corporate steer. We were able to use these sessions to answer questions, clarify expectations and share recommendations where appropriate.

What we would do differently

As we were keen to ensure that the sessions were as open as possible and all colleagues felt they could ask anything that they like, the conversation was not always relevant to everyone who attended.

Whilst there are benefits to sharing information broadly, we later introduced some sessions that had a specific theme or demographic, to ensure the information discussed benefitted all attendees.



Guiding Principles



What we did

Throughout our three-month planning period (October to December 2022) and during the trial itself, we produced a series of short 'Guiding Principles' documents that aimed to answer common and emerging questions and concerns. These evolved over time – with some guidance issued through these documents providing an updated or slightly different steer on a previous topic as we gained further insight into working practices and experience.

What we learned

Through the weekly check-in survey referenced earlier in this document, and during the drop-in sessions outlined earlier, we were able to collate ongoing themes related to the four-day week from a wide range of employees. Where it became evident that more formal guidance was required to ensure a unified approach, or information was required to provide clarity, we would produce a new Guiding Principles document. This document was then promptly issued to all colleagues across the Council using a range of internal communications channels. Each document contained approximately six principles in the form of a question and answer, designed to provide further guidance around a particular area or theme.



What we would do differently

The Guiding Principles have proved to be extremely valuable and provide clarity and reassurance for our teams. The only improvement for consideration would be to clearly communicate that principles are established based on our knowledge and experience at a specific time within the trial, and highlight that amendments may be made, based on availability of more data. Whilst there was no need to change most of our guidance issued in this way, further points of clarification were provided as we progressed through the trial.

External support



What we did

We invited the Bennett Institute for Public Policy at the University of Cambridge to support our trial.



What we learned

The Bennett Institute is committed to interdisciplinary academic and policy research into the major challenges facing the world, and to high-quality teaching of the knowledge and skills required in public service. By working with them, we have been able to ensure that our data is analysed without any risk of bias. This is hugely important given that this is a trial with robust data at its core – such as the full range of key performance indicators that we are using to determine the success or otherwise of Council services during the trial.

Whilst we have completed our own ongoing reviews of the data, we have also been assisted by colleagues from the Bennett Institute to ensure that the findings are supported by independent analysis. The feedback and support provided ensures that we take a broad view of our data and consider aspects beyond the operational matters of the organisation.

What we would do differently

The Bennett Institute have supported us from the early stages of the trial and have been hugely beneficial to our trial. We would encourage any other Council considering learning from our experiences and trialing this way of working to engage a third-party to provide analytical support at the earliest opportunity to ensure all aspects of the data are considered in full.

A project team



What we did

We created a four-day week project team, which still meets on a weekly basis, and contains representation from several key areas, including Leadership Team, HR, Communications, Policy, Transformation, Learning and Development, Union representatives, the Bennett Institute for Public Policy at the University of Cambridge and Cambridge City Council. This Cambridge City Council representation is especially key given that we share several important services, such as Planning and Waste, and their input as the trial developed was critical.

What we learned

During the planning phase of the trial this working group was created to support and lead on all elements of the Council's four-day week work. The working group has met weekly for six months to discuss a variety of matters including training, the previously mentioned Guiding Principles documents, drop-in sessions, and data analysis. Through the creation of a broad working group, we have been able to address any issues promptly and generally ensure communication has been relevant and timely for colleagues – as well as reactive when needed.

What we would do differently

As the group developed, we were able to recognise knowledge gaps and invited additional members to the group. Starting with a broader coalition of colleagues at the start may have accelerated some of our progress, although this is hard to quantify without running a future trial.



Part time colleagues



What we did

To try and ensure fairness across the board we gave all employees 20% of their weekly working time as non-working time, in-line with the principles of a four-day week. As mentioned elsewhere in this document, for full time employees, this was usually taken as a full day. For part-time employees, this was either taken as a full day where possible, or as part of a day, or resulted in them working their normal days but for shorter periods.

What we learned

While this approach did allow part-time colleagues to pick an option that fit best with their needs, feedback from them was that they didn't always feel they had as much benefit if they weren't getting a 'full day off'.

What we would do differently

Another option is for part-time employees to take a full day off every fortnight, instead of taking 20% of their hours each week. This would have been preferable for some colleagues. It would still result in them working the same overall reduced hours, and potentially also could have increased cover options on Mondays and Fridays.



Communication with colleagues



What we did

During the three-month planning period at the end of 2022, there was a steady stream of continuously updated advice and guidance, as well as information, provided to colleagues. This included via the 'Guiding Principles' documents mentioned above. This internal communication was vital to help colleagues prepare for the trial. We also ran 'red team' sessions (an incredibly quick way to gather feedback on an idea or something you are thinking of doing) and established a hub on our intranet for employees to exchange hints and tips. Another key internal communication mechanism was the establishment of a 'Champions' group across Council services.

What we learned

We were always clear that we felt the best ideas for increasing productivity would come from teams themselves – whereas the more corporate guidance on how the trial was going to run was centrally-issued. However, there were some misunderstandings early in the planning period about how some colleagues may be affected – particularly those on part time contracts. The 'Champions' mentioned above were engaged and acted as useful critical friends throughout the process.

What we would do differently

Along with the centrally issued corporate guidance, an additional idea to consider would have been to encourage even more two-way conversations from an earlier stage. This may have helped the project team clear-up any misunderstandings at an earlier stage. Also, the 'Champions' could have been engaged slightly earlier in the process and been able to act more as trouble-shooters or a 'middle person' for their teams.



Councillors



What we did

We held briefings for councillors when the trial was announced, and during the planning period to update them. We reported to committees with progress updates during the trial itself. We aimed to provide a service that would be seamless for councillors, so that (like residents) there should be no impact on them. At the end of the trial, we surveyed councillors and invited them to roundtables led by the Bennett Institute researchers.

What we learned

The feedback from councillors was generally very positive, with members feeling that meetings with officers tended to be more productive, and time was used sensibly. Councillors also commented positively that officers seemed more motivated and focused.

Many councillors expressed frustration that they weren't briefed about the trial earlier and that they weren't always confident explaining the four-day week to their residents. A number of councillors were concerned about the Waste trial, which they thought was very important, but also more complex to implement.

There was a very mixed picture regarding the accessibility of officers, with some commenting that it had improved (due to clear alternate contacts on email signatures on someone's day off) while others raised concerns that they had struggled to contact the right officer.

What we would do differently

Members themselves suggested that communications with officers would be easier if they had access to Microsoft Teams, which is something the Council is currently exploring.

What some colleagues have said

Now I have adjusted to working four days, I am really enjoying it. My time at work is more focused for more of the time, but by organising my time I am getting my work done. My time away from work feels more focused as well and I have had the time to do things I have been wanting to do.

I am finding it much easier to uphold work momentum during my four days at work than I did during a five-day week. It's a sprint rather than a marathon, and I think I am working much more efficiently, simply by having my tasks lined up for the week and maintaining the motivation to tick them off the list.

For the past two weekends, a parent has been in hospital in another part of the country. I have been able to visit them and recover from this during my three-day weekend. I would have had to take time off or start the working week in a poor mental and physical state without the four-day week trial.

The four-day week encouraged me to join our local network of leisure centres to take advantage of their swimming and exercise classes which I'm really enjoying.

I find it difficult to fit all my work in to 30 hours. I enjoy only working four days, but those four days are longer than normal hours.

It is far more of a culture change than I imagined it would be.

Feeling more productive and driven to complete tasks within the four days to be able to reward myself with the extra day off. Weekends feel less pressured and rushed too!

Need to get in touch?

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