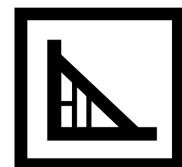


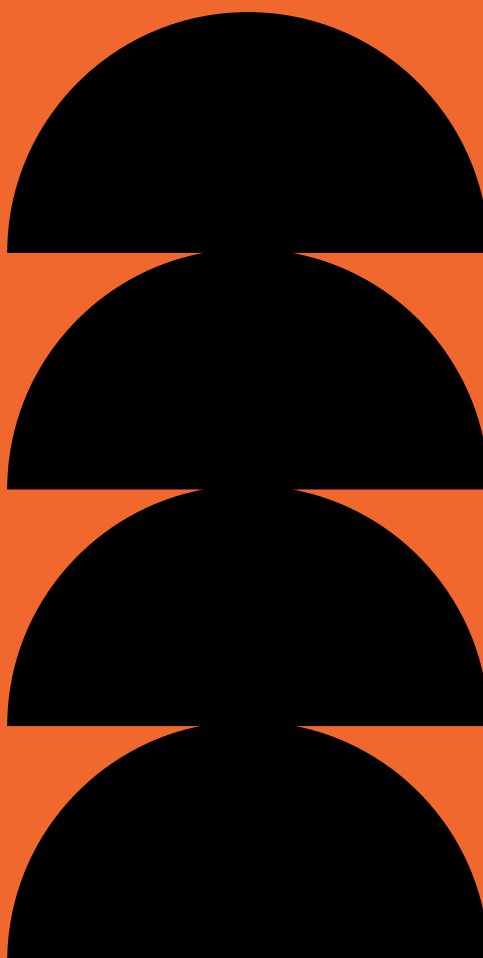
South Cambridge District Council's Shift to a Four- Day Week:

Evidence, Outcomes and Lessons for Local Government

Prof Brendan Burchell, University of Cambridge
Prof Daiga Kamerāde, University of Salford



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Headline Findings

- In 2023 South Cambridgeshire District Council reduced working hours for all employees, so that working four days a week became the new norm.
- £399,263 was saved annually, mostly from filling vacancies permanently instead of using expensive agency workers.
- 21 of 24 Key Performance Indicators were maintained or improved.
- By July 2025, based on 27 months of data, SCDC voted to make the four-day week permanent, becoming the first council in the UK to do so.

Back in 2022 South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) were facing the same problems as many other local authorities in England.

- Demand from residents was increasing, but following austerity cuts to local government, they were hard-pressed to maintain a good service.
- Salaries in some occupations were not competitive with the private sector, so they were losing good staff and struggling to replace them, even with expensive recruitment bonuses and market factor supplements to pay.
- They were forced to use costly agency staff in many roles.

This all contributed to low employee morale. Having exhausted all available tools to recruit and retain employees, and support them at work, the council decided to try a bold approach that hadn't ever been tried in local government in the UK. They saw that there had been very positive results from trials of a four-day week in the private sector in the UK and elsewhere.

- Employees would get a 20% reduction in their weekly working hours without any cut in pay, and they would work more efficiently to get the same quantity and quality of work done without having to hire additional staff.

There was agreement by the leading group on the council (Liberal Democrats) to trial this new arrangement for three months in the first instance.

The Trial

The trial began in January 2023 with the SCDC office staff. Most staff would take either Mondays or Fridays off. Council services would still be as available as before, for instance Monday to Friday, or 24/7 for emergency services. The initial results were sufficiently positive for the trial to be extended in September 2023, adding in the council's shared waste service, which is run jointly with Cambridge City Council. Staff were expected to complete the same workload in fewer hours, with the council aiming to solve long-running recruitment and retention problems.

By July 2025, based on the data for 27 months of staff working four-days a week, SCDC voted to make the four-day week permanent, becoming the first council in the UK to do so.

The decision to extend the trial to frontline services followed a similar logic: the Greater Cambridge Shared Waste Service had for several years been able to fill only around 133 of its 148 driver and loader posts, relying on an average of 15 agency staff at any one time, with agency usage having reached as high as 20% of the workforce in previous years. A four-day week was seen as one way to address this shortage, timed to coincide with a route optimisation exercise that was needed in any case to rebalance collection rounds against housing growth.

KPI Performance

A particularly important source of evidence in the trial was the Key Performance Indicator (KPI) data, which showed that performance was not harmed by the shorter working week.

21 of 24 service KPIs were either maintained or improved, with 10 showing statistically significant improvement. This evaluation was conducted independently by three universities. Three KPIs showed deterioration during the trial period. A range of factors beyond working time arrangements may have influenced these three outcomes, including wider economic conditions and lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (and one of these three KPIs measured the performance of an outsourced housing maintenance service rather than that of council employees.).

It is important to note that the KPI numbers were not based on a vague

impression of success; they came from measured service indicators, where the council had data going back eight years against which to compare the trial. In practical terms, the council reported, for instance, improved planning decision times and better performance in benefits processing. The waste service also maintained a 99.89% success rate while handling nearly 800,000 collections a month.

Retention

One notable finding is that staff turnover fell by 39 per cent after the trial began. That is a substantial change for a council struggling with recruitment and staffing pressure, because lower turnover usually means fewer people leaving, less disruption, better retention of skills, and less reliance on temporary cover. The trial also reported improved motivation and morale, which helped keep staff in post.

A useful way to read this is that the council offering a four-day week may have become a more attractive workplace, which in turn reduced the “leakage” of staff out of the organisation. The report’s findings on wellbeing and work-life balance reinforce that explanation.

By October 2025, several months after the council had voted to make the arrangement permanent, turnover had fallen further still, to 41 per cent below pre-trial levels, suggesting the retention gains were not a short-term novelty effect but had been sustained.

Recruitment

Recruitment also improved in measurable ways. The council successfully recruited 134 new colleagues during the trial, the average number of applications for externally advertised jobs rose by 53 per cent, and 76 per cent of new hires said the four-day week had influenced their decision to apply.

Cost Savings

The financial case was nearly as important as the service case. The council said it was saving around £399,263 a year, largely because it had become easier to fill vacancies and therefore rely less on expensive agency staff.

The savings matter because they help explain why the council considered the policy sustainable in the longer term even before the wellbeing argument is considered. If a council can retain staff more effectively, reduce churn, and avoid agency premiums, it can improve its budget position while maintaining service quality. In other words, the experiment was sold not as a perk, but as an efficiency reform.

Much of this saving came from reduced agency spending: of 22 hard-to-fill posts examined during the trial that had previously relied on agency staff, 10 were filled permanently, generating an annualised agency saving of £483,000. These savings were partly offset by the cost of extending the waste service's vehicle fleet to operate a four-day collection pattern.

Employee Wellbeing

The wellbeing results were a major part of the council's case for permanence. Another independent report from an HR consultancy said staff had experienced better work-life balance and improvements in health and wellbeing as well as increased motivation, and commitment.

This is significant because wellbeing was viewed not simply as an additional benefit, but as one of the mechanisms through which the model was expected to operate. Lower stress and better morale can reduce absenteeism, improve concentration, and make retention easier, which then feeds back into better service delivery.

Disabled Workers and Carers

The results for disabled workers and carers were disproportionately positive – in

other words these employees saw even more benefit in their wellbeing than other employees. Some of these employees also reported that without the four-day week they probably would have left the council, but that this innovative working pattern enabled them to stay in work.

Political Opposition

The trial attracted substantial political scrutiny throughout its duration. SCDC Conservative councillors argued that residents should not be paying council tax to fund an extra day off for staff, and some said there was no reliable proof the model worked; one said she had received over 300 emails from worried residents, while another described the policy as unfair and “a slap in the face” to taxpayers. Nationally the Conservative government criticised the scheme, attempted (unsuccessfully) to stop the trial and warned other councils against following it. In opposition, they have continued this position. There was also criticism from the Taxpayers’ Alliance.

After the trial had completed and after the general election in 2025 there was also criticism from one senior Labour minister.

Despite criticism from political opponents and sections of the media, the council's elected leadership continued to support the initiative. The Liberal Democrats that introduced the trial were subsequently re-elected in 2026 gaining all but two of the seats (previously nine seats were held by the Conservatives). It is not possible to determine the extent to which the four-day week influenced voting behaviour. Although the four-day week remained a politically contested policy throughout, it withstood an unusually intensive period of independent and government data scrutiny without the underlying performance case being undermined.

Why It Was Permanently Adopted

The final vote in July 2025 made the four-day week permanent. The deciding factors were the combination of service stability, cost savings, and better recruitment and retention. In plain terms, the council concluded that it could deliver public services at least as well as before, while also making the organisation healthier and easier to staff.

Overall Assessment

The South Cambridgeshire trial is notable because it combined three things that are often hard to achieve together: stable KPIs, lower costs, and better staff wellbeing. It did not produce perfection; there were minor teething problems (for instance in the mentoring of new recruits) and critics pointed to weaker spots in satisfaction data. Even so, the council concluded that the evidence was sufficiently positive to justify making the arrangement permanent.

Why It Matterred

These recruitment and retention gains had a knock-on financial effect. The council said the lower turnover reduced recruitment pressure and helped generate around £399,263 in annual savings, largely by cutting agency-worker costs. So the staffing improvements were not only a human-resources success; they also fed directly into the council's budget.

The broader lesson is that flexible working can be a powerful recruitment tool in local government, especially where pay is not especially competitive. SCDC's experience suggests that time flexibility can sometimes matter as much as salary in attracting and keeping staff.

What Other Councils Can Learn From This

South Cambridgeshire's experience suggests that a four-day week can be one possible option for councils seeking to address recruitment, retention and workforce wellbeing challenges. The results indicate that, under the right conditions, reducing working hours can coincide with stable service performance, improved staffing outcomes and financial savings. A [report](#) by the Autonomy Institute estimated that if implemented in local governments across the UK, a four-day week could create around £1 billion of savings per year in total.

South Cambridgeshire's experience indicates that achieving positive outcomes from a four-day week depends on thoughtful preparation, service redesign, workforce engagement and ongoing monitoring of performance. South

Cambridgeshire invested considerable effort in planning, monitoring performance, redesigning working practices and engaging with staff and residents throughout the process. The council also closely tracked service outcomes and was prepared to adjust where necessary.

The South Cambridgeshire experience also points to a workable sequence for councils considering a similar move: trialling office-based services first, where redesign of workloads and meeting culture is more straightforward, before extending the model to frontline services such as waste collection to complement operational changes.

Every local authority operates in a different context, with different workforce pressures, service demands and political circumstances. The key lesson may therefore be less about copying a particular model and more about being willing to test innovative approaches to longstanding workforce challenges, while collecting robust evidence on what works and what does not. The experience in South Cambridgeshire shows that, when delivered well, a four-day week in local government holds potential to improve service delivery, quality of employment, and financial management.

The South Cambridgeshire trial provides the most detailed example currently available of how such an approach can be implemented and evaluated in local government.

This document provides a brief overview, written by academics involved in evaluating the trial. More detailed information and updates can be found at <https://www.scambs.gov.uk/four-day-working-week>.

Some drafting of the document was assisted by AI.

Corresponding author, Prof Brendan Burchell, bb101@cam.ac.uk

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The Autonomy Institute is a not-for-profit independent research institute that creates data-driven tools and policy to strengthen democracy and build the future economy. Working time reduction is one of Autonomy's core focus areas, from prospective research and economic analysis to pilot plans, case studies and costings. In 2022, Autonomy co-designed and evaluated the UK four-day week pilot. The Institute also works directly with individual organisations in the UK, Europe, and beyond on working time reduction projects, and was the Scottish Government's expert partner for its shorter working hours pilot in 2023–2025. Autonomy coordinates the European Work-Time Network, a pan-European network of over 70 trade unionists, academics, activists and policymakers focused on working time reduction.

Professor Brendan Burchell's main research field is the relationship between employment and wellbeing. In the past ten years he has focussed specifically on Working Time Reduction. He has been involved in many Four-Day Week research projects through his research at the University of Cambridge and as a Fellow of Magdalene College, Cambridge. He was one of the independent researchers who evaluated part of the South Cambridgeshire District Council Four-Day Week trial.

The 4 Day Week Foundation leads the UK's national campaign for a four-day working week. We campaign to build awareness, share evidence, and grow a national shorter working week movement – bringing together businesses, employees, and policymakers to rethink working life.

Professor Daiga Kamerāde is a social scientist at the University of Salford whose work focuses on working time, wellbeing and organisational change. She leads Four4All, a major Horizon Europe project exploring how shorter working time can be introduced in ways that support productivity, employee wellbeing and effective service delivery. She was part of the research team evaluating the four-day week at South Cambridgeshire District Council, examining its effects on organisational performance. She works with employers and policymakers to translate research evidence into practical lessons for workplace change.