

Report proposes next steps following Council's four-day week trial

1 year ago



A new report outlines how [South Cambridgeshire District Council](#)'s four-day week trial has seen £434,000 less spent on agency staff covering hard to fill roles.

This has been achieved by filling 10 permanent roles that the Council previously struggled to recruit to – particularly in the Planning Service, where the private sector pays more. This has led to the reduction in spending because directly employing staff in permanent roles is much more cost effective than hiring agency staff that the Council was relying on.

Under a four-day week, officers are expected to carry out 100% of their work, in 80% of the time, for 100% of the pay. The Council's opening hours have been maintained so that they have been at least what they were before the trial – and have been extended on Wednesdays. There is evidence elsewhere that working a four-day week means people got more done in less time. Similar trials are taking place across the UK, Ireland, and in the USA.

The Council introduced the four-day week trial in a bid to improve services by filling hard-to-fill posts permanently, rather than relying on more expensive agency staff. It also aims to retain colleagues as regularly changing staff, or using agency employees to cover posts, is both costly and disruptive to services for residents. 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.

The four-day week trial for desk-based staff began in January 2023, to help attract and keep talented colleagues in an incredibly competitive local employment market. This includes staff at Greater Cambridge Shared Planning, a service shared with Cambridge City Council.

The Bennett Institute for Public Policy at the University of Cambridge independently reviewed the Council's data from the initial three-month trial. They looked at data from 18 different key areas, covering performance in Planning, Housing, Transformation, Human Resources and Corporate Services and Finance.

The data showed that nine out of the 16 areas monitored show substantial improvement when comparing the trial period from January to March to the same period in 2022. The remaining seven areas monitored either remain at similar levels compared to the same period last year or saw a slight decline. The Bennett Institute noted however that not a single area of performance fell to a concerning level during the trial. The Council also plans to have the data from the 12-month trial independently reviewed after the end of March 2024.

A trial for crews at Greater Cambridge Shared Waste, another service shared with Cambridge City Council, commenced in mid-September 2023. This didn't start at the same time as the initial desk-based trial, due to the complexities and time required to reorganise bin collection rounds for around 128,000 households across Greater Cambridge. Collection rounds are reviewed every few years to ensure they remain efficient and balanced as new homes are built, and the changes were made at the same time as a scheduled review.

In December 2023, the Government announced that they were consulting on the possibility of using 'financial levers' from 2025/26 to disincentive councils from working in this way – but no further details have been published on what these measures could be. As a result, the Council's plans to carry out a consultation shortly after the end of the trial in March this year – before deciding whether to become a permanent four-day week employer – cannot go ahead.

The Council report, published today (Wednesday 21 February), outlines how the Council needs to understand the full implications of any proposed changes from Government in order to run its own consultation effectively – as a consultation at this stage could mean consulting again once that information has been provided. The report therefore proposes that the Council continues with its four-day week arrangements, until the Government has provided the required information. Once this is known and understood a consultation can then be carried out, results analysed, and Councillors at a Full Council meeting can decide on whether to become a permanent four-day week employer or not.

The report, set to be discussed by South Cambridgeshire District and Cambridge City Councillors in the weeks ahead, shows how it has cost £434,000 less employing colleagues permanently, rather than using agency workers, to cover 10 posts that could not previously be filled. This covers the period from when the trial was announced to the end of 2023.

In addition to the 10 roles which have been recruited to permanently, the Council identified further posts that were being covered by agency staff at the start of the trial. Two of those posts have been deleted, and as part of the Council's continued Transformation work – which is expected to deliver additional savings of £2 million – a further 10 roles have been absorbed into other roles or are externally funded.

The Council is only including in the four-day week cost reduction calculations, roles where agency staff were being relied upon before the trial, that are now filled with permanent colleagues.

The Council's agency spend still fluctuates due to the need to bring in agency staff to carry out short term programmes where permanent staff are not required – such as administering the Government's Homes for

Ukraine initiative locally.

There are also savings expected to be realised through reduced sickness absence due to the health and wellbeing benefits to staff from the four-day week. These benefits are expected to be most significant in roles that are more physical – such as amongst waste crews where musculoskeletal injuries can be more commonplace than in desk-based roles. A reduced overall fuel cost for Greater Cambridge Shared Waste, owing to the route re-optimisation programme and four-day week collection pattern, is also anticipated to deliver savings to the councils.

The performance data collected during the trial will be analysed and assessed following the end of the formal trial in March this year and the report recommends that Councillors consider this data at a Full South Cambridgeshire District Council meeting by the end of July and at a Cambridge City Council Strategy & Resources Scrutiny Committee too.

South Cambridgeshire District Council's Lead Cabinet Member for Resources, Cllr John Williams, said: "Our four-day week trial is about improving the consistency of services to residents and businesses – by helping us attract and keep hold of talented staff in a hugely competitive job market. We know we cannot compete on salary alone and so must find new ways of tackling our recruitment and retention issues. These are particularly acute in South Cambridgeshire due to the cost of housing locally. Importantly, we've spent £434,000 less on using agency staff to cover 10 roles we classed as hard to fill before the trial. This is because, since announcing the trial, we have been able to fill these roles permanently – rather than using agency workers to cover.

"We expected to be able to run a consultation about the four-day week shortly after the trial ends at the end of March – but the Government's own recent consultation into using financial levers to disincentivise councils from proceeding with a four-day week means we now can't. We need to understand what the Government mean by this before we can effectively consult. Today's report therefore sets out the proposed next steps."

Cllr Mike Davey, Leader of Cambridge City Council, said: "The key thing for us is working out what's best for our residents. So far during the trial we've seen high standards maintained in the services we share – planning and waste – with a five-day service maintained for planning and no changes made to the frequency of bin collections. We're looking forward to seeing the full analysis later this year, once the trial has concluded, at which point we'll be able to further interrogate the data to determine the extent to which a four-day week can help deliver high-quality services for residents."

The report will be discussed at the Council's Employment and Staffing Committee on Thursday 29 February, before Cabinet members will decide on the trial's next steps at their meeting on Tuesday 12 March. Given the involvement in the trial of Greater Cambridge Shared Planning and Greater Cambridge Shared Waste staff, the proposals will also be discussed at Cambridge City Council's Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Committee meeting on Monday 25 March.

- The report considered by the Council's Employment and Staffing Committee and Cabinet can be found within the [meeting agenda](#)