

Government recognises Council's 'constructive engagement' as Best Value Notice expires

1 year ago



The Government has removed a Best Value Notice that was given to [South Cambridgeshire District Council](#) for its four-day week working arrangements.

The Council received a six-month Best Value Notice from the then Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in November 2023. It was extended for another six months in May 2024. However, [in a letter today](#) (Friday 8 November) from the recently named Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), the Government says the Notice will not be reissued.

Today's letter from MHCLG states "We recognise the Council's constructive engagement with the department throughout the period of the Notices, including your cooperation with the request for data about the impacts of the four-day working week trial. As the Deputy Prime Minister set out in her letter to local authority leaders on 16 July and reiterated on 24 October at the Local Government Association conference, this Government is committed to working as partners in power, with mutual respect underpinning our approach. This means an end to micromanaging local authorities."

The letter also outlines how MHCLG believes that "local authorities are independent employers who are rightly responsible for the management and organisation of their own workforces."

The Leader of South Cambridgeshire District Council, Cllr Bridget Smith, said: "The results from our four-day week trial painted a really positive picture, with many of our services improving. This was along with the hundreds of thousands of pounds of taxpayer money we saved, improved recruitment and retention

plus incredibly significant positives around health and wellbeing.

"We have spent the last year having to submit around 200 pieces of raw data to Government every single week in response to this now-expired Best Value notice – providing lots of evidence demonstrating our Council is functioning very efficiently. Disappointingly, at no point were we given any feedback on the data from Government. As today's letter from MHCLG clearly points out – there is now agreement that councils themselves are best placed to consider what works best for them when it comes to recruiting and retaining the best staff to deliver high-quality services for residents."

Under a four-day week, officers are expected to carry out 100 per cent of their work, in around 80% of their contracted hours, for 100 per cent of their pay. The Council's opening hours have been maintained so it has been open for business just as it was before the trial – with longer opening hours on Wednesdays too.

This summer, an [independent report by two universities](#) into the Council's performance during its four-day week trial was published. Of 24 key performance indicators monitored by the Council, analysis by the Universities of Cambridge and Salford found 22 improved or remained the same. The areas found to have improved included percentage of calls to the Council's Contact Centre answered, average number of weeks to determine householder planning applications and average number of days to process Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support changes.

There was also a financial assessment of the trial, which outlined a known full year cost saving of £371,500. This was mainly due to permanently filling 10 posts that were previously identified as 'hard to fill'. The financial saving reduced the Council's budget overspend as a result of not needing more expensive agency alternatives to fill the 10 posts.

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, which can also be disruptive. For example, when bin lorry drivers leave, it can disrupt collections when new drivers are learning bin routes or agency drivers cover them as replacements are trained. 11 lorry drivers left the Council in 2022, but only five did in 2023 after bin crews joined the trial.

Since the formal trial finished at the end of March 2024, four-day week working at the Council has continued whilst the Council awaits information from Government.

During last year's Local Government Finance Settlement consultation, the previous Government consulted on the potential of using financial levers to discourage councils from adopting four-day weeks. Until there is more clarity on this, Cabinet members considered it not feasible for the Council to carry out a meaningful consultation of its own and decide on next steps.

However, whilst that information is awaited, the Council continues to plan for a consultation – which could take place early next year if the new Government's Local Government Finance Settlement for 2025/26, due to be provided in mid-December, provides clarity on the financial levers threatened by the previous Government.