

Council votes to permanently adopt four-day week following extensive independent analysis

6 months ago



[South Cambridgeshire District Council](#) has voted to become the first Council in the UK to permanently adopt a four-day week – after rigorous independent analysis showed most services got better or were maintained, with significant improvements to recruitment and retention.

Under South Cambridgeshire District Council's four-day week, staff are expected to carry out 100 per cent of their work, in around 80 per cent of their contracted hours, without reduction in pay. All Council staff will be able to opt-in under a Productivity Policy.

Independent analysis from the Universities of Salford, Bradford and Cambridge highlights how 21 of 24 services they monitored have improved or stayed the same since four-day week working began at the Council in 2023. Those areas which saw a statistically significant improvement include:

- The percentage of calls answered by the Contact Centre.
- The average number of days taken to update Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support claims.
- The average number of weeks for householder planning applications to be decided.
- The percentage of planning applications (both large and small) decided within target or agreed timescales.
- The percentage of Council house repairs complete within 24 hours.
- The percentage of complaints responded to on time.

If performance variations caused by COVID are discounted, every single service monitored either got better or stayed the same.

The number of applications for jobs at the Council rose by more than 120 per cent during the four-day week. Beforehand, only around eight in 10 jobs advertised were filled – sometimes only five out of every 10. The number of workers leaving fell by more than 40 per cent – helping provide benefits to communities through greater stability of services.

The Council has also cut the amount it has to spend over its budgets on staff. There has been a yearly saving of £399,263. This is mainly due to filling vacancies permanently – rather than using more expensive agency workers, which can be disruptive for residents as officers change.

The four-day week has seen more staff say that they intend to continue to work for the Council, a key factor in reducing turnover and high vacancy rates. Mental and physical health and motivation have improved.

Further independent research by the University of Cambridge details how the four-day week has benefited disabled colleagues, those with medical conditions and carers.

The Council initially ran a three-month trial of a four-day week at the start of 2023 to help to ease acute recruitment and retention challenges. That trial was extended for one year. The Council then had to run a public consultation – which took place earlier this year – before being able to determine the next steps. Four-day week working has continued in the meantime.

An independent report from market research company DJS Research into that consultation outlines what responses showed about residents' perception and experiences of services during the four-day week.

A representative survey shows people felt there had been no statistically significant difference in their experience of nine services. There was a perceived decrease in three services. Elsewhere in the same survey, 45 per cent of people expressed support for the four-day week – but there were a range of responses.

This comes after Local Government Association surveys found that, nationally, people's overall satisfaction with their local council fell from 72 per cent of respondents being 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied in 2012, to 62 per cent in 2022, and then to 56 per cent in 2024.

The four-day week data was discussed at Monday's Scrutiny and Overview Committee. District Councillors then voted at the [Thursday 17 July 2022 Full Council meeting](#) to become a permanent four-day week employer.

As South Cambridgeshire District Council is the employing authority of two services which it shares with Cambridge City Council – Greater Cambridge Shared Planning and Greater Cambridge Shared Waste – these shared service colleagues have also been working a four-day week. Cambridge City Council is due to consider whether to support the continuation of the four-day week in these services at their Full Council meeting on Thursday 24 July. South Cambridgeshire District Council's decision is therefore subject to the outcome of the Cambridge City Council discussions.

The Leader of South Cambridgeshire District Council, Cllr Bridget Smith, said: "We've shown that well-

rested staff, with the time to stay in good physical and mental health, are highly motivated to deliver the improvements that all of us in local government strive for. In a modern workplace like ours, where staff feel hugely valued, reducing working hours doesn't mean compromising on quality. Work is not just sitting at a desk for a set number of hours every week; it's about what you do, how productive you are and delivering excellent services for communities. When planned carefully and with a laser focus on performance, the four-day week helps people focus better and work more efficiently. With the right structure and support, teams can deliver just as much – if not more – while also having more time for their wellbeing and personal lives. South Cambridgeshire had particularly acute recruitment and retention challenges due to the high cost of housing locally. I strongly believe the four-day week has solved this problem for us."

South Cambridgeshire District Council's Lead Cabinet Member for Resources, Cllr John Williams, added: "Since we introduced the four-day week, the difference in recruitment and retention has been remarkable. We've seen job applications more than double, which means we're attracting a much wider pool of talent. At the same time, fewer people are choosing to leave, helping us build more stable teams that deliver more consistent, quality services for residents and businesses. That's not just good for staff – it's good for residents and local businesses too. It means we're not constantly re-training new people or relying on expensive agency workers. As a result, our services are more consistent and, in many cases, better, and we're saving hundreds of thousands of pounds by reducing our dependence on agency staff. The four-day week is helping us be financially secure and fit for the future, delivering better value for money and services for residents."

Cllr Cameron Holloway, Leader of Cambridge City Council, commented: "We've supported from the outset South Cambridgeshire's progressive thinking on tackling the recruitment and retention crisis affecting councils up and down the country.

"Our primary obligation is to our residents, and so we're delighted that the shared planning and waste services have continued to be delivered to a high standard throughout the four-day week, and that the Council has saved money in those services. The waste service as a whole makes nearly 800,000 collections per month and has maintained a success rate of 99.89%, while the planning service has improved in key metrics such as the time taken to decide planning applications.

"I'm glad that Council workers – who, let's not forget, are our neighbours, friends and family, as well as providing vital services to residents – have benefitted from a better work-life balance and have seen improvements in their health and wellbeing.

"Our councillors are looking forward to discussing the recommendation to support South Cambridgeshire's decision to become a permanent four-day week Council at our forthcoming Full Council on 24 July. In the 21st century, with all the technological advantages of modern life, we should aspire to a society where people have a positive work-life balance and can live healthily and happily. We need forward-thinking organisations to pave the way for that to happen."

Daiga Kamerāde, Professor in Work and Wellbeing at the University of Salford, said: "In the industrial era, more hours usually meant more output. In today's knowledge and service-based economy, growing evidence suggests many organisations now achieve more by working smarter, not longer.

"By making its four-day week permanent, South Cambridgeshire District Council becomes the UK's first

local authority – and joins more than 30 private and non-profit employers – to move from pilot to permanent practice after seeing productivity and staff wellbeing hold steady or improve. For organisations struggling to recruit while service demand rises, a shorter week is increasingly viewed as one strategic option to attract and retain talent to ensure service delivery.

“Our independent evaluation – carried out by researchers from the Universities of Salford, Cambridge and Bradford – tracked 24 objective performance indicators. The methods are open and replicable, giving other councils a transparent template for evidence-based decisions and adding to the growing research that challenges the long-held belief that longer hours automatically mean better performance.

“The evidence indicates that smarter working can deliver equal, and in some cases better, results for residents, taxpayers and staff. We, the research team, will continue to expand our four-day week studies – analysing new data, publishing peer reviewed findings and feeding that evidence back into practice – because good science and practice evolve.”