

Public sector impact studies

Local government: A four-day week to solve a recruitment crisis





The problem

Public services across the UK face a profound recruitment and retention challenge, an issue that is particularly acute in areas with a high cost of living. South Cambridgeshire District Council was experiencing a severe staffing crisis, struggling to attract and keep key professionals like planners and waste collection drivers who were being lost to a vibrant local private sector. This talent drain resulted in the council frequently going over its budgets to hire expensive agency staff, who could not provide the same continuity or quality of service as permanent employees.

This public sector impact study is based on a talk at Productivity Pitches, a series of events hosted by the Institute for Government and The Productivity Institute, which aims to share and support ways to improve public sector performance levels. The talk is available to watch on the [Institute for Government's website](#).



The innovation

In response, the council embarked on trial for a four-day working week. The innovation was not simply a reduction in hours, but a fundamental change to the work contract, built on three key components:

- *A productivity-based model:* The trial was founded on the '100-85-100' principle where staff deliver 100% of their work output in 85% of their contracted hours in return for 100% of their pay. The fifth day off was positioned as a reward to be earned through increased efficiency and intensity, not an automatic entitlement.
- *Full five-day service availability for the public:* This was achieved by requiring staff to stagger their non-working days (typically a Monday or a Friday) to ensure that all services remained fully staffed and accessible throughout the entire standard working week. Emergency on-call services were also maintained on a 24 hour a day, seven day a week basis.
- *Bottom-up implementation:* Rather than imposing a rigid new system, leadership empowered individual teams to redesign their own work processes to find the necessary efficiencies. This led to a range of team-specific solutions. Some adopted new communication rules like making phone calls instead of sending emails, while others used shared digital planners to track every task. This fostered a culture of shared ownership over the trial's success.





The impact

The results of the trial, which were independently assessed by university partners ¹, demonstrated clear evidence of improved productivity.

- *Resolved the staffing crisis:* Staff turnover fell by 39%. Job vacancies attracted 50% more applicants, who were of a significantly higher calibre than before. Over three quarters of new recruits during the trial cited the four-day week as a key reason for accepting a job.
- *Significant financial savings:* The council has seen a significant reduction in overspending on staff, leading to direct cashable savings. This is because it has been possible to stop using agency workers to cover posts the Council wanted to fill permanently. As a result, an overall ongoing annual net saving of £399,263 has been achieved.
- *Enhanced staff wellbeing:* Employee health and wellbeing metrics improved significantly compared to baseline data gathered before the trial, with staff reporting increased commitment to the organisation, better mental and physical health, and higher motivation.
- *Broadly improved service performance:* The evaluation showed impressive performance gains across the council, with statistically significant improvements in key services like planning, finance, and emergency repairs. Alongside these successes, it also revealed that performance declined in some housing services, notably rent collection and the time taken to re-let properties.

1 The model was assessed in two waves. The first study can be accessed on the [Bennett School of Public Policy's website](#) and the second can be accessed on the [South Cambridgeshire District Council website](#).



Takeaways

The case study shows how rethinking the work week can boost public sector productivity. The model's success lies in a new employment contract, in that it exchanges the less productive periods of a traditional five-day week for four days of highly focused work. The reward isn't a cash bonus, but the highly valued gift of time. This provides a compelling non-financial incentive, allowing a public body to compete for talent more effectively than modest pay rises ever could.

The project's success was also driven by its implementation strategy. By empowering frontline teams to redesign their own processes, the council unlocked a wave of practical innovations. Staff-led solutions moved beyond simple process efficiencies to address fundamental workflow design, helping to ensure that the right job was being done by the right person at the right level. This demonstrates that genuine productivity gains are often best achieved by harnessing the expertise of the people who do the work every day.

Finally, the initiative highlights the critical role of courageous and data-driven leadership. The council faced considerable political opposition from central government but defended its right to innovate by meticulously collecting and publishing performance data. By subjecting their results to independent academic scrutiny, it built a strong case that the model was delivering better services, saving public money, and creating a healthier, more motivated workforce.

The council's vote to make the four-day week permanent, held in July 2025, was therefore a victory for evidence-based innovation. It helps to prove that local leaders can drive productive change when they have the courage to innovate, alongside the rigorous data needed to prove their case.

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