

Fancy a day off? What the four-day week might offer housing

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**4 - DAY
WORKING
WEEK**

Introduction

More UK employers are operating a four-day week, meaning staff work 80% of their normal hours for the same pay.

A four-day week not only helps with recruitment and retention but can mean that employees are less stressed and more motivated.

This briefing looks at how a four-day week can operate in practice, talking to housing associations that took the plunge and introduced shorter hours.

Key points

- Four-day week trialled successfully by a range of UK employers
- Shorter hours with no loss of pay seen as a way to recruit and retain staff and improve employee welfare
- Some housing associations trialling or operating four-day weeks with support of staff
- Shorter hours help associations to compete with other employers in recruiting key staff
- Trial continuing at South Cambridgeshire District Council, including housing and planning departments
- Government yet to give other councils the go ahead to trial or introduce four-day weeks.

What is the four-day week?

A four-day week allows employees to work 80% of their normal hours in return for the same pay.

Employers choose how it operates in conjunction with staff, along with the specific days worked by individuals. This generally depends on how many days per week the organisation needs to open or offer customer service.

[Campaigners argue that people in the UK work some of the longest hours in Europe](#) while at the same time having one of the least productive economies. With the UK having invented the weekend in the mid-19th century, they argue, a revised approach to working hours is long overdue.

Moving to a four-day week not only benefits individuals by freeing up more leisure time, but offers advantages to the economy, environment and wider society.

Less stressed employees are likely to be more productive, enjoy better health and reduce their carbon footprint. A four-day week should also boost gender equality in the workplace, giving people more time for childcare and caring, or simply spending time at home or in their local community.

How might the four-day week operate?

During the final six months of 2022, 61 UK employers trialled a four-day week among about 2,900 workers. This saw five different versions of the four-day week piloted:

- **Fifth day stoppage:** all staff work the same four days each week and the company or organisation closes for a fifth day, plus the weekend. Works best when employee collaboration is important and it is not essential to be open for more than four days per week
- **Staggered:** employees take different days off each week (normally under a rota arrangement) so the organisation is open or operates for the same number of days as before
- **Decentralised:** departments or teams devise their own work patterns or rotas, allowing some staff to work a four-day equivalent over five shorter days (see Merthyr Valleys Homes case study below)
- **Annualised:** staff work an average of 32 hours per week, calculated over a year. Means employees may work longer hours when demand is highest, while working fewer hours for the remainder of the year
- **Conditional:** a four-day week is granted, based on performance. Can lead to managers suspending the arrangement if performance suffers, returning to a five-day week.

What did the pilot show?

The pilot, organised by the 4 Day Week Campaign, [was judged by organisers to be an overwhelming success](#).

Before and after data showed 39% of employees were less stressed, with 71% reporting reduced burnout. Levels of anxiety, fatigue and sleep issues also decreased, while mental and physical health improved.

People found it easier to balance work with family and social commitments, with 60% of employees saying it was easier to combine paid employment with care responsibilities. Absenteeism due to sickness fell by 65%.

Companies' revenue stayed broadly the same during the trial, rising by 1.4% on average (weighted by company size). But the change in working hours helped significantly with retention. The number of staff leaving participating firms fell by 57% over the trial period.

Fifteen percent of employees said no amount of money would induce them to return to working five days after becoming accustomed to a four-day week.

[A further trial is due to get underway this autumn](#). Training and workshops will start in mid-September, with a full launch on 4 November.

Which countries operate a four-day week?

Internationally, employers in Australia, Europe and North and South America [are either operating or trialling a four-day week](#). In the United States, the switch is quite common among software companies.

Two years ago, Belgium became the first European country [to legislate a four-day working week](#). However, employees still work the same number of hours as before, leading to longer working days.

Since 2023, government employees in the United Arab Emirates (equivalent to 90% of the country's workforce) have been able to work a four-day week if they choose.

In Iceland, there was a major shift towards four-day week working following a national trial between 2015 and 2019. Businesses in France are increasingly offering four-day weeks, while Germany began a pilot study in February.

Which UK employers operate a four-day week?

Among the employers taking part in the UK's first four-day week trial were marketing firms, charities, care providers and firms in the financial services sector. But four-day weeks do not suit everybody, with Asda forced to scrap a trial among managers after they complained they were overworked.

In 2023, South Cambridgeshire District Council began a four-day week trial that remains ongoing. It includes the Council's housing department and the joint planning service it runs with Cambridge City Council.

Early results were encouraging, with [independent studies showing](#) that more planning applications were determined on time, while fewer were overturned by inspectors. Claims for Housing Benefit were also processed faster.

However, rent collection levels are still below the long-term average, while the number of days taken to re-let council homes remains below target.

Overall, the Council demonstrated improvements or no change in performance for 22 out of 24 indicators, with staff turnover down by 39%. Less money is being spent on recruitment advertising.

Prior to the general election, the Conservatives threatened to ban four-day weeks in local government. Labour is thought to be less opposed, having included proposals for four-day working in its 2019 manifesto.

However, the government has yet to withdraw a best value notice, issued last November, which requires South Cambridgeshire to produce weekly data on staffing levels, sickness and telephone calls and emails received.

For the time being at least, other local authorities are refraining from trialling four-day weeks. The first housing association to trial and then introduce a four-day week was London-based Causeway Irish Housing association, in 2017 (see below).

In Scotland, Melville Housing association moved to a four-day week in 2023, opening Monday to Thursday. The change was made permanent at the start of this year.

According to Kirsten Dean, Melville's Head of Finance and Corporate Services, the shorter week rewards staff at a time when the association cannot afford hefty salary rises. Tenants may still pay rent, report repairs and check their rent accounts seven days per week.

"It's not a perfect solution but it's a compromise that both staff and customers support" [said Dean at the start of the trial](#). "We'll be putting in place measures to ensure that we maintain our high service levels and we'll be monitoring performance closely throughout the year."

In Wales, Merthyr Valleys Homes began piloting a four-day week in 2022, and made the switch permanent this summer (see below). Bron Afon Community Housing is in the throes of a four-day week trial.

How might the four-day week benefit housing organisations?

Potentially, a shorter working week helps employers counter skill shortages, aiding recruitment and retention.

Surveyors and IT specialists are among staff in demand not just across the housing sector but the wider economy. A shorter week can also attract other housing professionals who wish to spend less time in the workplace.

Nor does a four-day week need to be confined to office roles. Such a change has been considered, though not widely adopted, [in the construction industry](#). Earlier this year, a report by the Construction Skills Network flagged up the need [to recruit 251,000 extra workers by 2028](#) – above previous estimates.

Are there any legal implications?

Moving to a four-day work week may require employers to vary employment contracts but any modifications do not need to be major.

Changes to working hours and to contracts should be made with the consent of staff to avoid claims of constructive dismissal. Where existing contracts stipulate specific hours or working days, they may need to be amended.

Mutual agreement when altering hours and other terms and conditions is recommended to protect both the employer and employee. Thus, any four-day pilot should be discussed fully with staff beforehand.

Where an employer moves to a permanent four-day week, they will need to consider how this affects part-time staff and holiday entitlements. Where an employee's holiday is expressed in days, this will need to be reduced.

However, an individual can still take the same number of weeks' holiday per year, as they will only use up four days' entitlement (rather than five) for each week taken off.

The four-day week in practice

Merthyr Valleys Homes

Staff at Merthyr Valleys Homes (MVH) have been working a four-day week without any loss of pay for more than two years.

Following a trial that began in June 2022 and ran until this summer, the housing association made working four days per week permanent for all employees from July 2024.

MVH, a mutual housing association run by tenants and staff, employs just under 250 staff, including some part-time workers. At the start of the trial, part of a wider national pilot, the association agreed that four-day working would apply to everyone, regardless of their job role. But it was also stressed that the change must not adversely affect services, with employees required to be as productive, if not more efficient, than before.

During the pandemic MVH employees became more used to flexible working, with many working from home. *“They told us that a healthy work-life balance was of utmost importance”* says Ruth Llewellyn, the association’s Assistant Director of People.

The pandemic also meant staff were appraised more on outcomes, rather by the hours, or days, spent in the workplace. Traditional ways of working were challenged, including the number of meetings that were held.

MVH’s decision to join the national pilot was approved by its democratic body, made up of 11 elected tenant representatives and eight elected employee representatives. The democratic body makes reviews services, approves MVH’s corporate strategy and appoints its board.

Under the new arrangement, full-time staff work a 30-hour week instead of 37 hours. This is generally spread over four days, with individual departments or teams drawing up a rota to ensure a service is provided five days per week.

In a few cases, employees opt to work five shorter days, meaning they juggle their hours around responsibilities such as childcare. Hours of part-time staff are calculated proportionately.

Employee contracts remain as before. According to Llewellyn, four-day working demands that all staff are more accountable for their time and take ownership of performance. *“It’s based on 100% pay for 80% of the time, but leading to 100% productivity”* she adds.

Since the trial began in 2021, staff turnover has fallen from 10.37% to 5%. More than 90% of staff report improved physical and mental health.

The four-day week also makes MVH a more attractive employer locally. This is especially important for recruiting surveyors and IT specialists who are in demand in other sectors, as well as in housing. *“We’ve managed to recruit some really good candidates”* says Llewellyn.

Merthyr Valleys Homes was created 15 years ago when tenants voted for a stock transfer from Merthyr Tydfil Council. It became a mutual in 2016.

Eight years later, she adds, would-be employees see MVH as an innovative organisation that is willing to take risks while at the same time putting staff welfare first. *“It was a brave decision to start the trial but an even braver one to make it a permanent arrangement.”*

Causeway Irish Housing Association

Seven years ago, the Deputy Chief Executive of Causeway Irish Housing Association came up with an idea for rewarding staff without increasing the association’s pay bill.

Instead of working five days per week, Alan D’Arcy proposed that office staff and support workers worked just four. The move was designed to retain staff at the London-based association, which owns or manages 240 general needs homes for young people and provides a range of specialist services.

“As a very small organisation there’s only so much that we could offer people to stay in terms of financial incentives” says D’Arcy, who is now the association’s Chief Executive. *“So, we offered them time instead.”*

Following a trial in 2017, the switch became permanent the following year and while the shorter week works very well for office-based staff, it can be more difficult for support staff who work face to face with clients and may need to see them on a frequent basis.

“Our core staff have remained constant, but there’s been a higher turnover in support workers on some contracts” he explains. *“In the case of support workers, their job does not stop on a Friday. It can be three or four days before they next see their client.”*

Virtually all Causeway’s 22 employees are contracted to work 32 hours per week over four days. For staff with children, it means paying less each week on childcare. Others use their day off for training and development, or enjoy a greater work life balance.

Causeway is the largest provider of LGBT supported housing in the UK and holds contracts to support vulnerable people, such as care leavers and child asylum-seekers.

Rotas are juggled so that not everybody takes Monday or Friday off. Another issue is that Causeway regularly deals with organisations, including local authorities, that operate five-day weeks and expect a five-day service. Office rotas need to be carefully managed to ensure service remains responsive over five days.

“It would be easy if everybody was working four days” says D’Arcy. *“When you’re a four-day week organisation and provide services to organisations that function on a five-day basis, you have to work extra hard to ensure there are no communication delays.”*

But the offer of a four-day week can help with recruitment. In August, a newly appointed housing officer admitted during her interview that she was attracted to the post by the shorter hours. *“It helps to recruit and retain staff who are not frontline facing, but it has to be tightly managed”* he adds.

Conclusion

A four-day week is not a panacea for all employers but appears to offer a potential solution to recruitment and retention challenges that is also popular among staff.

In any five-day period, some employees are bound to ask whether they really need to be in work. The growth of home or hybrid working during the pandemic gave many staff a taste of flexible hours that they wish to see continue in the longer term.

On the other hand, some housing staff struggle to fit everything into a 37 or 40-hour week, especially those meeting clients or customers face-to-face.

It is the need to be available to customers at least five days per week that probably explains the reticence of many social landlords to consider reducing the hours of staff.

But as the wider economy moves towards four-day working, both in the UK and abroad, housing organisations are advised to stay ahead of the game and perhaps consider whether offering their staff more leisure time might also lead to improved performance.

Points to consider

- Has your organisation considered switching to a four-day week? What impact might it have on employees and overall performance, or on your business plan?
- Do any of your suppliers or contractors operate a four-day week? Does it work successfully and can they share any benefits?
- Which model of four-day working is likely to be most suited to your organisation?
- What can be learnt from employers that abandoned four-day week trials?

About the author

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