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Independent report analyses Council's four-day week trial

An independent report into South Cambridgeshire District Council's performance during its four-day week trial has been published.

11 key indicators monitored by the Council were found to be performing better during the trial, compared to beforehand. This covers areas such as call answering times, timeliness of planning decisions, how long it takes to process benefits claims and speed of emergency repairs to Council homes. The areas found to have improved are:

- The average number of days to process Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support changes.
- Staff turnover, which has dropped by almost 40%.
- Major planning application decisions made in time.
- Major planning application decisions overturned.
- Smaller planning application decisions made in time.
- Smaller planning application decisions overturned.
- The average number of weeks taken to determine householder planning applications.
- The percentage of emergency repairs to Council homes completed within 24 hours.
- Percentage of calls to the Council's Contact Centre that were answered.
- The percentage of complaints responded to within timescales.
- Invoices paid within 30 days.

A further eleven key performance indicators were found to have no significant differences during the trial, compared to before.

The two areas that were exceptions in terms of performance during the trial period were housing rent collected and average days to re-let housing stock. Housing rent collected either hit or was just below the Council's target in the 15 months of the trial, but overall collection rates were below the long-term average, indicating that rent collection has not recovered to pre-Covid levels. The cost-of-living crisis may have been a factor in this performance.

The other area is the average number of days taken to re-let Council homes, which has an ambitious target of 17 days - with the top 25% performing Councils in the country averaging 37 days. Returned Council homes now also often require extensive works which take longer to complete.

The analysis was carried out by researchers at the Universities of Cambridge and Salford who evaluated the Council's key areas of performance over a number of years – including during the full length of the four-day week trial from the beginning of 2023 to the end of March 2024.

XXXX from the University of Salford commented: **INSERT QUOTE HERE**

The independent analysis from the Universities is part of a package of reports that South Cambridgeshire District Councillors will discuss during the weeks ahead. The reports will be considered at the Employment and Staffing Committee on Monday 15 July and Full Council on Thursday 18 July.

Given South Cambridgeshire District and Cambridge City councils share important services such as waste and planning – Cambridge City Councillors will also receive an update about the trial, and specifically how these shared services have performed.

POSSIBLE QUOTE FROM CITY COUNCIL HERE.

The report to be discussed by Councillors also shows a financial assessment of the trial, which outlines a known full year cost saving of £TBC. This is mainly due to reduced agency spend on 10 posts that were previously identified as 'hard to fill' and have since been recruited to permanently.

Meanwhile, recruitment data shows how there has been a 53% increase in the average number of applications for jobs advertised externally and more than 130 new staff have joined the Council. 76% of new starters were influenced by the four-day week trial when deciding whether to join.

Also included in the update for Councillors are the findings of another comprehensive health and wellbeing survey of staff. The Council has carried out several of these surveys in recent years – both before and during the four-day week trial. The latest findings from Robertson Cooper show that, since the start of the four-day week at the Council:

- The biggest change seen is for the 'Health' measure which has significantly improved from an area of caution before the trial to a score that is now in the top 20% compared to other organisations.
- Productivity amongst staff has increased.
- There has been improvement to employee commitment, with more staff reporting that they intend to stay longer working for the Council, a key factor in reducing turnover and high vacancy rates.
- Mental health has improved, along with physical health.
- Motivation has risen.

South Cambridgeshire District Council's Lead Cabinet Member for Resources, Cllr John Williams, said: "The independent analysis from the Universities of Cambridge and Salford paints a positive picture of the vast majority of our services during the four-day week trial. It shows either improvements or no significant difference to the quality of our service for residents in 22 of the 24 areas measured. For the two areas where we have seen an exception to this positive trend, there are clear and sensible explanations and context to help understand why this is the case. Coupled with the hundreds of thousands of pounds of taxpayer money that we have saved during the trial, improved recruitment and retention and positives around health and wellbeing –

this brave and pioneering trial has been a success, and all District Councillors will now be able to discuss these reports at our upcoming meetings. Our approach has been centred around 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 have needed to find bold new ways of tackling our recruitment and retention issues. These are particularly acute in South Cambridgeshire due to the cost of housing locally.”

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 bin lorry drivers leave, it can sometimes disrupt collections when new drivers are learning bin round routes or when agency drivers cover them while replacements are trained. The report to be discussed by Councillors outlines how 11 lorry drivers left the Council in 2022, but only five did in 2023.

Under a four-day week, officers are expected to carry out 100% of their work, over four days or pro-rata for part time colleagues, for 100% of the pay. The Council’s opening hours have been maintained so that the organisation has been open for business just as it was before the trial – with longer opening hours on Wednesdays too.

Since the formal trial finished at the end of March 2024, four-day week working at the Council has continued. Cabinet members agreed this would be the case until further information is provided by Government following their Local Government Finance Settlement consultation at the end of last year. The Government consulted on the potential of using financial levers in the future to discourage councils from working in this way. Until there is clarity about what those financial levers are, it is not feasible for the Council to carry out a meaningful consultation of its own and decide on any next steps. You can read more about the Council's four-day week [on its website](#).

Ends

Notes to Editors

The report due to be considered by the Council's Employment and Staffing Committee and Full Council can be found at:

<https://scambs.moderngov.co.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?MIId=9795&x=1>

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