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***Shaping Public Sector
Transformation: The Promise
of a Four-Day Working Week***

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Executive Summary

This paper explores the resurgence of the Four-Day Working Week (4DWW) and its potential for transforming the UK public sector. Historically rooted in the 19th-century labour rights movements, the 4DWW has re-emerged as a solution to modern work-life challenges, particularly in response to growing concerns around employee wellbeing, burnout, and productivity. With increasing interest in shortening the workweek across both public and private sectors, local councils in the UK, faced with recruitment, retention, and financial pressures, are now considering the 4DWW as a viable long-term strategy for improving service delivery while enhancing workforce satisfaction.

The paper examines key themes, such as the relationship between working hours, employee wellbeing, and productivity. In the public sector, where stress and burnout are exacerbated by resource limitations and high demands, the introduction of a 4DWW could significantly improve employee wellbeing. Research indicates that reduced working hours can alleviate stress and boost productivity by encouraging employees to rethink and streamline their work processes. However, the complexity of measuring productivity in the public sector, where intangible factors such as workplace culture play a significant role, remains a challenge.

Another focal point of the paper is the role of strategic adaptations, such as job crafting and the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI), in facilitating a successful transition to a 4DWW. AI has the potential to automate repetitive tasks, freeing up valuable time for employees to focus on more meaningful work. While early trials of the 4DWW have shown positive outcomes in both private and public sectors, the findings suggest that public sector organisations will need to make cultural shifts and embrace technology to fully realise the benefits.

The paper concludes by identifying areas for further research, including the long-term impact of the 4DWW on public sector productivity, the role of organisational culture in the successful adoption of reduced working hours, and how AI can be effectively leveraged to support this transition. These areas are critical for addressing the unique challenges faced by the UK's public sector as it seeks to adopt more sustainable and innovative work practices.

Introduction

The origins of the modern working week can be traced back to the historic achievement of Australian stonemasons, who successfully campaigned for the eight-hour workday in 1856 (National Museum of Australia, 2023). This victory demonstrated that the reduction of working time was not merely an aspiration for manual labourers but for workers across all sectors, marking a significant milestone in labour rights movements (Stronge & Lewis, 2021). However, almost two centuries later, the question of how long we should work has

returned to the political agenda, reignited by policymakers and activists. Today, the demand for a shorter working week has evolved from what was once a radical position to a mainstream consideration. Rising interest and support for the reduction of working hours have materialised in the form of the Four-Day Working Week (4DWW), which has been piloted by numerous organisations as a potential solution to modern work-life challenges (Stronge & Harper, 2019; Jahal et al., 2023).

In the UK, local councils are currently facing significant recruitment and retention challenges, alongside growing financial constraints. These pressures demand new approaches to working arrangements to protect essential service delivery while simultaneously creating a satisfied and highly productive workforce (Jorden & Alayande, 2023). The rapid transition to remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic is often cited as a catalyst for these discussions, which have led to flexible work arrangements becoming more widespread (Rafferty & Pillai, 2022). This momentum has extended to the consideration of the 4DWW as a potential long-term solution for both public and private sectors (Laker, 2022). Adding to this debate is the emergence of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, which hold the potential to support worktime reduction strategies by automating repetitive tasks and improving overall efficiency (Jahal et al., 2023).

The Four-Day Working Week is typically implemented in two primary forms: a compressed schedule where employees work four extended days, or a true reduction in total working hours where employees work four standard days while receiving the same pay (Dunham & Hawk, 1977; Imber, 2021). This paper focuses on the latter, which aims to provide a more balanced approach to work, benefiting employee wellbeing and productivity without increasing the intensity of workdays. In light of mounting evidence that stress, depression, and anxiety account for the majority of work-related health issues in the UK—resulting in significant lost productivity (Health and Safety Executive, 2023)—the prospect of reducing working hours has garnered serious attention.

Research suggests that a reduction in working time can positively influence wellbeing, economic outcomes, and productivity (Barnes, 2019). However, despite these promising findings, challenges remain, particularly when it comes to implementing the 4DWW across diverse organisations (Harrington, 2022). For instance, lessons learned from France's implementation of a 35-hour workweek highlight the potential difficulties in maintaining high productivity without overburdening employees. Prunier-Poulmaire and Gadbois (2001) argue that insufficient consideration of organisational diversity led to increased workloads for some employees, resulting in widespread dissatisfaction. Therefore, while successful trials in the private sector have demonstrated positive outcomes globally—such as Spain's \$60 million investment in a national 4DWW pilot project and similar trials in Iceland and Belgium (Swigunski, 2021; Jones, 2021; Miller, 2022)—applying these lessons to the public sector may prove more complex.

Frederickson (1997) argues that the principles driving success in the private sector do not always translate effectively to public sector organisations. This is particularly evident in the findings from France's 35-hour workweek, where concerns about reduced competitiveness, increased labour costs, and lower tax revenues emerged (da Paz Campos Lima et al., 2015). Such complexities must be thoroughly examined before rolling out a 4DWW pilot scheme in local authorities, which face unique operational, economic, and cultural challenges (Lehndorff, 2014).

Current literature predominantly focuses on the private sector, leaving a gap in understanding the implications of implementing a 4DWW in the public sector. While local authorities in the UK operate as independent employers, government bodies such as the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) can introduce measures to monitor council performance and raise concerns over productivity (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2023). Opposition to the 4DWW often comes from entities like the TaxPayers' Alliance, which argues that a reduction in working hours will either diminish public service quality or necessitate increased taxes to fund additional staff (TaxPayers Alliance, 2023).

This underscores the need for a deeper understanding of how a 4DWW could be implemented within public sector frameworks, while ensuring that service delivery remains robust. This literature review explores some of the key elements around the 4DWW for public sectors, before suggesting areas for future research.

The Impact of the Four-Day Working Week on Wellbeing, Burnout, and Work-Life Balance

Employee wellbeing has become a critical concern in recent years, as highlighted by Meister (2021). Several studies have drawn connections between working over 40 hours per week and increased risks of burnout, often characterised by emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and a decline in professional efficacy (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 2020). This issue is particularly pronounced in the public sector, where work environments are shaped by social, political, and economic pressures. Due to frequent budgetary cutbacks, employees in this sector often face high demands coupled with limited resources, leading to a decline in overall wellbeing (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Research by Mental Health UK (2020) further supports this, revealing that nearly one in four women reported difficulty managing stress at work, although men experienced comparatively lower pressure. However, Boettcher et al. (2019) caution that such findings may be influenced by social factors, with men potentially less attuned to early signs of work-related stress. While improving employee wellbeing through various interventions has been the subject of significant research (Gabriel & Aguinis, 2022), much of this work overlooks how changes in working patterns—such as the introduction of a 4DWW—might impact employee wellbeing.

The potential for a reduced working week to alleviate burnout is supported by various studies. A reduction in working hours can allow employees to adjust their workloads, thereby enhancing their autonomy and flexibility to negotiate their roles—an example of job crafting (Gabriel & Aguinis, 2022). A case study involving 2,900 UK businesses trialling the 4DWW found that 39% of employees reported lower stress levels, and 71% experienced reduced burnout by the trial's conclusion (UK Research and Innovation, 2023). The job crafting concept, as proposed by Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001), suggests that workers are capable of modifying their work physically or cognitively. However, Tims and Bakeker (2010) critique this framework as being overly general, instead advocating for a more nuanced model of job crafting. Both models agree that, when employees are aware of the potential for change, they are more likely to proactively alter their work processes (Letona-Ibañez et al., 2021). This theory is highly relevant to the implementation of a 4DWW, as it enables organisations to offer employees the opportunity to increase structural job resources, particularly by providing greater flexibility and control over their work processes (Tims & Bakeker, 2010). Bruning and Campion (2019) reinforce this view, arguing that employees who engage in proactive job crafting are better able to align their roles with their personal needs, reducing burnout while increasing motivation and productivity (Rudolph et al., 2017).

Despite the potential benefits, there are challenges. Job crafting, when coupled with a reduction in working hours, may inadvertently result in overwork or conflicts between work and family life, particularly if employees are unclear about how to manage their tasks effectively (Zito et al., 2019). Organisations must therefore ensure that employees have realistic workloads and are properly trained on how to allocate resources and meet performance targets, helping to mitigate the risks associated with overwork (Janjuha-Jivraj, 2019). This underlines the importance of organisational support and training in managing workload and wellbeing as part of the 4DWW transition (Ingusci et al., 2019).

The relationship between reduced working hours (RWH) and burnout remains a subject of debate. While there is evidence suggesting that RWH can enhance both productivity and job quality (Barck-Holst et al., 2020), the public sector's limited resources—due to shrinking budgets—may lead to increased work intensification. Kelliher and Anderson (2009) argue that the resulting pressure to complete the same amount of work in less time could contribute to higher stress levels. Prunier-Poulmaire and Gadbois (2001) similarly contend that the intensification of work might offset the positive health impacts of a shorter working week. Lewis et al. (2007) thus challenge researchers to examine the practical realities and broader implications of reduced working hours, especially in the context of the 4DWW.

Another critical area for consideration is work-life balance, which has gained increasing importance in contemporary society. Numerous studies suggest that reduced working hours improve satisfaction with both job and non-work life (Lepinteur, 2019; Nassen & Larsson, 2015). Gauksdóttir (2018) conducted a study of four Icelandic organisations that

implemented shorter working weeks, finding significantly lower levels of work-life conflict and higher satisfaction with work-life balance compared to control groups that did not participate in the reduction. A more recent study from Ireland corroborates these findings, revealing that employees participating in a 4DWW trial experienced a marked improvement in their work-life balance, with satisfaction scores increasing from 3.0 to 4.0 (Kelly et al., 2022). However, Eurostat (2019) reports that UK workers average 42.5 hours per week, higher than many other European countries, suggesting that the issue may lie with excessive workloads rather than work-life balance itself (CIPD, 2019).

The concept of work-life balance is further complicated by individual preferences. Kossek et al. (2012) highlight that different employees manage the boundary between work and home in various ways. Some may embrace the flexibility of working from home, while for others, this may create conflict. Liao et al. (2019) argue that work-life conflict can result in diminished resources in both personal and professional domains, as employees expend more effort to achieve balance. Organisations must therefore consider the potential negative impacts of increased workloads before implementing a 4DWW, as maintaining workload flexibility will be key to preserving employee wellbeing and work-life harmony.

In the context of the UK public sector, the potential benefits and challenges of a Four-Day Working Week take on added complexity. Public sector organisations, already strained by budget cuts and resource constraints, may face increased pressure to maintain service delivery while reducing working hours. However, given the high levels of stress, burnout, and poor work-life balance reported among public sector employees, a well-implemented 4DWW could offer a transformative solution. If carefully managed, with attention to workload distribution and adequate support, the 4DWW could help enhance employee wellbeing and productivity in this critical sector, driving a much-needed shift toward sustainable working practices.

Productivity and Strategic Adaptations in the Public Sector

Improved Productivity and Service Delivery

Numerous studies suggest that reducing the length of the working week can enhance employee wellbeing and productivity. Gauksdóttir (2018) highlights that a shorter working week helps to reduce stress and provides employees with more time for recovery, which in turn allows them to improve their productivity and efficiency. This increase in efficiency is partly due to employees rethinking their working processes, prompted by the need to complete tasks in less time. However, measuring productivity is not straightforward, as it is influenced by various factors, including workplace culture and the overall work environment, which can be difficult to quantify (Zorrilla, 2020).

In the context of the public sector, where resources are often limited and expectations remain high, the challenge of measuring productivity is further complicated by these intangible factors. Moreover, there has been limited research on how employees in

different occupations strategically respond to the introduction of a 4DWW, especially in public sector settings. Moen and Chu (2023) have suggested that employees engage in "time work," a strategy through which they adapt to time constraints and demands by reshaping their work processes. In their earlier study, Moen et al. (2013) identified four key strategic adaptations professionals make to manage work intensification, and these strategies are likely crucial in the context of a 4DWW. Adapting to reduced working hours requires effective time management and strategic modifications to work routines, demonstrating the importance of establishing time-work strategies in the public sector to ensure successful implementation of the 4DWW (Moen & Chu, 2023).

However, there are concerns about whether the private sector's success with 4DWW adaptations can be mirrored in the public sector. Data from the TaxPayers' Alliance (2023) indicates that public sector productivity has only increased by 4.1% over the last 20 years, highlighting the sector's struggle to boost efficiency. In contrast, a recent pilot study at South Cambridgeshire District Council (2023) demonstrated promising results, with nine out of sixteen service areas showing significant improvements following the introduction of a 4DWW. However, some areas remained stagnant, and others experienced slight declines, suggesting that while the 4DWW holds potential for public sector transformation, the outcomes are varied and depend on specific contexts. The limitation of this pilot is its small scale, raising questions about the generalisability of the findings to other local authorities. This gap in research underscores the need for further public sector trials to determine whether the adaptation strategies proven effective in the private sector can be successfully implemented within public organisations.

Leveraging Artificial Intelligence as a Strategic Adaptation

In recent years, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a critical tool for enhancing productivity, particularly in supporting the implementation of the 4DWW across various sectors, including the public sector. AI technology can automate repetitive and time-consuming tasks, freeing up time for frontline staff to focus on more complex and valuable activities (Office for Artificial Intelligence, 2020). Research conducted by Autonomy suggests that AI-driven productivity gains could allow up to 28% of the workforce to reduce their working week from 40 to 32 hours while maintaining both pay and performance levels (Garcia et al., 2023). This finding demonstrates the significant role that AI can play in making a 4DWW viable, but it also hinges on a broader shift in mindset where leaders prioritise productivity outcomes over the traditional metric of hours worked (Whillans, 2020).

Despite the potential benefits of AI, the relationship between technology and productivity is complex. Earlier studies, such as those by Coote and Franklin (2013), found that technological advancements, while boosting efficiency, did not necessarily lead to significant increases in productivity. This could be due to the performance metrics used, which often fail to account for service delivery and other qualitative outcomes, particularly in the public sector. More recent research, however, indicates that leveraging technology,

including AI, can support the transition to a 4DWW by streamlining work processes and creating more dynamic working environments (Penzo, 2023). Organisations are encouraged to embrace AI and data-driven approaches to better align working patterns with the demands of a 4DWW, ensuring that productivity gains are realised without compromising service quality. Framing the 4DWW as a comprehensive organisational policy, rather than an informal initiative, could help public sector organisations maximise the benefits of these technological advancements (Whillans, 2020). By embracing these strategic adaptations, public sector organisations can transform their workforce and improve work-life balance while maintaining service delivery standards in an increasingly digital world.

The potential of a 4DWW to improve productivity and employee wellbeing is evident from the research, but its successful implementation in the UK public sector requires careful consideration of specific challenges. With persistent budgetary constraints and rising demands on public services, public sector organisations must find ways to maintain service quality while adapting to reduced working hours. Strategic adaptations, such as the use of time-work strategies and the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to automate routine tasks, offer promising avenues to enhance efficiency.

However, the variability in productivity outcomes, as seen in pilot studies like South Cambridgeshire District Council, highlights the complexity of applying private sector success models directly to public sector contexts. For the 4DWW to be a transformative solution in the public sector, it must be supported by a broader shift in organisational culture, where productivity is measured by outcomes rather than hours worked, and where AI and other technological advancements are leveraged to their full potential. This shift is crucial to addressing the current challenges of recruitment, retention, and service delivery in the UK's public sector.

Areas for further research

The initial literature review highlights that adopting a 4DWW may have significant benefits to UK public sector employers. Consequently, three key areas are proposed for future research to further explore these opportunities.

- Long-term Impact of the 4DWW on Public Sector Productivity and Service Delivery: While initial pilot studies show promising results, further research is needed to assess the long-term effects of a 4DWW on productivity and service quality in the public sector. Investigating how different departments and service areas adapt over extended periods would provide valuable insights into the sustainability of these gains.
- The Role of Organisational Culture in 4DWW Adoption in the Public Sector: Future research could explore the influence of organisational culture on the success or failure of the 4DWW in public sector contexts. Understanding how leadership styles, employee attitudes, and existing work practices impact the adoption and

adaptation of a reduced working week could offer critical insights for policy development.

- Leveraging Artificial Intelligence to Support the 4DWW in Public Services: While AI is often mentioned as a tool to enhance productivity, there is limited research on how AI can specifically support the implementation of a 4DWW in the public sector. Investigating the types of tasks and processes that can be automated, and the potential barriers to AI adoption, would help identify how technology can be used to sustain a shorter working week without compromising service delivery.

Conclusion

The 4DWW presents a promising opportunity to reshape the future of work in the UK public sector, offering potential benefits in terms of employee wellbeing, productivity, and service delivery. As public sector organisations face growing challenges with recruitment, retention, and financial pressures, the 4DWW provides a viable solution to address these issues while fostering a healthier, more satisfied workforce. However, successful implementation requires careful consideration of sector-specific complexities, including limited resources, high service demands, and the need for strategic adaptations.

Research shows that a reduction in working hours can enhance employee wellbeing and reduce burnout, particularly in high-pressure environments like the public sector. However, the success of the 4DWW will depend on a broader organisational shift towards measuring productivity based on outcomes rather than hours worked. Furthermore, the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other technological advancements can play a crucial role in enabling public sector employees to work more efficiently within a reduced timeframe, while maintaining or even improving service quality.

Despite promising pilot trials, the transition to a 4DWW in the public sector is not without challenges. The variability in results across different service areas highlights the need for a tailored approach that takes into account the unique operational and cultural dynamics of each organisation. Further research is essential to explore the long-term effects of the 4DWW on productivity, the role of organisational culture in its success, and how AI can be leveraged to support the reduction in working hours. Whilst the 4DWW has the potential to transform public sector work in the UK, its success will rely on ongoing evaluation, strategic adaptation, and a willingness to embrace new ways of working that prioritise both employee wellbeing and organisational efficiency.

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