

WORKFORCE

**Government says four-day weeks should 'cease immediately'**

**27 OCTOBER 2023 | BY KWAME BOAKYE**

Councils that have started four-day week trial should “cease immediately” the government warned yesterday, after issuing non-statutory guidance for the sector.

The guidance also stated the councils that are considering the scheme should not seek to pursue it in any format, and that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is “exploring other measures to ensure that the sector is clear that this working practice should not be pursued”.

Just one council, South Cambridgeshire DC, is actively trialling a four-day week and its leader has urged the government to meet in-person to discuss the issue.

Lee Rowley, local government minister said: “The government is being crystal clear that it does not support the adoption of the four-day working week within the local government sector. Local authorities that are considering adopting it should not do so. Those who have adopted it already should end those practices immediately.

“Those councils who continue to disregard this guidance are now on notice that the government will take necessary steps in the coming months ahead to ensure that this practice is ended within local government.”

In July, Mr Rowley warned South Cambridgeshire DC who initially trialled the four-day week between January and March and subsequently extended it until March 2024 to end “the experiment immediately”. However, Bridget Smith (Lib Dems) leader of South Cambridgeshire said the trial needed to run for its “full planned length” to gather data and assess whether a difference had been made.

In response to the new guidance Cllr Smith said the council's initial three-month trial saw performance levels "generally maintained and in some cases improved"

She said: "There was strong evidence it was helping us fill hard to recruit posts and improving retention, so we extended the trial to test that over a longer period. Since January, our sickness rates have fallen by a third, staff turnover has reduced by 36%, and complaints about services involved in the trial are down too.

"Every decision we make centres on what is best for the communities who elect us. Our offices are open five days a week, and we can be contacted 24 hours a day, seven days a week in an emergency like during last week's flooding. Local councils should always be free to decide the best way to deliver services for the residents they represent."

Cllr Smith also said that whilst the government asks councils to "innovate and cut costs and provide higher quality services" it also directs them "not to innovate" to achieve this.

She added: "We are best placed to make these decisions in our area, which has high private sector wages and housing costs, making it very difficult to attract and retain talented staff we need to deliver for residents and businesses.

"Before we announced the trial, we were spending about £2m a year on 23 agency staff who were covering vacancies - often in specialist roles where the private sector pays more. This bill could be halved if all the agency posts were filled permanently. We have now filled 13 of these posts - mainly in the planning service - that are notoriously 'hard to fill' due to the national shortage of planners."

Cllr Smith said South Cambridgeshire expects to spend “significantly less” on agency staff covering vacancies this year, and that at the end of the trial, it would provide evidence gathered to residents, businesses and councillors to decide whether to continue with the four-day week.

She said: “I wish the government would take-up our offer of talking to us in-person about the trial so we can outline all the benefits we can evidence so far.”

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