

REPORT

Management and elected members' perspectives: Insights from the focus group study

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Management and elected members' perspectives: Insights from the focus group study

In addition to surveys and the evaluation of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), the analysis of the four-day week (4DW) at South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) includes a series of focus groups. These were conducted and analysed by researchers from the Bennett Institute for Public Policy at the University of Cambridge. A focus group is a research method in which a small group of people (usually a maximum of 12 people per session) come together to discuss a specific topic in a moderated setting. Focus groups can help organisations gain deeper insights into the perceptions, needs and aspirations of participants, which would otherwise go unnoticed. For participants, the focus groups provided a platform to actively participate in shaping the 4DW trial and express their ideas and opinions in a safe setting.

From the data obtained, comprehensive statements can be made about the daily practice in SCDC during the 4DW. There were two groups: Individuals with leadership responsibilities within SCDC and elected members of both SCDC and Cambridge City Council. This ensured that both the internal and external perspectives were sufficiently considered and given a voice.

The main objective of the focus groups was to understand how leaders and elected members experience the 4DW, the challenges they faced and how they addressed them. The main themes from these discussions are presented below.

The management perspective

In general, the issues raised by the managers are quite universal and repeated between the different focus groups. However, there are of course nuanced differences which depend mainly on the size of the team, the proportion of full-time and part-time staff within the team, the type of service provided and the personality of the manager. Despite some challenges, the overall feedback on the trial was largely positive.

Adapting the leadership style

Overall, managers reported that the 4DW required an adjustment of their management style. Two aspects were particularly important: clearer and more direct communication, as well as more delegation of responsibility to the team.

For example, one manager reported that the 4DW has led to them being much more confident and open in communicating what they expect from whom and when, but on the other hand, they said they also feel more empowered to communicate clearly when they think deadlines are unrealistic and want to give their team more time. This suggests there is a clear expectation management on their part, especially regarding deadlines.

Other managers confirmed that a micromanagement style does not work within the 4DW. "I have always tried not to micromanage [...] I believe that the hands-off approach is good because it forces the employees in a 4DW to do their work regardless of whether the manager is present or not."

New ways of working

As a result, both the leaders and team members had to introduce new ways of working more efficiently. This proved useful in enabling team members to optimise productivity and achieve more within the trial. Different working methods and new "rules" proved useful in the trial:

- Open door policy to allow informal and spontaneous interaction within the office
- Some managers stated that they spend more time in the office than before
- Scheduled days on which the whole team is present in the office (e.g., Wednesday every fortnight)
- Working on shared documents alongside each other
- Making phone calls instead of writing emails
- Setting up a system for staff to take over or hand over tasks to others depending on capacity
- Joint management of team members' diaries.

Influence on team culture

Most managers feel that the culture and cooperation within their teams improved during the trial. This was mainly due to the fact that communication between the team members suddenly became more relevant, especially since not everyone was always able to attend all meetings and therefore more attention was paid to optimising information sharing within the team.

However, there were also some critical comments or concerns about the team culture. Interestingly, the choice of the day off could hold some potential conflict within the teams. One manager noted that "there is some jealousy within the team as some feel that Friday is the "better" off day."

Overall, managers felt that if the 4DW trial is extended, there needs to be more emphasis on team culture, cohesion and collaboration.

Trust in team members: Flexible and remote working

Managers reported that there are concerns within SCDC that the 4DW may take away the flexibility that staff have had in the past. For example, some managers reported that they feel that their team members now tell them more often that they are, for example, taking a longer lunch break, going to the dentist or walking the dog - because they feel that the 4DW already gives them quite a lot of flexibility and anything beyond that requires the strict approval of their managers. This discussion was often accompanied by the question of how far remote working/working from home and the 4DW are compatible. While the vast majority of managers do not perceive a conflict, some indicated that they would like to see their employees in the office to a greater extent than the currently required presence of at least one day every fortnight.

Overall, the 4DW seems to test managers' trust in their team to some degree.

Some managers also seem to have a stronger need to monitor the work of their team members, especially when results and performance are more difficult to measure and/or mistakes are not immediately visible until after some time. Overall, however, there is a broad consensus that in the long run a mindset is needed where output is more important

than input (especially working time). This is also in line with one manager's statement that the prejudice that employees have to be physically in the office to be perceived as productive workers has to be overcome.

One of the managers notes: "You also have to be able to trust the people you've hired, because if you don't trust them to do their job, why did you hire them?"

However, the picture is mixed when it comes to flexible working hours and working from home in the context of the 4DW. It seems to depend mainly on the manager in question, but also on the individuals within the team. For example, it was noted that some team members feel more secure when they can keep track of how much and when they worked.

Using digital tools

It was interesting to observe that the 4DW has made visible underinvestment in digital tools and solutions in recent years. For example, it was mentioned that better digital solutions on the SCDC website would lead to citizens being able to find most information themselves and apply for almost all service themselves through appropriate optimised digital solutions, which would drastically reduce the workload for staff.

However, there were also a number of examples of the internal use of digital tools during the 4DW that managers felt contributed significantly to the success of the trial, such as sharing and editing documents or sharing team diaries using appropriate tools.

In the context of the 4DW, planning and information management platforms seem to be the most needed, as many teams do communication-intensive tasks. One manager described how helpful a tool like 'Microsoft Planner' is: "It was a big turning point for the 4DW. If we don't have something written down in 'Planner', it doesn't get done."

It was clear from the discussions that one of the key challenges for SCDC is to invest in tools that interact with each other (e.g., MS Planner is compatible with other tools in the MS Suite). This is necessary to reduce friction between tools and avoid silos, such as different teams within SCDC using different applications.

There is also the need to invest in staff training to handle more complex digital technologies. Many managers noted that staff members still use the most basic digital tools, without feeling the urge to transition to anything new or complex: “I think we are using digital tools in a quite basic way. We use only the Microsoft package. I don’t know what Trello [a planning platform] is’,” says a manager. Another noted: “There is an opportunity to up our game, but there has to be an investment in software and training.”

Training of junior staff and new employees

Critically, some managers noted that the 4DW leaves little to no time for training and onboarding of junior staff or new team members. In particular, according to the managers, new entrants’ interaction with experienced staff is often lacking, as the latter spend most of their core days (Tuesday to Thursday) in meetings.

Also, the continued trend of working from home since the Covid pandemic leaves new employees with fewer opportunities for organisational socialisation and informal interaction with experienced staff.

Some managers have responded to this problem by arranging specific times (about one hour per week) with new employees or junior staff to ensure direct interaction with them. According to the managers, this is particularly necessary in the case of newly created functions where both the manager and the employee need sufficient time to understand the requirements of the function. Managers acknowledge that while it can be a challenge to find enough time for 1:1 meetings, they are essential, especially for passing on tacit knowledge to younger employees.

Also, some managers explained that they get creative when it comes to meetings with younger or new staff, for example, some arrange meetings outside the formal setting and go for a walk together in the park. This creates time for team building and at the same time gives managers the opportunity to check on the progress of their staff.

Elected members perspective

The researchers also held roundtables with elected members to capture their experiences and feedback. In general, members are very positive about the 4DW initiative. Criticisms were mainly about the lack of integration of shared services such as the waste service and the insufficient communication with Cambridge City Council prior to the announcement of the trial, which caught most members off guard. However, these initial difficulties have now been almost completely overcome. The main points from the discussions with the elected members are presented below.

Accessibility of officers

The picture regarding the accessibility and availability of officers was very mixed. While about half of the members said they had no problems getting in touch with the right people at SCDC at any time and said they did not notice any slowdown in answering questions etc., the other half had concerns.

Among members, the perception of the 4DW was that the main communication with SCDC was now concentrated on Tuesdays to Thursdays. While most members felt this was beneficial as it resulted in "quieter and more effective" Mondays and Fridays, some also stated that it would be "impossible" to reach the relevant contact person on Mondays and Fridays, which would severely constrain their work.

Some also said that the 4DW led to extra work on their part, as they often had to contact different people several times until they received an answer. Such statements elicited mixed reactions from the other members; while some said they had similar experiences, others said that a contact person was always available for them at any time.

Overall, it was noted that it is essential for collaboration that all email signatures include an alternative contact person and the non-working day, and that there should be upfront communication between officers and councillors about these issues, especially when two people are working closely together; it should not be the councillor's job to find out who is working when and who is covering for whom.

Improvement in meeting practices and outputs

Members generally indicated that meetings tended to be more productive within the 4DW - in particular, the introduction of pre-meeting agendas helped councillors to prepare for meetings effectively and to use the time within the meeting efficiently. Councillors also commented positively that officers appear to be more motivated and focused in meetings and their output is more precise.

For example, some members described that that work within SCDC was now better prioritised and that they appreciated that at least two contact persons were now available for issues and possible problems.

Others also noted positively that committee reporting is being reconsidered as part of the 4DW, noting that the length of agendas for committee meetings is something that should be addressed.

Support for members

As noted at the beginning of this section, many members expressed dissatisfaction about learning of the trial only a short time before the general public and the lack of joint consultation between SCDC and Cambridge City Council prior to the trial. However, all stated that this has now been overcome and that they would like to move on.

Some members stated that it is a misconception to consider the trial as a SCDC project, as it directly affects a number of partners as well as the residents. It is therefore important to facilitate collaboration between all stakeholders involved.

In particular, members requested that there should be training and support for members in dealing with residents' enquiries about the 4DW. From a member's perspective, there is a particular need to ensure that residents know that they can still contact officers if they need to. How best to communicate this with residents is something that the members would like support on from the SCDC.

It was also noted that there should be training sessions for councillors and officers to help understand how best to interact, what both parties expect from each other and how best to support each other.

Challenges related to the Greater Cambridge Shared Waste Service

Currently, the Greater Cambridge Shared Waste Service is not part of the 4DW trial. However, a proposal for for this service to trial a 4DW will be presented to SCDC members on 15 May 2023 (and to Cambridge City Council in the coming weeks). From the members' point of view, this seems to be a critical point for the success or failure of the 4DW, noting that it is the service that citizens care most about.

The possible extension of the trial to the waste service is seen as necessary, especially as there is no intention to create division within the staff and because it is desired that all services benefit from the positive effects. However, from the members' perspective, there are critical challenges with regard to the waste service. Some members say it is not possible to reduce the work of waste collection to four days without significant physical stress, and concern was raised that mistakes may be made if the staff are rushed.

There was consensus that a smooth introduction of any waste trial was critical and that there is little room for trial and error in this regard. In the context of this issue, there were also some interesting discussions about how waste collection could be fundamentally changed in the long-term, including technological solutions (such as sensors indicating when and if a bin needs to be emptied) or flexible collection systems according to need (family bins will probably need to be emptied more often than those of single pensioners).

Using Microsoft Teams

With regard to the above-mentioned partial lack of availability or accessibility of contact persons, several members suggested that it would be helpful if members could contact SCDC officers via Microsoft Teams. This would allow them to see who is currently online and who is out of office before emailing them. It would also be

possible to set up project teams via Teams, to allow several people to be contacted at the same time and allow for a more flexible approach to taking on tasks.

Members also noted that they would like to be able to initiate Teams meetings themselves. Currently, the joint use of Teams does not seem to be possible but was supported by all members as a sensible way forward. In particular, it is seen as helpful to manage one's expectations in terms of responses and the availability of officers.

The definition of productivity in SCDC

There is general agreement among the members that regardless of whether the 4DW remains or not, it is necessary to think about the efficiency of working methods. The three-month trial was a good starting point to initiate changes regarding the working methods of SCDC. In this context, the use of software, the qualification of staff, the use of AI, and cooperation with external consultants were discussed in particular. However, what will be a bigger challenge from the members' point of view is how to make these changes measurable. In particular, the definition of 'productivity' is seen as a challenge by the members. Currently, productivity in SCDC is mainly equated with performance and made measurable through KPIs. However, many councillors believe that qualitative measurements are necessary, especially because many of the services are ultimately about the quality of the outcome rather than the quantity.



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