

Introducing a shorter working week in Scotland's public sector

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Autonomy is an Institute which creates data-driven tools and research for sustainable economic planning.



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Executive summary

Executive summary

This report presents research findings related to two shorter working week initiatives in Scotland's public sector: a year-long pilot of a 32-hour working week, and a contractual move to a 35-hour working week among a selection of public sector organisations.

How did the 32-hour pilot work?

Following the Scottish Government's open call for interested public sector bodies in 2023, two organisations made the decision to take part in a year-long pilot of a 32-hour working week. The organisations were Accountant in Bankruptcy (AiB) and South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE), who entered into the pilot with a combined workforce of 259 staff in 2024-25.

The pilot involved implementing a 32-hour working week across the whole organisation for a period of one year, without any loss in staff pay or benefits, and with a commitment to maintaining standards of service delivery. Whereas AiB started from a standard full-time working week of 37 hours, SOSE began with a normal working week of 35 hours.

Each organisation chose to schedule the 32 hours in the form of a four-day working week, staggering the non-working day among staff to ensure a full coverage of key organisational functions. Each organisation also included its part-time staff by offering them pro-rata (proportional) working time reductions.

How was the pilot evaluated?

The Autonomy Institute and academic partners were commissioned by the Scottish Government to coordinate the pilot and investigate its impact on service delivery and staff well-being. An additional goal of the evaluation was to document the lessons being learned within the organisations as they adapted to the shorter working week.

The research activities included:

- ↳ Tracking available key performance indicators (such as processing times, staff absences or stakeholder views) in order to assess the pilot's impact on service delivery.
- ↳ Conducting extensive staff surveys at intervals during the pilot, in order to capture changing views and experiences across a wide range of metrics.
- ↳ Conducting in-depth interviews at intervals during the pilot, in order to capture decision-making, work processes and impacts on the ground.

Key pilot findings

- ↳ **AiB and SOSE successfully shortened the working week, giving staff more autonomy over their time, integrating more efficient working practices and maintaining organisational performance across the key metrics investigated.**

- ↳ **Participation rates were very high.**

There was an almost 100% rate of participation among staff. By mid-trial, 92.2% of staff at AiB found they were able to reduce their working hours every week. At the endpoint of the SOSE pilot, 94% said they had either 'completely' or 'mostly' been able to take their working time reduction every week.

- ↳ **Both organisations demonstrated an increase in productivity.**

AiB found stability within all three of its key organisational processes during the pilot, as compared with the year prior and its own process target times. SOSE's KPI assessment, focused mainly on client response times, also showed stability as compared to the year prior. For context, staff headcount in SOSE increased slightly from 138 to 141 between the start and end points of its pilot, and AiB staff headcount decreased slightly, from 121 to 118 between the start of its pilot and approximately nine months in (the time of reporting). These results suggest that the pilot coincided with an increase in productivity.

Staff interviews helped explain these performance results. Staff shared their pilot initiatives around work planning, task-sharing, focus periods, new meeting conventions, the digitalisation of processes and the use of task-managing software, among other things.

↳ **Well-being also improved across a range of measures.**

To give highlights from AiB:

- ↳ Self-assessment of mental health saw an 18.4% improvement and average scores for work stress dropped by 18.4%, with improvements also documented in areas of fatigue, burnout and sleep.
- ↳ Average scores in the area of 'satisfaction with time' increased by 46.8% and participants were on average significantly more satisfied with their jobs and their lives in general.

To give highlights from SOSE:

- ↳ The percentage of staff feeling 'very satisfied' with their work-life balance rose very sharply, from 4% pre-pilot to 84%, nine months in.
- ↳ 83% of staff reported a 'very positive' or 'positive' impact on stress (meaning a reduction in stress) and 98% believed the pilot had led to a 'very positive' or 'positive' improvement in the area of motivation and morale.
- ↳ Overall instances of sickness saw a modest drop and there was a very significant drop in sick days taken for psychological reasons (a decrease of ~25.7% during the pilot period, as compared to the year prior).

In general, the pilot was also extremely popular with staff. Staff who were interviewed often gave highly enthusiastic accounts of their experiences and almost unanimously hoped the policy would be continued beyond the pilot. Staff with care responsibilities seemed to be particularly supportive of the pilot, often using emotive phrases such as 'life changing'.

↳ **The pilot captured a range of good practice lessons to learn from.**

These included (but were not limited to):

- ↳ Ensuring a strong level of staff consultation before introducing the policy, in order to anticipate problems, gauge approval, and gather ideas for the successful transition to the new working pattern.
- ↳ Providing staff with comprehensive FAQ documents, answering any and all questions about the terms and conditions of a shorter working week.
- ↳ Preserving existing flexibility arrangements, which are clearly important to staff, as well as including part-time workers in the shorter working week policy using pro-rata (proportional) working time reductions.
- ↳ Staggering the day off for the sake of maintaining a five-day service and scheduling inter-team tasks within the 'core week' (when all staff are working).
- ↳ Thinking carefully around what kind of 32-hour rota is right for different work teams and their organisational challenges, as well as a transparent process for allocating days off among staff.
- ↳ Asking staff to be flexible about working on the day off as a contingency measure in exceptional circumstances - but not undermining the policy's value by relying on this too greatly.
- ↳ Ensuring that staff can easily reclaim any time worked on days off as TOIL.
- ↳ Developing robust conventions for handing over work and covering staff on their day off, including more interdependent working.
- ↳ Paying special attention to the impact of changing work schedules on staff with school-age children or health conditions.

↳ **Both organisations extended their pilot beyond the research period.**

SOSE were permitted a six month extension and AiB were permitted to extend for two months.

↳ **The pilot was a good example of social partnership working.**

Scottish Government and the two pilot organisations showed a clear commitment to principles such as consent, transparency and staff collaboration in the setting up and running of the pilot. The processes outlined in this report may provide a useful model for other national governments considering pilots.

Assisting the move to a 35-hour working week

Since October 2024, public sector organisations covered by the Scottish Public Sector Pay Policy have been strongly encouraged towards standardising a 35-hour working week for staff, on a contractual basis. Of the 73 public bodies covered, all of them (with one exception) have either implemented or are expected to implement a 35-hour working week by April 2025.

As part of its Scottish Government commission, the Autonomy Institute's consultancy team was asked to conduct a piece of work adjacent to the 32-hour working week pilot. This work involved offering support to interested public bodies, managing the transition to a 35-hour week. The final step of this process, in February 2025, involved conducting a 35-hour 'check in' survey with participating organisations, exploring topics such as the reception of the policy among staff and potential support needs. Overall 5 public sector organisations took part, with 1,974 members of staff completing the survey. The key findings included:

↳ An overall positive impact

The majority of respondents reported positive outcomes from the transition to a 35-hour week, particularly in terms of employee wellbeing, work-life balance and self-reported productivity. A substantial 79% of participants felt they had been able to consistently adhere to the new 35-hour schedule. The survey also highlighted that 65% of staff deemed their overall experience of the 35-hour work week as very positive, while 83% noted a positive impact on their personal life. Notably, 86% expressed satisfaction with their work-life balance.

In the area of productivity and performance, a significant 71% of respondents indicated that the transition positively affected their productivity and focus, with less than 4% reporting a negative impact. This reflects the potential for a reduced work week to maintain, or even enhance, performance standards.

↳ Challenges identified

While the general response to the transition has been positive, some organisations reported challenges. For instance, 20% of respondents from two participating organisations struggled to consistently maintain the 35-hour work week due to issues related to time management and workload expectations. While the peaks and troughs of workloads and the corresponding flexi system mean there is an expectation that some working weeks will be longer than others, concerns were raised regarding the perception that staff were still expected to deliver the same volume of work using the same processes under reduced hours.

↳ **Opportunities for improvement**

The survey revealed a potential need for targeted support in areas such as workload management and the effective communication of expectations for part-time workers. Some part-time staff expressed that their inclusion in the new policy had not been sufficiently communicated, necessitating clearer, more consistent messaging around equity and workload adjustments.

↳ **Recommendations for future action**

Continued monitoring and management of flexi-time use to reduce dependence on this as a workaround for workload issues.

Improved communication and engagement strategies for part-time workers to ensure their needs are adequately addressed within the new framework.

Ongoing support for training relating to the Oracle staff management system to enhance efficiency.

An emphasis on reshaping work processes to optimise performance within the reduced hours and address any emerging challenges collaboratively.

These findings and recommendations aim to provide insights for the participating organisations and other public sector bodies navigating similar transitions, ensuring that the full potential of the 35-hour working week can be realised.

Introduction

Introduction

This report presents research findings related to two shorter working week initiatives in Scotland's public sector: a year-long pilot of a 32-hour working week, and a contractual move to a 35-hour working week among a selection of organisations within the Scottish Main Bargaining Unit (hereafter 'SG Main').¹

The 32-hour week pilot

The investigation of a four-day working week has been a Scottish Government commitment since its inclusion in the 2023-24 Public Sector Pay Strategy, and also in the 2023-24 Programme for Government, which stated the intention to commence a pilot by the end of 2023.

An open exercise was held by Scottish Government, inviting any public body covered by the Public Sector Pay Policy to register interest in participating in a pilot. A 'Four-day Working Week Pilot Working Group' was then established to facilitate discussions between Scottish Government officials and interested public bodies. Following these discussions, two organisations – Accountant in Bankruptcy (AiB) and South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE) – made a commitment to participate in the pilot, moving ahead with a combined workforce of 259 staff.

In October 2023, Scottish Government commissioned the Autonomy Institute and its academic partners to conduct an evaluation of the pilot's impacts. At the broadest level, the definition of a four-day week taken here involves organisations reducing their standard full-time hours down to 32 hours per week, with no loss in staff pay, plus an organisational commitment to maintain the prior level of service (a full breakdown of the pilot parameters is provided below).

The purpose of the pilot itself was to:

- ↳ Investigate the impact on employee well-being.
- ↳ Investigate the impact on productivity and service delivery.
- ↳ Identify working practices that may help or hinder the move to a four-day week.

¹ SG Main is a group of agencies, directorates and non-ministerial offices subject to a common set of terms and conditions with regard to issues such as pay, working hours and benefits.

The participating organisations

The 32-hour week pilot featured two organisations and a combined total of 259 staff. The characteristics of these organisations were judged by the researchers to represent an ideal stress test of the policy. These characteristics included having a mixture of full-time and part-time staff, having a multi-departmental setup, serving a range of functions, and the inclusion of roles with a responsive/public-facing aspect.

Background details on the participating organisations are provided here.

Accountant in Bankruptcy (AiB)

Accountant in Bankruptcy (AiB) is based in North Ayrshire, has 119 staff, and is an Executive Agency of the Scottish Government. Its remit is to ensure access to and the delivery of fair and just processes of debt relief and debt management for the people of Scotland. In practical terms, this involves delivering, with stakeholders, a range of options for individuals including the management of personal applications for bankruptcy, the protection of trust deeds and the approval of debt payment programmes under the Debt Arrangement Scheme. AiB also has a duty to minimise the cost to the public purse for undertaking these activities.

A delivery team handles the day-to-day processing of each debt solution, working closely with the individuals impacted, as well as money advisors, insolvency practitioners and creditors, among others. The team also records corporate insolvencies on the public register of insolvencies, which AiB is responsible for. Meanwhile, a dedicated policy team works continually with stakeholders to ensure the right legislation and regulations are in place. AiB also includes a range of support functions, with dedicated personnel in the areas of IT, cyber security, finance, procurement and business development.

South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE)

South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE) is Scotland's newest economic and community development agency. It was established by the South of Scotland Enterprise Act 2019 and came into being on April 1st 2020. It has 140 staff and a remit to cover Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders, supporting people, enterprises and communities across the region.

A stated goal of the organisation is to bring a regionally-focused approach to economic development, tailored to the needs of the area. This includes providing dedicated business support to enterprises, in order to help them grow, develop and reach new markets. It also involves supporting non-profit and community groups to make a local difference. Acting as "the voice of the South", SOSE also advocates for the region internationally. In 2023-2024 SOSE supported 1,300 businesses, social enterprises and community groups, as well as distributing 152 grants totalling £9.2 million.

Pilot design

The involvement of AiB and SOSE in this project involved a common commitment to the following pilot principles:

- ↳ An agreement to implement a 32-hour working week across the whole organisation for a period of one year.
- ↳ The policy is to be implemented without a loss in staff pay.
- ↳ There should be a commitment to fully maintaining the level and quality of service delivery throughout the pilot.
- ↳ The pilot should be voluntary, with individual staff participating on an opt-in basis and maintaining the freedom to opt-out at any point, without pressure.

In the preparatory phase of the project, each organisation was also required to build on these principles and fine tune their plans for implementation, according to their own requirements. Both organisations also decided on the following principles:

- ↳ For full-time staff, the 32 hours will typically be worked in the form of a four-day working week (although exceptions may be requested).
- ↳ A five-day service will be maintained and staff's allocated days off will be staggered in such a way as to ensure coverage of key functions (i.e. the organisation will not simply 'close its doors' for an extra day per week).
- ↳ Staff contracts will not be altered for the purposes of the pilot.
- ↳ Staff will agree to a potential occasional need to readjust their working pattern in order to accommodate business requirements, with reasonable notice being provided.
- ↳ There will be a continued commitment to any flexible working arrangements and benefits that are already in place.
- ↳ Part-time staff will receive a pro rata reduction in their weekly working hours (rounded up to the nearest half-hour).
- ↳ The pilot will not affect existing annual leave entitlement and staff will still be able to claim their full balance of annual leave. The weekly day off may also be taken in addition to public privilege days and bank holidays.²

2 A public privilege day is a day of leave granted to employees of the civil service.

Finally, there are some parameters where the two organisations diverged.

- ↳ Each organisation started from a different ‘normal’, in terms of its standard full-time hours. Given that AiB’s standard full-time working week is 37 hours, the 32-hour pilot constituted a 5 hour per week working time reduction for full-time staff. By comparison, SOSE’s standard full-time working week of 35 hours meant that the 32-hour pilot constituted a 3-hour per week working time reduction for full-time staff.
- ↳ In each organisation, the reduction to a 32-hour week over four days produced a slight extension to the working day, relative to previous standard hours over five days. In AiB, the extension was approximately half an hour. In SOSE, it was approximately one hour.
- ↳ Due to internal organisational demands and the need for an appropriate period of preparation, each organisation opted to begin its pilot on a different date. The SOSE pilot commenced on 2nd October, 2023, whereas the AiB pilot commenced on 14th April, 2024.

Pilot evaluation

The Autonomy Institute and partners were commissioned by Scottish Government to provide an independent evaluation of the 32-hour week pilot. The researchers devised a mixed-method research strategy, designed to capture the impacts, perspectives and working practices surrounding the pilot from several vantage points. Research activities included:

- ↳ Working with the organisations to track any available key performance indicators (such as processing times, staff absences, and stakeholder views) in order to assess the pilot’s impact on service delivery.
- ↳ Conducting extensive online staff surveys at intervals throughout the pilot, in order to capture staff’s changing views and experiences across a range of metrics.
- ↳ Conducting in-depth interviews with senior and junior staff at appropriate points in the pilot, in order to capture decision-making processes, working practices and impacts on the ground.

Further information on each of these methods can be found in the appropriate sections throughout this report.

Support for 35-hour week organisations

Although the bulk of this report is dedicated to the findings of the 32-hour pilot, a later section also covers Scottish public sector organisations working a 35-hour working week.

The implementation of a 35-hour week has been a longstanding ambition of Scottish Public Sector pay policy.³ In July 2023, a number of bodies piloted a ‘wellbeing hour’ with staff as part of the 2022-23 pay award. On a non-contractual basis, staff on a 37-hour working week were permitted to use one hour per week (prorated for part-time staff) “to undertake activities to improve... physical or mental wellbeing”.⁴

The wellbeing hour initiative was effectively viewed as a pilot of a 36-hour working week, forming the foundation for a shift to a 35-hour working week on a contractual basis in October 2024 within SG Main. Meanwhile, all bodies covered by the Scottish Public Sector Pay Policy are now being strongly encouraged towards standardising a 35-hour working week for staff.

As part of its Scottish Government commission in 2023, the Autonomy Institute’s consultancy team worked with a selection of consenting 35-hour week organisations. Activities included presenting case studies of existing shorter working week organisations, as well as meeting with senior staff to troubleshoot any emerging problems. Finally, in January 2025, a 35 hour ‘check in’ survey was conducted with consenting organisations, exploring topics such as the reception of the policy among staff and potential support needs.

The structure of this report

The findings from the research activities described above are presented in the following sections.

Part 1: ‘Organisational performance’ presents data gathered by the two 32-hour pilot organisations to assess the success of the pilot from an organisational perspective, with respect to areas such as process times, stakeholder satisfaction and staff sick leave.

3 A breakdown of the policy and the organisations covered is available at: <https://www.gov.scot/policies/public-sector-pay/staff-pay-remits/>

4 A description of the wellbeing hour pilot is available at: <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/foi-eir-release/2023/09/foi-202300366969/documents/information-released-1/information-released-1/govscot%3Adocument/202300366969%2BWellbeing%2BHour%2Bguidance%2Bfor%2BSG%2BMain.pdf>

Part 2: 'Staff impacts' presents the survey data gathered by the researchers in order to assess the impact of the pilot on staff, including data on issues such as whether they were able to fully participate in the 32-hour week, and how it impacted their well-being and work experiences.

Part 3: 'The view from the ground' presents the data gathered in the form of hour-long interviews with staff in the two pilot organisations. The purpose is to document the thought-processes and practical measures that the two organisations took in implementing the 32-hour week, as well as capture the impact of the pilot in staff's own words.

Part 4: 'Supporting the shift to a 35-hour week' shifts attention away from the 32-hour week pilot findings to document the Autonomy Institute's adjacent work with Scottish public sector organisations moving to a contractual 35-hour week. The section includes the results of the preliminary 'check-in' survey with participating organisations.

A note on the presentation of pilot findings

It should be noted that although both AiB and SOSE participated fully in the three key research areas – organisational performance measures, staff impact surveys and staff interviews – the precise evaluation metrics and questions used are not symmetrical across the two organisations. The types of performance metrics accessible in each organisation, the differing pilot start dates, along with each organisation's own needs in terms of assessing the success of its pilot all had some bearing on what types of data were collected and reported. For this reason, in each section we have presented the findings by organisation: 'Case 1: Accountant in Bankruptcy' and 'Case 2: South of Scotland Enterprise'. The exception is 'Part 3: The view from the ground', where the consistent design of the research interview process across the two organisations allowed the researchers to report the two cases in an integrated way.

Part 1

**The 32-hour
week pilot:
organisational
impacts**

The 32-hour week pilot: organisational impacts

Case 1: Accountant in Bankruptcy

Processing times

100% of the 119 staff within AiB made the decision to opt-in to the 32-hour pilot. In order to evaluate its pilot from a performance perspective, AiB monitored the time taken to complete processes within its three main areas: personal bankruptcy applications, the Debt Arrangement Scheme and Protected Trust Deeds. Since delivering these three debt solutions is the primary purpose of AiB, assessing average process times in each of these areas provides an excellent measure of the pilot's success. Here we present the results in each of the three areas, using results from the same period the year prior,⁵ as well as the target times set internally by AiB,⁶ as points of comparison.

Personal bankruptcy applications

The personal bankruptcy application processing time is a measure of the average time taken from when a bankruptcy application is submitted and the fee received, to when the bankruptcy is finally awarded and published on the Register of Insolvencies. This end-to-end time includes both AiB's internal processing time and the time taken to engage with money advisors and applicants to ensure that all necessary supporting information and evidence for the application has been provided.

⁵ The pilot researchers were not able to compare the pilot results to years earlier than 2023-4, since AiB revised the metrics used to measure performance in 2022-3, as part of its annual business planning.

⁶ These internal target times are a product of AiB's own analysis of processes and historic KPI outcomes, combined with input from its Advisory Board and operational leads. The pilot evaluators were advised that target times have generally been shortened over the years, to reflect improvements in processes within AiB.

Table 1: Average bankruptcy processing time by quarter, April 2023 to December 2024, and number of applications received (AiB)

		2023-4 (Prior to pilot)				2024-5 (During pilot)			
	Target	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
		Apr-Jun	Jul-Sept	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sept	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar
Average processing time (days)	9.0	8.3	7.8	6.7	5.8	7.5	6.6	7.1	*
Debtor applications received (number)	-	550	485	498	482	587	437	506	*

* (Not available at the time of reporting)

The table above shows that there has been no detriment to processing times for personal bankruptcy applications corresponding with the pilot. If we compare the first three quarters of 2023-4 and the first three quarters under the 32-hour week pilot (the comparison period for which complete data are available), we can see that both the caseload (1,533 in 2023-4 versus 1,530 during the pilot) and the average case processing time (7.6 in 2023-4 versus 7.1 during the pilot) have remained stable - and well within the target time of 9 days.

In sum, the processing time of personal bankruptcy cases has remained stable despite the reduction of the standard full-time working week from 37 to 32 hours.

Debt Arrangement Scheme

This performance measure takes into account the average time taken to approve debt payment programmes under the Debt Arrangement Scheme. The end-to-end process spans from when a money advisor submits an application to AiB to when the application is approved and published on the public Debt Arrangement Scheme register. The process includes tasks such as liaising with money advisers and clients to ensure quality and accuracy of information.

Table 2: Average approval time for DPP under DAS by quarter, April 2023 to December 2024, and number of applications received (AiB)

		2023-4 (Prior to pilot)				2024-5 (During pilot)			
	Target	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
		Apr-Jun	Jul-Sept	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sept	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar
Average processing time (days)	4.0	3.7	3.3	2.8	2.1	2.4	2.2	2.9	*
Applications approved (number)		1,409	1,504	1,393	1,281	1,348	1,328	1,167	*

* (Not available at the time of reporting)

The table above shows that there has been no detriment to AiB's Debt Arrangement Scheme approval process. If we compare the first three quarters of 2023-4 and the first three quarters under the 32-hour week pilot (the comparison period for which complete data are available), we can see that both the number of applications (4,306 in 2023-4 versus 3,843 during the pilot) and the average application approval time (3.3 in 2023-4 versus 2.5 during the pilot) have decreased slightly – and remained well within the target time of 4 days.

In sum, the end-to-end time of the Debt Arrangement Scheme process has seen no negative impact, despite the reduction of the standard full-time working week from 37 to 32 hours.

Protected Trust Deeds

This performance measure takes into account the average time taken to protect a trust deed. Prior to AiB's involvement, the application process for Protected Trust Deeds involves a five-week advertising period. The end-to-end process reported here spans from the time that follows this, from when AiB formally approves the protection of the trust deed, through to its appearance on the Register of Insolvencies.

Table 3: Average time taken to protect a trust deed following the 5-week advertisement period, April 2023 to December 2024, and number of trust deeds protected (AiB)

		2023-4 (Prior to pilot)				2024-5 (During pilot)			
	Target	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
		Apr-Jun	Jul-Sept	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sept	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar
Average processing time (days)	1.5	0.8	1	1	1.1	1	0.9	0.9	*
Trust deeds protected (number)		1,328	1,235	1,481	1,234	1,377	1,367	1,330	*

* (Not available at the time of reporting)

The table above shows that there has been no detriment to AiB's process for protecting trust deeds. If we compare the first three quarters of 2023-4 and the first three quarters under the 32-hour week pilot (the comparison period for which complete data are available), we can see that both the number of trust deeds processed (4,044 in 2023-4 versus 4,074 during the pilot) and the average application approval time (0.9 in 2023-4, remaining at 0.9 during the pilot) have remained stable - and well within the target time of 4 days.

In sum, the end-to-end time of the process for protecting trust deeds has remained stable, despite the reduction of the standard full-time working week from 37 to 32 hours.

To summarise: in all three performance metrics - corresponding with the three key functions of AiB - there was no reported disruption to processing times as a result of the 32-hour week pilot. This means that the pilot was associated with a significant increase in productivity, with work performance remaining stable in spite of a significant reduction in working time across the organisation. Furthermore, viewed on a quarterly basis, there are many cases of improvements in processing times, when the pilot period is compared with the previous year.

To add further context, AiB qualified to the pilot researchers that the organisation experienced no detriment in terms of the follow-on from these three main processes (meaning the increase in productivity was not associated with a rise in errors or issues).

Although precise metrics are not available, AiB also reported a perception that several further areas of the organisation had experienced no detriment in terms of efficiency, as a result of the 32-hour pilot. These areas included various administrative and management processes surrounding the three key functions outlined above.

Finally, it is also significant that this overall increase in productivity was achieved despite a decrease in staff headcount, prior to and during the pilot period.

Table 4: Staff numbers by year (AiB)

	Staff headcount	Full-time equivalent ⁷
As at 31 December 2024 (approx nine months into pilot)	118	107.8
As at 31 March 2024 (shortly before pilot commenced)	121	110.7
As at 31 March 2023 (approx one year prior to the pilot commencing)	126	115.5

Taking into account all of the above, it is possible to conclude with confidence that the reduction of the standard working week from 37 to 32 hours (including pro rata working time reductions for part-time staff) had no negative impact on service delivery within AiB. The qualitative findings in Part 3 of this report - particularly those exploring AiB's alterations to its work culture and processes - contribute to explaining these positive results.

Service user satisfaction

Approximately eight months into its pilot, AiB distributed a large survey to its stakeholders, seeking views on topics such as how respondents experience contacting AiB, using its case management systems and navigating its website. In total, 328 responses were returned. Although this survey was deployed as part of a general service evaluation (and not for the direct purpose of evaluating the pilot) it does contain some findings that are pertinent to the pilot evaluation. One potential concern around introducing a 32-hour working week might be its impact on the availability of staff for service users. However, of the 62 respondents

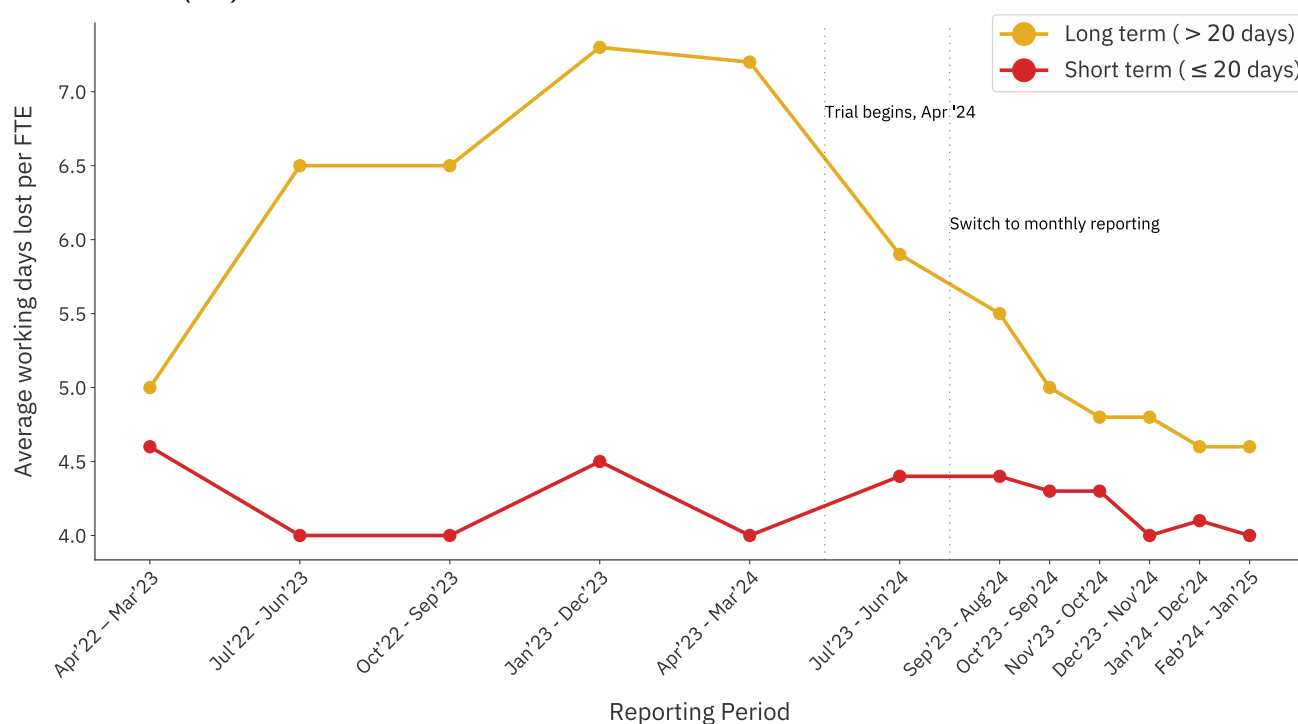
⁷ 'Full-time equivalent' refers to the number of people employed by AiB based on contracted hours per day (i.e. full-time = 1 and part-time < 1)

who had recently (i.e. during the pilot) contacted AiB by phone, 90% were satisfied or greater with the quality and the speed of the service. Furthermore, of the 95 respondents that had recently contacted AiB by email, 90% were satisfied or very satisfied with how their query was dealt with, and it was found that 93% of urgent queries received acknowledgement within two working (i.e. Monday - Friday) days. Looking at the 328 responses as a whole, 90% of respondents rated their user experience with AiB as four or five stars out of five.

Sickness absences

AiB provided the researchers with data on staff sickness absences, representing an additional check for the pilot's organisational impact. The figures represented in the chart below reflect a number known as the AWDL, or *average working days lost per staff year*,⁸ separated by long-term and short-term absences.⁹ The figures are reported quarterly up until July 2024 and monthly thereafter, due to the migration of SG Main to an alternative management system.

Figure 1: Short and long-term absences, year ending Mar 2023 until year ending January 2025 (AiB)



8 A 'staff year' is a measure of both the employee's full-time equivalency and the length of assignment. Scaling is applied to long absences to account for annual leave. Absence data is also carried with an employee into a new organisation when they move (although note that AiB has not recruited any new staff in 2024 or 2025).

9 'Long-term absences' encompass the average of all absences for individuals whose 12-month total > 20 days. 'Short-term absences' is the average for all absences ≤ 20 days. AiB has historically been able to access additional metrics, such as incidences of absence and the reason stated for absence. However, due to the ongoing migration of SG Main to the Oracle Cloud management system, reliable measures on these were unavailable at the time of reporting.

The Figure shows that, during the 32-hour pilot, changes in average short-term absences did not undergo any significant movement compared to historic data.

In the area of long-term absences, there was a steady climb in the AWDL in the year leading up to the 32-hour pilot, peaking at 7.3 days at the end of December 2023 before reducing very slightly to 7.2 days at the end of March 2024, shortly before the pilot start date.

When compared to the previous period's sickness absence rate, each period following the commencement of the 32-hour pilot in April 2024 has shown the average long-term absence rates reducing in the first quarter, and then month-on-month from the end of August 2024 to the end of January 2025 (the time of reporting).

Given the range of variables likely to impact staff absences, we cannot conclude that the reported reductions were directly caused by the 32-hour pilot, but this is nevertheless a positive picture. For the duration of the 32-hour pilot, short-term absences remained stable and long-term absences decreased.

Case 2: South of Scotland Enterprise

Almost 100% of the 140 staff within SOSE decided to opt-in to the pilot.¹⁰ In order to evaluate its 32-hour week pilot from a performance perspective, SOSE monitored its process time for responding to client enquiries, along with staff sickness data and staff turnover. Results from the same periods the year prior are also presented for the purposes of making a comparison. For context, staff headcount in SOSE increased from 138 to 141 between the start and end points of its pilot.

At the outset of the pilot, SOSE also stated a strong preference to investigate the views and experiences of its key stakeholders, as they relate to the pilot. The researchers assisted in the design of a short survey, whose results are also reported here.

Response times

Over the course of the pilot, SOSE monitored the percentage of client enquiries that received an initial response from staff within three working days – a target time set out in SOSE's service level agreement. This metric is known as the *SLA%*. The *SLA%* was monitored over the period spanning between 1st October, 2023 (one day prior to the start of SOSE's 32-hour pilot) and 31st September 2024 (one year later). The corresponding period from the previous year (2022-2023) is also reported, for the purposes of making a comparison.

¹⁰ Only one staff member decided not to take part. The reason given was that they were due to retire during the pilot.

Table 5: SOSE's SLA% and number of enquiries, the year of the 32-hour pilot and the year prior

	01 Oct, 2022 - 31 Sept, 2023 (Year prior to pilot)	01 Oct, 2023 - 31 Sept, 2024 (During the pilot)
SLA%	94.42%	92.04%
Number of enquiries received	1308	1457
Number of enquiries responded to within SLA target	1235	1341

These findings show a modest decrease of ~2.4% in the SLA%, when the pilot period is compared with the same period from the year prior. However, it should be noted that the total number of enquiries received during the pilot, as compared with the same period the previous year, increased by 149 (an increase of approx 11.4%). When expressed in terms of the total number of enquiries responded to within the target time, SOSE recorded an overall increase: from 1,235 enquiries to 1,341 enquiries. In other words, more enquiries were answered within the SLA target time during the pilot, even though the overall SLA% was slightly lower during the pilot, as compared with the same period in 2022-2023.

Taking into account changes to the SLA%, it is fair to report that the reduction of working time to 32 hours over four days did not cause any significant disruption in the area of client response times. The fact that client response times were not significantly disrupted by the reduction in working time is instead suggestive of a productivity increase during the pilot period.

Stakeholder perceptions

A notable finding is the fact that SOSE reported having received no formal complaints about the pilot via its usual complaints process, over the pilot's duration. However, seeking to explore stakeholder perceptions further, the researchers worked with the project liaisons within SOSE to identify a list of key external stakeholders (including partner organisations, clients and contractors) whose experiences relating to the pilot were judged as important by SOSE's senior leadership. Such factors, for example, may include the increased client base and number of enquiries SOSE received during the pilot

38 stakeholders were identified and the researchers approached all of these, inviting them to complete a short online feedback survey. The aspect of the survey most relevant to the pilot evaluation focused on the potential impact of the 32-hour pilot on working relationships with SOSE. Respondents were asked to rate their experiences on a scale (*positive change*, *no change*, and *negative change*), to categorise the theme of their comment, and to fill in a text box explaining their rating.

In total, 23 of the 38 invited respondents completed the survey, at a minimum of eight months into the pilot (allowing enough time for impressions to form).

The survey feedback in this area was mixed, with 14 respondents saying that the 32-hour pilot had produced no change in their working relationship with SOSE, 1 respondent reporting a positive impact on their working relationship, and 8 respondents indicating some areas for improvement.

In the 'no change' category, one respondent described an efficient cover system, whereby 'if one member of staff is unavailable (for whatever reason) then another would answer my questions'. Other respondents wrote:

I have had several strategic meetings with senior staff from SOSE over the last 3-4 months and am not aware that this trial has had any detrimental impacts on our relationship or the shared agenda that we are collectively pursuing.

I've not been aware of the change of hours. It has had absolutely no impact on us.

Of the 9 respondents who noted a change, four mentioned opportunities to enhance the 'availability and responsiveness' of SOSE staff. Of these four, three qualified their assessment by suggesting that the negative impact had been 'minor' and had not affected their overall perception of SOSE as an organisation. One respondent cited 'one or two examples of reduced availability'.

One respondent highlighted that 'some staff appear to respond or attend meetings even when it's their defined day off', adding that this 'is not in the spirit of the 4 day week' and can create confusion around staff availability. Another comment stated that the respondent would frequently 'find that [their advisor] was not in office' upon contacting them, while another stated that they 'find most of [their] interactions are not time critical and [the advisor] has been very responsive and helpful'.

In the absence of a follow-up conversation with these respondents, the researchers are unable to conclude to what extent these concerns are directly related to the 32-hour week pilot, compared to other potential organisational factors.

Sickness absences

SOSE monitored staff turnover and absences for the purposes of the pilot evaluation. Figures were gathered over the period spanning between 1st October, 2023 (one day prior to the start of the 32-hour pilot) and 30th Sept, 2024 (one year later). Figures spanning this period were compared with those from a corresponding period the year prior.

Table 6: SOSE's sickness absences, the year of the 32-hour pilot and the year prior

Period	Sickness absence (as % of total available working days) ¹¹	Sickness absence (as total work days lost to absence)	Instances of sickness	Total days of absence classed 'Anxiety / Stress / Psychiatric'
01 Oct, 2023 - 30 Sept, 2024 (During pilot)	3.08%	899	119	265
01 Oct, 2022 - 30 Sept, 2023 (The year prior)	2.46%	738	122	357

Expressed as a % of total available working days, the overall picture in this area is one of stability. There was a small increase (0.6%) in the proportion of working days lost to sick absence on the 32-hour (four-day) week, as compared with the previous 35-hour (five-day) week, the year prior.

However, this masks the fact that the overall *instances* of sickness saw a modest decrease (from 122 to 119 instances) as well as the significant drop in sick days taken for psychological reasons. The number of sick days taken for psychological reasons dropped to 265 during the pilot period, as compared with 357 the year prior - a very significant decrease of ~25.7%.

¹¹ Since neither staff contracts nor SOSE's leave recording system were altered for the purposes of the pilot, "total available working days" (or 100%) equates to the number of available annual working days on a standard five-day working week.

Staff turnover

The pilot caused no disruption in the area of staff turnover. There was a small decrease in the number of staff leaving SOSE during the 32-hour week pilot period, as compared with the same period the previous year. The number of leavers dropped from 11 (a turnover rate of 7.89%) to 7 (a turnover rate of 5.02%). Monitoring the recorded reasons for leaving, a HR representative at SOSE reported that there was no relationship between reasons for leaving and the 32-hour pilot.

Part 2

**The 32-hour
week pilot: staff
impacts**

Part 2: The 32-hour working week pilot: staff impacts

Case 1: Accountant in Bankruptcy

As part of the impact evaluation, the researchers conducted three all-staff surveys within AiB - once prior to the pilot start date in April 2024 (to capture baseline data), once at the pilot midpoint in November 2024 (to capture interim results) and a final time at approximately the nine month mark, in January 2025.¹² This method allowed the researchers to analyse how staff impacts in a range of areas altered over time, as compared to pre-pilot conditions. Participation was voluntary and respondents answered the surveys anonymously, via an online survey platform. The surveys had a response rate of 77.3%, with 92 out of AiB's 119 staff providing valid responses across all three surveys. Among the valid responses, 76 were full-time staff and 16 were part-time.

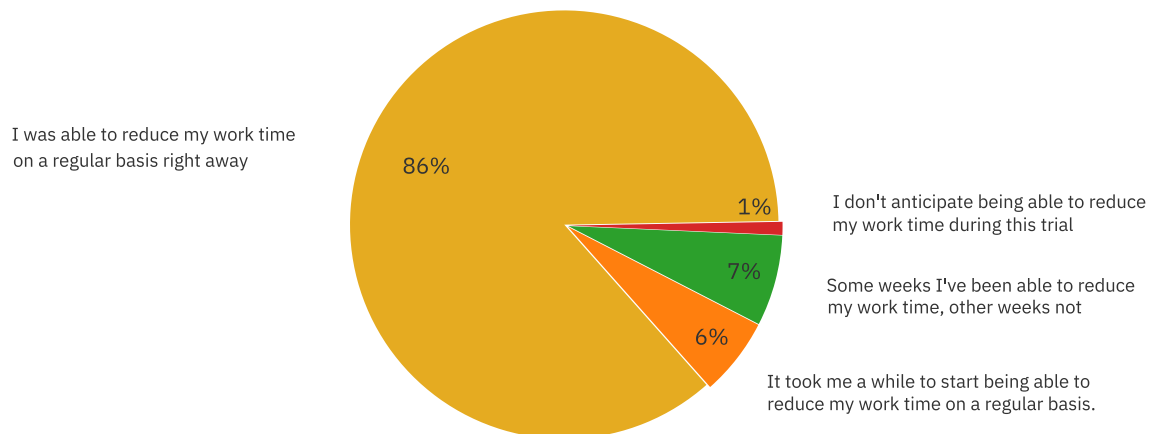
Work time, days of work and overtime

As to be expected, the pilot had a significant impact on reported working hours. Working schedules shortened, with reported hours dropping from 37 hours per week on average, to 33.4 hours for full-time workers. Part-time workers received pro-rata (proportional) reductions in working hours. Overall, the working time reduction was very significant, but the figures do suggest that some employees occasionally carried out modest amounts of work out of hours (the research interviews in Part 3 of this report suggest that this was most likely to be senior staff).

Expressed in terms of days, the average number of days worked went from 4.7 to 3.9 (an average 17.4% reduction in working hours). When staff were asked in the midpoint survey how long *into* the pilot it had taken them to begin taking a regular day off, 86.3% of respondents said they had been able to reduce their hours on a regular basis 'right away', 5.9% said it 'took me a while', and 6.9% said they had been able to reduce their working time on 'some weeks, but others not'. Only one staff member anticipated not being able to reduce their working time during the pilot.

¹² This date was selected so as to be as late as possible in AiB's pilot, while leaving sufficient time to analyse the data within the project's reporting deadline.

Figure 2: How soon into the pilot staff were able to reduce hours (AiB)



Participants were also asked how often they work overtime. On a scale of 1 (never) to 4 (daily) staff scoring reduced from 1.5 to 1.2 (a 19.7% reduction), between the baseline and endpoint surveys.

Job conditions and attitudes

The survey used several measures to understand staff's changing work experiences over the pilot, including factors such as perceptions of work intensity, control over schedules, and a self-assessment of capability at work.

In general, there was not a significant reported change from baseline to endpoint across the indicators, which is encouraging. There was a small, weakly statistically significant decrease in the average perception of work intensity over the course of the trial (from 3.4 to 3.3 on a '1 to 5' scale). In terms of 'schedule control', the survey used a multi-item scale (from 1 'very little', to 5 'very much') which includes control over days worked, number of hours, time off work and when each workday begins and ends. Before the trial began, the average value was 4.4 for full-time staff, increasing modestly to 4.6 by the endpoint survey.

The one area where we did see significant change is 'self-rated work ability'. Staff were asked to rate their capability at work from 0 to 10, as compared with a 'lifetime best' (where 10 is the best). At the baseline, staff report an average score of 6.7 while at the endpoint the score was 7.9 (a 17.3% increase). The qualitative data in Part 3 gives some explanatory weight to this finding, outlining the ways that staff embraced the pilot by making alterations to their work processes.

Mental and physical health

The survey included a multi-dimensional assessment of staff well-being over the course of the pilot, with significant improvements found over a range of measures. The average mental health score (ranging from 1 'poor', to 5 'excellent'), increased from 2.8 at the beginning of the trial to 3.3 by the endpoint survey (an 18.4% increase). Participants also reported very slight improvements in their physical health: the baseline score (where 1 is 'poor' and 5 is 'excellent') was 2.9 and this increased to 3.1 by the endpoint - marking a 6.6% increase.

The improvement in physical health may be partly explained in the number of staff who told researchers in interviews (reported in Part 3 below) that they had been using the non-working day for activities such as cycling, attending the gym or going on long walks. The reported improvements in mental and physical health also seem to dovetail with reported changes in the areas of fatigue and sleep. Reports of fatigue decreased over the course of the pilot, with the average fatigue score falling from 2.5 to 2.1 (on a scale of 1-4, from 'never fatigued' to 'fatigued daily'), marking a 17.5% decrease. The prevalence of reported insomnia and general sleep difficulties also declined, with a 14% reduction from the baseline to endpoint survey (2.3 to 2.0).

Turning to work stress, we found that this decreased over the trial period. On a 1-5 scale from 'never' stressed to stressed 'all the time', the frequency of reported work stress declined on average from 2.8 before the pilot to 2.3 at the endpoint survey (an 18.4% reduction).

A measure of 'burnout' also saw a significant decrease, dropping from a score of 2.8 to 2.2 (this score represents an amalgam of 7 sub-criteria ranked on a 1 to 5 frequency scale, including categories such as tiredness, exhaustion, frustration and more). This marks a 24.2% reduction in experiences of burnout between the baseline and endpoint surveys.

Work-life balance, job satisfaction and life satisfaction

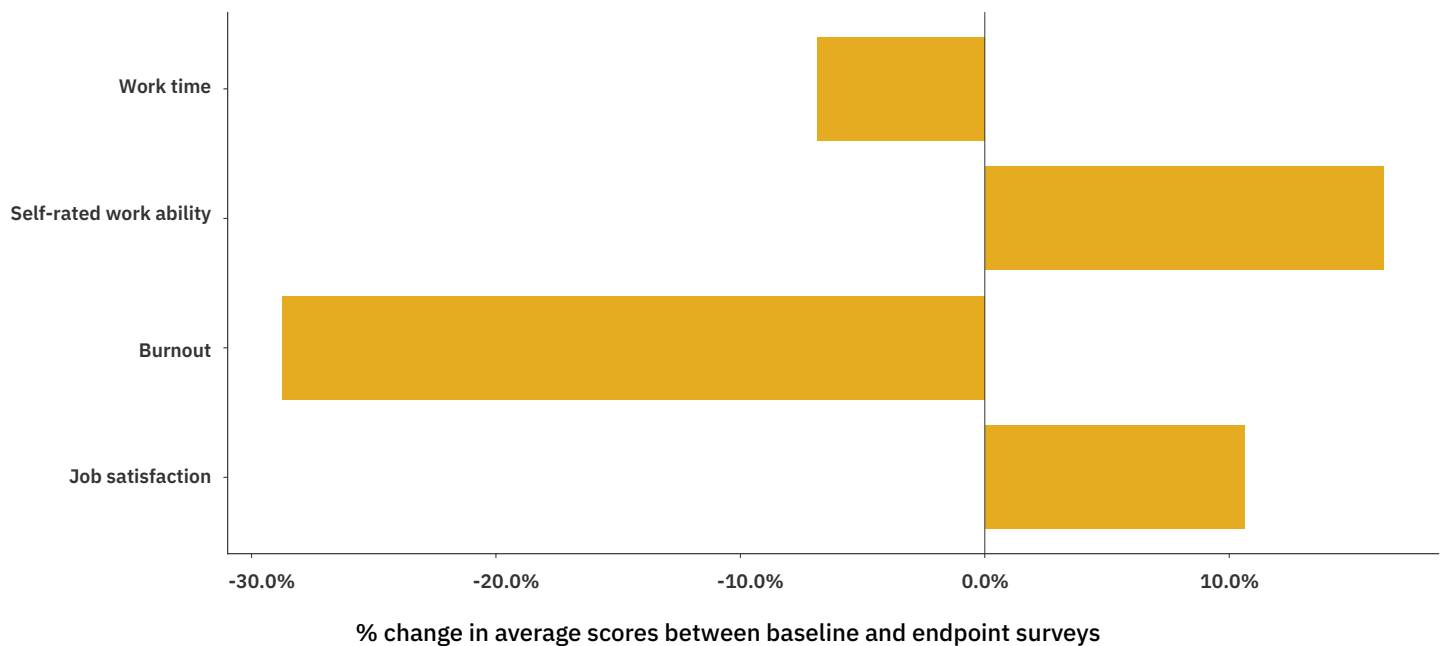
The survey took several further measures related to well-being. In the area of 'work-life balance' (defined as the 'ability to combine paid work with social life', where 1 is 'very difficult' and 5 is 'very easy'), staff experienced a significant improvement: the baseline score of 2.9 increased by 28.1% to a score of 3.7. The picture also improved in the area of overall job satisfaction, with a significant average increase from 6.4 to 7.1, between baseline and endpoint surveys (rated from 0 'not satisfied at all' to 10 'completely satisfied'). This improvement was mirrored in the area of overall life satisfaction. At the beginning of the trial, when asked how satisfied they were with their lives (from 0 'not satisfied at all', to 10 'completely satisfied'), participants responded with an average of 6.4 out of 10.

This measure had increased to 7.2 by the endpoint survey (a 12.3% increase). This finding also corresponds to a general ‘satisfaction with time’, i.e. with the ‘amount of time you have to do the things you like doing’. Respondents reported an average increase in satisfaction, from 5.1 pre-pilot to 7.5 by the endpoint survey (a very significant 46.8% increase).

Across the pilot

Stepping back to summarise AiB’s staff survey results, it is clear that the working time reduction brought significant improvements. Pulling together some of the key measures outlined above: the pilot saw a significant decrease in levels of burnout, along with an improved sense of work ability and overall job satisfaction. It is also worth noting that these results are very much in line with prior shorter working week pilots, which also found similar changes in work ability, work experiences, and well-being across the twenty measures in this survey.

Figure 3: A summary of key staff metrics from AiB’s pilot: the amount of working time reduction, self-rated work ability, levels of burnout and levels of job satisfaction. Percentage change in average scores between baseline and endpoint surveys.



Case 2: South of Scotland Enterprise

As part of its impact evaluation, the Autonomy Institute conducted an extensive all-staff survey within SOSE.¹³ The researchers ran the survey twice, once in December 2023 (approximately three months into the pilot), and again in June 2024 (approximately nine months into the pilot), seeking to explore changes in staff experiences over time. Participation was voluntary and respondents answered the survey anonymously, via an online survey platform. Some questions also included open text boxes, giving participants the option to explain their answer.

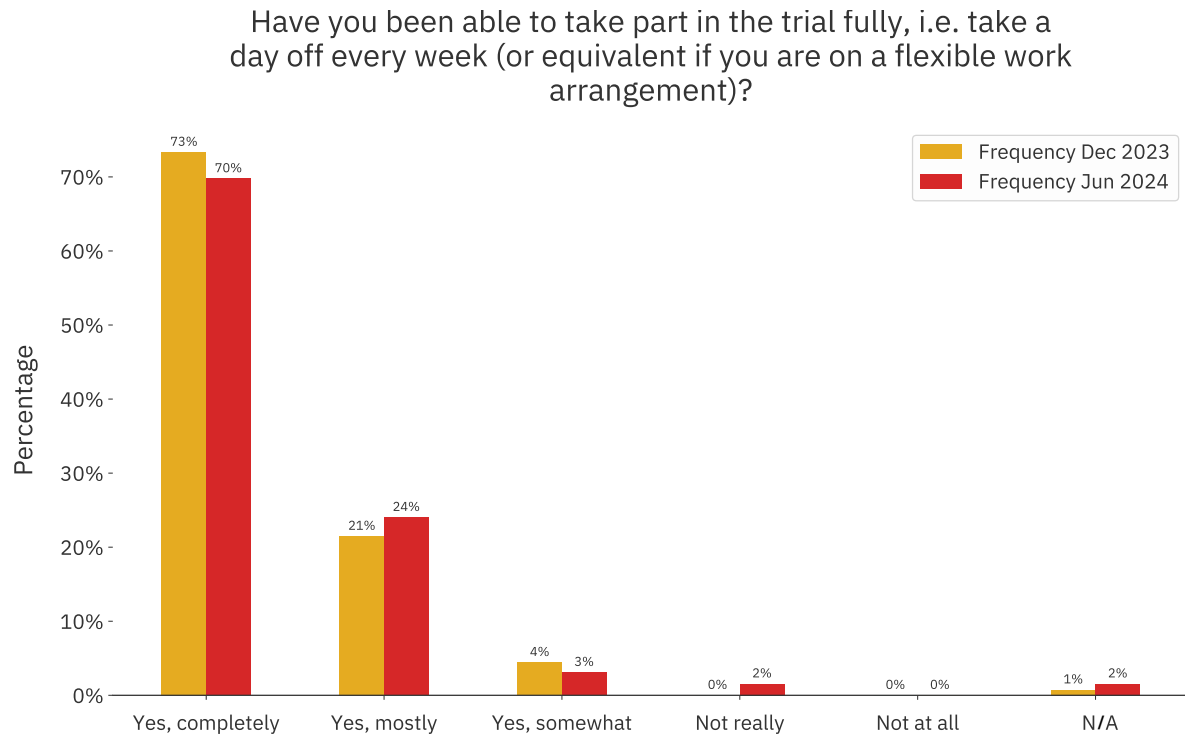
The surveys had a strong response rate: 135 staff (96% of the SOSE workforce) responded to the first survey and 129 (92%) responded to the second, with the majority of questions answered in both cases. Among the responses, prior to the introduction of the pilot, 67% of staff worked full-time on a five-day schedule, 22.5% worked full-time on a compressed (<5 day) schedule, and 10.5% were part-time.

Participation in the pilot

From a participation perspective, SOSE's pilot was a strong success. Only one staff member opted out of the pilot (for the reason that they were due to retire during the pilot). Furthermore, at the pilot's nine-month point, 94% of survey respondents said that they had been able to take a day off every week, either 'completely' (70%) or 'mostly' (24%). Only 2% of respondents gave a negative answer, choosing that they had 'not really' been able to participate, but no additional information was provided to explain the reasons why.

13 Note that this survey is different in its design to the survey that was run with AiB staff (presented above) by the Autonomy Institute's academic partners at Boston College, meaning it has different questions and survey intervals. Due to SOSE's decision to begin their pilot prior to the commencement of the Autonomy Institute's commission, it was not possible to collect live baseline data and therefore not possible to use the favoured method deployed at AiB.

Figure 4: Level of staff participation in the pilot (SOSE).



Text responses suggest that exceptions to being able to take the day off are mainly due to external engagements scheduled with stakeholders, or the need to cover for team members taking annual leave. All responses given suggest that staff are happy with this arrangement and able to reclaim the hours as time off in lieu. Below is a representative response:

In practice, I occasionally need to attend events, conferences, inward visits or meetings that occur on my non-working day, so as to maintain access to stakeholders and so forth. I am happy to do so, and believe that flexibility is necessary... and when my team members have needed to do so, I have found it relatively easy for them to swap their time off for another day.

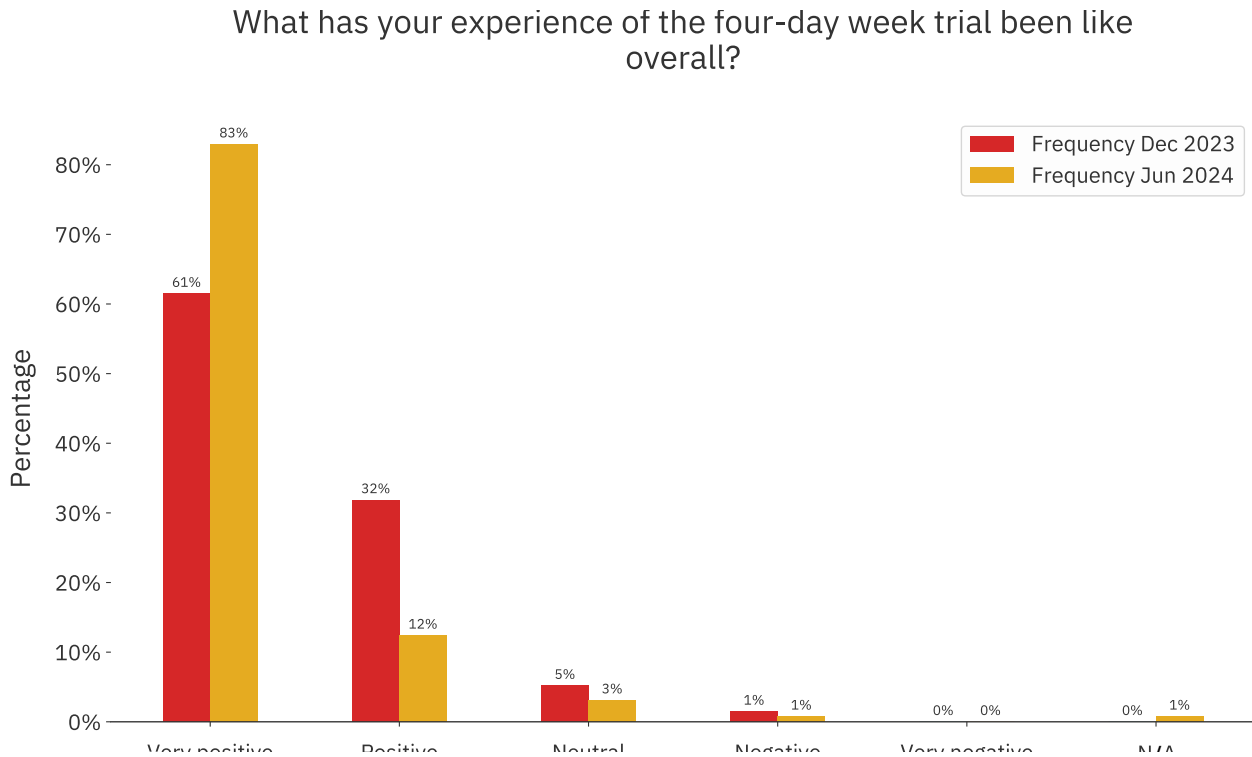
Experience of the pilot

Staff were asked to rate their 'overall experience of the pilot' (from 1 to 5, where 1 is 'very negative' and 5 is 'very positive') and the results were strong. At the nine-month mark, 97% of respondents declared their experience as either 'positive' or 'very positive'. The weighting of staff reporting a 'very positive' experience also increased significantly between the three-month and the nine-month mark - from 61% to 84%.

Text responses suggest that this may be due to an acclimatisation period associated with the pilot. For example:

It was difficult at first to rearrange workload etc, but it is now working very well. It took a little getting used to initially when it came to making sure to get in touch with colleagues before their [non-working day], but once I became accustomed to this, it had no negative impact.

Figure 5: Overall experience of the pilot (SOSE)



There was one instance of a negative pilot experience. The reasons for this cannot be fully explained, but the respondent is a part-time member of staff and - in another question - did report a negative impact of the pilot on collaboration, communication and team spirit. This could be due to the new working patterns making it more challenging for this respondent to communicate and work together with other team members.

SOSE's staff talk about the future of the policy

In the spaces for text comments within staff surveys, many staff took the time to express appreciation towards their employer for participating in the pilot. We have included a selection here:

The [pilot] has made more of a positive impact on me than any staff benefit I've ever had, at any job, in all my life. Super supportive and hope we can be bold enough to keep it going!

I would struggle to return to a 5-day week now and I would be unlikely to consider a role with another organisation unless it offered a 4-day week.

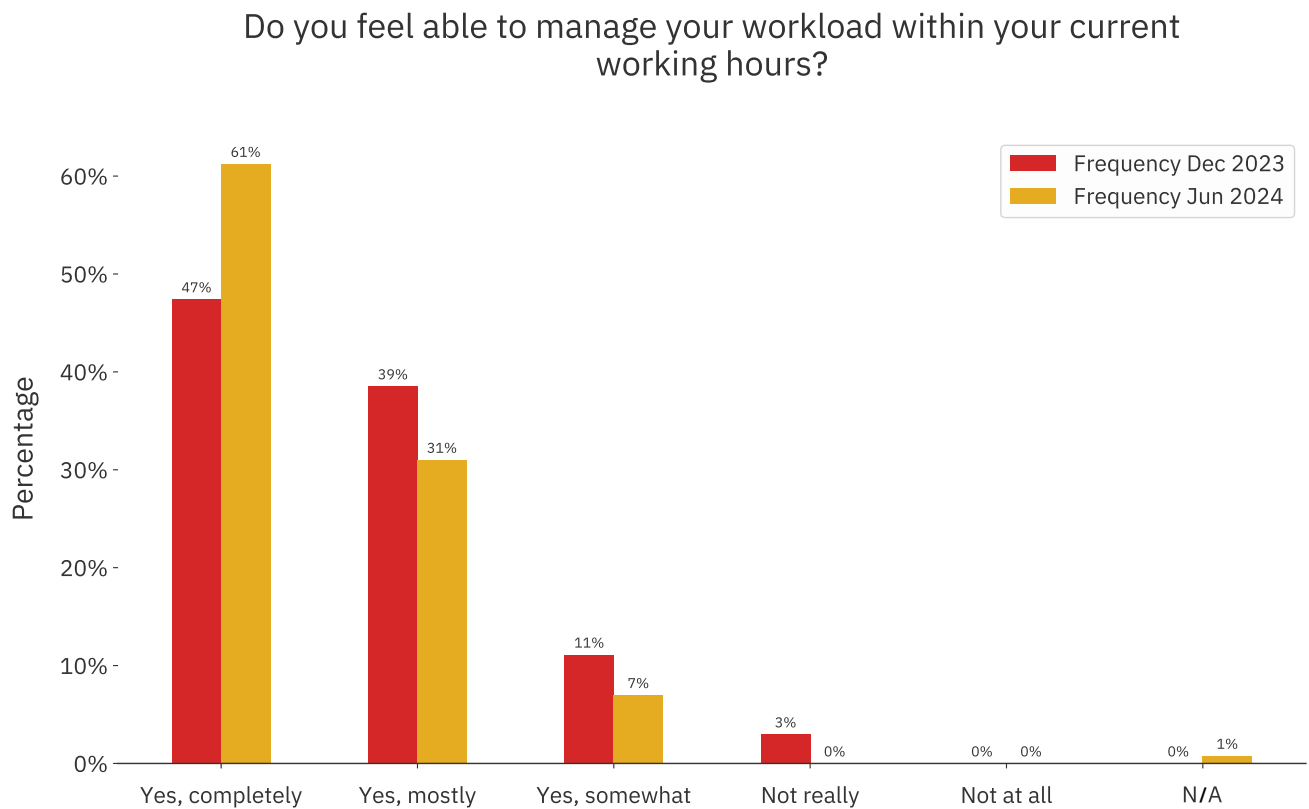
I do not believe I could return to 5 days a week working. If the trial ends, then I would look to work compressed hours.

Thank you for being brave enough to pilot this. It was a hard adjustment at work to begin with but we've really got into a good way of working now and are much more focused with our time together. The effect on my life outside of work has been huge and I'm so grateful.

Managing workload

Staff were asked whether they felt able to manage workload within their pilot working hours (rating on a 1 to 5 scale, where 1 is 'not at all' and 5 is 'yes, completely'). At the nine-month mark, 93% of staff answered that they were either 'completely' or 'mostly' able to manage their workload.

The results in this area also improved between the three-month and nine-month mark, suggesting that staff acclimated to the pilot and became more effective at managing their work as it progressed. The weighting of staff reporting they could 'completely' manage workload increased significantly between the three-month and the nine-month mark - from 47% to 62% - and the weighting of staff saying they could 'not really' manage dropped off - from 3% to nil.

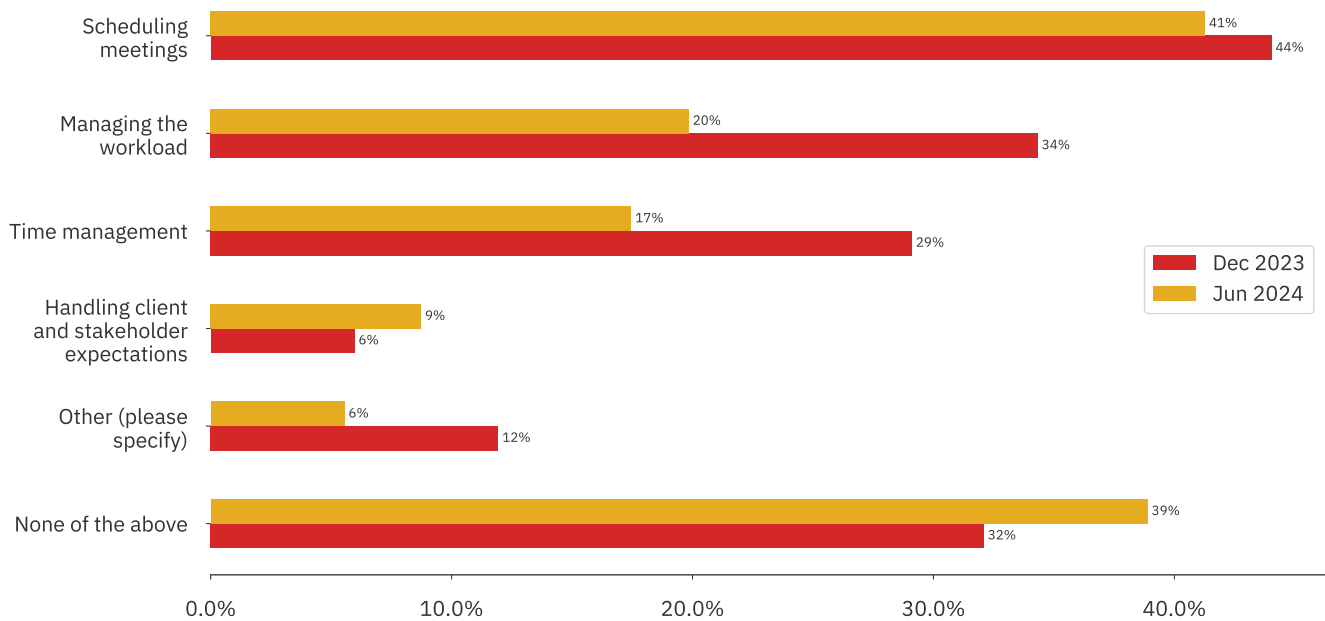
Figure 6: Ability to manage workload during the pilot (SOSE)

Adapting to the 32-hour week

The survey sought further detail on the perceived challenges of adapting to the pilot. By the three-month mark, 32% said they were not experiencing any problems, with this figure rising to 39% at the nine-month mark. For those who did experience problems, the main challenge revolved around scheduling meetings.

Figure 7: The reasons for challenges in adapting to the 32-hour policy (SOSE)

What, if any, challenges have you faced adapting to the four-day week in your work? Please select all that apply.



Text responses suggest that scheduling meetings is a particular concern for staff members who work with external stakeholders. For example, one staff member shared a belief that the 32-hour week policy would be easier to adapt to were others in the public sector also practicing it:

The only challenge potentially comes with being one of the few public bodies that is trialling the approach, so we are working with partners that don't yet have the same culture and therefore assume you are available five days per week for collaborative meetings. However these tend to be on Mondays, so now that I am working on Monday, and have Friday as a [non-working day], this is a relatively rare problem.

As may be expected, those staff already working compressed hours or part-time pre-pilot generally reported less difficulty with adapting to the pilot than those working full-time: half of those on flexible working patterns reported no issues at all, compared to 33% of those working full-time standard hours.

Impacts on staff wellbeing

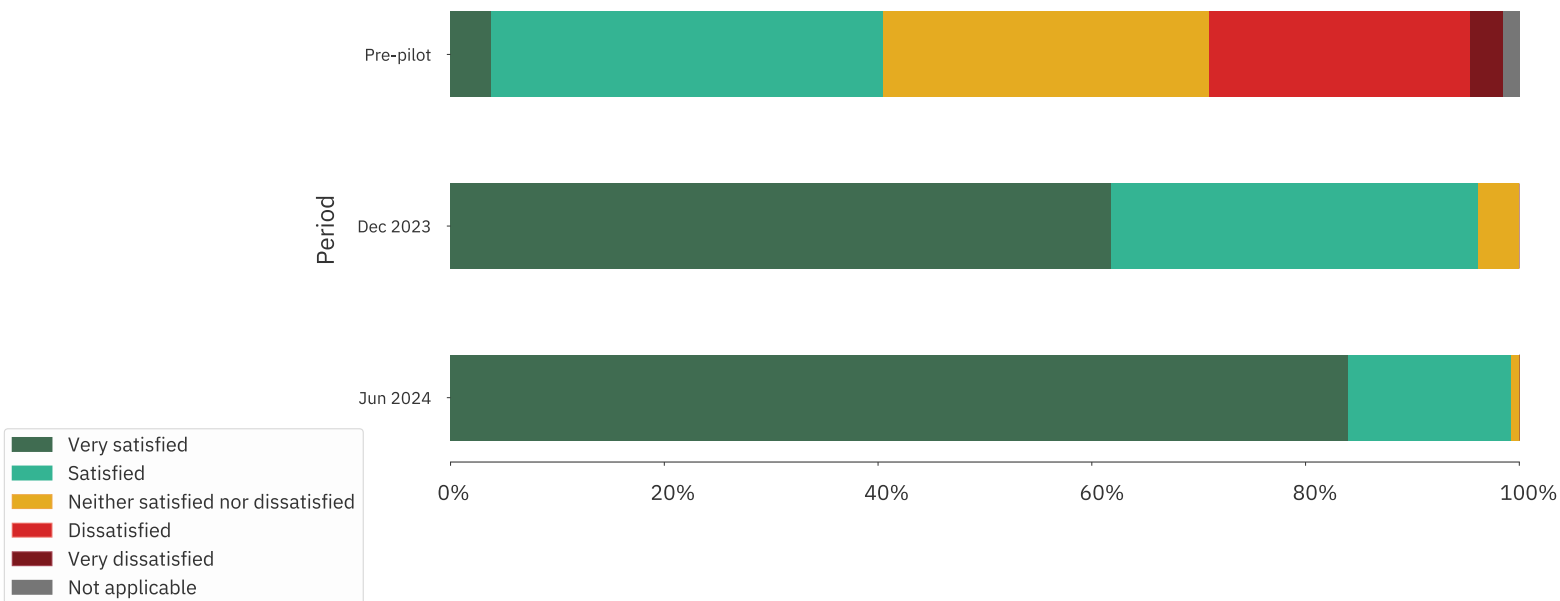
The survey asked staff to report on several measures of well-being, including perceived impacts on work-life balance, stress levels, and personal life in general.

Work-life balance

Staff were asked to rate their feelings about their work-life balance at the three-month and nine-month mark (on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is 'very dissatisfied' and 5 is 'very satisfied'). For this question, the researchers were also able to compare responses with results from an internal staff survey that SOSE conducted in December 2023 - prior to the pilot - in which the same question was asked.

Figure 8: Staff satisfaction with their work-life balance, pre-pilot, three-months into pilot, and nine-months into pilot (SOSE)

Now that the four-day week trial has started, how do you feel about your work-life balance (including the amount of free time you have outside of work)?



Staff responses in the area of work-life balance are very positive. The proportion of staff who say they are 'very satisfied' with their work-life balance rose from 4% pre-pilot, to 84% nine-months into the pilot. The proportion of staff saying they were 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' rose from 41% pre-pilot, to 99% at the nine-month mark. Additionally, no respondents reported any dissatisfaction with their work-life balance after the pilot started, compared to 27% prior to the start of the pilot.

These sharp increases in satisfaction with work-life balance may seem surprising given that SOSE's pilot involved only a 3 hour working time reduction for full-time staff (with the standard working week reducing from 35 to 32 hours). However, they may perhaps be explained in relation to the change in how hours were scheduled – across four days instead of five – which gave employees a full additional day for non-work activities.

Staff often commented on work-life balance in their text responses:

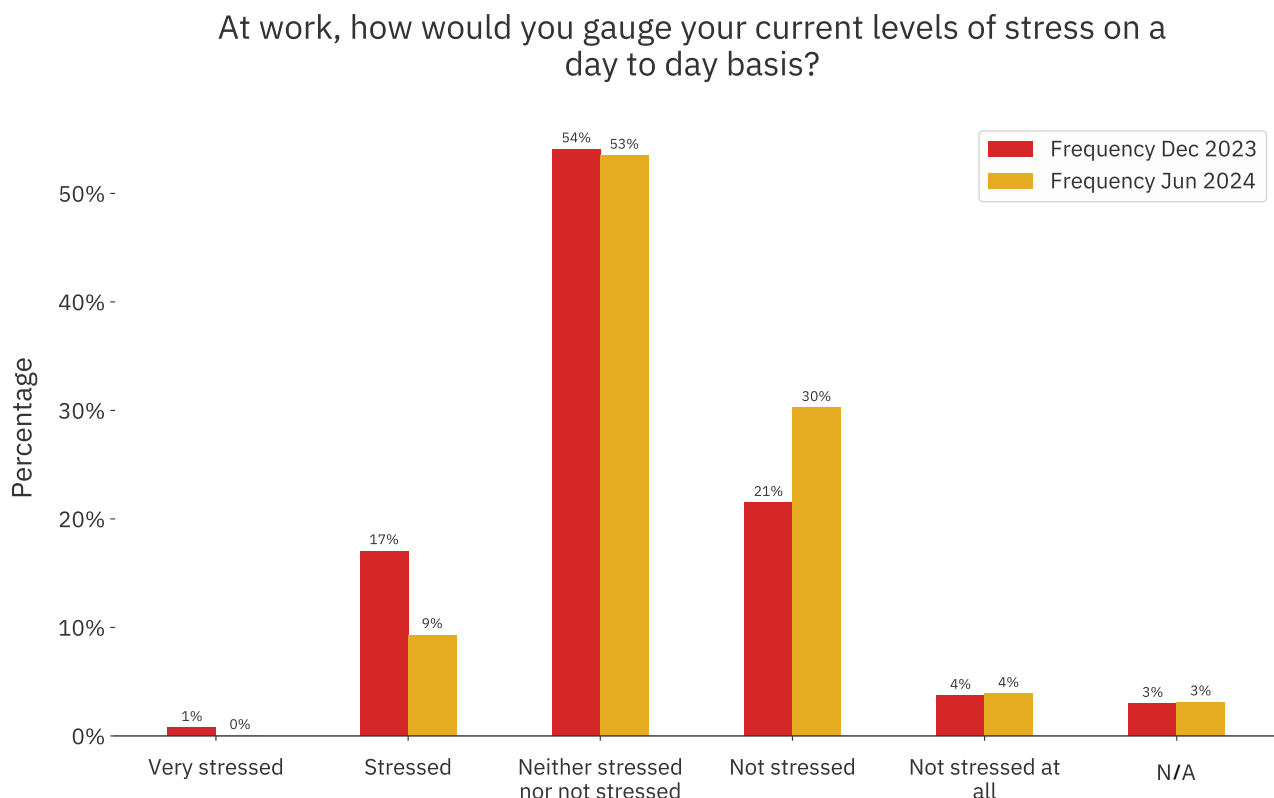
It has made a huge difference to my work-life balance and makes life feel like slightly less of a juggling act.

The opportunity to participate in this trial has added hugely to my work-life balance and overall has had a real positive impact on my mental health and wellbeing.

Stress

Staff were asked to assess their everyday stress levels three-months and nine months into the pilot (on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is 'not stressed at all' and 5 is 'very stressed'). While the majority of staff were neutral on the subject of stress, there were some modest improvements found over the course of the pilot. While 19% of respondents said they were regularly 'stressed' or 'very stressed' at the pilot's three-month mark, this number dropped to 10% by the nine-month mark.

Figure 9: Staff assessment of their stress levels, three months and nine months into the pilot (SOSE)



A possible interpretation is that these findings complement those presented above, regarding adaptation to a 32-hour working week. It is possible that any initial stress caused by changing work schedules subsided over time, allowing the benefits of additional time off to then take hold.

Surveys also asked respondents to compare their everyday stress levels at work versus at home. As at work, the majority of respondents are neutral on the subject of stress at home, and there are of course myriad variables that can contribute to home stress other than work scheduling. With that said, improvements were found over the course of the pilot. The proportion of respondents saying they were either 'very stressed' or 'stressed' at home dropped from 18%, three-months into the pilot, to 10%, at the nine-month mark. In their text responses, one staff member wrote:

Having a three-day weekend has significantly lowered my stress levels and I return to work feeling refreshed and ready to tackle tasks.

Personal life and responsibilities

Surveys asked staff to rate the general impact of the pilot on personal life (on a 1-5 scale, where 1 is 'very negative' and 5 is 'very positive'). The results were extremely positive, with 96% of staff reporting a 'very positive' or 'positive impact', and no staff member reporting a negative impact.

Of 4% that reported 'no impact', all of these staff were either part-time or on compressed hours prior to the pilot, meaning that they experienced a less significant change in their hours and schedules.

On a more granular level, it appears that female staff members were more likely to report the pilot having had a 'very positive' impact on home life. At the nine-month mark, 80% of female respondents reported a 'very positive' impact, as compared to 61% of male participants.

Impacts on the organisation

Complementing the more objective performance data presented in Part 1 of this report, surveys asked staff to provide ratings in the area of organisational performance, including the impact of the pilot on personal productivity, working culture, and sense of the organisation's overall efficiency.

Productivity

Based on the self-assessment provided in the survey, the average productivity of SOSE staff – measured as the percentage of the working day during which staff feel fully productive – rose from 86% at three-months into the pilot to 90% at the nine-month mark. Approximately two-thirds of respondents said that on average, they were productive for 90% or more of the working day.

The survey also asked staff to rate the impact of the pilot on their productivity and focus (on a 1-5 scale, where 1 is 'very negative' and 5 is 'very positive'). 92% of staff reported that the impact of the pilot was either 'very positive' or 'positive'. Part 3 of this report, outlining various work process changes within SOSE during the pilot, helps to explain this positive assessment.

Working culture

Staff were asked to rate the impact of the 32-hour pilot on working culture (on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is 'very negative' and 5 is 'very positive'). Nine-months into the pilot, 94% of respondents felt that the pilot had either a 'very positive' or 'positive' impact. No respondents reported a negative impact.

In their text responses, several staff took the time to stress the positive impact of the pilot on issues relating to equalities and inclusion:

For individuals, especially working mothers, who carry the load, it has made a considerable difference... We are more diligent and managing workload has been better and way more equal. I feel more valued and respected.

It actually creates a little bit more of a level playing field. Before, people with different hours or working patterns would stand out a bit... Now, everybody is the same... I think that is a very good thing across the board for all colleagues.

Being neurodivergent... the [pilot] has improved my quality of work, motivation, happiness, stress levels. I've never been so motivated and happy to work in my whole career... It makes me feel very lucky to be part of an organisation which looks after its employees in such a way.

SOSE's overall efficiency

Staff were asked to rate the impact of the pilot on SOSE's efficiency as a whole (on a 1 to 5 scale, where 1 is 'very negative' and 5 'very positive'). Nine months into the pilot, 86% of survey respondents judged that the impact of the 32-hour week on the SOSE's efficiency had been either 'positive' or 'very positive'. 12% said that there had been no impact, while 2% reported a negative impact.

Part 3 of this report – offering a qualitative account of work process changes within SOSE – helps to explain this positive assessment. A significant number of staff also clarified their answer in their text responses:

I think it has really focused work meetings. A bit more thought goes into how much time is needed for the meeting, who is needed and are there other options, rather than default to 1-hour meetings. Meetings are streamlined and focused. We have identified ways to deliver work output in a more streamlined, time-efficient way.

The extended working day enables me to more easily accommodate travel time when visiting clients who may be located far from my base.

A small number of comments were more negative. However, these pointed to issues that were not attributable to the pilot but other factors, such as reductions in staffing or general issues with processes and work allocation within the organisation.

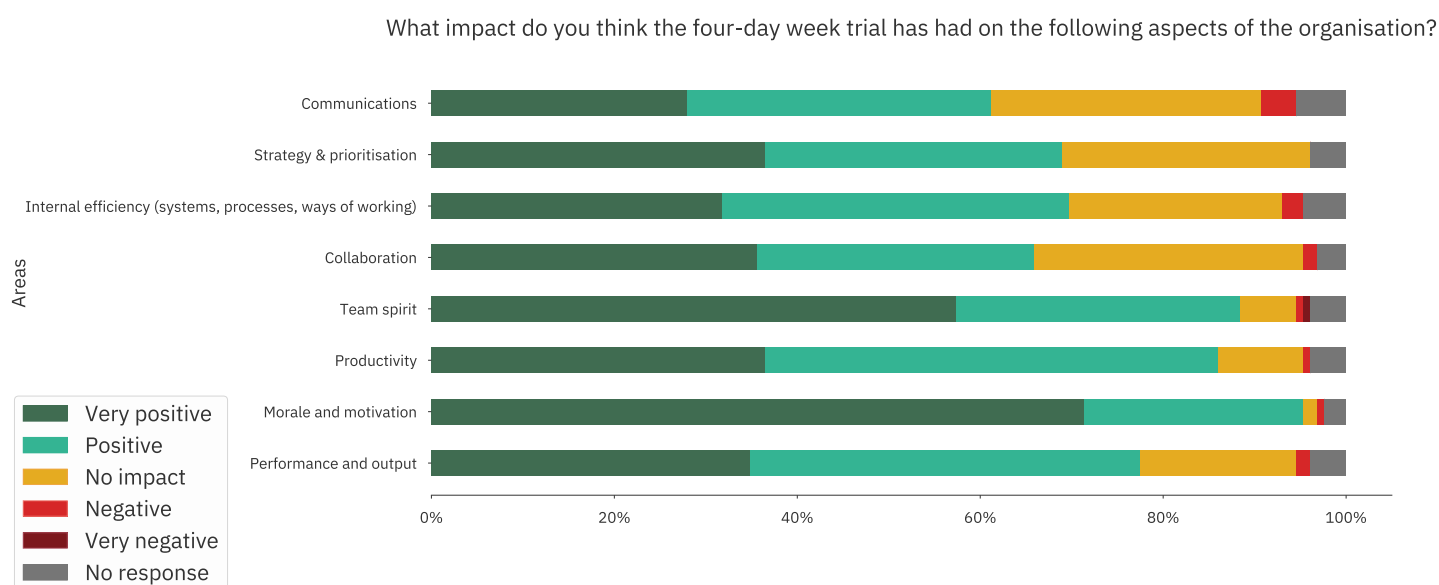
Text responses in this area also support the findings relating to stakeholder experiences, presented in Part 1 of this report. Staff described either a lack of comment from external stakeholders – which they took as a sign that the pilot had caused no disruption – or indicated that the stakeholders they worked with were positive and curious about the pilot.

I have had no comments from clients or partner organisations because I don't think they have noticed any change to SOSE's service delivery. I think this is a testament to the way the trial has been implemented and the positive effect it has had.

Surprisingly I haven't heard anything negative really. Socially, I only hear positive comments from friends [and] people in the town saying the conditions at SOSE look great and that they want to work for SOSE as a result [or] they wish their employer was more flexible.

A further survey question asked staff to rate the impact of the pilot on specific areas of the organisation (with various areas rated on a 1 to 5 scale, where 1 is 'very negative' and 5 is 'very positive').

Figure 10: Staff perception of the pilot's impact on different areas of the organisation (SOSE)



The main areas in which the pilot was perceived to have a positive impact are morale and motivation (98% judged 'very positive' or 'positive'), team spirit (91% judged 'very positive' or 'positive'), and productivity (88% judged 'very positive' or 'positive'). However, as the figure above shows, the pilot was described as having positively impacted all aspects of the organisation presented in the survey.

Part 3

The 32-hour working week pilot: the view from the ground

The 32-hour working week pilot: the view from the ground

As part of the pilot evaluation, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with a cross-section of participating staff. The purpose of these interviews was twofold:

- ↳ To gain insight into the decision-making processes and practical measures that went into the implementation of the 32-hour policy in each organisation.
- ↳ To complement the survey data by capturing, in participants' own words, the impact of the pilot on work experiences and home life.

To begin the process, liaisons from within AiB and SOSE provided the researchers with organisation charts, which were then used to create a sample of interviewees. The sample prioritised representation from the spread of departments and role types within each organisation, aiming to also include a mixture of genders and age groups. In total, 44 staff took part in an interview. The sample included:

- ↳ 23 participants from AiB (9 in senior leadership positions and 14 in non-leadership positions)
- ↳ 21 participants from SOSE (10 in senior leadership positions and 11 in non-leadership positions)

Each interview was conducted online and lasted approximately one hour. Interviews involved a semi-structured format, with a combination of prepared questions and spaces for interviewees to introduce their own topics. Researchers then analysed the responses and grouped them into themes, represented by the subheadings below.

A positive reception

A prominent finding of the interviews is that overall, opinions of the pilot were extremely positive. Among the 44 staff interviewed, there was an emphatic and almost unanimous desire for the 32-hour policy to be made permanent following the pilot.

Numerous staff also told researchers about their potential plans to request alterations to their working hours, in the event that Scottish Government would not consider the policy for continuation. Common plans beyond the pilot included considering a ‘compressed hours’ four-day week (in which standard full-time hours are worked over four days instead of five) and voluntarily lengthening the working day by a small amount, in order to accrue enough flexi-time to accommodate a regular nine-day fortnight. These intentions might be read as a reflection of the very high value that staff placed on having an additional day off.

Although some staff were considering these options, these same staff always stressed that a 32-hour week policy was their preference. Some praised its nature as an organisation-wide policy that improves the sense of parity around working hours within the organisation.

Fertile ground

Interviewers asked staff in senior leadership positions why their organisation volunteered for the pilot. In both organisations, there was a belief that the 32-hour policy could be viewed as part of an established lineage of staff-focused initiatives. In AiB this involved initiatives such as menopause support, organised walks, a support for healthy eating and flexible working hours policies. In SOSE, the pilot was seen as continuous with the organisation’s commitment to flexible working, mental health awareness, and the special leave granted to staff with care responsibilities during the Covid pandemic.

Enthusiasm among senior leadership teams also stemmed from a belief that the 32-hour policy held potential as a ‘win-win’ for staff and the organisation, improving staff well-being, but also having a knock-on effect in terms of staff commitment and work performance.

We want to see the impact this will have on people’s lives. What does having that extra time do to benefit you? What you also hope is that people will be more refreshed - more willing to maybe go the extra mile when needed... I hope it will lead to a general improvement in well-being, and less time being lost through stuff like stress et cetera, because you’ve got an extra amount of time to recover, do your own thing. A wee bit less pressure on you. (AiB, senior leadership staff)

People who are their best outside work are their best inside work. (SOSE, senior leadership staff)

Members of senior leadership within both organisations also discussed their sense of early confidence about the success of the pilot, explaining that their organisations were already engaged in a process of reflecting on ways of working. In AiB, for example, interviewers were told that the organisation was already committed to an ongoing process of improving work processes and communication flows.

In both organisations, researchers were also told that the experience of home-working during the pandemic meant staff were already accustomed to thinking creatively about how to collaborate and get their work done. Several staff presented the 32-hour week as a natural evolution of this experience. In SOSE, a staff member also told researchers that SOSE’s working-from-home policy – which cuts both the commute and the day’s “settling-in period” – already provides a good bedrock for achieving the greater efficiency demanded by a 32-hour week.

In sum, the pilot was viewed by members of senior leadership in the two organisations as a good opportunity to test their confidence that working hours could be reduced without a negative impact on productivity.

In my opinion it would be possible to reduce working hours and not have a massive impact - well, in fact, have a positive impact on productivity. This was a fantastic opportunity in an operational setting, to see if this can work in practice. (AiB, senior leadership staff)

Pre-pilot concerns

In the lead up to the pilot, both organisations took the issue of staff consent very seriously. Senior leadership staff in both organisations were firm on the idea that the pilot would not have been permitted to go ahead without a high level of staff approval (which was 100% in AiB and close to 100% in SOSE).

Prior to committing to the pilot, each organisation ran extensive consultations with staff. In AiB, this involved dedicated meetings followed by an informal ‘agreement in principle’ survey for staff, and later, a more formal opt-in survey, accompanied by a full description of the policy’s terms and conditions. In SOSE, the consultation process also involved staff focus groups. These activities were designed by the organisations in order to gauge the level of approval for the pilot and draw out any concerns before the prospective start date.

Although staff in both organisations were mostly in support of the pilot, the researchers were told that early staff consultations revealed several concerns:

- ↳ Some staff had concerns connected to misconceptions about how a 32-hour policy might operate. For example, some were worried it would mean the organisation closing its doors for an extra day per week, and others that the policy would negatively impact their pay or annual leave entitlements.
- ↳ Part-time staff were concerned about whether they would be included, and keen to know what the policy would mean for their hours.
- ↳ Staff had differing levels of confidence over whether they would be able to manage their workloads on the new working pattern.

- ↳ Several staff were concerned about the extension to the working day involved in implementing the new pattern (outlined in the introduction to this report). One person said they had been concerned about coordinating school runs around the new schedule, and another person, experiencing long-term health problems, said they were initially worried about the scope for fatigue on the new schedule.

Responding to such concerns, a member of the senior leadership team within each organisation produced a comprehensive set of FAQ guidelines and distributed these to staff. These guidelines were designed to answer and anticipate staff questions about the new policy, as well as ensure staff were fully-informed about how things would work at the point of consent. A senior member of AiB advised:

Make sure you are prepared and have lots of guidance in place, because people are going to ask questions... There was a lot of work done trying to think of scenarios that may arise and we covered that in the guidance, so that people were making an informed decision [about whether to consent to the pilot] (AiB, senior leadership staff)

In SOSE, a staff member closely involved in spearheading the initiative said that the FAQ document was ‘growing all the time’, based on staff concerns and input:

I spent hours researching, reading everything that was publicly available on the four-day working week... We just started looking at the different models, issues that companies had experienced - you know part-time staff, level of service, cover, holidays - all those kinds of bugbears. (SOSE staff member)

Staff in AiB, in particular, praised the transparency and forward thinking represented by the organisation’s detailed FAQ document. The FAQ guides themselves were clearly a product of significant care and initiative by the members of staff responsible, representing something of a best practice example in terms of how to communicate a 32-hour policy to staff. Key features of the pre-pilot FAQ documents included:

- ↳ A clear description of the policy parameters, such as the amount of hours being reduced, a description of the new working pattern, and clarification that pay will not be impacted.
- ↳ Clarification about the commitment to involve part-time staff, and a table setting out the level of pro rata working time reductions, as they apply to staff with differing numbers of working hours.
- ↳ Transparency around the process for deciding which day of the week each staff member will take off (a process explained below).
- ↳ Confirmation that annual leave balances will not be affected by the policy, and a detailed explanation of how to book leave and take bank holidays in the context of the new policy.

- ↳ Confirmation that the existing policy of flexi-time will not be compromised by the new policy, and a reminder on how to use the existing flexi-time system.
- ↳ A statement on the commitment to equality, prompting staff to come forward if they believe the new working pattern will be to their detriment for any reason.
- ↳ A statement being honest with staff that, due to the potential adjustment period associated with the 32-hour policy, there is a chance that they may be asked to work on their day off in exceptional circumstances.

AiB's FAQ document also contained detailed step-by-step instructions on the procedure for booking annual leave during the pilot. This was required due to the organisation's ongoing reliance on HR software calibrated for standard working hours. Troubleshooting this problem required significant effort from a member of the senior leadership team during the pilot preparation period.

Designing a staggered model

As the introduction to this report outlines, while certain pilot parameters were fixed in advance, the organisations were free to define particular terms and conditions of their 32-hour policy with respect to organisational requirements. During the interviews, researchers asked participants to give a detailed description of the 32-hour model in their organisation, along with an account of how its specific terms and conditions were decided.

Both organisations decided early on that they would not close their doors for an extra day per week. Instead, both organisations opted for a 'four-day week with a five-day service', staggering the allocated day off among staff to ensure a sufficient coverage of functions over five days.

We made the decision very early that we were not going to close on a Friday. The public perception of that is that we're diminishing our service to give staff a day off. That's a very hard argument to make. We think the public should have the same level of service that they did beforehand... We decided it would be a five-day service with staff working a maximum of four days a week. (AiB, senior leadership staff)

In both AiB and SOSE, the senior leadership teams decided that the staggered model would typically involve some staff taking Mondays off, and others taking their day off on a Friday. Staff often explained to interviewers that a benefit of this arrangement is that it preserves three days (Tues-Thurs) in which all staff are present for any larger meetings or work processes requiring cooperation across teams. In SOSE, some staff referred to these three days as the ‘core week’, and although some staff in the organisation’s pre-pilot focus groups expressed preferences for days off other than a Monday and Friday, the senior leadership team decided that preserving a core week would be important for service delivery.

In AiB, by comparison, there were some teams whose practical challenges led them to opt for alternative arrangements. The AiB facilities team, for example, (responsible for receiving mail and managing the building) had allocated days off on days other than a Monday and Friday, finding this was better for maintaining coverage. Since they were not generally included in large meetings, maintaining a ‘core week’ was less important for the facilities team. Two further teams opted for all staff to have a common Friday off: the procurement team, who are not required to be available to the public five-days a week, and the policy team, who surmised that parliamentary work is generally quieter on this day, meaning they would be less likely to fall behind.

Beyond this, the researchers also enquired into the process for deciding which individual staff members were allocated which days off. In both organisations, senior leadership decided that final decisions in this area ought to lie with team leaders, who it was believed would have the best overview of coverage needs in each area of the organisation. In both organisations, team leaders were tasked with consulting their staff to discuss preferences for the non-working day. Once staff preferences (and any special requirements such as care responsibilities) had been taken into consideration, team leaders then decided whether any staff preferences would need to be denied for the sake of coverage.

We said, ‘you tell us what you would prefer as your non-working day. But, we may not be able to give you that day because the business has got to operate’. (AiB, senior leadership staff)

Within SOSE, senior leadership interviews revealed a common impression that, owing to the level of staff enthusiasm for the pilot, the process for allocating days off had been worked through with little conflict.

I couldn’t believe how seamlessly it went. Managers were empowered to organise it with their teams. We got a 60:40 split in the end - 60% on a Monday and 40% on a Friday. (SOSE, senior leadership staff)

In AiB, by comparison, a very small number of staff reported minor tensions at work as a result of certain staff not receiving their preferences. In both organisations, the researchers also heard of tweaks to the allocation of days made part-way into the pilot, as lessons were being learned about coverage needs, as well as agreements within teams to rotate the allocation of Mondays versus Fridays at a certain point during the pilot, for the sake of fairness.

In general, the choices made by the two organisations around when to schedule days off and how to allocate them suggested a high level of care and forethought, balancing staff preferences with the goal of maintaining staff coverage over five days.

Maintaining flexibility

A novel feature of Scotland's 32-hour pilot was the way in which the new policy interacted with significant flexi-time arrangements, already in place.¹⁴ Staff at AiB, in particular, often commented on the relation between the two policies. One feature of the existing flexibility policy is that staff are allowed to work their hours at any point between 7am and 7pm, accruing small deficits/surpluses of working time over a period of one month. Any surpluses of work may then be claimed back in the form of time off in lieu (TOIL).

At the outset of the pilot, senior leadership at AiB felt it was important to emphasise that introducing the 32-hour policy would not mean rolling back on any aspect of existing flexi-time policy: the goal was to operate the two policies side by side.

Several staff told researchers how much they appreciated the flex policy. While some relied on it for childcare commitments (such as school runs), others said they used the flex policy as a way to avoid wasting their own and their organisation's time (logging off, for example, when there was less to do, in anticipation of working longer hours during busier periods). The ability to accrue flex leave was also discussed as a core benefit of the job – one that staff did not want to see rescinded.

Following the introduction of the 32-hour week, some staff told researchers that the shorter working week made it more difficult to accrue surplus hours on the flex scheme. However, when asked, they all said that on balance, they preferred the guaranteed and regular time off represented by the 32-hour policy.

¹⁴ As a member of SG Main, AiB is subject to the group's standard set of flexi-time arrangements, viewable here: <https://www.jobs.gov.scot/flexible-working>. Although SOSE is not part of SG Main, it operates a comparable flexi-time policy.

Several staff also suggested that the existing flex policy was a good bedrock for the 32-hour policy, because it had already established necessary conditions of trust within the organisation. With the flex policy, staff must be trusted to schedule their hours sensibly around workload, and managers likewise trusted to honor requests for TOIL. Several staff said that these existing norms helped with the introduction of the 32-hour week. Managers, for example, never shared with researchers any concerns around staff exploiting the 32-hour policy to avoid tasks. Likewise, when senior leadership announced that exceptional circumstances may require staff to complete work on their day off, it appeared that staff had no problem trusting that this would be handled fairly, and that they would be able to claim the time back in the form of TOIL. This was not a formalised aspect of the policy, but referred to by one AiB staff member as ‘part of its common sense’.

We need to be flexible in how we operate it but we also need flexibility from staff... I think that was an easy trade-off for most people. (AiB, senior leadership staff)

In interviews, no staff member complained or disapproved of the potential requirement for work on the day off. One staff member in SOSE told the researchers that this was an element of the flexibility needed to make the policy work.

The researchers judged the terms around the potential for work on the day off as reasonable, given the uncertainties of a pilot, but interviewers did seek to find out how often this requirement was actually enacted. Based on interviews, the actual pressure to complete work on the day off appeared to be very minimal in both organisations.

It's there as the exception... we would not upset [people's plans] unless we have to. (AiB, senior leadership staff)

Signalling a commitment to honour the day off, both organisations chose to name it the “non-working day”. Several managers also told interviewers it was their policy to never contact staff on the non-working day, stressing the importance of sticking to the policy in order to properly test and adapt to it.

If we want this four-day week to really work... then we have to commit to it, we have to say that the day is a day. ‘Take it, it's yours, use it as a rebalance, recharge and recover day, and do what you like with it’. I've not called in any of my staff on that day. (SOSE manager)

Another manager told researchers that relying too much on contingency plans and asking staff to alter their day off may end up undermining perceptions of the policy as a fair one.

Branch leads need to meet on a regular basis to have as much consistency as we can across the office, so that we're passing the same message down... so that you've not got any resentment, area to area. (AiB senior leadership)

Staff who did report working on the non-working day all gave the impression that the work was either exceptional or minimal. One AiB staff member said they had once replied to a work text message on a day off, and another had signed in for ten minutes to sign off reports before a deadline. A small number of senior staff reported having worked more regularly on their non-working day, with one adding that they accepted it as part of the role: “a senior position comes with additional responsibilities”. Within SOSE, the researchers heard from staff who had worked as an exception in order to meet a busy client, attend a community event, or attend a training day, before reclaiming the day as TOIL. In summary, we might describe the policies in both organisations as well protected, with minimal to no requirements for working on the day off.

On my non-working day I can completely disconnect from work. (AiB staff member)

Finding efficiencies

The performance metrics outlined in Part 1 of this report showed stability within a range of performance measures across the two pilot organisations, despite the shorter working week, suggesting that the pilot was associated with significant productivity increases.

This is consistent with findings in previous shorter working week pilots, where it has been found that introducing a shorter working week tends to promote a period of innovation around work processes, as staff seek ways to achieve reduced hours without impacting output.¹⁵ This has been referred to by working time consultants and campaigners as ‘working smarter’, and Scotland’s pilot yielded many examples, allowing researchers to make sense of the observed productivity increases.

An internal evaluation report, shared with the researchers by AiB, clarified that “the pilot has helped AiB drive improvement across the business”, in part by promoting an “overall look at working habits”. In both organisations, this process involved some combination of senior coordination and more spontaneous changes at the team and individual levels.

At the more coordinated level, senior managers at AiB explained the organisation’s ongoing commitment to improving the design of its digital case management systems, as well as refining communication flows and bureaucratic functions across the organisation. However, they also told researchers that the pilot had prompted them to encourage staff to develop their own initiatives:

15 For example: ‘The results are in: The UK’s four-day week pilot’, *Autonomy Institute* (p.54-58)

When teams knew we were going down this road, they were given autonomy to look at how they can do things better. Any areas where they could save some time, they were encouraged to try and do it. (AiB, senior leadership staff)

By far the most common efficiency measures discussed by staff in both organisations related to meetings. The pilot had fuelled internal discussions about the norms around meetings – specifically, how long they need to be, who needs to attend, what the purpose is, and whether there is a purpose at all.

If you're having a meeting, it's to discuss issues that people present can contribute to, in order to make decisions. What I felt a lot of our meetings were [before] is you would sit around, one person would describe what they were doing, then the next person would describe what they were doing [and so on]. There is some value in that, but it is limited... We've introduced the question, 'do we have to all really gather together for this meeting?' This project has allowed us to ask about the value we're really adding when we do things. (AiB, senior leadership staff)

In both organisations, researchers heard about meetings where fewer people were asked to attend, regular meetings being reduced in length or frequency, and extra efforts to create task-focused agendas and clear actions. Nobody interviewed suggested that the reforms around meetings had impeded their ability to complete work. Instead, many staff talked about the changes very positively. One staff member from SOSE, for example, said they were glad to be free of “meetings for the sake of meetings” and another from AiB told us that their understanding of how work tasks were being divided in the team had improved as a result of the changes.

Beyond meetings, researchers were told about other changes to work processes that had either been prompted or escalated by the pilot. In AiB, a weekly report (with typically stable findings) is now compiled fortnightly instead. Teams are using software to prioritise work tasks, and some staff are sharing mailboxes. In SOSE, some staff were planning their work using productivity software and channeling efforts into writing more effective emails.

Many staff in SOSE also told interviewers that Mondays and Fridays (outside the ‘core week’) had been valued by many as good days for work requiring travel or as ‘focus periods’, ideal for doing work requiring extended effort, concentration or reading. This is due to the reduction of distractions and communications on these days, brought about by the pilot.

[Fridays are] a good opportunity to rattle through lots of things. (SOSE staff member)

On the flip side, however, some managers at AiB said that fitting their necessary meetings into the Tuesday-Thursday ‘core week’ had sometimes been challenging, and others said that beginning work on a Tuesday made them feel as though they were playing catch-up.

Staff in both organisations had also been developing new norms related to the challenge of maintaining coverage within a four-day working pattern. The working time reduction, along with new rotas, made it important for staff to know who was working and when, so that they could anticipate any possible gaps in coverage. In AiB, staff had been ensuring their hours were visible to others in their calendars and researchers were told that there had been greater efforts to allocate work to staff ahead of time. In SOSE, staff described the importance of having a clear and detailed set of notes when handing over tasks to colleagues, prior to a day off, as well as clear out-of-office messages to signpost clients to the correct personnel on a Monday or Friday.

We make sure there is always someone to go to. (SOSE, senior leadership)

A common observation among interviewees was that the need to be more vigilant about coverage had enhanced the sense of interdependence within the organisation. A senior manager in AiB said that a 32-hour week demands more ‘multi-skilled’ staff, and staff in both organisations said that the pilot had seen staff making special efforts to learn aspects of one another’s roles. In some parts of AiB, this effort had also been formalised as a ‘cross-training plan’.

Most staff described this commitment to overlap staff responsibilities with a sense of enthusiasm. A manager at AiB, for example, recollected having to cover a member of junior staff on their non-working day, saying that although the experience was initially ‘nerve wracking’, it had given him a better appreciation for the skills of the junior staff. Despite the mostly positive accounts around skill-sharing and interdependence, however, the researchers did also hear about a minority of longer-term staff who had been resistant to the new direction and felt more guarded about the boundaries of their roles.

In interviews, researchers also sought to investigate whether the drive to seek new efficiencies was experienced by some staff as unpleasant. Interviews, however, tended to corroborate the positive staff survey results on job satisfaction (reported in Part 2 above). Staff often talked about a feeling of proficiency brought about by changes to work processes - a positive sense of getting things done. Staff in SOSE talked about having become more focused in their work, using words and phrases to describe work such as ‘buzz’, ‘enthusiasm’, ‘less sluggishness’ and ‘less moaning and groaning’. Staff in AiB painted a similar picture, with one staff member describing a ‘positive shift in office mood’.

Several staff across the two organisations also shared their experience that work tends to ‘stretch out’ to fit the time available, to some degree.

If I do more I think the job satisfaction increases because I feel like I have achieved a lot within that day. If I had five days to do what I am doing, I would probably span it out like ‘oh, I’ll do that later’. The more you do, the more energy you create and you get a bit of a buzz... You’re on the ball and you’re on the go.

I'm not cramming and rushing, but I am always moving on. (SOSE staff)

Another staff member at SOSE told interviewers that the 32-hour pilot had made space for initiative and creativity at work. They believed that the policy had allowed the mental space to think about the longer-term/strategic goals of the organisation, which is not always possible when engaged in the daily cycle of communications and small tasks.

If I am out walking at the weekend, I now have a little space in my mind where I can think - 'I have a great idea, and when I get back I can do this'. (SOSE staff)

On the more negative side, a selection of staff in both organisations did tell researchers that the changes associated with the pilot had left them more tired at the end of the day – particularly the small extensions to the working day brought about by the new working patterns. One person within SOSE was concerned about the prolonged screen-time brought about by the slight extension to the working day. When asked, none of these staff said they would want to go back to the previous arrangement. As one SOSE staff member pointed out, however, care ought to be taken in relation to the impact of changing hours, schedules and work processes on people experiencing fatigue or other hidden health conditions.

Home life

As well as providing insights into the decision-making processes and changing working practices associated with the pilot, interviews were an opportunity to ask staff about how they had experienced their additional time off.

I smile more now. (AiB staff member)

Life isn't as boring. (SOSE staff member)

Staff shared with researchers the many things they had been doing on their non-working days and accounts were generally extremely positive, with phrases such as 'life-changing' commonly heard.

The pilot has meant a huge weight off my shoulders. When it first started, I didn't realise how much of a loop of work-home-work-home I was on. I know it's only one day, but I've been able to step off that. (SOSE staff member)

Even if it ends and it never comes back, the time I've had with my granddaughter is irreplaceable. (AiB staff member)

It was very common for staff to tell researchers that their ability to complete household chores or 'life admin' tasks (such as paying bills, going to the Post Office, or getting the car serviced) on the day off had significantly improved the quality of their time in the evenings and at the weekend.

There's a girl I know on Instagram and she's put this story up - she's mopping her floor at 10 o'clock on a random weeknight. Gone are those days. (SOSE staff)

We are now able to have long weekends - it used to be one day of me recovering because I was absolutely shattered mentally. And then one day to do anything. It was rubbish. And then the rest of the week at work. And psychologically because I know I have those three days, I feel ready to enjoy things. (SOSE staff)

Some staff with dependent children also reported feeling more attentive and energised for family activities.

The weekend is the weekend. I feel that I am spending more time with the kids, and not as grumpy. I don't feel as much pressure to get 'life' done - household cleaning, bills, etc. And I think that also makes Monday a lot better because I am coming back into work fresh, knowing that everything's done, I've had a great weekend with the kids... I've seen how one day can just completely change the whole week. (SOSE staff)

A general impression was that the pilot meant a great deal to staff with caring responsibilities, whether this involved children or elderly family members.

I honestly can't get across how beneficial it is to me personally with elderly care responsibilities. I think it must be the same for people with young children too. I'm relied upon to do things and I now feel like I have the time to do them. Lots of things fall to me in my family, and sometimes I feel resentment towards others in the family for not pulling their weight, but I don't feel that so much now. I enjoy the time I get to have with my mum. (AiB staff)

One staff member told the researchers about their need to care for a child who needed regular hospital appointments, due to a chronic health condition. Since the pilot began, these appointments can now be done as a family and bookended with enjoyable activities, as opposed to being done in a rush.

Other staff referred to how the pilot had left them better equipped to adapt to changing circumstances such as developing health conditions, the birth of a child, or arising care responsibilities. Staff told researchers that the additional day off had provided the time to deal with these things without needing to reduce to part-time hours and suffer a pay penalty.

Staff members were asked:***What are some of the things you have been doing on your day off?***

Gardening	Long walks/walking the dogs
DIY	Visiting family
Chores and housework	Taking time to shop locally
Long cycle rides	Picking up children from daycare
Playing music	Enjoying time with partner
Taking pre-school child to the library	Caring for an elderly relative
Enjoying the gym's quiet hours	Taking children to a sport club
Taking long weekends in Scottish towns	Training for a half-marathon
Taking family to medical appointments	Volunteering at school career day
Enjoying time alone	Learning a new language
Crossword puzzles	Assisting on a school trip
Mentoring a young person	Going for meals with retired parents
Attending football matches	Cooking/baking
Resting	Video games

Given the temporary nature of pilots, they do not necessarily provide a full picture of what citizens might do with their additional free-time, were there a permanent policy in place. In interviews, several staff speculated about further ways they might use their free-time, should the 32-hour policy become permanent or more widely adopted. One staff member said they were eager to take up education or volunteering on their day off, but that the temporary nature of the pilot had so far stopped them from committing. Another staff member imagined a future when the 32-hour week might be Scotland-wide, enabling citizens to coordinate their efforts on their days off, contributing to the community and building local economies.

What happens next?

Assessing the staff interviews as a whole, it is fair to summarise that there was an overwhelming desire in both organisations to see the policy continue. Staff also commonly talked about the value of a pilot as a kind of staging ground for working through the challenge of reducing working time: “we’ve still got more learning to do along the way” (AiB senior leadership).

Many staff also discussed, however, their awareness that the 32-hour pilot had been embarked upon in the context of significant uncertainty: around the pilot's impacts, around Scottish Government's level of commitment to the shorter working week, and around the regulatory challenges that might be raised by any effort to extend or scale up the policy.

Staff in both organisations also speculated that the regulatory challenges of extending the policy may be particularly difficult for AiB, given its membership under the common terms and conditions of SG Main. Concluding one interview, a member of senior leadership within AiB clarified the potential difficulties, but hoped strongly that solutions would be sought:

We've operated on the expectation that this is one year – one and done. This is a shame to me. If we can demonstrate that things have worked well, it's a crying shame if, at the end of the year, we're done because we're part of the Scottish Main Bargaining Unit. I understand entirely the bureaucratic reasons that would make this difficult. But by the same token, if this is successful, it would be nice to find a way. (AiB, senior leadership)

Part 4

Supporting the shift to a 35-hour week

Supporting the shift to a 35-hour week

Background

The implementation of a 35-hour week has been a longstanding ambition of Scottish Public Sector pay policy and, in October 2024, public bodies within SG Main moved to a 35-hour working week on a contractual basis. Meanwhile, all bodies covered by the Scottish Public Sector Pay Policy are being strongly encouraged towards standardising a 35-hour working week for staff. At the time of reporting, of the 73 public bodies covered by the Public Sector Pay Policy, all of them (with one exception) have either implemented or are expected to implement a 35-hour working week by April 2025.

As part of its Scottish Government commission, the Autonomy Institute's consultancy team worked with a selection of consenting 35-hour week organisations. These organisations have moved from full-time contracted hours of 37 hours per week, to 35 hours per week. Part-time staff have been included within the policy by having a pro-rata reduction in hours. In terms of the scheduling of hours, the model of implementation is determined by the organisations themselves, according to the specific demands of service delivery. Autonomy's supporting activities included presenting case studies of existing shorter working week organisations, as well as meeting with senior staff to troubleshoot any emerging problems in the transition to 35 hours.

Staff survey

Following Autonomy's programme of support for participating organisations, a survey was conducted with five organisations. The purpose of this survey was to conduct an early 'check-in' with employees following the initial 4-5 months on a 35-hour working week. The survey sought to gauge staff perceptions, identify common challenges, and uncover innovations that may have emerged as organisations adapted to the new working arrangements. The survey was conducted in February 2025 via an online survey platform, and respondents were anonymous.

It is also important to note that this analysis does not use any baseline or comparative data to assess the success of the 35-hour policy. Unlike the adjacent 32-hour working week pilot, which evaluates the success of the working time reduction across a range of metrics, the objective of the 35-hour research was to provide a ‘temperature check’ on the impact of moving to a 35-hour working week. In this sense, the analysis can provide the foundations from which subsequent check-ins may be carried out with organisations, beyond the Autonomy Institute’s involvement.

The survey analysis focuses on a number of key areas:

- ↳ Exploring staff perceptions of the transition to a 35-hour week.
- ↳ Understanding the recurring concerns and difficulties expressed by staff in adapting to the 35-hour schedule.
- ↳ Highlighting any noticeable impacts on equity and inclusion within the workplace.
- ↳ Detailing the effects on work schedules, workload distribution, and time management outside of work.

The survey design received input from various stakeholders in order to maximise participation, as well as ensure alignment with the tone and language used in other Scottish public sector surveys. It was structured into four key sections:

- ↳ Personal impact of the move to 35 hours, including experiences and perceptions of the policy.
- ↳ Organisational impact of the move to 35 hours, documenting organisational changes and responses to these.
- ↳ Impact on working life, including the impact on work-life balance.
- ↳ Demographic information.

The survey included a mixture of closed multiple choice questions and open form qualitative questions, providing respondents with opportunities to contextualise and explain their answers.

In total, 1,974 members of staff from 5 organisations completed the survey. For the purposes of data protection and anonymity we have decided not to disclose the names of the organisations that took part. This does not in any way distract from the main aims of the survey, which are to understand staff perceptions, identify common challenges, and uncover any positive benefits that staff have experienced in these early stages of implementation. The overall intentions of the analysis and recommendations are to inform initial lessons around the 35-hour policy, which may be of use to the participating public sector bodies, as well as other bodies deliberating or implementing comparable working time reduction initiatives.

Developments and trends

Respondents to the survey were largely positive towards the introduction of the 35-hour working week. Some key themes have emerged across the organisations, with staff reporting increased wellbeing, a better work-life balance, and a positive impact on performance. Feedback has also highlighted a few key areas representing an opportunity for more targeted support in the continued transition to the 35-hour working week.

Adoption of the 35-hour week

Participants were asked whether they have been able to work a 35-hour week on a consistent basis since its introduction (or equivalent for part-time or flexible work arrangements). 79% of survey respondents gave a confidently positive answer, judging they had either ‘completely’ or ‘mostly’ been able to stick to the 35-hour working week on a consistent basis.

Q7: Have you been able to work a 35-hour week on a consistent basis since its introduction (or equivalent if you are on part-time hours or a flexible work arrangement)?

↳ Yes, completely: 53 %

↳ Yes, mostly: 26%

↳ Yes, somewhat: 10%

↳ Not really: 7%

↳ Not at all: 4%

↳ Not applicable: 0.5%

Survey feedback has highlighted the positive impact of participating in the new reduced work schedule for staff:

I feel less overworked, so my focus feels improved on my day to day tasks.

Less working time means more effective planning and organisation. I'm now more aware of what has to be done and more motivated to complete tasks effectively to make use of my working day.

However, whilst participation was high overall, responses from two organisations indicated significant numbers of staff unable to consistently adopt the 35-hour week. In one organisation, 20% of respondents indicated that they had been ‘not really’ or ‘not at all’ able to work the shorter working week, whilst in another organisation, the figure was 19%.

Qualitative feedback from respondents in these two organisations suggests this might relate to difficulties around time management and productivity, problems with flexi time accrual, and a perception that people are being expected to do the same amount of work in less time. For example:

The work hasn't contracted in line with the hours. The tasks/deliverables are the same.

I work in a small team and my workload increased around the same time that the contracted working week became shorter. I consistently have a higher than allowed number of flexi hours to use and no convenient time to use them.

My work load remains the same, I just have less core hours to complete, and end up having to take more days off with the accumulated hours (flexi).

Despite these difficulties and given the early stages of the transition, it is promising to see such a high percentage of respondents consistently working the 35-hour week. In the experience of the Autonomy Institute’s Workplace Consultancy team, small pockets of concern are fairly common at the early stage of implementing working time reduction – especially among staff whose roles make it harder to cut down hours, such as those in management positions and more front-facing roles.

Staff wellbeing and work life balance

Participants were asked what their overall experience of the 35-hour working week policy had been like so far. 65% of respondents judged that their overall experience of the 35-hour working week had been very positive, 21% positive, 10% selecting neutral, with 2% negative and 1% of respondents selecting very negative. Both quantitative and qualitative feedback from the survey shows that staff wellbeing and work-life balance has been much improved. Across organisations:

- ↳ Participants were asked how they feel the 35-hour week had impacted their personal lives. 83% of survey respondents judged that the 35-hour week to have either very positively (46%) or positively (36%) impacted their personal life.
- ↳ Participants were also asked how they feel the 35-hour working week has impacted personal wellbeing. 82% of respondents answered either very positively (46%) or positively (36%).

- ↳ Finally, participants were asked in general, how would you rate your work life balance (including the amount of free time you have outside of work)? 86% answered either very satisfied (43%) or satisfied (43%).

Staff often offered comments to elaborate on these positive assessments:

I'm genuinely a happier person. I'm less unsettled in my role and performing better than ever.

As a parent, the introduction of the 35-hour working week has drastically reduced my need for childcare provision and allows me to spend more time with my children daily.

It has been a great benefit. I get to enjoy my work-life balance and being more physically active makes me more positive and confident in my role.

It has made my work-life balance much better, I find myself able to enjoy activities outside of work more and as such I do not feel as anxious coming into work. I am still able to get all my work done with no change in my ability to do this but I feel more focused and procrastinate less.

Productivity and performance

One of the key government aims of introducing the 35-hour working week was to maintain a high standard of productivity and performance. Feedback from this survey has demonstrated that a large proportion of staff judge that the transition to the 35-hour week has had a positive impact on performance and time-management.

Participants were asked how they feel the 35-hour working week has impacted their productivity and focus. Across organisations, 71% of staff judged that the 35-hour working week has either impacted productivity and focus 'very positively' (36%) or 'positively' (35%), with less than 4% reporting either a 'negative' (3%) or 'very negative' impact (0.6%).

Q19: What impact do you think the 35-hour working week has had on the following aspects of the organisation?

- ↳ Performance and output: 58% reported either a very positive (25%) or positive (33%) impact, 35% reporting no impact. 7% reported either a negative (6%) or very negative impact (1%).
- ↳ Collaboration: 47% reported either a very positive (22%) or positive impact (25%), with 47% reporting no impact. 5% reported either a negative (4%) or very negative impact (1%).
- ↳ Internal efficiency: 46% reported either a very positive (20%) or positive impact (26%), with 48% reported no impact. 6% reported either negative (5%) or very negative impact (1%).

It is important to note here that ‘no impact’ may be regarded as a positive outcome, where there has been no perceived change to organisational aspects of performance and delivery as a result of the reduction to 35 hours. Many staff took the opportunity to explain their positive responses:

The 35-hour working week has boosted my productivity. I get the same amount of work done as before, but in less time. It's prompted me to cut out unnecessary work and focus on key, rather than peripheral, tasks.

I am critically evaluating meetings to attend and reducing meeting lengths where appropriate to do so.

It has been a great benefit. It has made me work 'smarter' and have more control over my day by questioning “do you really need me at that meeting, what value do I add?”.

Challenges and Opportunities

This section highlights areas where the survey pointed to possible opportunities for additional support within 35-hour organisations. When asked ‘what (if any) challenges have you faced adapting to the 35-hour work week in your work’, 72% of staff reported experiencing ‘none of the above’ in relation to the options listed (shown below). Although response to the 35-hour week has been largely positive, we have highlighted some of the challenges that were reported across organisations.

Management of workload

Across organisations, one of the key concerns highlighted was the management of workload within a 35-hour working week. The survey showed that across organisations, many staff felt there had been significant support for improving workplace efficiencies, addressing meeting culture, and managing workloads. However, as to be expected when transitioning to a shorter working week, there were some concerns.

Q10: What (if any) challenges have you faced adapting to the 35-hour week in your work? (tick all that apply)

- ↳ Time management: 16% across all organisations
- ↳ Scheduling meetings: 8% across all organisations
- ↳ Managing workload: 16% across all organisations
- ↳ Handling client/stakeholder/customer expectations: 7% across all organisations
- ↳ None of the above: 72% across all organisations

Qualitative feedback across organisations highlighted that some staff felt that the expectations surrounding the 35-hour week were to carry on as before, delivering the same amount of work using the same process, in less time. This is a contrast to the organisations in the 32-hour pilot, for example, where staff explained to researchers the ways in which their organisation altered work processes to accommodate the working time reduction.

While concerns about workload were not prevalent across all respondents, it may be that within specific organisations there are particular roles and areas of work that may experience more pressure to fulfill workloads. In the experience of the Autonomy Institute's workplace consultancy, such positions may include responsive or demand-led roles, client-facing roles, and management positions.

It was also highlighted that in cases where staff felt their overall workload had not changed, there could be an overdependence on the flexi accrual system to manage the transition to a 35-hour working week, meaning staff are simply accumulating more working hours on a weekly basis in order to get work completed. As the flexi system is in place to deal with fluctuations in workload, this doesn't necessarily present an issue if being used to manage peaks and troughs in job demands.

However, there may be an opportunity here to identify specific roles and teams within organisations where more targeted support could be offered, to avoid a general increase in flexi time accrual. The below responses give an insight into the problem:

Time management remains a significant issue, but I don't feel it any worse than previously. I probably work some unlogged hours anyway, but appreciate my commitment is limited to 35 hours.

The main issue for me is that I will just work additional hours as tasks require. It just means that I am accruing more flexi hours which then keep taking me over my monthly limit for carry-over.

I like the theory of the 35 hour working week, we just don't have the resource needed. If deadlines were not as tight, and the volume of work [was] less it would be manageable.

One of the areas that was flagged as presenting an opportunity for further staff support was the Oracle system, used for management of staff working hours and flex-time. Oracle was introduced around the same time as many of the participating organisations implemented a move to 35-hour working week. From initial conversations with senior leaders, the researchers learned that there had been concerns about the impact that adjusting to the software could have on workloads, especially for staff in HR. Feedback from respondents suggests that learning and troubleshooting the new system had caused a spike in workload, coinciding with the shift to 35 hours.

I have lost more time on a weekly basis working out the new Oracle system for myself and staff than I have lost due to the 2 hours less per week.

Moving to a 35-hour week and also the new decimal Oracle system has been difficult to navigate. I often work more than 7 hrs a day as I am unfamiliar with the decimal system and it is impossible to know how much time I have worked before clocking out. I have to use an external online calculator to work out when I should take lunch out, clock out in the day, which is time-consuming.

Impact on part-time workers

There were numerous comments from part-time workers, whose feedback indicated that the question of their inclusion within the 35-hour policy was not communicated adequately. The impact on part-time workers is always a sensitive point in working time reduction projects, involving questions of equity, work capacity, and adequate accommodation for people with caring responsibilities.

A shorter working week can offer a meaningful way to address the inequities involved in part-time working by making full-time work more accessible to more people. At the same time, it is equally important that staff who remain part-time are able to benefit from the working time reduction policy in a meaningful way. When asked in an open question for any further comments about the 35-hour initiative, several part-time staff shared a view that their involvement had not been given enough consideration. For example:

The comms for part time colleagues was poor.

[There was] no thought for part time workers that were already doing tasks in less time than other full time staff.

This was handled poorly for [part-time] workers. Reducing my hours from 21 to 19.9 hours per week hasn't made any difference to the hours I do, but now I have too much flexi leave and regularly get messages from my manager about it.

As I work part time, the adjustment to the number of my worked hours was pro-rata'd, and for some reason that translated to slightly unusual, and occasionally inconsistent start times (which is easily the [worst] issue).

However, in addition to these concerns, there were also positive comments from part-time staff that indicated the benefits of the policy:

I am part-time and was working my hours over 3 days. Since the reduction in hours I have been able to work my hours over 2.5 days. This has had a real psychological benefit and improved my work life balance greatly.

I had been part-time for a few years to help manage a health condition. Though the change to a 35 hour week seems fairly small in practice, it was one of the factors that helped me feel confident in trying to transition from part-time work to full-time work as the change felt less drastic psychologically. I am now comfortable and stable in full-time work. I'm a huge supporter of this change and am personally very grateful for how it helped improve things for me.

External-facing roles

Many respondents to the survey were involved in roles with significant levels of external engagement, perhaps involving telephone calls, remote appointments, and client or stakeholder meetings. These tasks can put particular pressures on time management, such as the need for travel time or adherence to specific periods of availability. Survey comments indicated that the introduction of the 35-hour working week has meant that staff within these roles may have specific challenges. For example:

My work-life balance hasn't changed. I still can't leave early on telephony days. It can be hard in local delivery to work 7 hours each day if clients want certain appointment times.

Fitting in 2x three hour visits a day with travel in 7 hours is not doable. The 35-hour policy often goes unnoticed and feels overshadowed due to the increasing demands of telephony, which covers over 50% of the hours worked every week. At present, I believe there is a negative air to start early and rush to finish to avoid some of the hours spent on telephony.

The nature of external-facing roles means that workload can often vary, and the flexi system presents an effective tool for managing these fluctuations. There is also, however, perhaps an opportunity here to address communications with staff around the pressures of delivering external engagements, and to consider specific forms of support or resourcing to help staff with external responsibilities benefit from the 35 hour week.

Office based working versus working from home

Survey responses highlighted differences in experiences among staff who work in-office as opposed to at home. In-office staff appreciated the impact of a shorter working week in light of their commuting time. For example:

The [35-hour] week means we can finish early, meaning that I can get home a bit earlier, which is very beneficial to my work life balance.

I'm very pleased about the change to a 35-hour working week - it has given us 24 minutes back a day, which I didn't think sounded like a lot before it happened, but really makes a difference. I am consistently leaving work earlier without having had to arrive earlier, which is a great feeling. My flexi balance is also now always in positive, which wasn't usually the case before!

The reduced hours [policy] is very welcome by myself and colleagues whose jobs are office based, [without] the opportunity to work from home and enjoy the many benefits of those who do work from home. Leaving slightly earlier means we can avoid peak travel times going home, ultimately resulting in a better work life balance by avoiding lengthy and stressful commuting journeys.

Some of the comments captured in the survey suggest that staff who do not have the option of working from home could experience the benefits of the 35-hour policy in a more tangible way, specifically in relation to commuting and work-life balance. Future analysis of the policy could therefore focus in more detail on trying to capture the differences in experience between staff who work predominantly from home compared with those who work in the office. This can represent an important dimension of equality and inclusion when thinking about staff potential to benefit from the policy.

Recommendations

The findings from the survey have demonstrated that, overall, the transition to a 35-hour working week has yielded positive outcomes for employee wellbeing, work-life balance, and self-reported productivity. These promising initial results indicate that the move towards reduced working hours aligns well with the core objectives of improving employee satisfaction and enhancing performance across public sector organisations.

However, the survey has also uncovered specific challenges that need to be addressed to ensure that the full benefits of this policy are realised. Acknowledging these challenges is likely crucial for the continued success of the initiative.

The recommendations outlined in this section are informed by the experiences of the Autonomy Institute's workplace consultancy and their previous work with organisations adopting a shorter working week. They are designed not only to support the participating organisations but also to provide valuable insights for any other public sector organisations that may encounter similar issues during their transition to a shorter working week.

↳ Monitor the use of flexi time

Flexi time is being used extensively in some organisations to make up for staff regularly working over 35 hours. This has resulted in some staff accumulating large amounts of flexi leave which they struggle to use alongside annual leave. However, the Autonomy Institute has worked with organisations reporting very positive experiences of flexi systems. Attention should be given to reducing dependence on flexi-time to adapt to the shorter working week, when adjustments to ways of working would be more effective. This monitoring could also potentially include monitoring the amount of work done on designated non-working days.

↳ Communicate adaptations for part-time workers clearly and consistently

Part-time workers have expressed some frustration and confusion with regards to their inclusion in the 35-hour policy. The survey highlights the importance of giving special consideration to the inclusion and practical implications for part-time staff. We would recommend planning co-ordinated engagements with part-time staff in order to obtain honest feedback over how the policy can be designed and communicated with their situation in mind.

↳ **Additional training for the Oracle management system**

Staff reported difficulties utilising the Oracle staff management system, suggesting that it has made things less efficient than before the system's adoption. This may point to an additional training need. However, we also recognise that the introduction of the Oracle system has coincided with the move to 35 hours. Our recommendation is to investigate further, to discern whether the problem is likely to resolve itself over time, or whether more direct solutions are needed.

↳ **Continue reshaping work processes for the sake of efficiency**

Managing their workload in fewer hours remains a concern of many staff – which is not uncommon in the early stages of a working time reduction. Attention needs to continue to be paid to ways of working more efficiently at the organisational and team levels. There can also be ongoing efforts to identify specific support needs, as they emerge, in collaboration with staff. Meanwhile, communications should be centred on reminding staff that the shorter working week involves a transition and that proactive and collective approaches to increasing efficiency can help ensure the policy is a success. Areas for consideration have often included rethinking the norms around meetings, streamlining bureaucratic processes and communication flows across the organisation, exploring the automation of certain processes, and having clear policies for assigning and prioritising work.

Conclusions

Conclusions

AiB and SOSE successfully shortened the working week, giving staff more autonomy over their time, integrating more efficient working practices and maintaining organisational performance across metrics.

↳ **Participation rates were very high and significant working time reductions were maintained.**

258 of the 259 staff across the two organisations made the decision to opt into the pilot – an almost 100% rate of participation. By mid-trial, 92.2% of staff at AiB found they were able to reduce their working hours every week. At the endpoint of the SOSE pilot, 94% said they had either ‘completely’ or ‘mostly’ been able to take their working time reduction every week.

Interviews also gave a picture of very strong organisational commitment to the pilot. Part-time staff in both organisations were offered pro-rata (proportional) working time reductions and the organisations also pledged that staff would only be required to work on an allocated day off in exceptional circumstances, with processes in place for claiming this time back.

↳ **Both organisations showed an increase in productivity.**

Both organisations opted to stagger the additional day off among staff, in order to prioritise service coverage over five days.

Monitoring several KPI’s relative to target times and the previous year’s performance, AiB found stability within all three of its main processes, despite the shorter working week. This suggests that the pilot corresponded with a significant productivity increase. AiB also had a strong year in terms of client satisfaction – 90% of respondents to a stakeholder survey rated their overall experience with AiB as four or five stars out of five. Turning to SOSE, their KPI assessment focused mainly on client response times, showing stability in this area as compared to the year prior.¹⁶

16 For context, staff headcount in SOSE increased slightly from 138 to 141 between the start and end points of its pilot, and AiB staff headcount decreased slightly, from 121 to 118 between the start of its pilot and approximately nine months in (the time of reporting).

Staff interviews helped explain these performance results. Staff shared their pilot initiatives around work planning, task-sharing, focus periods, new meeting conventions, the digitalisation of processes and the use of task-managing software, among other things. Many also described a general increase in productivity as a result of an improved sense of well-being and motivation generated by the 32-hour policy.

↳ **In both AiB and SOSE, the 32-hour week pilot corresponded with improvements in staff well-being across a range of measures.**

To give highlights from AiB:

- ↳ The self-assessment of mental health saw an 18.4% improvement and average scores for work stress dropped by 18.4%, with improvements also documented in areas of fatigue, burnout and sleep.
- ↳ Average scores in the area of 'satisfaction with time' increased by 46.8% and participants were on average significantly more satisfied with their jobs and their lives in general.

To give highlights from SOSE:

- ↳ The percentage of staff feeling 'very satisfied' with their work-life balance rose very sharply, from 4% pre-pilot to 84%, nine months in.
- ↳ 83% of staff reported a 'very positive' or 'positive' impact on stress (meaning a reduction in stress) and 98% believed the pilot had led to a 'very positive' or 'positive' improvement in the area of motivation and morale.
- ↳ Overall instances of sickness saw a modest drop and there was a very significant drop in sick days taken for psychological reasons (a decrease of ~25.7% during the pilot period, as compared to the year prior).

In general, the pilot was also extremely popular with staff. Staff who were interviewed often gave highly enthusiastic accounts of their experiences and almost unanimously hoped the policy would be continued beyond the pilot. Staff with care responsibilities seemed to be particularly supportive of the pilot, often using emotive phrases such as 'life changing'.

↳ **The pilot captured a range of good practice lessons to learn from.**

These included (but were not limited to):

- ↳ Ensuring a strong level of staff consultation before introducing the policy, in order to anticipate problems, gauge approval, and gather ideas for the successful transition to the new working pattern.
- ↳ Providing staff with comprehensive FAQ documents, answering any and all questions about the terms and conditions of a shorter working week.
- ↳ Preserving existing flexibility arrangements, which are clearly important to staff, as well as including part-time workers in the shorter working week policy, using pro-rata (proportional) working time reductions.
- ↳ Staggering the day off for the sake of maintaining a five-day service and scheduling inter-team tasks within the 'core week' (when all staff are working).
- ↳ Thinking carefully around what kind of 32 rota is right for different work teams and their organisational challenges, as well as a transparent process for allocating days off among staff.
- ↳ Asking staff to be flexible about working on the day off as a contingency measure in exceptional circumstances - but not undermining the policy's value by relying too much on this.
- ↳ Ensuring that staff can easily reclaim any time worked on days off as TOIL.
- ↳ Developing robust conventions for handing over work and covering staff on their day off, including more interdependent working.
- ↳ Committing to the 32-hour policy, with an awareness that there might be an adjustment period in some areas of business, and appreciating the early days of the policy as a learning experience.
- ↳ Paying special attention to the impact of changing work schedules on staff with school-age children or health conditions.

↳ **Both organisations extended their pilots beyond the one-year research period.**

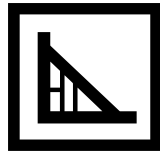
SOSE were permitted a six-month extension and AiB were permitted to extend for two months.

↳ **The pilot was a good example of social partnership working**

Scottish Government and the two pilot organisations showed a strong commitment to principles such as consent and staff collaboration in the setting up and running of the pilot. This included Scottish Government's outreach process to prospective participating bodies, significant periods of staff consultation and preparation within the two pilot organisations, and a very clear 'opt in/opt out' policy, accompanied by detailed information on the pilot's terms and conditions. The process of Scotland's public sector pilot may be a useful model for other national governments considering pilots.

↳ **Those organizations that moved to 35 hour working weeks show promising signs of success, too**

- ↳ Of the 73 public bodies covered by Scotland's Public Sector Pay Policy, all of them (with one exception) have either implemented or are expected to implement a 35 hour working week by April 2025.
- ↳ After the transition, 79% of staff survey respondents judged that they had either 'completely' or 'mostly' been able to stick to the 35-hour working week on a consistent basis.
- ↳ Some staff reported minor difficulties with the move to the 35 hour week, but this can be expected in the early phases of transition. Ongoing monitoring of staff perceptions is recommended to smooth practices as part of a 'new normal'.



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