

COUNCIL CHIEFS URGED TO PILOT A FOUR-DAY WORKING WEEK

Fórsa is asking the chief executives of Ireland's local authorities to engage with a new four-day week pilot programme, and the initiative is the latest move in the public service union's campaign for reduced working time without loss of pay for employees or productivity for employers. Report by Grace Heneghan.

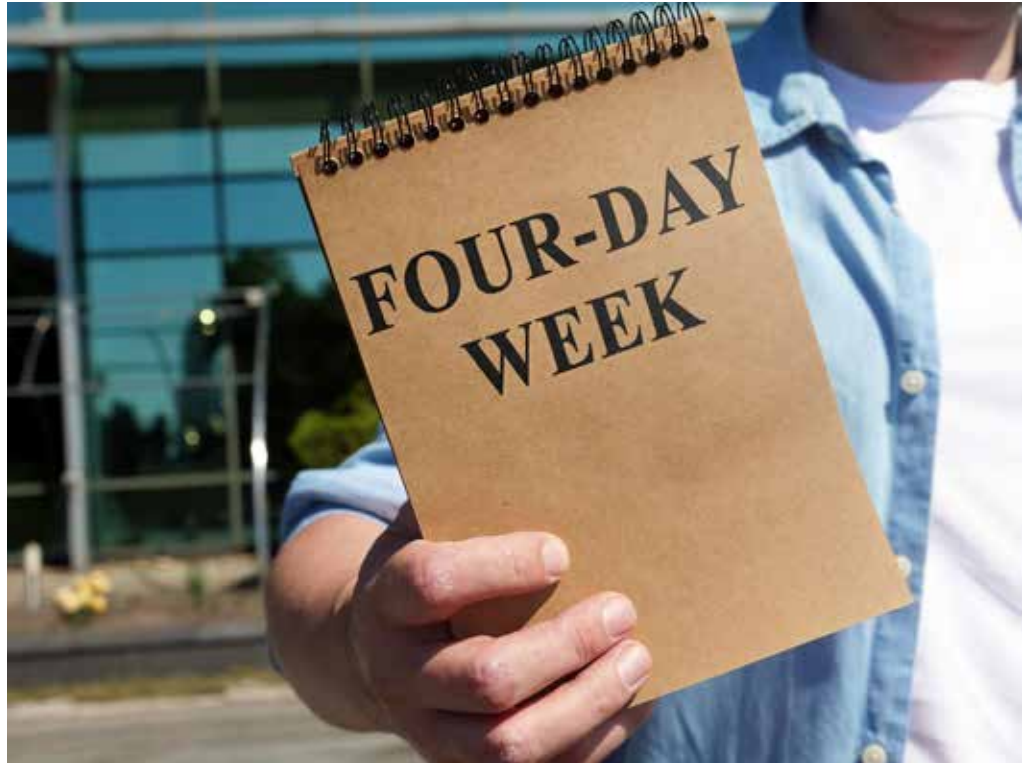
Local authorities are highly suitable for four-day working week trials, according to Peter Nolan, who heads Fórsa's Local Government Division. "Local government has a diverse workforce and produces a range of services that are highly valued by communities. It would be great to have the sector involved in a pilot exercise, which benefits workers while maintaining, or even increasing, productivity," he added.

Fórsa is part of a coalition of employers, unions, environmental and women's campaign groups, which is calling for a gradual, steady, and managed transition to a four-day working week in all sectors of the economy.

And Ireland's largest public service union has had an incredible response from Irish employers to the Four Day Week Ireland pilot programme, which was officially launched in June, according to Fórsa's Campaign Director Joe O'Connor.

"Over 100 companies have contacted us requesting to discuss the pilot in more detail, and more than 50 of those businesses have formally expressed strong interest in participating in the trial," added O'Connor who is also Chair of the 'Four-Day Week Ireland' campaign.

He said the union hopes to involve



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both public and private sector employers in a national four-day week pilot programme, which is due to be rolled out in Ireland next January on a six-month trial basis.

CITY COUNCILLORS PASS MOTION

Dublin City Council recently became Ireland's first local authority to pass the motion, which would see a four-day working week introduced for council staff. The proposal has also called for the local authority to pilot the reduced timetable for its 6,000 or so employees.

The motion stated: *"This council calls on the Chief Executive to engage with the relevant trade unions for City Council staff with a view to piloting, and introducing, a four-day working week."*

The plan, which was put forward by Labour's Cllr Kevin Donoghue, received unanimous backing from all 63 councillors

at Dublin City Council's monthly meeting in July. "Directly, it would affect a lot of the workers on Dublin City Council, but I have a view that it would affect the entire community," Cllr Donoghue noted, following the meeting.

"For the families of those workers, I'm hopeful that it would go some way towards addressing significant gender imbalances that exist, say in the likes of caring responsibilities. But it also gives people a chance to be more involved in their local community."

He said that the Covid-19 pandemic had illustrated how those changes to working could be successfully introduced, and studies from abroad had shown that a four-day week was feasible. "Companies are talking now about doing things that would have been unimaginable a year ago," he added.

According to the Green Party's Cllr

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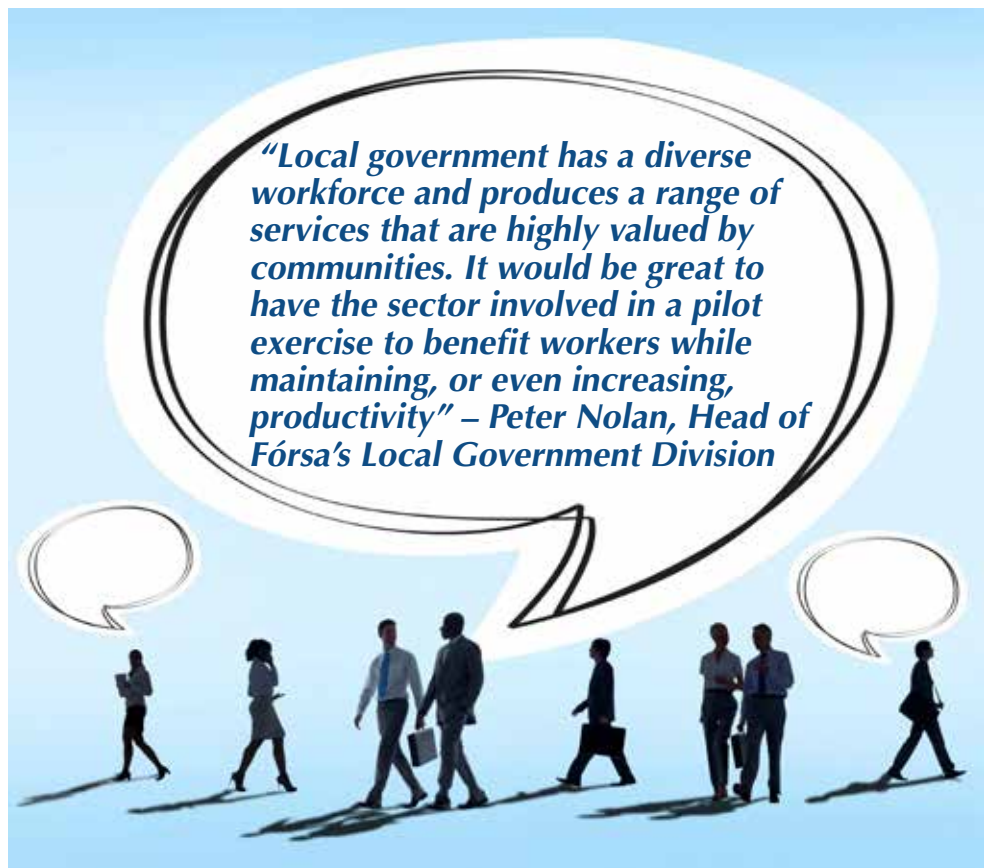
Fórsa is urging its members to back the four-day week campaign, which launched a six-month pilot programme, by signing up to a global petition to encourage employers to trial the concept.

Hazel Chu, reducing the working week to four days would mean better productivity in terms of how physical and mental wellbeing is looked after. The former Lord Mayor of Dublin also pointed out that it will impact climate change and will lower carbon emissions if people are travelling to work on a four-day week basis.

'4-DAY WEEK GLOBAL' FOUNDATION

Fórsa's local government conference in May heard from Andrew Barnes, Chief Executive of New Zealand firm Perpetual Guardian, who said his company had doubled per capita productivity and halved sick leave rates since it adopted a four-day week in 2018.

He said the policy had helped his company maintain productivity and profitability during the Covid lockdown. Following the successful introduction of the four-day week by Perpetual Guardian, Barnes established the '4-Day Week Global'



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Foundation to support businesses and campaigners.

“This is the employment model in the 21st century. Thousands of companies worldwide have followed our lead and experimented with the four-day week. It’s an issue facing workers across the world, regardless of country and culture, because there’s a mismatch between the amount of time we spend working and the amount of time we spend with our families and communities,” he said.

According to Barnes, the Covid experience of a rapid shift to remote working had boosted the case for the four-day week by removing “a barrier of trust” regarding time management and productivity.

POSITIVE PUBLIC OPINION POLL

Last year Fórsa, which represents over 80,000 public service members, published Ireland’s first ever public opinion poll on the concept. Three-quarters of respondents said they supported a government exploration of its introduction, while almost half the number of Irish employers said it would be feasible to trial a four-day week in their own workplace.

Joe O’Connor said the four-day week, with no loss of pay or productivity, offers the potential of a genuinely better future for workers, employers and the environment.

“The strong support for a four-day working week among Irish people is consistent with similar studies internationally. What may once have seemed like a radical concept is now, for many, a reasonable and rational ambition,” he said.



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RESEARCH TO ASSESS THE IMPACT

More research into the implications of a four-day working week has been undertaken both in Ireland and abroad over the past few months.

In June, the Government announced it was seeking proposals from the research community on the economic, environmental and social impacts of introducing a four-day working week in Ireland, and launched a six-month trial programme.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, and the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, opened a two-week call for research submissions on 1 July, and up to €150,000 will be made available to support the research.

Organisations participating in the scheme will be eligible to receive supports, training and mentoring on the implementation of a shorter working week, and employees should not experience any loss of pay.

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment Leo Varadkar described the concept of achieving the same outcomes and productivity, for the same pay with 20% fewer hours worked as an “ambitious idea”. Noting that while it may work for some sectors, he said it was hard to see how it would work, for example, in health, education and manufacturing.

“However, we need to keep an open mind when it comes to innovations in the world of work. This research will give us a much greater understanding of the potential of this idea and that’s why the Department has agreed to co-sponsor it.”

CONCEPT WORKS ELSEHWERE

Earlier this year the Spanish Government passed legislation to support employers moving to a four-day week, while in Iceland, the world’s largest-ever trial of a four-day working week recently concluded.

Just over 1% of the Icelandic population took part in the study in Reykjavik, which saw their working week reduced to 36 hours, with no reduction in pay. Researchers found the trial to be an “overwhelming success” with workers reporting boosted productivity and wellbeing, while at the same time, feelings of stress and burnout were reduced.

It is understood that trade unions in Iceland have already started to negotiate plans for reduced working hours on a wider scale.

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For more information on the six-month pilot programme visit www.fourdayweek.ie or email contact@fourdayweek.ie