

# A FOUR-DAY WEEK FOR SCHOOLS



**Autonomy**

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## Executive summary

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- This report outlines the relevance and strategy for working time reduction in UK schools.
- Teaching is one of the most overworked professions in the UK. As this report notes, the logic of 'more hours = better education' holds back the potential of teachers and their work in the UK.
- A new survey carried out for this report, found that two-thirds of teachers say they've reached 'breaking point' because of their workload, and more than a third say they feel stressed every day because of their workload.
  - 71% of teachers reported feeling stressed at least once a week because of their workload
  - Over a third (38%) cited stress as a daily experience.
  - Nearly two-thirds (63%) of teachers said that they had been at 'breaking point' because of their work.
- Insufficient funding, overbearing bureaucracy and a long-hours culture all need to be addressed. However, there is also a strong case for a direct reduction in working hours.

- A 32-hour working week with no reduction in pay is incredibly popular among teachers - almost 75% support the policy
  - 61% of teachers surveyed also believed that a four-day week would improve their teaching
  - 69% said that they would be much more likely or somewhat more likely to stay in the profession if they had a four-day week
- Across the UK, undertaking reforms to the structure of the school day and week is a relatively straightforward process.
- There are already successful examples: Forest Gate Community School is considered here as a case study.
- Against moves towards even longer hours for teachers, governments across the UK should encourage headteachers trying to reduce working hours for their staff.
- Moving students to a four-day week, alongside teachers, should also seriously be explored. 45% of teachers would like to see the school week reduced to four-days for staff and students..
- This should occur in addition to much-needed measures such as better funding, greater recruitment and reduced bureaucracy.

I.

**OVERWORKED**

## Overworked

UK teachers are overworked. Long hours have become endemic across the UK economy, but in few places have they reached as high a level as the education sector. In 2020, research by Ofsted found that full-time school teachers reported an average of 51 hours worked a week, with senior leaders putting in fifty seven hour weeks.<sup>1</sup> Another study found that 25% of teachers work more than fifty nine hours a week, with **10% working in excess of sixty five hours a week.**<sup>2</sup> These data contrast with working hours put in by teachers in other countries, such as Finland - where teaching workweeks average at thirty four hours per week.<sup>3</sup>

**Under half of these hours are actually spent teaching in a classroom.**<sup>4</sup> The need to juggle an extensive list of responsibilities - including planning, marking, and a wide array of other administrative and bureaucratic jobs - means that many teachers feel that they simply do not have enough time to do the important aspects of their job. It's unsurprising then, that many end up with little choice but to work in what should be their 'free time', such as evenings, weekends and annual leave.

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1 Ofsted (2019) 'Summary and recommendations: teacher well-being research report'. Accessible at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teacher-well-being-at-work-in-schools-and-further-education-providers/summary-and-recommendations-teacher-well-being-research-report>

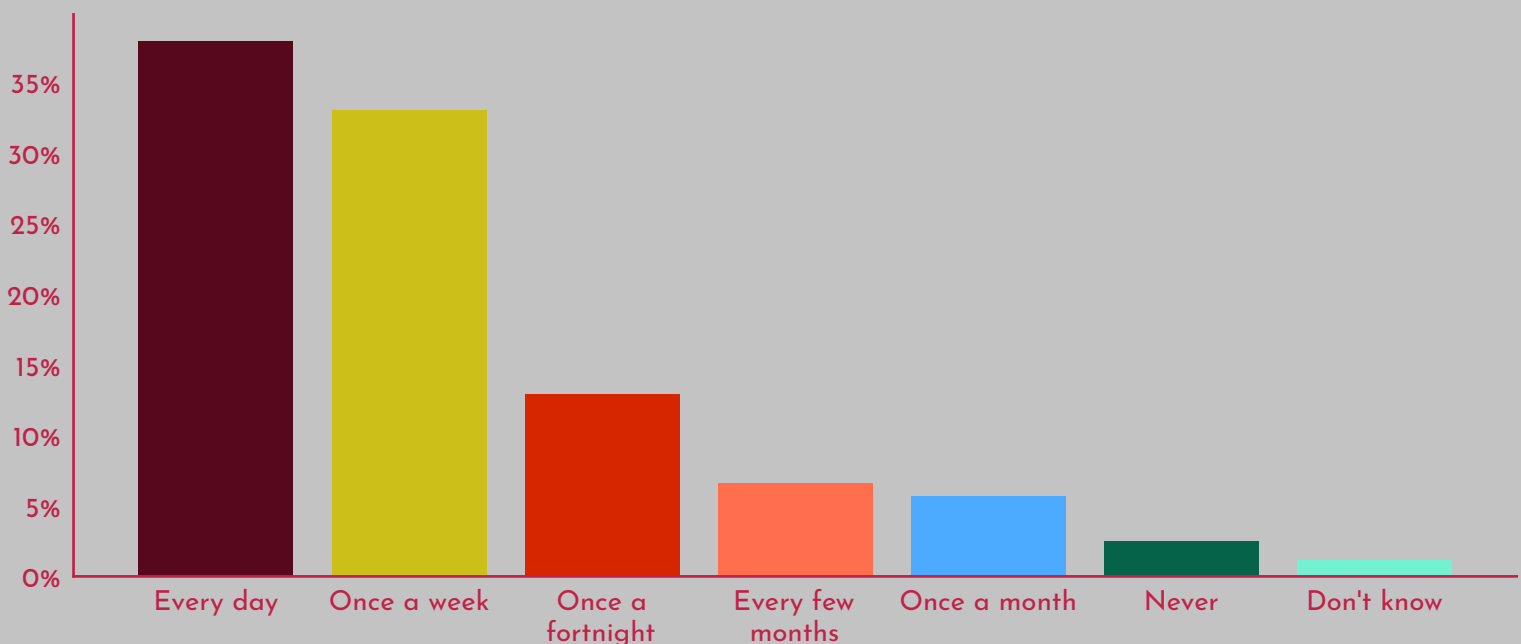
2 See Katherine Sellgren. (2019) 'Teachers 'have worked long hours for many years'', BBC News. Accessible at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-49728831>

3 Nuffield Foundation (2019) 'Quarter of teachers in England report 60-hour working week'. <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/news/quarter-of-teachers-in-england-report-60-hour-working-week>

4 Rebecca Allen, Asma Benhenda, John Jerrim & Sam Sims. (2021) 'New evidence on teachers' working hours in England. An empirical analysis of four datasets', Research

This chronic level of overwork has consequences. In a new survey of over 500 Primary and Secondary School teachers in the UK carried out by Survation and commissioned by Autonomy, 71% of teachers reported feeling stressed at least once a week because of their workload, with more than a third (38%) citing it as a daily experience. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of teachers said that they had been at 'breaking point' because of their work.

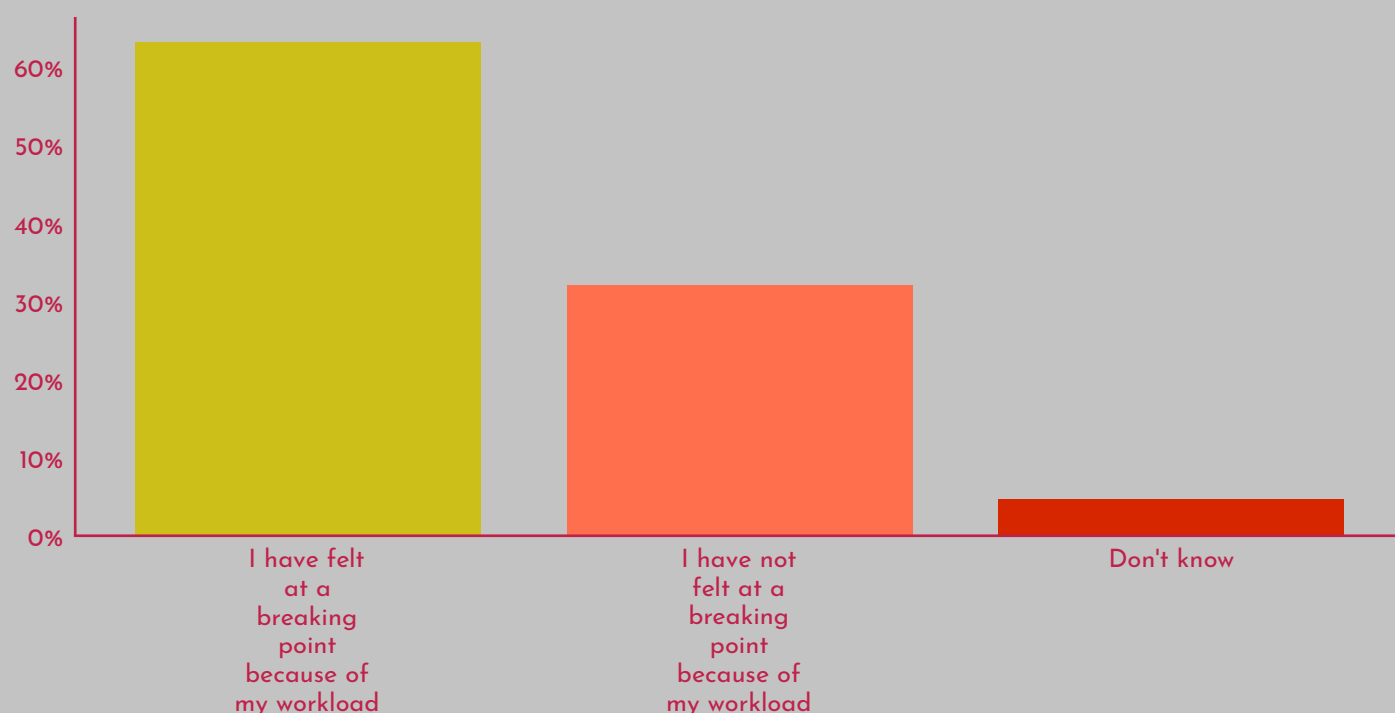
### How often, if at all, do you feel stressed because of your workload?<sup>5</sup>



<sup>5</sup> These survey questions were carried out by Survation.



## Which of the following statements is the closest to your experience in the last year?



Overwork has profound effects on the health and wellbeing levels of teachers, which according to recent evidence, are worryingly low. According to the UK's Health and Safety Executive, teaching staff report the highest rates of work-related stress, depression and anxiety in Britain.<sup>6</sup> The 2020 Teacher Wellbeing Index found that 74% of all education professionals have experienced negative behavioural, psychological or physical symptoms due to their work, while nearly a third had undergone a mental health issue in the past year.<sup>7</sup> Of those teachers affected, poor work-life balance (65%) and excessive workload (62%) were routinely cited as the main causes. Beyond the negative effects on their work performance, 40% of affected teachers believed that their personal relationships had suffered. 10% had felt suicidal.<sup>8</sup>

6 Ofsted (2019), 'Teacher well-being at work in schools and further education providers', 4. Accessible at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teacher-well-being-at-work-in-schools-and-further-education-providers/summary-and-recommendations-teacher-well-being-research-report>

7 Education Support (2020) 'Teacher Wellbeing Index 2020'. Accessible at: <https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/resources/for-organisations/research/teacher-wellbeing-index/>

8 Ibid.

The negative effects of chronic overwork, however, reverberate far beyond the shocking mental and physical toll borne by teachers. When many schools are often already over-stretched and under-staffed, 25% of teachers have been forced to be absent from their current workplace due to health problems caused or made worse by their work.<sup>9</sup> Of the 52% of education professionals who had considered leaving the profession due to pressures on their health and wellbeing, 68% gave excessive workload as their primary reason.<sup>10</sup>

The Covid pandemic has only exacerbated these issues. A survey by the trade union NASUWT in 2020 found that 82% of teachers said their workload had increased (45%) or substantially increased (37%) since prior to the pandemic.<sup>11</sup> Faced with rapid adjustments to online learning with incredibly varied levels of support, inconsistent and unclear guidance from authorities - all on top of 'very real concerns about personal safety, trauma and bereavement' - overworked teachers have been expected to find even greater capacity on the the frontline of the pandemic.<sup>12</sup> 'The demand of Covid-19', writes one report, 'has piled further pressure onto an already strained workforce'.<sup>13</sup>

In England, however, rather than seeking to ease the massive burden already placed on teachers, the UK Government has been pushing schools to increase their hours, with Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi encouraging a move to 6 and a half hour day across England, and praising 'excellent examples' set by academy trusts already operating an even longer school day.<sup>14</sup>

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9        Ibid.

10       Ibid.

11       NASUWT (2020) 'Covid-19 pressures risk damaging education'. Accessible at: <https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/article-listing/covid-19-pressures-risk-damaging-education.html>

12       Education Support (2020) 'Teacher Wellbeing Index 2020'. Accessible at: <https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/resources/for-organisations/research/teacher-wellbeing-index/>

13       Ibid.

14       Whittaker, F. (2021) 'Zahawi wants all schools to 'move towards' 6.5 hour day', Schools Week. Accessible at: <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/zahawi-wants-all->

Meanwhile, in December 2021 the Welsh Government also announced trials of additional hours in 14 schools across the country,<sup>15</sup> as part of a commitment in Welsh Labour's cooperation agreement with Plaid Cymru to 'explore options to reform the rhythm of the school day, to create space for more wide-ranging, culturally-accessible activities and opportunities'.<sup>16</sup>

Responding to the Covid pandemic, however, we should not lose sight of the incredibly detrimental effects of long working hours on teachers and the education they provide. All too often, chronic overwork is treated as 'fact of life', not a fundamental issue that a better, healthier and more sustainable education system needs to urgently address.

As one of the primary causes of workplace stress and poor physical and mental health, long hours are potentially helping drive teaching's retention crisis, and negatively affecting the experience of students in the classroom. Governments and policy-makers need to explore alternatives.

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[schools-to-move-towards-6-5-hour-day/](https://gov.wales/schools-to-move-towards-6-5-hour-day/)

15 Welsh Government (2021), 'Changes to school day to be trialled in Wales'. Accessible at: <https://gov.wales/changes-school-day-be-trialled-wales>

16 Welsh Government (2021), 'The Co-operation Agreement: 2021'. Accessible at: <https://gov.wales/co-operation-agreement-2021>



# **II. TIME OUT? RAISING THE PROSPECT OF A SHORTER WORKING WEEK IN SCHOOLS**

## Time out? Raising the prospect of a shorter working week in schools

For the above reasons, reducing teachers' working hours would be a desirable initiative and a path to a different teaching system. However, although ministers across the UK's national governments and policy-makers have - in the past - often recognised that overwork is a deep-seated problem in the profession, they have successively failed to bring working hours down to a healthy, transformative level.

Surveying trends in teachers' working time over the last 25 years, one education expert has suggested that - given the failure of many recent initiatives - 'bolder plans are needed by the government to show they are serious about reducing working hours for teachers and bringing them into line with other countries'.<sup>17</sup>

Issues such as underfunding, staff shortages and increased bureaucracy have all played a contributing role to the overwork crisis in education. Securing adequate resources for schools, and reducing teachers' bureaucratic workload ought therefore to be at the heart of all sufficient policy responses. However, this shouldn't preclude taking bold action to reduce teachers' working hours directly. If indirect measures have so far struggled to bring down working time, the case for a straightforward cut in teachers' working week could be even stronger.

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17 See Katherine Sellgren. (2019) 'Teachers 'have worked long hours for many years'', BBC News. Accessible at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-49728831>

## Building off recent successes

There's growing evidence of the benefits that shorter working hours bring to workers and the organisations they're based in, with trials of a four day week taking place at an increasing rate across the globe. In recent years, we've seen companies like Microsoft in Japan and Unilever in New Zealand, alongside regional and national governments in Spain and Iceland, all introduce shorter working hours - with no reduction in pay - for their workers.<sup>18</sup>

The results have been an 'overwhelming success'. In Iceland, workers taking part in trials not only saw significant improvements in their sense of work-life balance and wellbeing, but also in their workplace productivity.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps just as important though, the workplaces involved in the Icelandic trial were diverse, comprising not just office-based, administrative labour, but also public services such as hospital departments, police stations and childcare providers.

The Icelandic trials have shown that a shorter working week is not only a desirable option for public sector workers in the UK, like teachers, that could bring a host of clear benefits to an overworked, burned-out workforce: a cut in working hours is also a viable reality. So long as plans to reduce hours are adapted carefully to the specifics of each workplace - with workers themselves leading in their design - a shorter week should be as viable for teachers as it is for graphic designers or video game producers.

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18 See BBC News (2020). 'Unilever explores four-day week', BBC News. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-55139079>

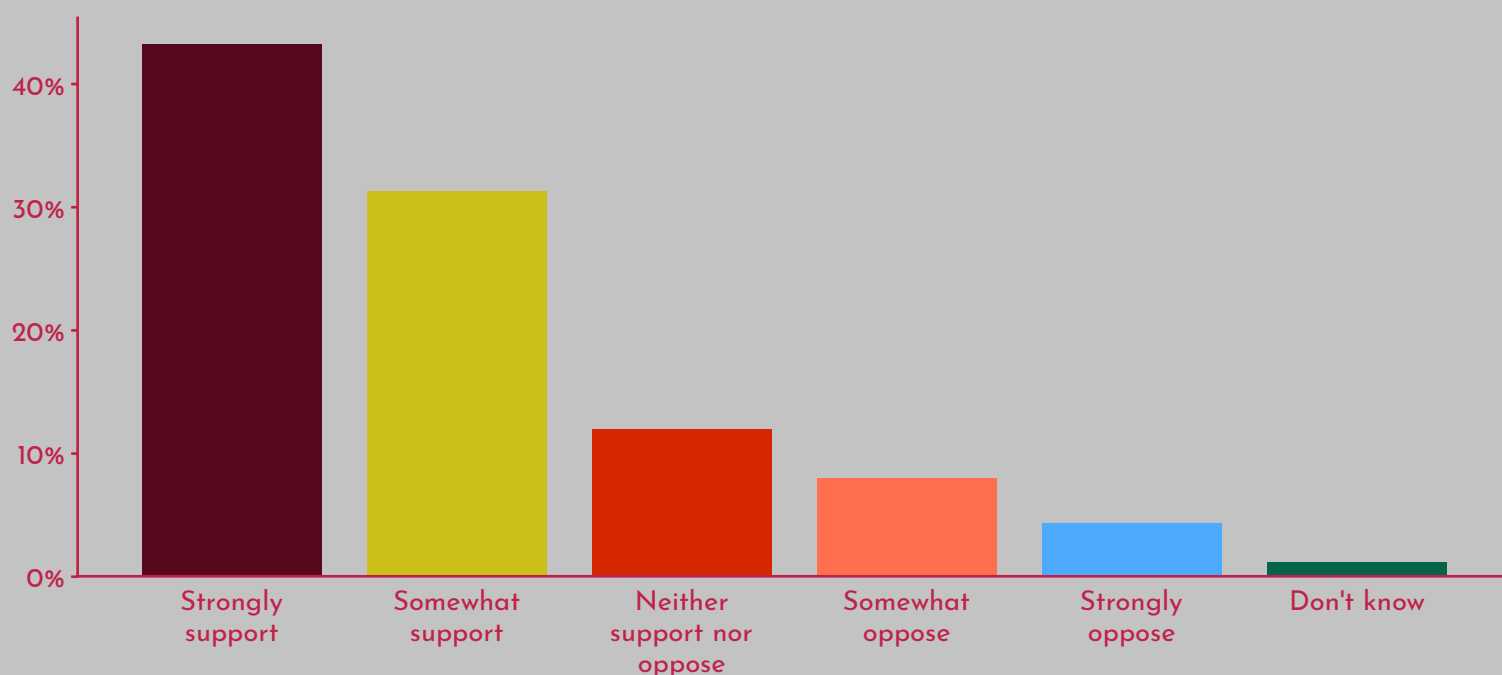
19 Gudmundur D. Haraldsson and Jack Kellam (2021). 'Going Public: Iceland's Journey to a Shorter Working Week', Autonomy. Accessible at: <https://autonomy.work/portfolio/icelandsww/>

A shorter working week for schools is, as we show below, both popular and plausible: it commands widespread support from teachers, and has already proved a success in a handful of ground-breaking schools to have implemented reduced hours to date. A shorter working week should be a core demand for those working towards better conditions for teachers and pupils alike in the education sector.

## Wholesale support

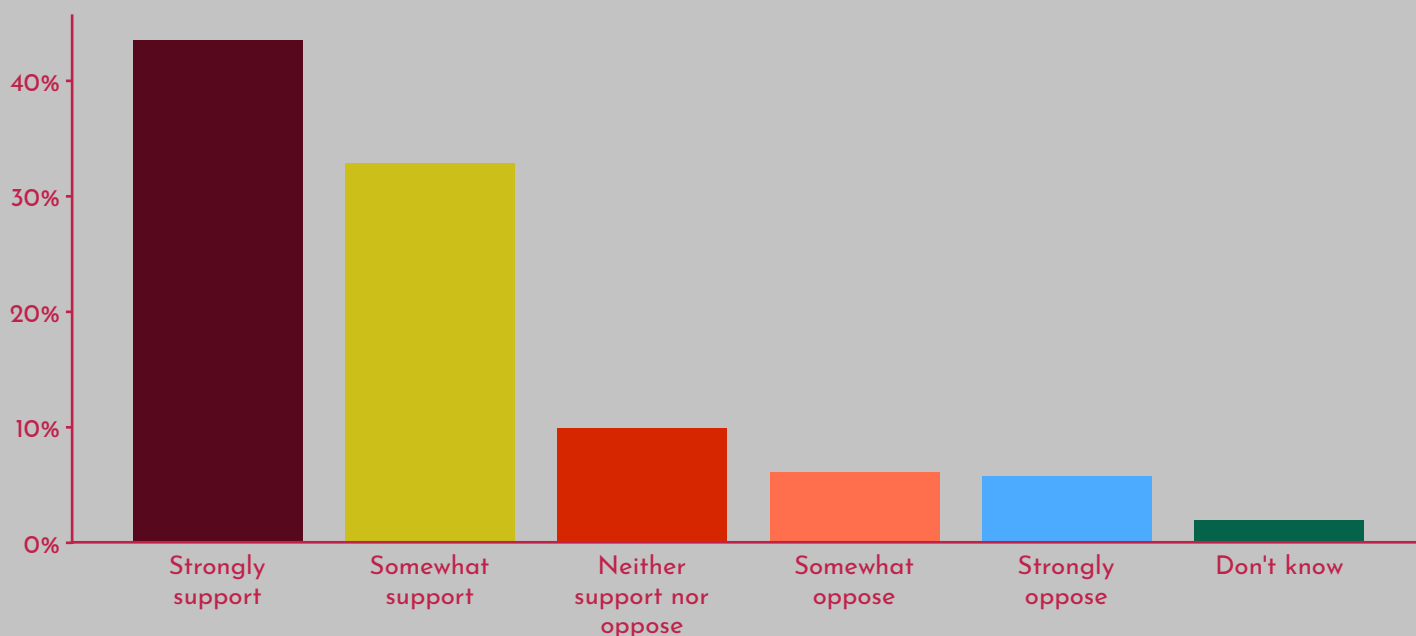
To gauge support for a four-day week amongst teachers, and to find out the effects they thought such a transition could bring, Autonomy commissioned a teachers survey with Survation. The response was clear: for time-crunched teachers, a four-day week with no loss in pay is an overwhelmingly popular idea, supported by 75% of the profession.

**To what extent would you support or oppose teachers moving to a four-day, 32 hour working week with no reduction in pay?**



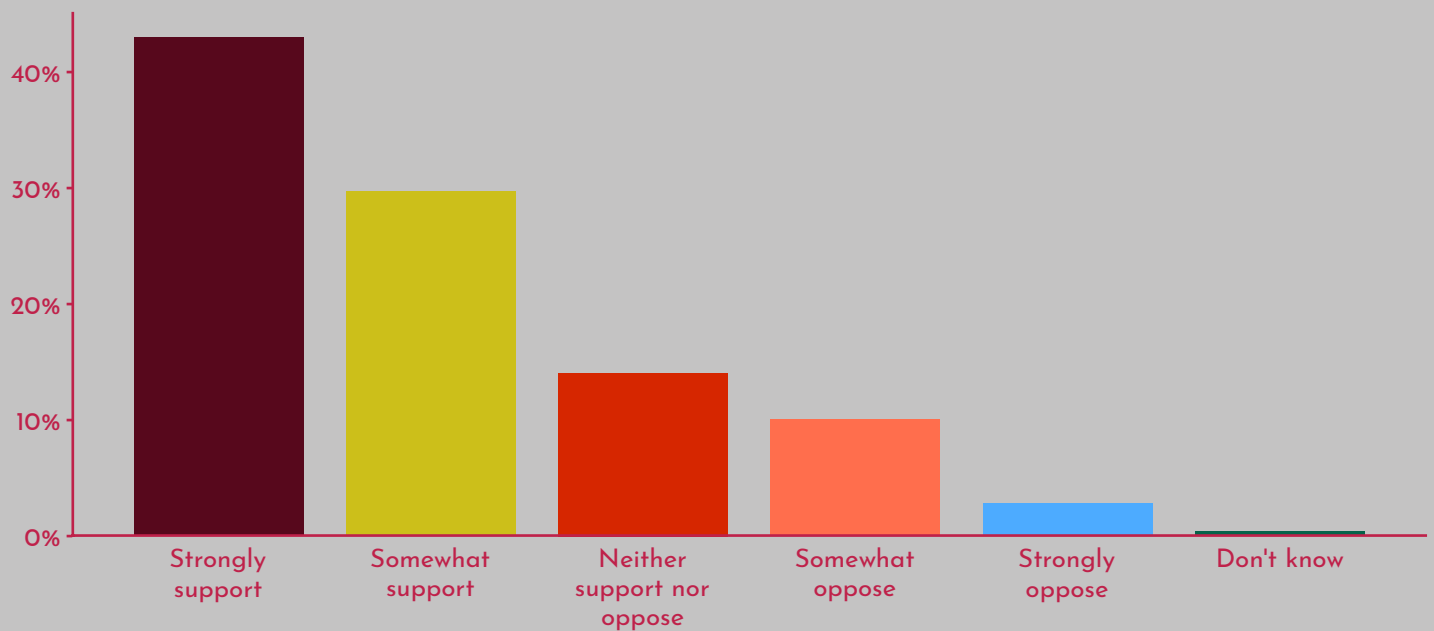
Support for shorter hours was strong among both primary and secondary school teachers, with around three-quarters of workers in both cohorts backing a four-day week.

**To what extent would you support or oppose teachers moving to a four-day, 32 hour working week with no reduction in pay? (Level of education: primary)**



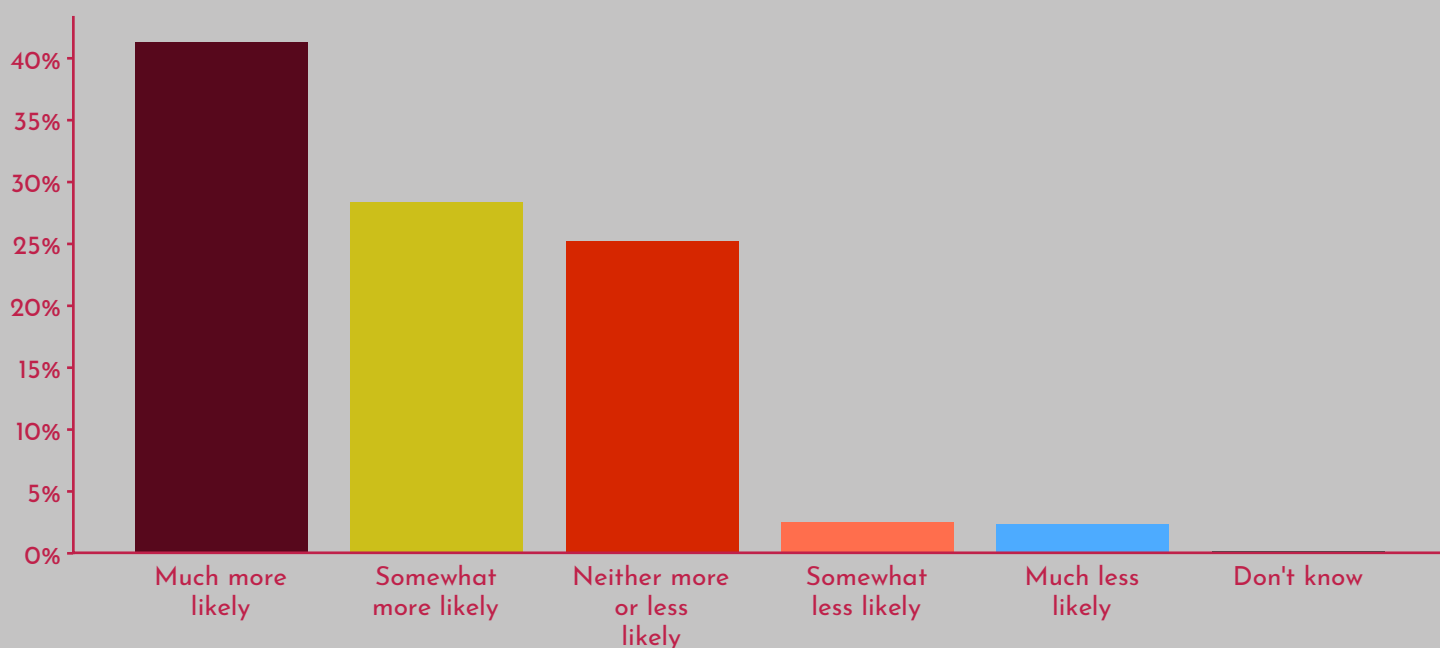


**To what extent would you support or oppose teachers moving to a four-day, 32 hour working week with no reduction in pay? (Level of education: secondary)**



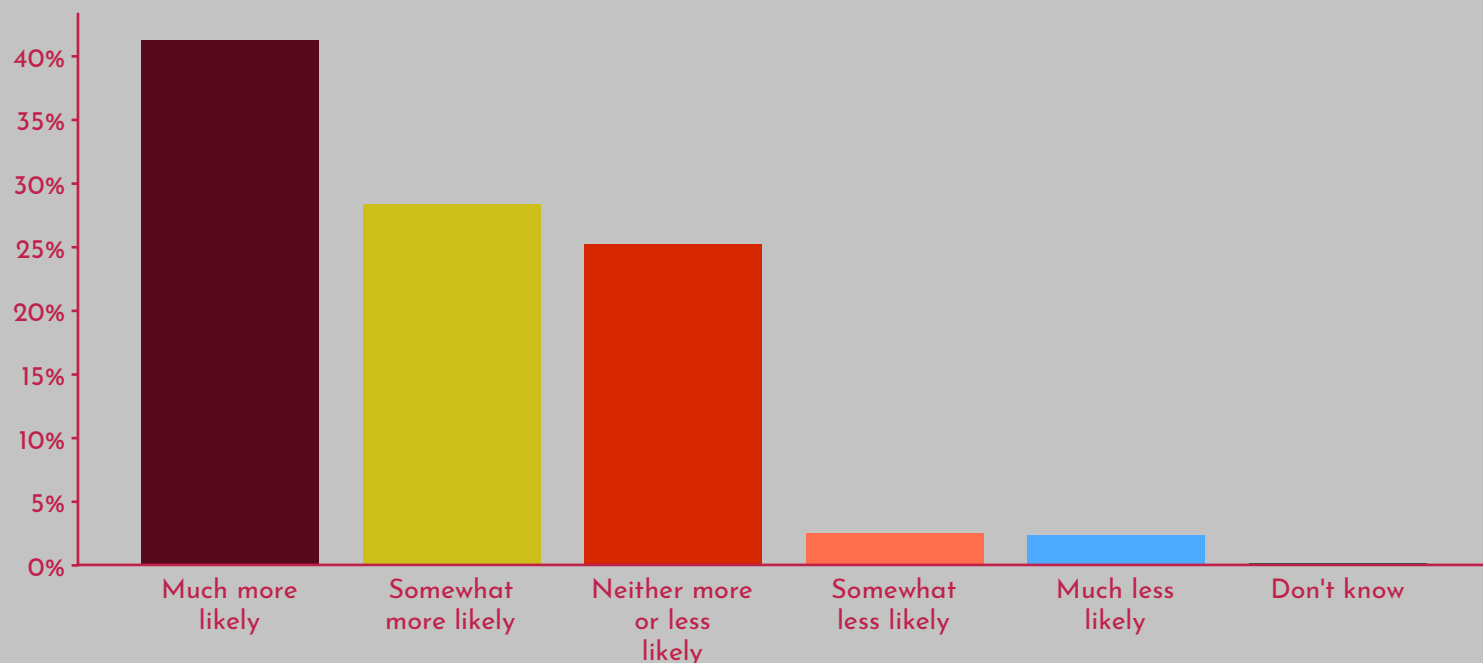
Teachers also envisaged a wide range of knock-on effects from a shorter working week. With an ongoing crisis regarding teacher retention, our survey showed the difference that a shorter working week could make to keeping teachers in their jobs, with almost 70% of teachers saying that fewer hours would make them more likely to stay in the profession.

### To what extent would a shorter working week make you more or less likely to stay in the teaching profession?

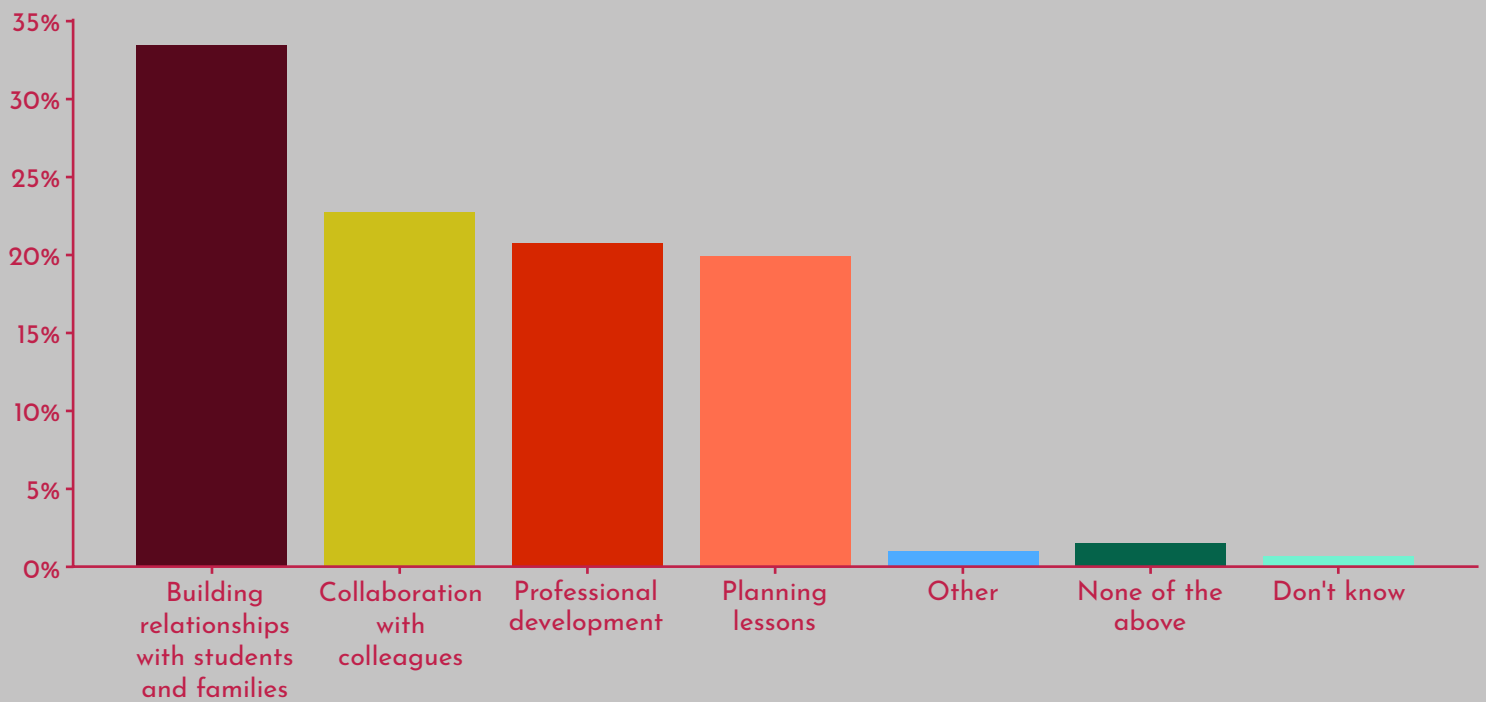


The quality of working time, and not just the quantity, is also important. Teachers were eager to see the four-day week as part of a wider rebalancing of their working time, away from meetings, general administration and marking, towards a greater focus on building relationships with students and families, collaborating with their colleagues and moving forward with their professional development.

**If you were given the option of reducing your workload, which of the following Activities would you most likely choose to reduce?**

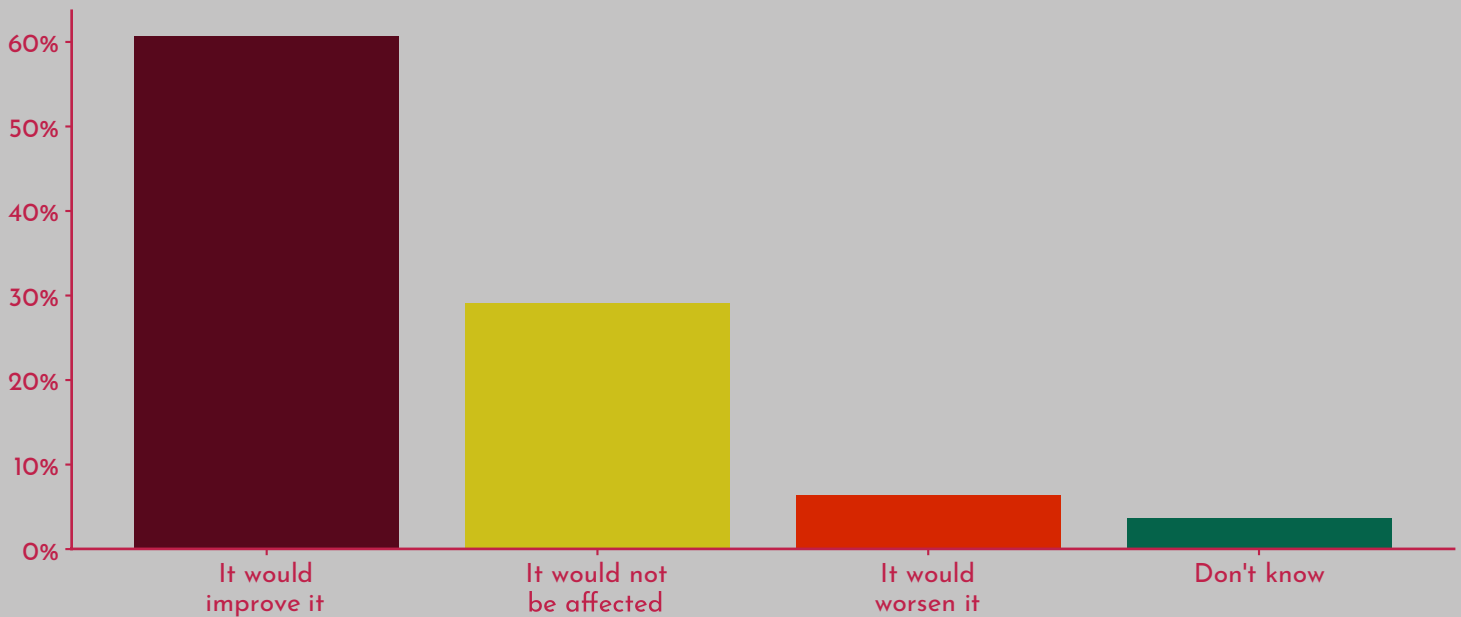


### Which of the following activities would you like to do more of in your role?

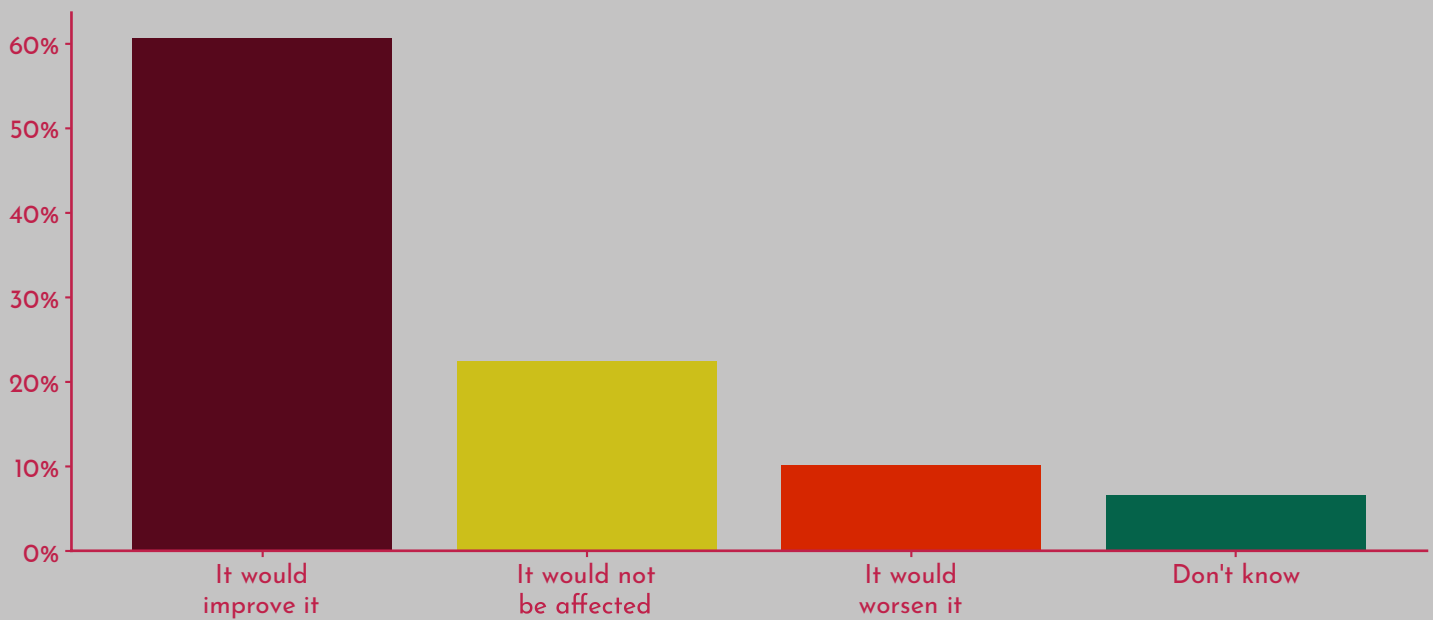


As such, teachers also believed that a shorter working week would be beneficial for students too. 61% of those polled said that a four-day week would improve the quality of their teaching, while 57% believed it would ameliorate the broader working culture of their school. Less tired, stressed and burnt-out individuals would make better teachers - and lead to a better atmosphere around school corridors.

### In your opinion, how would a four-day week affect the quality of your teaching?

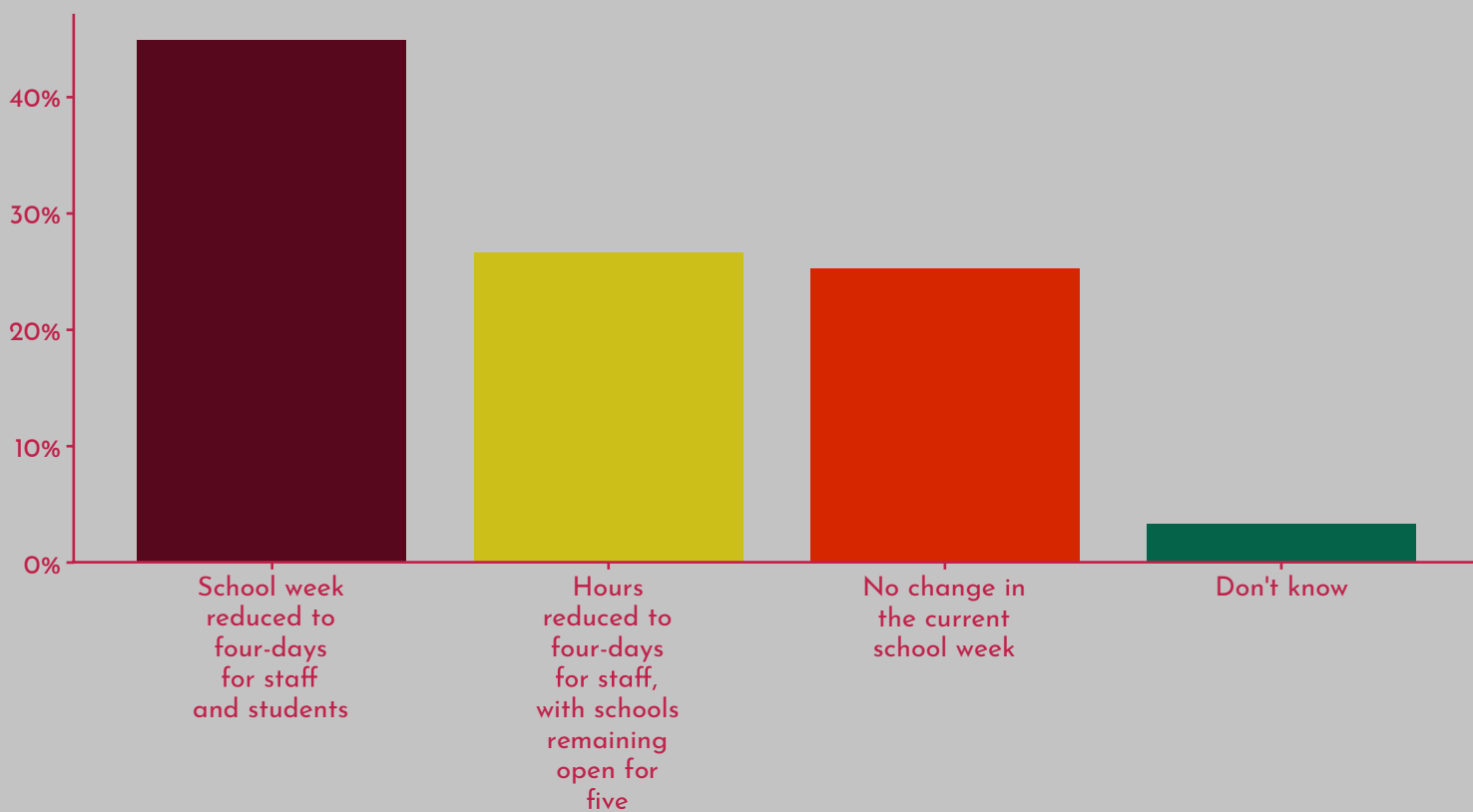


**In your opinion, how would a four day week affect the working culture of your school?**



45% of teachers would like to see the school week reduced to four-days for staff and students, compared with 27% that would like to see four-days for staff but schools remaining open for five.

### Which of the following options would you prefer to see?



## Talking to teachers

In addition to the survey polling, we also conducted interviews with two current teachers who were members of the National Education Union (NEU) who, alongside other national teaching unions, have made working hours one of their key campaigning issues. The interviewees were clear on the positive transformational effects that shorter hours could bring - even if they saw them as a significant change from current cultures of overwork.

One of our interviewees, a recently-qualified primary school teacher in London, described how she was, for instance

“constantly exhausted... long hours just leave me feeling run-down all the time. It’s not just the stress of it - working so much just leaves you physically unwell”.

Another interviewee noted how

“One of main problems teachers face is overwork - we have to maintain a high intensity all day, and the job involves a lot of emotional labour”



When one of our interviewees has been able to get small breaks from intense work - such as through 'planning, preparation and assessment' (PPA) hours, or on the rare occasions they could afford to call in unwell - even such short respites feel transformational.

"It's like... [when I've had PPA time out of class or have been absent through illness]... I can actually do the washing or make myself a healthy meal in the evening without a sense of guilt or looming stress. The relief even a couple of hours gives you is incredible. Otherwise, I'm normally getting home from school at 7 or 8pm just absolutely drained, wanting to collapse into bed. I honestly don't know how people with families and stuff do it."

Both interviewees were therefore strongly supportive of a shorter working week, but they stressed that it would be important to communicate that it wouldn't expect teachers to compress 5 days of teaching load into a shorter period.

"Teachers find it so hard to get their work done in the time they've got already: they need to know that a shorter working week would be about reducing their workload, not increasing it. We already fill our spare time with work - planning, marking, and stuff - so it would be important that this was safeguarded."

"It's important that a four-day week genuinely was a 20% reduction in teacher workload. When I work a part-time day at the moment, for instance, I'm still often pushed into working a full day anyway... Where teachers have a lot of responsibilities, especially at primary level, this needs to be factored in."

Nevertheless, the potential of a shorter working week was still profound. Most obvious was on the health crisis affecting teachers:

“The effects on mental health and wellbeing though, more than anything, would be incredible. At the moment, my job just keeps turning me into a robot: it’s just so all-consuming. Don’t get me wrong, I still love doing important work, and I know it’ll always be demanding, but it shouldn’t mean you have to give up everything else. You do so much for other people, just a tiny bit more of the week “for yourself” would mean a lot. Just more time away to rest and reset would be amazing.”

But they also believed shorter working hours would make people better teachers, and keep them in the job:

“Good teaching is supposed to be a reflective practice - but the demands of long hours at the moment just cut straight against that. Extra time would give more space to think creatively about what you want to achieve with your students and do the job really well”

“When you’re refreshed and rejuvenated - those are the times when I find myself enjoying teaching most. As term goes on, you just get worn down by the long hours. A shorter working week would make your best teaching more sustainable. You’d have happier teachers who’d be in a better place to do their jobs... and keep them in the profession for longer”

This survey and initial interviews show that teachers recognise a reduction in working hours as a potentially transformative policy capable of addressing chronic issues of overwork, producing better, healthier teachers and higher standards of educational provision.



# **III. SCOPE FOR CHANGE**

## Scope for change

Reducing working hours is a popular idea with teachers: but how could it be implemented within UK schools today?

In truth, schools across the UK could move to a shorter working week with few legal barriers. Although the education system is a devolved matter, and some specifics vary with the national context, the responsibility for setting the structure of the school day and week usually falls on a school's headteacher and/or governing body. With adequate political will and support, therefore, a reduced working week is already a viable possibility for many schools.

### What does the law say?

In the UK, education is a devolved matter: in short, this means that each of the national governments in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, along with the UK Government for England, have control over schools within their jurisdiction. There are quite significant divergences between the systems in terms of national curricula, examinations and governance - but schools in each country have similarly few direct restrictions to varying the times of the school day, or moving to a shorter working week.

The most "regulated" schools - i.e. those that are local authority maintained - are, in England, obliged to be open for at least 380 sessions (i.e. 190 days) a year, with the local authority often specifying when terms should start and finish: free schools and academies are even less restricted.<sup>20</sup> The specifics of the school day and week, however, are decided by headteachers, often in agreement with their school's governing bodies. While 'the norm' across the UK is a five day school week, with each day starting around 8-9am and finishing around 3-4pm, this isn't regulated by law.

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Long (2021) 'The School Day and Year', House of Commons Library Research Briefing. Accessible at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn07148/>

Indeed, official guidance from the Department for Education (DfE) in England notes that, although schools looking to change their school week should bear in mind the interests of all stakeholders and think through a range of possible consequences, the decision is ultimately theirs to make:

In the event that a school decides to make changes to its school day or week, it is expected that schools will act reasonably when making such decisions; giving parents notice and considering the impact on those affected, including pupils, teachers, and parents' work commitments and childcare options. In particular, schools should consider the potential impact of a shorter week on parents' work commitments, their childcare options and their choice of school.<sup>21</sup>

Schools are also required, in England and Wales (with similar specifications in Scotland and Northern Ireland) to plan teachers' 'directed time': the minimum 1,265 hours, spread over 195 days, in which they are required to be at work and available to work. As such, any significant changes to a school's working week would need to consider carefully how its staff's allocated time might need to be altered or re-evaluated to best fit the new schedule. However, there remains flexibility in how directed time is allocated to pursue shorter hours.

There is ample legal latitude, therefore, for forward-thinking headteachers, senior leadership teams and governing bodies across the UK to trial shortened working weeks in their schools. As we explore in the next section, a handful of secondary schools in England have already made use of this freedom to pursue shorter weeks with successful results.

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21 Department for Education (2020). 'School attendance: Guidance for maintained schools, academies, independent schools and local authorities': 17-18. Accessible at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-attendance>



**IV.  
SIGNS OF THE  
FUTURE:  
FOREST GATE'S  
MOVE TO A  
SHORTER WEEK**

## Signs of the future: Forest Gate's move to a shorter working week

Results went up the year after a shorter working week was introduced. We surveyed staff a year on: nobody wanted to go back. It has been a resounding success.

- Simon Elliott, CEO of Community Schools Trust

A shorter working week has already become a reality for a handful of secondary schools belonging to the Community Schools Trust (CST) in East London, who have demonstrated that a reduction in working hours for UK teachers is a real, viable possibility.

Forest Gate Community School, followed by the Cumberland School and Waterside Academy, have all moved to a shorter working week since 2019, finishing their lessons at lunchtime on a Friday - giving both staff and pupils an additional half-day of free time. Simon Elliott, the headteacher behind the initial scheme at Forest Gate (who has since become CEO of the CST), saw the program as a direct reaction to the chronic problem of overwork within the teaching profession.

'Numerous reports have shown that, compared to people in comparable professions, teachers both earn less and work more', he explains. Reducing working time was therefore one way to tackle this inequity, mitigating the workload and pressure that bureaucracy and league tables have placed on teachers. But Elliott also saw a shorter working week as a way to further improve standards in the school, giving staff time to be better rested and prepared during the school day.

Indeed, the move to a shorter working week in Forest Gate followed a wider set of reforms intended to reduce teachers' workloads: from scrapping book-marking and writing student reports by hand, to ending formal lesson observations and adding an additional week to the Christmas break. Recently, CST schools have also abolished their performance management processes, opting instead to give staff automatic pay rises.

### Freeing up Friday afternoons

The four-and-a-half day week has been achieved across the CST by adjusting the structure of the school week. To find space for reduced hours at the end of the week, Friday afternoon's lessons were moved into longer Tuesdays and Wednesdays. However, an hour of 'pastoral' provision was removed, leaving teachers with a net one hour gain out of the classroom every week. Over the course of a forty week school year, this adds up to an additional forty hours free time for teachers - or the equivalent of nearly two weeks extra holiday. This is a four-and-a-half day week for students too: the school remains open for those who need it, with a rota of extra-curricular activities, but these are optional, and pupils are free to head out of the school gates at Friday lunchtime.



## Forest Gate's 'Shorter Working Week' timetable

	Mon	Tues	Weds	Thurs	Fri
8:35	Lesson 1	Lesson 1	Lesson 1	Lesson 1	Lesson 1
9:25	Lesson 1	Lesson 1	Lesson 1	Lesson 1	Lesson 1
10.15 - 10.30	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break
10.30	Lesson 3	Lesson 3	Lesson 3	Lesson 3	Lesson 3
11:20	Lesson 4	Lesson 4	Lesson 4	Lesson 4	Lesson 4
12.10 - 1300	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	End of day for students  Fish and chip takeaway lunch 12.10-12.40  1 twilight session per half-term
1.00 - 1.50	Lesson 5	Lesson 5	Lesson 5	Lesson 5	<b>Teacher free time - no meetings</b>
1.50 - 2.40	Lesson 6	Lesson 6	Lesson 6	Lesson 6	
2.40 - 3.30	Lesson 7	Lesson 7	Form time Citizenship Assembly Yr 11 PE /prep	Form time Citizenship Assembly Yr 11 PE/prep	

This might not yet be a full four-day week for schools - but the reductions in working time for teachers have still had significant effects. On the one hand, results at the school increased the year after a four-and-a-half day week was introduced. On the other, the change has been overwhelmingly popular with staff. When staff across the three trusts were anonymously surveyed about the new timetable, over 98% affirmed their preference for a shorter working week.

Importantly, given the culture of long hours and overwork in many parts of the sector, teachers at CST schools have been encouraged by senior leadership to make the most of their shorter working hours on Fridays, and - to as great an extent as possible - avoid simply filling it with administrative work and planning. Elliott explains,

I personally stand up at each school and say, “listen, on Friday afternoons, it isn’t a con: I want to see you walk out of that door”, and I make sure that I regularly leave early too. If teachers want to use the afternoon to get the train to Paris for the weekend, then, of course, that’s fine!

Teachers’ use of newfound ‘free time’ on Fridays at CST schools does vary, though. Given the profession’s high workload - even with the trust’s wide program of reforms - some do stay in school to carry out planning work for the following week. Nevertheless, Elliott believes that this time out of the classroom still has significant positive effects, acting as a ‘buffer’ that helps to protect teachers’ weekends:

A lot of teachers do use their Friday afternoons to prepare for the next week and catch up on stuff so that they don’t have to take it home and work over the weekend. As such, having this time does help alleviate a lot of stress: staff are better placed to ‘switch off’ properly on Saturday and Sunday, and take a much-needed break.

Still, a lot of teachers at CST schools do make the most of their half-days at the end of the week:

If they’ve got something on over the weekend - say they are going to see their parents, etc. - many do use that extra time for rest. Another good measure of take-up among staff is that there’s a pub next door to the school: it definitely fills up on a Friday afternoon!

## Making the transition

Introducing the shorter working week at CST required obtaining permission from the school's chair of governors as well as the staff who would ultimately be tasked with adapting to the changes. Responses and feedback for the proposal were gathered through an online survey, and questions were taken on board. As a result of concerns about what students would do on the 'free' Friday afternoons, the leadership team designed the rota of optional activities - such as karate, or cards club - that exist for pupils who want or need to stay on school premises on Friday afternoons.

Forest Gate did encounter some initial scepticism, however. As Simon explains,

The local authority wasn't that happy because they said, "you are going to have kids on the street causing disorder". My initial response was that they were going to be on the street at 3:30pm or 4pm anyway, so what's the problem?! Of course, nothing of the sort came to pass, anyway. A few parents did also express concerns about child care, but we pointed out that the kids were welcome to use our gym, or take part in supervised sports, so that was actually well-received.

Elliott was also clear from the start that, should the reduction in working hours prove unsuccessful or unpopular, he would have no hesitation in reverting to the previous timetable. However, the shorter working week has now become an established, 'everyday' part of life at CST schools - valued by staff, students and parents alike. Elliott is clear in his conviction that other secondary schools could readily follow in CST's path.

If you are prepared to be radical then you can do it. It does require a change in mindset, because the ways in which schools' performance is assessed can often discourage bold transitions. So, schools interested in reducing their working week need to be bold and look to where they can make some real time savings, because the sky won't fall in. You know, we dropped book marking and the sky didn't fall in. We had a three-week Christmas and the sky didn't fall in. We removed written reports for parents and the sky didn't fall in - if anything results went up.

The experience of Forest Gate, along with the other CST schools, shows that direct reductions of working time are not only desirable in UK schools - they're readily feasible. Along with the other reforms introduced within CST, a shorter working week has made a tangible difference to the lives of its teachers: reducing their workload, and increasing their ability to have a meaningful period of rest every week. Teachers and senior leadership in UK schools should feel empowered to make changes that would benefit staff and students alike. As Elliott remarked, "the sky didn't fall in... if anything, results went up"!

## An international trend?

A shorter working week in UK schools could build on the success of recent similar policies around the world. As part of a growing trend, rural areas of the United States of America, such as Idaho, New Mexico and Oklahoma, for instance, have seen over 1,600 schools shift to a four-day week.<sup>22</sup>

Four-day weeks in the US schools first arose following the Great Recession, to attract teachers and save costs. Covid, however, has accelerated the trend with school leaders describing the pandemic as a 'catalyst' for changes to the structure of the school week.<sup>23</sup>

Usually, the school day is lengthened Monday to Thursday, mostly making up for a Friday in which neither teachers nor students are in school. While this does not therefore produce a dramatic reduction in staff workload, research has found four-day weeks in the US have helped to retain teachers, and also proved popular with parents and students alike who value the extra time that shorter weeks allow them to spend together.<sup>24</sup>

22 Paul N. Thompson, Katherine Gunter, John M. Schuna, Jr., Emily J. Tomayko (2021) 'Are All Four-Day School Weeks Created Equal? A National Assessment of Four-Day School Week Policy Adoption and Implementation'. *Education Finance and Policy*, 16(4): 558-583

23 Adria Hyde (2021) 'Buffalo Island Central eyes four-day school week', *Jonesboro Sun*. Accessible at: [https://www.jonesborosun.com/news/buffalo-island-central-eyes-four-day-school-week/article\\_713c66bf-355d-5fc5-92e5-528cf4d53e05.html](https://www.jonesborosun.com/news/buffalo-island-central-eyes-four-day-school-week/article_713c66bf-355d-5fc5-92e5-528cf4d53e05.html)

24 Kilburn, M. Rebecca, Andrea Phillips, Celia J. Gomez, Louis T. Mariano, Christopher Joseph Doss, Wendy M. Troxel, Emily Morton, and Kevin Estes. (2021) 'Does Four Equal Five? Implementation and Outcomes of the Four-Day School Week', RAND Corporation. Accessible at: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA373-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA373-1.html)



**V.  
REALISING A  
FOUR DAY  
WEEK IN  
SCHOOLS**

## Realising a four-day week in schools

This report has shown that, in the face of an overwork crisis in education, there is significant support for a shorter working week among teachers, who believe it would not only improve their own wellbeing, but also the education received by their students. We've explored existing successful strategies for reducing the working week in the UK context, and seen that there is already flexibility for schools to make changes to the structure of their school week.

Nevertheless, as with healthcare roles, the social care sector and other frontline services, there exists well-intentioned caution when the question of reducing the working time of teachers is raised. This is clearly in part due to the nature of the work itself: how can quality of service be maintained, whilst supporting staff wellbeing as well as organisational performance? However, there is equally a danger in fetishising currently existing working patterns, and neglecting the historical fact that working time reduction has occurred across all sectors across the previous century.

With this in mind, policymakers, headteachers, board members and teachers themselves can move from the question of 'if' a shorter working week is possible, to the question of 'how' such an initiative should be carried out. Below, we outline a number of recommendations to take a four-day week for schools forward, as well as key questions that stakeholders should come together to develop.

### **Policy-makers need to prioritise a reduction in teachers' working time**

Current discussions around lengthening the school day consistently overlook the need for teachers to work less if they are to be healthier, stay in their jobs for longer, and provide better education in the classroom. This potential multi-dividend impact is why the logic of 'more hours = better education' holds back the potential for education in the UK. The profession's overwork crisis is harming teachers and setting back children's education - it needs urgent action.

### **Education authorities should offer firm backing to schools eager to trial shorter working weeks to improve their teachers' wellbeing and pupils' education**

Schools in the UK are often provided with both financial and practical support to trial changes to educational practice.<sup>25</sup> Given the urgency in reducing teacher workload, similar initiatives are needed to test the beneficial effects of shorter working weeks.

### **Moving students to a four-day week, alongside teachers, should also be seriously explored**

Teachers most urgently need a reduction in their working time. However, a four-day week for students, alongside teachers, should be seriously explored too. This was the most popular choice when teachers were asked in the survey we carried out for this report (see charts above). According to the survey data, 45% of teachers would like to see the school week reduced to four-days for staff and students, compared with 27% that would like to see four-days for staff but schools remaining open for five.

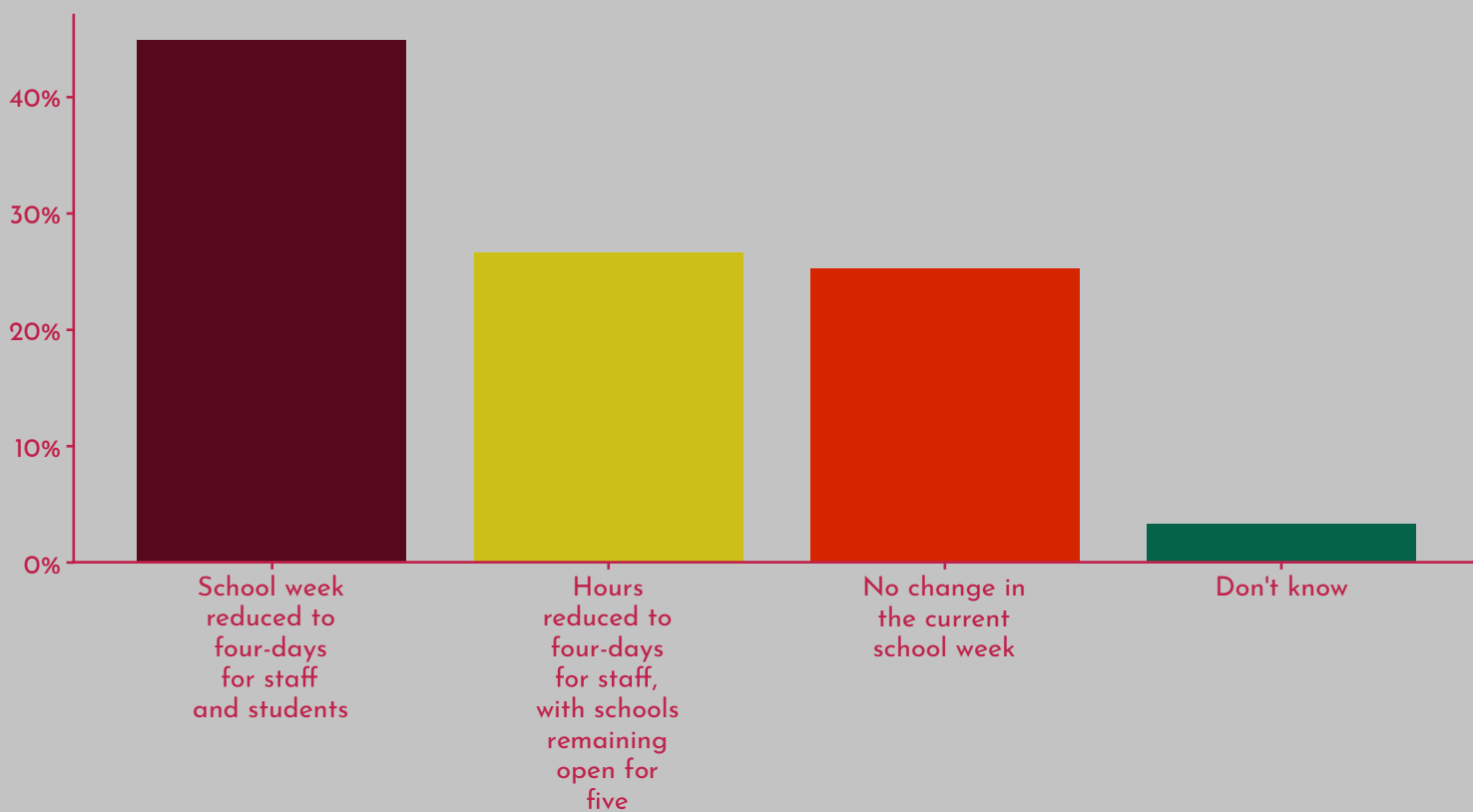
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<sup>25</sup> For instance, the Welsh Government has used 'pioneer' schools to develop and test its forthcoming 'Curriculum for Wales', and is now providing support to a selection of schools to trial a longer school day. See Welsh Government (2021) 'Curriculum for Wales: the journey to curriculum roll-out'. Accessible at: <https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/curriculum-for-wales-the-journey-to-curriculum-roll-out/#-priorities-for-curriculum-development-and-learning>; Bethan Lewis and John Arkless (2021) 'Longer school days trialled in Wales education overhaul', BBC News. Accessible at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-59416122>



Societal attitudes to work are changing, with shorter and more flexible working weeks becoming a reality for many. As such, a four-day week for students is likely to become a much more viable option in time - as Forest Gate's early steps in this direction have indicated.

### Which of the following options would you prefer to see?



### **Work with parents and other stakeholders**

The Forest Gate precedent shows us that clear communication must be maintained at all times - both with staff and students within the school, but also with local authorities and parents who are indirectly (but crucially) related to the working hours of schools. Taking all of these stakeholders forward will be essential in the transition.

### **A four-day week could dramatically benefit teacher recruitment and retention - staff headcount changes should be explored, however.**

There is evidence that a shorter working week would significantly improve teacher retention, and begin to address a chronic crisis in the profession. Moving teachers to a shorter working week, with students still in school five days a week, though, would require an increase in teaching staff to ensure that per-teacher workload was effectively reduced.

Autonomy have shown elsewhere that increasing headcount in public sector roles to enable a shorter working week is a sound and relatively cheap investment. Funding a transition to a four-day week in schools could represent a generational investment and commitment to both educational standards and workplace health.

### **Differences for implementation in primary, secondary, and other specialist schools should also be considered.**

Overwork is a problem for teachers in both primary and secondary education alike, and both face a range of similar barriers to a healthy work-life balance. However, the additional pastoral care required of children in primary education - as well as teacher responsibilities for specific classes - may require alternative strategies for implementing shorter working weeks while ensuring teacher workload is reduced.

All survey questions were  
carried out by

# Survation.



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