



## Scotland the Brave?

By **Philip Cameron** - 30 April 2021

The long-term impact of Covid on flexible and remote working is all over the legal and non-legal press at the moment. Covid really does seem to have changed attitudes to allowing employees to work where and when they want, and it is widely anticipated that the working landscape post-Covid will be very different.

The right to disconnect from work is a hot topic as is the four-day working week. It is now firmly back on the agenda, although it has been in and out of the news for several years. By a four-day working week, we mean a reduction to working four days from five without any loss of salary.

The benefits of a shorter working week seem obvious: better mental and physical health, lower unemployment, and increased motivation. What is not to like?

The UK is well known for working some of the longest hours in Europe yet lagging behind some other European nations in terms of productivity. Despite that, the move to a four-day working week has been slow to take off here. There have been some starts though. For example, Wellcome Trust underwent a three-month trial of a 4-day week but decided not to go ahead following concerns about operational difficulties (reported in the Guardian in April 2019). The Labour party adopted the four-day working week as policy and had they won the 2019 general elections; they say that they would have moved the country to it by 2029.

Scotland is now the cheerleader for the move to a four-day working week. The SNP has taken up the mantle of trialling a four-day working week in specific response to how business has responded to Covid. As part of its Manifesto for the 6 May Scottish Parliament elections, the SNP has announced a £10m fund to allow companies to trial a four-day working week for its employees. The SNP intends to use the results of its learning from this to consider a more general shift to a four-day working week should Scotland gain more control from Westminster over employment rights in Scotland. With the SNP currently polling far ahead of both the Labour and Conservative parties, this trial may very well become a reality.

The Spanish government has also recently announced a similar national trial. Perhaps more will follow.

New Zealand seems to be the leader in a move to a four-day working week. Unilever is currently undertaking a year-long trial in its New Zealand operations and we await the results of that.

Also in New Zealand, Perpetual Guardian trialled and then implemented a four-day working week model. Its founder, Alan Barnes, says the four-day week is “not just having a day off a week – it’s about delivering productivity, and meeting customer service standards, meeting personal and team business goals and objectives.” The Perpetual Guardian website reports that its trial of the four-day working week resulted in a 20% increase in employee productivity, a 27% reduction in work stress, and a 45% increase in employee work-life balance.

Now the New Zealand government seems to be encouraging employers to take a similar approach. Jacinda Arden had recently stated that employers and employees should consider a four-day working week because of the flexibility that Covid has shown exists in the New Zealand workforce.

It really is time to watch this space, although you may have to look outside of England, as a government spokesman in response to the SNP manifesto stated that there were no plans to do anything similar in England. But as the last year has shown, government plans can change rapidly when the need requires.