

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM FHIONTAR, TRÁDÁIL AGUS FOSTAÍOCHT JOINT COMMITTEE ON ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND EMPLOYMENT

Dé Céadaoin, 6 Deireadh Fómhair 2021

Wednesday, 6 October 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 9.30 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

| Teachtaí Dála / Deputies | Seanadóirí / Senators |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Richard Bruton, | Ollie Crowe, |
| Paul Murphy, | Róisín Garvey, |
| Louise O'Reilly, | Paul Gavan, |
| Matt Shanahan, | Marie Sherlock. |
| David Stanton. | |

Teachta / Deputy Maurice Quinlivan sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Four-Day Working Week: Discussion

Chairman: I thank the members for participating in today's committee meeting, in line with the exceptional circumstances and measures we must take due to Covid-19. Members participating in the meeting room are asked to exercise personal responsibility in protecting themselves and others from the risk of contracting Covid-19. They are strongly advised to practice good hand hygiene and it will be noticed that every second seat has been removed to facilitate social distancing. We urge members not to move a chair from its current position. They should also maintain an appropriate level of social distancing during and after the meeting. Masks should be worn at all times during the meeting, except when speaking. I ask for their co-operation in this matter. Any member participating in the meeting remotely is required to participate from within the Leinster House complex only. Members are well aware of that point. Apologies have been received from Deputy Duffy.

Since the start of the pandemic, many workers in sectors across the economy have had to rethink their working arrangements, especially through the introduction of greater flexibility and technology in the workplace. Today, we are considering another potential new working arrangement in the form of a move to a four-day week as the standard arrangement across the economy, with no loss of pay. To discuss this issue, I welcome representatives from Four Day Week Ireland, which is a campaign group advocating for a four-day week. We are joined by the following: Mr. Joe O'Connor, chair, Four Day Week Ireland and pilot programme manager, 4 Day Week Global; Mr. Andrew Barnes, founder, 4 Day Week Global; Ms Margaret Cox, director, ICE Group; and Mr. Kevin Callinan, general secretary, Fórsa. From IBEC, we are joined by Ms Maeve McElwee, director of employer relations, and Ms Aoife McFadden, employment law services team. All the witnesses are participating in the meeting remotely.

Before we start, I will explain some limitations to parliamentary privilege and the practice of the Houses as regards references witnesses may make to other persons in their evidence. The evidence of witnesses physically present or who give evidence from within the parliamentary precincts is protected pursuant to the Constitution and statute by absolute privilege. However, today's witnesses are giving their evidence remotely from a place outside the parliamentary precincts and, as such, may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as witnesses who are physically present. Witnesses have already been advised that they may think it appropriate to take legal advice on this matter.

Witnesses are again reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity, by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable, or otherwise engage in speech that may be regarded as damaging to the good name of the person or entity. Therefore, if their statements are potentially defamatory regarding an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative they comply with any such direction.

Both opening statements have been circulated to all members. To commence consideration of this matter, I invite Mr. O'Connor to make opening remarks on behalf of Four Day Week Ireland.

Mr. Joe O'Connor: Four Day Week Ireland thanks the committee for the opportunity to present. We are a campaign coalition formed in 2019, comprising trade unions, businesses and business leaders, environmentalists, women's representatives and academics. We are part of the 4 Day Week Global foundation, a not-for-profit organisation established by international four-day week pioneer Andrew Barnes, following the successful introduction of a four-day working week in his business, Perpetual Guardian, in New Zealand in 2018. Since our launch in September 2019, we have been making the case for a gradual, steady and managed transition to a shorter working week in all sectors of the economy. We have started a public conversation in Ireland on the case for reduced working hours. Our medium-term objective is for the four-day working week to become the new default work arrangement across the economy, with no loss of pay.

We believe that this is not only achievable but essential as a response to technological change to allow us to future proof our economy and to share the benefits with workers. A growing body of international evidence, business case studies and academic research shows that a four-day week can be good for business, as well as for workers, families and the environment. Many companies that have trialled or introduced the four-day week report happier, more focused employees and, critically, higher productivity. They have experienced reduced employee burnout, stress, sick leave, absenteeism and turnover. For many businesses concerned with retaining their best employees as well as attracting and recruiting new talent, a shorter working week can provide a competitive edge.

Working less is shown to improve the physical and mental health and well-being of workers. It would also enable people to spend more time with their families, learn new skills, have more time for rest, leisure and socialisation and to give back to their local communities. It could also be revolutionary regarding gender equality, allowing better distribution of caring responsibilities between mothers and fathers. While on a societal level women still do the majority of care work, reduced working time will enable men to spend more time with their families and to take on more caring responsibilities in the home, which in turn will help remove barriers to women achieving senior positions in work, taking on leadership roles and pursuing training opportunities. Alongside a better work-life balance, a four-day week would also lead to reduced child-care costs for women and families.

Studies also show that a four-day week can significantly reduce carbon emissions and make a huge contribution to our defining collective struggle against climate change. Research from Chalmers University of Technology in Sweden identifies a close correlation between working time and carbon emissions, and projects that reducing the average working week to four days, or equivalent hours, would deliver a reduction in emissions of 16%.

Our campaign seeks to challenge the “always on” culture that has crept into aspects of the Irish economy, which lionises long hours as a perverse badge of honour, and to shift public, political and media narratives about working time reduction. A shorter working week is not about lazy workers wanting more time off, as some might have one believe. It is a business improvement strategy centred on working smarter rather than longer and on investing in the well-being of the most important asset to businesses – their people. In a poll carried out by Behaviour & Attitudes for Four Day Week Ireland in 2020, an enthusiastic response to the prospect of a four-day week was recorded among the Irish public. This concept was defined as “the same job, the same goals, the same salary but over four days rather than five”. Just over three quarters, 77%, of those surveyed said they are supportive of the Government exploring the potential introduction of a four-day week. Among employers that responded, more than two out of three,

or 67%, supported the Government doing this. Encouragingly, almost half of Irish employers, 46%, polled also said that they see trialling a four-day week in their workplace setting as being “feasible”.

The four-day working week that we advocate for is a flexible model and not a rigid one-size-fits-all approach. It is based on the general principle of the 100-80-100 model - 100% of the pay, 80% of the time, but, crucially, in exchange for 100% of the productivity. The disruption to societal and workplace norms by the Covid-19 pandemic has illustrated the potential for different models of work for workers and employers and reinforced the need to rethink old established work patterns.

The Four Day Week Ireland campaign believes that the future of work requires a shift away from a focus on time spent in the office, at the desk or on the clock. This is not an effective way to measure people’s contributions at work or a rational metric with which to link income. We must focus instead on measuring and rewarding collective outputs, results and productivity. In fact, for many of the businesses that have made the four-day working week a success, the core reason they have almost counter-intuitively managed to deliver better business outcomes over four days rather than five is that they have not introduced the four-day week in isolation. They have trialled the four-day working week as an entry point to a process within their business which focuses on productivity, prioritisation and a more efficient way of working. They have had an open conversation with their people about how their business can work smarter rather than longer. They have been clear about the metrics by which the trial will be measured and what success will look like for their business, and upfront that this needs to work for the employee and the employer. Instead of taking a top-down approach to how this can be delivered, they have empowered their staff to come up with the ideas, solutions and changes to work practices that can ensure that they can maintain or even improve their output over four days rather than five. It has worked.

The case we are making for a shorter working week is not that we should adopt a nine-to-five, four-day working week across every economic sector and setting. Just as the nine-to-five, five-day week might be the standard or most common work arrangement today, it is, of course, not the only arrangement. There will continue to be a need for different types of flexibility for both workers and employers in order to ensure that working time reduction across society can coexist with ensuring that essential services in both the public and private sectors can continue to operate over five, six and, in some cases, even seven days. This will require strong management, clever rostering and buy-in from staff. We do believe, however, that some version of a shorter working week, based on the principle of the “100-80-100” model, is achievable right across the economy.

This is not just some abstract idea. The four-day week is working for huge numbers of businesses worldwide. This includes a long-running landmark trial of a shorter working week in Iceland, which was hailed as an “overwhelming success”, with the vast majority of the country’s workers securing contracts to shorten their hours. These trials ran between 2015 and 2019, cutting working weeks to between 35 and 36 hours from a 40-hour week for many, with no reduction in pay. This included offices, playschools, social service providers and hospitals. The landmark four-day week trial at Perpetual Guardian in New Zealand in 2018, monitored by academics at the University of Auckland, found engagement levels rose by between 30% and 40%, work-life balance metrics by 44% and so on. Microsoft Japan’s 2019 four-day week trial yielded a 39% increase in productivity. In the US, leading fintech start-up Bolt and crowdfunding platform Kickstarter, among many others, have recently announced their intention to intro-

duce a four-day working week. Closer to home, here in Ireland, the four-day week has been successfully adopted by a diverse range of companies in a number of different sectors across the island. This includes software developers in Donegal, a sales company in Clare and Armagh, a digital agency in Dublin, a legal practice in Newry, a public relations agency in Down and a recruitment, training and consultancy business located in Galway and Limerick, which the committee will hear from later this morning.

This should come as no surprise. Numerous academic studies, including from Stanford University's John Pencavel in 2014, show there is no correlation between working long hours and greater productivity. In fact, according to OECD figures, some of Europe's most productive economies, such as Denmark and the Netherlands, have among the shortest average working hours. Meanwhile, countries with longer average working hours, such as the UK and Greece, score among the poorest when it comes to productivity.

In June of this year the Four Day Week Ireland campaign launched the first ever four-day week pilot programme in Ireland, which will enable Irish employers to participate in a coordinated six-month trial of the four-day working week alongside similar pilot schemes in other countries, including the US, Canada and New Zealand. This follows the announcement of national, government-supported trials in other countries, including Spain and Scotland. As part of this, we have developed a package of tangible supports for employers that agree to participate in the pilot, which will provide those organisations with unparalleled access to the expertise, tools and resources they will need to run a smooth and successful trial. I hope to get the opportunity to address some of those supports as part of the discussion.

The roll-out of the six-month trial will take place in early 2022. Since the launch of the pilot programme, we have had an exceptional response from Irish employers, with over 100 private and voluntary sector companies expressing an interest in participating in the trial. Around half of those companies recently attended half-day information events held by Four Day Week Ireland on the practicalities of the pilot programme. We have since secured firm commitments from 17 companies to participate in the pilot, with many others still engaged in advanced internal deliberations and processes about joining.

Chairman: Mr. O'Connor, your time is up. The members will have seen your statement so they will have been able to read it themselves. Thank you for your contribution. You may come back in later. Now I invite Ms McElwee to make her opening statement on behalf of IBEC.

Ms Maeve McElwee: IBEC thanks the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment for the opportunity to address the considerations of a campaign for a four-day working week. IBEC is Ireland's largest lobby and business representative group. Our purpose is to help to build a better, sustainable future by influencing, supporting and delivering for business success. IBEC engages with key stakeholders in Ireland and internationally and its positions are shaped by our diverse membership, which ranges from small to large and from domestic to multinational businesses. Our 39 trade associations cover a wide range of industry sectors and include financial services, food and drink, medtech, small firms, retail, property and biopharm-achem, to mention just a few. IBEC represents members who employ over 70% of the private sector workforce in Ireland.

The accelerating pace of change in our workplaces has driven the adoption of new technologies and facilitated many new ways of working for our members. This era, described as the fourth industrial age, is bringing changes to the way we work, live and relate to one another due to the digital revolution. While it could be seen as an extension of the third industrial age, that

of computerisation, it is evolving at an exponential rather than a linear pace. Moreover, it is disrupting almost every industry in every country. And the breadth and depth of these changes herald the transformation of entire systems of production, management, and governance. This speed of change has been further fuelled by the events of the past 18 months. The experience of flexible, remote and hybrid working has grown significantly as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, with many organisations now considering how they might incorporate the continued benefits of new work structures for the longer term.

The relaxation of the remaining Covid-19 restrictions announced by the Irish Government has employers engaging with the return to the workplace in a significant number of ways and with a significant number of employees who have been working remotely, some for up to 18 months. Many employers are putting in place for the first time formal remote and hybrid working policies where these are possible.

An IBEC survey of 370 organisations in May 2021 showed that of the employees working remotely at that time, 81% of IBEC members were planning for a hybrid working model, with 15% returning all employees to work fully on site and 4% of those working remotely to continue to do so fully after the relaxation of restrictions. Across all respondent organisations, three quarters expected the use of hybrid working to increase over the next two to three years, 70% saw a change in the training of managers in managing flexibility, 70% envisaged new ways of working to facilitate that flexibility and 45% foresaw an increase in flexibility on start and finish times over the next two to three years, post Covid. It is therefore very clear that the traditional working model is changing and that the four-day week or compressed work schedule model is one practice that may provide other opportunities for the right work-life balance for some organisations. Some members in IBEC have conducted successful trials in this area.

The Four Day Week Ireland website sets out that it seeks as its objective “to move towards the four day week being the standard work arrangement across the economy, with no loss of pay”. It further states:

Strong management and clever rostering will need to ensure that businesses and public services can function for 5 or in some cases even 7 days, alongside a shorter working week for all workers.

There are a number of well-publicised successful pilots of four-day working weeks, in particular, as mentioned, that of Perpetual Guardian, in New Zealand, an estate planning firm, Microsoft Japan’s 2019 trial and the trials in Iceland between 2015 and 2019 in which working hours were reduced to 35 hours a week without pay reduction for 2,500 employees. The latter covered about 1.3% of the country’s population. All were declared successful on the basis of increased productivity, employee satisfaction and well-being, and reduced absenteeism. It is clear, therefore, that a four-day working week may suit some organisations and some ways of working.

However, the four-day working week does not suit all organisations. In the UK, the Wellcome Trust, the second biggest research donor foundation, abandoned its plans to implement a four-day work week in September 2019, with Ed Whiting, its director of policy and chief of staff, stating:

After extensive internal consultation on whether we should trial the four-day week, we have concluded that it is too operationally complex to implement.

A pilot in the city of Gothenburg, in Sweden, introduced a six-hour day for some nurses. The

results of the two-year trial were encouraging, with the nurses becoming “healthier, happier and more energetic”, but the costs were too high. For 68 nurses to change from eight-hour days to six-hour days on the same salary, 17 new workers were hired at a cost of €1.26 million. The cost was deemed simply too high and the pilot was abandoned as a result. The Microsoft trial in Japan, while promoted heavily in the media as having increased production by 40%, noted in its report under “lessons learned”:

More issues must be considered and arranged before the four-day workweek can be implemented in Microsoft Japan. After new preparations have been laid out, implementation cannot be readily made. Thus, another experiment may not be as successful because some employees by nature may not be as patient as the others.

I understand that that trial has not been recommenced.

Will a four-day working week attract the same complexities and additional costs as the Wellcome Trust and city of Gothenburg experiences illustrated for some organisations? While the benefits highlighted by the pilot schemes include increased productivity, reduced stress and increased well-being, and a company’s ability to attract and retain talent, there are increased costs and complexities for employers. It is not possible for all roles to be performed across four days only. In many circumstances the employer will have to recruit to cover for the fifth day in traditional five-day roles, in particular in service and professional industries. Roles that involve shift patterns that cover 24-hour days, seven days a week also see additional resources required to cover what is already budgeted and paid for in an employer’s eyes. Also, the Perpetual Guardian trial identified a number of challenges, for example, resourcing in some of the smaller teams. By way of illustration, there could be a team of three where an employee has to fit his or her own work into four days and provide cover for others who are not available as they are also compressing their working week.

The complexities that may arise in the educational sector, across early childcare services, primary, secondary and third level providers must also be considered as falling outside the ease of introducing a four-day working week. The introduction of a four-day week in such sectors would require an increase in headcount to cover service provision in that fifth day. It may not be possible to source the necessary skill set or to attract employees to cover one-day-only roles.

While the new resources required would increase employment, it sees increased costs for employers and complexities in its management while disruption for service users, clients, children and third level students is evident. The argument may be that the increased productivity would cover these additional costs and that it would be a win-win model for both employer and employee, but the reality is these complexities remain and some more so than others for certain industries and organisations. Certain roles cannot be compressed into four days without reducing the corresponding service offering to four days, which for many businesses, organisations, clients and service users is simply not feasible.

Many flexible working arrangements exist, and with the national remote working strategy committing to legislate to provide employees the right to request remote working, this will further galvanise the evolution of the remote and flexible working landscape. As a relatively new concept, the emerging evidence is mixed and for some organisations the complexity and cost of managing a four-day workforce over a five-day or seven-day working week has been and will continue to be prohibitive. In other organisations, flexibility is considered more broadly, with policies tailored to reflect the different types of flexible working requests that employees may need rather than a one-size-fits-all model.

Announcing the €150,000 research fund to launch a pilot scheme in Ireland in January 2022

to run parallel with several countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand, the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, has said it is “too early to say” whether a four-day week could work in Ireland, but the idea is “ambitious”.

IBEC would accept that the four-day working week holds many advantages for some organisations and sectors, and IBEC acknowledges the importance of innovative working models to continue to strive for better and more efficient workplaces, but it must be balanced in its approach and its application must benefit all parties to the arrangement. Organisations must be allowed to introduce flexible modes of working that suit the particular needs of their businesses. The imposition of a four-day working week on all organisations would be counterproductive to this aim.

Chairman: I invite members to discuss the issues with the witnesses. I remind members to indicate they are in the Chamber or attending the meeting via Teams by using the raise hand function.

Senator Paul Gavan: I thank both delegations for their very balanced and well-thought-out proposals and presentations on the idea of a four-day week. I will declare an interest that I am very much a supporter of the four-day working week concept. It has become a fundamental question for all of us now as we come out of Covid around how we can build back better and how we can build back in a way that makes a real difference to people’s working lives. I commend Four Day Week Ireland for a particularly strong presentation setting out how it can be done, where it actually has been done, and the successes to date. It is important we use this platform to give an opportunity for those present today to explain exactly how it is working in practice. To begin, I invite Ms Margaret Cox to tell us about her experiences as a manager of the ICE Group and how the four-day working week has become such a viable concept for her in her business.

Ms Margaret Cox: Does the Chairman want me to answer now or will all the questions be taken together?

Senator Paul Gavan: I would like Ms Cox to go ahead. I have 14 minutes so perhaps Ms Cox will not mind taking a couple of minutes to outline her own experience of the four-day working week. It would be very useful to hear from her on this.

Ms Margaret Cox: I thank the Senator and I thank the committee for the invitation to be present. I recognise the balanced discussions on both sides of the argument between IBEC and Fórsa. Our organisation, the ICE Group, is a member of IBEC and we have been delighted with the help we have received from Ms McElwee and the conversations that we had with IBEC as we have gone through this journey, especially on the employment law and legal side of things.

Our model is very simple. We decided to go for a fixed flexibility model. In the ICE Group we work around a three-day weekend and everybody works Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and they are off Friday, Saturday and Sunday, or they work Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and they are off Saturday, Sunday and Monday. We have small teams and it is a small organisation.

On the complexity issue, we went through a trial for six months that started on 1 July 2019 and we are now more than two years into the whole programme. The trial was important because it allowed us to work out with our team members how we were going to address aspects such as covering the fifth day. We did not take on any additional headcount to deal with people

being off on the fifth day. We did take on additional headcount because our business expanded.

For us it has been a commercial success. It has been a societal success in terms of our employees as they have more time off, more time with their families and more time in the community. We have increased our productivity. We measured an increase in productivity in the first year of 27%. We also measured a 33% increase in our wellness and happiness score. We reduced our single day absenteeism to one in a six-month period. Across all of our employees, we had one loss of unplanned absenteeism during a six-month period and we improved our retention. From our point of view it has been a commercial success and a success for all of our people. It is a three-day weekend in the ICE Group every single weekend. It is like having a bank holiday for 52 weeks of the year around the weekend. I am not sure this answers the Senator's specific questions but I am happy to answer any additional specific questions.

Senator Paul Gavan: I thank Ms Cox. It definitely does answer my questions because it gives a good working example of how a private sector company can embrace a four-day working week and how it can be a win-win for employees and for the business given those striking details around increased productivity, absenteeism and staff retention. It is a great example of how this concept can work.

I want to ask my colleagues from the Fórsa trade union to expand on this pilot project because it does look like a very exciting proposition. In his presentation Mr O'Connor mentioned the opportunity to expand on what is involved in the actual supports available to companies that sign up to this pilot project.

Mr. Joe O'Connor: I thank the Senator. The programme we have designed will roll out as a six-month co-ordinated trial between February and July of next year. As I said, 17 companies have signed up to participate so far and we are in active engagement with a number of others. This includes businesses from a range of different sectors, including manufacturing and logistics, software development, tech, finance, ICT, engineering and so on. We have developed a package of supports that will provide those businesses with the opportunity to trial this in the most successful and smoothest way possible. We have designed a training programme that has been developed by business leaders from all over the world who have successfully implemented a four-day working week. The intention around that is to ensure the companies trialling this will be able to learn from the experiences of others who have done this already and to be able to integrate this into their pilot design and the planning processes.

They will also be able to avail of mentoring. We have a panel of international business experts and pioneers of the four-day week, including people like Ms Cox, who will be matched up with each company that participates in the pilot programme based on their particular business needs, challenges and context. There will be somebody to support and advise and guide them through the six-month trial.

The third area is networking. We will plug companies into a peer support structure of other companies who will be trialling this programme in parallel, including Irish employers and other employers internationally who will be doing this at the same time. This can provide a community where people can share ideas and experiences and learn from each other along the four-day week journey.

Finally, and probably most critically from our point of view, we developed a research partnership with Boston College and University College Dublin whereby they will work with each company to agree the most appropriate metrics for productivity for that business, whether it be

sales, profits or service standards. They will assess productivity, well-being, carbon emissions and other factors during the six-month trial, at the end of which they will produce an assessment of how the four-day working week has impacted on the individual companies participating, as well as, collectively, the companies and employees taking part. I hope that answers the Senator's question on the outline of the pilot programme on which we have been working.

Senator Paul Gavan: It does. I have a follow-up question. It is clear this is gaining a significant amount of leverage across the private sector, which is very welcome. However, apart from the research grant from the Government, which is welcome, I would have hoped to see a level of public sector involvement in the pilot project. Has such involvement been forthcoming to date? What else could the Government do to encourage it?

Mr. Kevin Callinan: I will answer that question if I may. The Senator is correct. We are pleased the Government, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications have put forward €150,000 for research so that Ireland can be part of this global movement. What worries us is that, thus far, the employers coming forward to participate in the trial here next year, which obviously will be part of an international trial, are confined to the private sector. For this to be balanced, it needs to include not just private sector companies but some public sector organisations and the voluntary sector. I have written to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy McGrath, as has Four Day Week Ireland, seeking to engage to ensure we get some level of participation by the public sector in the trial. In the context of the voluntary sector, we have a worry the current requirement for contracts with the State to be on an hourly basis rather than being based on output is a complete disincentive to its involvement in the trial. If we come at this from the point of view of trying to ensure we research this to get the best evidence possible to go forward, then we do need to spread this across the whole economy.

IBEC stated it would be wrong to impose this. Nobody is talking about imposition. That should be clear. What we want to do is develop this idea, embed it, demonstrate it can work and then, in the medium to longer term, try to leverage not just the economic benefits but the social and ecological benefits too. The Senator's question regarding the public sector is relevant and a matter in respect of which this committee and politicians generally could be very helpful.

Senator Paul Gavan: I thank Mr. Callinan. I am thinking in particular - perhaps all members, on a cross-party basis, will do likewise - of local councils, for example. Local authorities are ideal organisations for us to encourage to consider participating in this pilot project.

In my final couple of minutes, I invite both sides to reflect on the following question. One hundred years after an eight-hour working day was established, is it not high time to give serious consideration to a reduction in the working week? After 100 years of massive productivity gains, surely it is time now for us all to work collaboratively - that is what is happening here this morning - to establish a four-day working week. Surely it is high time to get a further reduction in working hours and a better balance for people's lives.

Mr. Joe O'Connor: I am happy to come in on that question. Our campaign is strongly of the view that, more than 100 years after the five-day week, the weekend and the eight-hour day were invented and introduced, it is time for an update and a reset. Since the early to mid-1980s, average working hours in most advanced western economies have more or less flatlined during a period in which productivity growth has increased significantly and technological advances, including globalisation, the Internet and email, have made an enormous difference to the economy. As we now enter this fourth industrial revolution of digital technology, automation and

artificial intelligence, it is very important the benefits of that are shared with workers. Working time is a very important place to start in having that conversation.

Senator Ollie Crowe: I thank Mr. O'Connor and Ms McElwee for their opening statements. I commend Ms Cox, who is from my constituency of Galway West and was a Senator for ten years, on her courage as director of one of the first companies in Ireland to implement the four-day week. It will not shock anyone who knows Ms Cox or her family members involved in the ICE Group that they are breaking new ground. I have been contacted by many people in Galway city who stated the ICE Group has led the way and continues to do so.

It seems to me all the momentum is on the side of those seeking a four-day working week, at least in certain sectors and companies. It has been successful in the majority of places where it has been trialled. The challenges such a working week would pose in certain areas, such as education, are significant. I do not believe there is any desire to move to a four-day week in that sector. I doubt there would be sufficient teachers to cover additional time, particularly for some second-level subjects. Has Four Day Week Ireland considered this issue? If so, what are its views on it?

Mr. Joe O'Connor: I thank the Senator. The reality is certain sectors of the economy are better positioned to make this change immediately. We believe a majority of the workforce are working in areas where the four-day working week could be introduced without additional employment costs while maintaining or increasing productivity. However, as Ms McElwee rightly outlined, the Swedish trial was extremely successful in terms of the outcomes for staff and patients but there were increased employment costs because, in that care home setting, there was a requirement to hire additional staff. There are areas of the economy, such as healthcare, where that should be considered. Our campaign is not proposing the introduction of a four-day working week for nurses and doctors without hiring more nurses and doctors.

However, in the context of this conversation about the future of work, there are certain sectors of the economy where a four-day week is appropriate. I refer to climate action and the number of jobs that will be displaced by automation and artificial intelligence. Most of the research suggests one of the areas in which we need to invest in the creation of new employment is the caring economy. As regards teaching, there are many examples in the United States of private schools having introduced a four-day working week as a mechanism to attract new teachers. Obviously, that is obviously a very different model from the one in Ireland but the four-day week has worked in practice. The reality is certain sectors of the economy are at a later stage of the transition than other sectors. In the context of the conversation about the public sector, local authorities and the Civil Service may be more ready for a trial now, but over time, the shorter working week can work across all sectors of the economy. It might look different in some sectors, such as in the form of a compressed five-day week, but this idea of working time reduction can be achieved across the economy.

Ms Margaret Cox: I thank the Senator for his kind comments regarding the ICE Group and the people who work with us on the ground in Galway. When we started this journey, I was the proverbial St. Paul on the road to Damascus. The Senator knows Felim McDonnell, my co-director. I told Felim a four-day week would never work in the ICE Group as we were too small an organisation and would not be able to make it happen.

However, what is very important is asking what we, as an organisation, a government or a country, can we do and how we can make it happen. I refer to the benefits available to Ireland. If we can make Ireland the best place to work and live, we will give ourselves a unique selling

point in terms of the global outlook we have as a country to invest in. It is about flipping it over and asking what we need to do to make it happen. I refer to what has been done in the past 18 months. Businesses, schools, hospitals and other bodies have done things we never would have thought possible. The same is true of the Oireachtas. Who would have thought we could be having an Oireachtas hearing on this issue involving six outside participants on a Teams link? My message to the committee today and to the Government is we must open our minds and look at the opportunities that exist. I see this an opportunity for the better for Ireland, specifically in terms of where we are positioning ourselves in the global employment and living market.

Mr. Kevin Callinan: Senator Crowe mentioned schools. It is not that we have not thought about it in the way he has suggested, but in the spirit of what Margaret has just said, we need to be prepared to think bigger in the medium to long term about how we do things. Maybe it would be better if teachers were teaching over four rather than five days and giving their energy there. On the fifth day, children might not be back with their parents. Maybe we could come up with things that children could be doing that would be better for them in terms of their broader development, health and well-being. These are the kinds of issues that, over time, we can start to engage with if we embrace this idea.

Senator Ollie Crowe: I agree with Ms Cox's comments regarding working within the resources of the company or the State, with each employee being given an option. That is the message. It could be set up on a Monday to Thursday or Tuesday to Friday basis, with productivity remaining the same or even increasing. That is a significant message for all companies.

I have a number of concerns around this. There are certain sectors or areas, like healthcare, where it may not be possible to implement a four-day week and in that context, we could be in danger of creating a two-tier workforce. We must be conscious of that. That said, I welcome the concept and believe it would work well in places like Galway city. However, in terms of nurses and doctors and the education sector, for example, we must look at it from an overall perspective.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I thank the witnesses for their presentations. The idea is very attractive and would be very popular but I feel a bit like the character in "Father Ted" who asks "Where's the catch?". The key to this is finding the 20% gain in productivity in the various sectors. What is the framework for delivering that productivity gain so that wages are not affected? As others have said, very small enterprises will struggle, as will 24-7 businesses and those that do not operate on a 40 hours per week basis. Traditionally, the concern has been that weaker or less organised sectors will get squeezed out. Is there a risk in moving away from the fixed working week, with overtime being required to be paid beyond that? If we move to something that does not have that sort of arrangement, are we jeopardising hard-won gains and pushing more into the Deliveroo-type economy? Those who are knowledge leaders can adapt to this while others will be left behind. Is this something for those who are well placed in businesses that have all of these traits while others will fall behind?

Mr. Callinan said the idea is not to make this compulsory. Some employers will see the benefit of this, and if the trials work, some will progress. What is the framework the witnesses are looking for from the State to bring this along? How do we ensure there is some level of equity for the sectors we have talked about like childcare, retail and so on, that need long hours and do not have the same capacity to produce the 20% improvement in productivity?

Do the witnesses see remote working as a step towards achieving these goals? Is remote working a toe in the water for employers that we can build on, rather than coming in with some

regulatory requirement, if that is where this is heading? Do we suck it and see? Risks to sectors that would not cope with a compulsory regime clearly exist.

Mr. Kevin Callinan: On the last point, remote working has shown us just how much change can happen relatively successfully when we have a disrupter. Therefore, it is fair to make the comparison with remote working because the idea of a four-day week, whose time has come in our view, is not as far-fetched as people may have thought. We are not talking about regulation at this stage or about implementing something across the economy or workforce as a whole. What we want to do at this stage is maximise participation in pilot programmes to try to gather evidence and identify issues or problems that may arise in particular businesses, sectors or even areas within the public sector.

Comments about the danger of a two-tier workforce are fair, but if we look at this over the medium to long term, we can see how work gradually will be revalued. Rather than it being what the Deputy describes, we can come at this anew. It will obviously impact on training programmes if we need more people in healthcare or education roles, for example. That is certainly something that would emerge but we are talking about this happening over a significant period of time.

I apologise but I have a prior commitment to address the PDFORRA conference at 2 p.m. in Killarney. Mr. Andrew Barnes will join the meeting in my stead. As a global pioneer on the four-day week, he has a lot of knowledge of the subject and will be happy to deal with the questions posed

Chairman: Thank you, Mr. Callinan, and safe travels. I invite Ms McElwee to respond to Deputy Bruton.

Ms Maeve McElwee: I wish to comment on the point made earlier by Senator Gavan regarding the changing world of work and how we have moved from much longer working hours over many generations to where we are today. It is also worth recognising that, over recent years, we have introduced very significant legislation to ensure people have a better work-life balance. There will be another directive from Europe on this but we have also seen significant improvements in all kinds of statutory and carer's leave to enable people to have a better work-life balance. This is something we should not forget in the wider conversation because these are very important flexibilities. They are also very important issues for employers in terms of managing and directing work on an ongoing basis.

When we look at some of the challenges, the issue raised by Deputy Bruton regarding a two-tier structure and polarisation within our workforce is something about which we are also concerned. We can already see that there is remote working internationally in professional classes. Most often these people are in very well paid roles and they have a much greater opportunity to work remotely than many other people who need to turn up to their place of work to perform the duties that they perform on an ongoing basis. In terms of layering on a four-day work week, again what we will see, potentially, is further issues around polarisation because it will be that same cohort who are more likely to avail, and certainly in the medium-term, of reduced working hours over the longer term.

When we consider the long-term future there are issues that we must think about very carefully. One issue is the area of demographics and the current structure of society. It is quite right to say, in the comment that has already been made, that we will see shifts with advancing technology with more of our work being realigned into areas like the caring sector. A larger

proportion of the population will also require care. Without a significant growth in the population we will have into the future, and we have it at the moment, significant labour and skills shortages. To be able to backfill and introduce those roles on a cost-effective basis, we have got a real challenge around the cost of implementing some of those. Private sector organisations and agencies that deliver social care, intellectual disability care, broader disability care, home care nursing and so on cannot be managed more efficiently on a reduced hours basis so will require really significant additional resources.

Let us consider the Icelandic trial. First, we probably need to adjust our discussion to whether this is a four-day working week or reduced hours. I say that because the Icelandic trial was about reduced hours and not necessarily a four-day working week overall. The people who conducted the trial acknowledged that there had been a significant increased cost of €24 million in the care sector. The trial only covered 1.3% of the Icelandic population so the findings mean that there would be a significant cost if one were to scale that up across a much greater percentage of the private sector that would operate within a larger ongoing four-day or reduced hours working week. We need to recognise that those costs exist. We need to think about the long-term realities of being able to attract and retain skills, and being able to produce those skills in a cost-effective manner. It would be the current workers who will have to pay for that on a long-term basis. That is a huge imposition of additional tax costs into the labour market. There are really significant questions about the affordability of that and the overall attractiveness of Ireland as a work location unless we see us moving in tandem with a global change. The really instructive piece is if we consider what has happened in France where a 35- or 36-hour work week has been implemented. We know that their professional cadre do not work those hours. On average, they work much more significant hours but that is a huge cost to employers where the state or the employer is having to pay overtime, and additional leave because it is time in lieu. The state pays really significant subsidies in order to advance that 35-hour work week and it presents challenges. The reality is that because the rest of international trade has not shifted, the French model is really making workarounds of that 35-hour work week in order to operate competitively at international level. When one moves outside of the framework of the individual firm and considers it as a much broader national issue, all of those things would come to the fore and must be very carefully considered.

Mr. Joe O'Connor: I thank Deputy Bruton for his contributions and shall comment on a few points. First, we view remote, hybrid, flexible and blended working as a huge part of the conversation on what the future of work needs to look like. We also think it is important that we do not purely confine the discussion on the future of work to the location of work. The conversation also needs to feature control over working time. As we have seen during the pandemic, the whole conversation on the right to switch off has been an issue for many workers and many different sectors. There are also the issues of average working hours and working time.

While we share the concern about having two tiers over the medium to long-term, we believe that if you do not start somewhere, you will not get anywhere. This is a pilot programme and experiment. We welcome the Government's commitment of €150,000 in research funding as an acknowledgement of the fact that at a very minimum, this idea is worthy of further investigation and exploration. The only way we can ensure that we get the best quality data from the pilot project and research is to ensure we have as broad a participation as possible, across as many different sectors and settings as possible. It will be only then that we can answer some of these questions.

We, in the campaign, fully acknowledge that up to now most of the research in this area,

with the exception of some projects like the Iceland one, has been very much at an individual company level. In many cases, a company would introduce this and would pair with an academic institution, but would then self-report its own outcomes. We want to develop a very ambitious pioneering project that will have a broad parallel trial of a four-day week across many different countries, sectors and settings because it would produce quality data that does not exist currently. Some of the results we have seen from companies in different sectors that have conducted trials are positive enough that this initiative warrants further and deeper exploration.

It is important to note that while less than 2% of the population took part in the Icelandic trial, this has led to policy change and 86% of the workforce has now negotiated new shorter contracts. It is a study around working time reduction rather than a move to a four-day working week. Our campaign talks about the 100-80 model and we are not just talking about the four-day working week. It is a reality that on the demand side around 90% of workers in almost all surveys, when given the option to choose between a four-day week or a compressed five-day week, chose a four-day week. In terms of businesses, of the 17 companies that have signed up to take part in our trial, 16 companies are doing it on the basis of a four-day week and one company is doing on the basis of a compressed five-day week. Within the business community there is a more significant interest in the four-day work week than the compressed five-day week.

Senator Róisín Garvey: The discussion is very interesting. There has been a swift change because all of a sudden we have gone from having no remote working to having a discussion on a four-day week. The work that the organisations are doing on this matter is great. It is important that the work is done well and that there is no narrative about two sides. It is unhelpful to the discussion for Senator Gavan to ask to hear from both sides because we all want good quality working rights for workers and we all want productivity. We all want happy employees and increased productivity if the four-day week is to work. That is the commonality. We need to make sure the debate is not polarised. We all want what is best.

It is brilliant that the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications have agreed to a trial because a four-day working week is a relatively new concept. We had to fight to get remote working of any kind in the programme for Government and we were given a rate of 20%. Remote working is a very new concept in Ireland and we are going from that to a four-day week. For that reason, I suggest that Mr. O'Connor must bear with the system. In reality, we all would prefer if a four-day week were introduced in the morning but things do not work that quickly. It is excellent that a trial will start in January and it is most important that we await the outcome. From what the witnesses have said, it seems that the trial will show that a four-day week is very effective. There has been no research done in Ireland in this regard. That work must happen first before we can jump forward in any direction.

I know that Mr. Callinan had to leave but I am interested in learning whether the teachers' unions have sought a four-day week because I have not heard that such a request has been made. I had a meeting with Ms Cox and Mr. O'Connor. I appreciate that a four-day working week is a very exciting concept in general terms but I contend that it must be done in a way that works and that nobody - employees or employers - takes the piss out of it. We must have structures to support everybody.

I am not sure what the ask is outside of the trial. If we have never done a four-day week in Ireland, we must start with a trial. If a trial proves that a four-day week is useful and good, the next step is to conduct a trial in the public sector. It will be interesting to see the uptake in

terms of the trial. I presume that Mr. O'Connor and his organisation will be involved in the forthcoming trial. I think the call was put out in July and it is now closed. Do our guests have information on the uptake? I do not have it to hand. It is great that mentoring and advice will be supplied because this is going to be a super programme we can extend throughout the country, although we will have to tread carefully and do it right.

In January, the Government will bring forward a Bill regarding a right to request remote working, which is definitely a step in the right direction. Having worked in Leinster House, what I have learned is that just because there is a great idea, that does not mean it can happen overnight. Unfortunately, it has to happen slowly but surely, with trials and tests. This is a national issue. We have great stories from individual businesses such as Ms Cox's that have done very well, but when we want something to happen at a national level, we have to do it with care. That is why the trial is really important. I am not sure how we can progress until we have the results from the trial but it is very exciting.

Ms Margaret Cox: I might come in there. One of the concerns I have - this is an ask, if I am being clear about it - is that we should not confuse remote working with a four-day week. Remote working and the right to request it is really important, but working a four-day week, with an additional day off during the week, will be a game changer for employees, communities and society. It will give that one day back. I think that if we mix it with remote working, productivity gains will increase even more than has happened at our company. Let us not confuse remote working with a four-day week-----

Senator Róisín Garvey: I am very clear on that. I am just pointing out what stage we are at. As a country, we are only working on legislation on remote working. That is my point. I would love a four-day week myself; who would not? I am just highlighting the reality of where we are as a State.

Ms Margaret Cox: It is important to recognise that change will take time and it is better in some organisations initially. The learning from those organisations is what will make the difference as we move into the more difficult places in regard to implementation. I thank the Senator for her comments.

Mr. John O'Connor: On what the ask is, our focus is on this pilot programme. We are not at this point talking about legislative change or regulation. Our intention is to run this pilot programme over three phases. The six-month co-ordinated trial will start early next year and we are planning to roll out two further trials between the end of next year and 2023. The critical issue for us is to ensure there is as much private sector participation as possible. Based on our engagements, we believe many Irish companies are interested in this and examining it. If they are interested, we want to be able to provide them with the support they need, through this programme, to ensure they have the most successful trial possible but also to ensure our research is as significant as possible.

There is also significant interest in the voluntary sector and I have engaged with a number of voluntary sector employers. As Mr. Callinan mentioned, however, there is a significant barrier to many voluntary sector agencies that receive State funds through State contracts. They are almost debarred from the programme on the basis the money they receive through those contracts is, effectively, billed on an hourly rather than an output basis. If they were able to tender for contracts based on the output they provide rather than the hours, that would enable them to participate in the programme.

Finally, as Mr. Callinan mentioned, there is the question of whether we can identify, not necessarily in the first phase of the trial beginning next February but at some stage over the pilot programme, discrete targeted areas of the public service and the Civil Service to participate in this trial in order that it will be broad and will apply to all sectors. That is our ask to the political system at this point.

Chairman: I ask Ms McElwee to be brief in her response because Senator Garvey's time is almost up.

Ms Maeve McElwee: I wish to pick up on the point Ms Cox made about ensuring we are clear about the difference between a flexible four-day work week and a reduced-hour week because they are very different issues. Particularly in the case of a four-day work week, one of the key concerns we hear from employers is that employees are not all seeking a four-day work week and a three-day weekend. In fact, there are many other flexibilities they require to be able to manage their personal lives and their own personal work-life balance. That is where issues such as the four-day work week cross over with remote working because children will still need to be dropped to school five days a week, they will still have appointments midweek that cannot necessarily be dealt with on one particular day off and so on. What we are really seeing as a drive across our membership base is that the employee relationship is becoming much more personal in respect of how flexibility operates for individuals. The narrative that is out there very much concerns how individuals want to interact with their employer. It is important we are clear what we are talking about, whether that is reduced hours, a four-day work week or flexible schedules. Flexibility represents the main driver we are seeing.

Senator Róisín Garvey: I thank our guests and commend them on bringing this concept to Ireland and bringing us forward. On the trial itself, I thought-----

Chairman: The Senator is well over time.

Senator Róisín Garvey: Mr. O'Connor might comment on the uptake of the trial.

Senator Marie Sherlock: I thank Mr. O'Connor, Ms Cox and our guests from Fórsa and IBEC for attending the meeting. I am interested in the concept of a four-day week especially in the context of female labour market participation. There is the issue of getting women into work but also that of keeping them there, given that, as we know, there is a significant and dramatic fall-off in women's participation after a particular age or because of certain care responsibilities in their lives. My other main interest relates to how a four-day week may mitigate the level of commuting in this country and reduce emissions. In some ways, the conversation is very timely. I wish the pilot programme all the best when it takes off next year.

I am conscious that Mr. O'Connor indicated that much of the research is based at the firm level at the moment as opposed to anything broader. In the context of the workplaces that have undertaken a four-day working week, what do we understand about female labour market participation? I refer to the issues of women going from part-time to full-time work and of whether more women want to join the organisations. Ms Cox might have a perspective on this as well. Based on the research Mr. O'Connor has seen, what insights can he give us?

Mr. Joe O'Connor: Most of the research we have examined in this area has not really drilled down into the impact on household distribution of labour. The National Women's Council of Ireland has been involved in our campaign since we launched it on the basis it believes this can be a great enabler of gender equality for the reasons I mentioned earlier. They include

enabling men to take on a greater share of the care and responsibilities and, in turn, removing barriers to women in respect of taking on senior leadership positions, training and so on, and providing a greater balance between women and men in that regard.

In the case of many of the surveys we conducted in the initial stages of our membership of this campaign, I was struck by the number of women who responded to say they were currently working a four-day week. They had been reduced to a four-day week because they had come off maternity leave and decided that, because of the benefits to family and work-life balance, they would stay on it. They were getting paid for only four days but their responsibilities and jobs had not changed. They were still expected to do the same work, over four days rather than five. That is a micro example of what we hope will be borne out by the research.

This project will examine time-use diaries of the employees who participate to see what the impact has been on the distribution of labour in the home. Most of the research on carbon emissions and working-time reduction relates to the company-level impacts, such as commuting, energy use and buildings, but there has not been a great deal of analysis of the behavioural changes that happen with individuals. Is it the case that when people work and live more intensely, they are unable to live as sustainably as they would like? That is the kind of question we hope this research project will answer. The broader the programme, the more we will be able to delve into some of those important questions.

Ms Margaret Cox: I might just come in, specifically, on the qualitative data we have seen. It is true that the lives of the women in my organisation are better than they were before we brought in a four-day week. They have more time to spend with family and they get stuff done on their day off. This is the case for men too but it is particularly true for women. With all due respect to everybody here, it is an accepted fact that women do a greater share of the general household caring work, in general, than their husbands, partners or whoever they are. It makes a difference to their lives but they are still getting 100% of their pay.

Mr. O'Connor made a very valid point. We have all seen that when we come back from maternity leave, we want to take more time off to be with family. Can we afford to go down to 80% of our wages? Some people can and some people cannot. We should balance that opportunity, especially for women, but also for fathers and other family members. It does not necessarily have to be about children; it could be that a person is looking after parents or somebody with a disability. It would be foolish to underestimate that. There is opportunity in the concept of us all caring for our families and our community. That is something that can be exploited in a very positive way as we go forward.

Senator Marie Sherlock: It is important to say that even pre-pandemic, notwithstanding the unemployment rate related to the pandemic at the moment, we had a very broad unemployment rate of just below 18%. That included people who would have liked to work but could not because of various structural issues in their lives, such as caring responsibilities or a disability. A move by some companies towards a four-day week would certainly encourage more of these people to seek work, which is very important.

My other question is on the conversation taking place in other countries. Mr. O'Connor and IBEC representatives spoke about the trials within certain companies in other countries. We had a discussion on the conversations in other countries and the legislative or other supports that could potentially be put in place. It was mentioned that the right to disconnect and the right to flexible working are coming down the tracks because of an EU directive. Are there other initiatives that could be taken at state level to encourage companies to take up a four-day week

and set boundaries around it, so it is not just five days compressed into four, or people working all hours of the day, even if they are formally only working four days? What conversations have taken place in other countries about this?

Mr. Joe O'Connor: I am conscious that Mr. Barnes has joined us. This might be a good time for him to come in on the international dimension. I might leave this with Mr. Barnes.

Chairman: I ask Mr. Barnes to be very brief because Senator Sherlock's time is up.

Mr. Andrew Barnes: The reality is different countries apply different solutions. It depends on the structural issues they have. We now see India is implementing a restriction to the working week but that is based on a very high level, while Japan is doing something different. The key thing is the bulk of legislation on work, internationally, is based on time and, therefore, there is inadvertent discrimination against companies trying to bring things in. In my country, New Zealand, we have to accrue holiday on the day we gift people off. The best solutions we are seeing globally are where government looks to get rid of those inadvertent barriers to introducing a flexible or a four-day week.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: I thank our guests for attending. There has been a lot of talk and I will not rehash what other people have said. There are a lot of positives with this, but it is a question of how many business sectors it can be applied to. It will not work for every business. We have highlighted some businesses that have to trade. Manufacturing companies cannot afford to stop a day's manufacturing, for instance. Areas of the public sector and childcare are in a similar situation. It will be interesting to see the trial that has been spoken about and what that throws up.

For those who have experience, and the IT sector was spoken about as an area where this has proven to be a success, will we create two-tier recruitment? I imagine many people, if they look at their employment options, would much prefer to work in an industry where they were going to have a three-day weekend, for instance. I could imagine how that would work for many people, but what are the thoughts of those who have been in this space? Ms Cox might like to comment. She talked about her business and how it manages its productivity, and mentioned that the three-day weekend works for it, but has she any idea about other companies she may have looked at? Would staff be inclined to migrate to her business as a result? If this is to be brought in at a large scale, there will be costs to employment but there may well be a shift in the types of jobs people are looking for. People will choose employment where a three-day weekend is on offer. I ask for Ms Cox's comments on that.

Ms Margaret Cox: We are a commercial business and we hope people would choose to come to work for our organisation. It would give us the edge in recruitment and retention. What we have found is that because people are coming back more energised, more happy and more focused, we get more work done in the time we are in the office than we did previously. That is what is giving us the additional productivity gains. Let me give a very simple example. Meetings tend to go on indefinitely in many organisations. We now have a very simple rule that unless it is a very important meeting, it lasts 30 minutes. No meeting starts without an agenda and if you are not supposed to be there, or you have nothing to add, you are not invited. We have cut out the waste within the process of managing our business. If we take that concept and work through it to the business moving forward, as people will do on the trial, the waste in that business is identified. It is by identifying waste that you achieve the greater productivity gains. I am not sure if that answers the Deputy's question but I hope it does.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: That is helpful. For businesses that are pivoting, is it the case that a business might give all its staff a three-day weekend that will start on a Friday and, therefore, the business is not open on a Friday, or will do the same on a Monday and, therefore, the business is not open on a Monday? Will it propose, potentially, splitting staff between some being off on Friday and some being off on Monday? How is this managed in terms of customer demand and dealing with the front face of business?

Ms Margaret Cox: The Deputy-----

Chairman: I will invite Ms McElwee in.

Ms Margaret Cox: -----is answering the question himself. We are saying it will depend on the organisation. In our organisation, we work Monday to Thursday or Tuesday to Friday because we cover five days. Other organisations are in a niche business and can afford to close down on a Friday, so everybody works Monday to Thursday. In other organisations, people choose what day they pick. Some organisations have people picking a Wednesday and others a Tuesday. It is a matter for the organisation itself to decide on what flexibility it wants and what works for its business. That can be done by listening to employees, teams of people and customers. Again, for businesses out there that are making money to create and sustain themselves, they have to listen to where their customers are. We do not want to be in a situation where companies are not in a position to deliver superior customer service to their clients as they move forward.

Chairman: I will bring in Ms McElwee. She has been indicating for a while.

Ms Maeve McElwee: I have two points. I apologise to Deputy Shanahan because this was not his question but, on the equality space, an assertion was made that a four-day working week will rebalance many of the gender challenges we find in the workplace. I would argue the issue is much more complex than that. Even as we look at what has happened over the course of the pandemic with, in many cases, both parents at home and children being minded, managed and schooled at home, we did not see a rebalancing of the burden between both parents as a result of them having equal access to the responsibilities and chores in the household. We absolutely know that burden fell much more heavily on women. We would really need to think about how we would be structuring our society in a four-day work week to ensure we are doing many different things to rebalance that relationship as opposed to just allowing more women to work four days a week and have a better quality of life from that perspective.

The other points that are important and which were raised by the Deputy Shanahan concern where we want to attract workers to. Obviously, for private sector firms this is a competitive piece, but from an IBEC perspective, looking at it from our wider economy and a sustainable environment, we have to think about where the jobs are going to be in the future. We have already indicated that many of them will be in the caring sectors. Those are not jobs where we can streamline or have efficiencies or choose to work Mondays or Fridays. Care is required and happens in a particular timeframe. For example, I cannot serve breakfast in a hospital at 9 p.m. on a Thursday evening to avoid coming in on Friday morning. The reality is we will have to have people there and that is a cost. It is a huge taxpayer cost. We need to think about how that then flows through into the wider economy. Based on our current demographics and the flows of labour, given we already have very considerable labour shortages in this area, we must consider whether we are going to be able to meet those needs. Are we simply going to end up in a situation where it is so expensive to provide that care, we find people withdrawing from the labour market - more often, women - because it is not cost effective by the time they have

paid for childcare and transport to get to work based on the salary and tax they pay? That is not to say we should not do it, but the point I am trying to make is we need to undertake a very strong regulatory assessment and take a careful look at both our labour market objectives and the economic costs, particularly as our population is ageing and our demographics are changing considerably, like many other European countries.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I thank the witnesses for their presentations. I thank, in particular, those who are campaigning for a four-day week. I really think it is an idea whose time has come. It brings together the interests of workers as workers, the interests of those who are unemployed, the fight for gender equality, and the need to tackle climate change. The benefit of the demand is that it can bring together the interests of the big majority in society in terms of transforming people's lives and society for the better.

I will start with some questions for Ms McElwee. In her opening statement, she referred to the four-day week or compressed work schedule. I ask her to expand on what she means by "compressed work schedule". Does she mean fewer hours overall in the week or is she talking about, as a potential alternative to the four-day week, an IBEC proposal to squeeze the same number of hours into a smaller number of days, for example, a person working 40 hours over four days, as opposed to over five days? Is that what she is getting at with the compressed work schedule model?

Ms Maeve McElwee: We have seen different examples of how organisations have introduced reduced working hours. We are not especially advocating for any type of flexibility. In some of the trials and reduced working hours, we have seen that people work a longer working day and then have perhaps Friday, Monday or the chosen day off. In other situations, they work exactly the same number of hours as they previously did, Monday to Friday, and have the advantage of an extra day they are not working. There are different ways of doing it and we are not advocating for one or other, in particular.

Deputy Paul Murphy: In those cases where the existing number of hours are squeezed into a lesser number of days, for example, four days, would Ms McElwee not be concerned about the potential negative impact on workers' health, in particular workers in manual jobs who are working for, let us say, ten hours in a day as opposed to eight hours in a day?

Ms Maeve McElwee: Yes, absolutely. That is why we do not particularly advocate for people working longer days. In fact, we have been working closely with the WRC around the code of practice on rights to disconnect. We are very conscious of the obligations of the working time legislation and the fact that working excessive hours does not tend to be productive in the long term. Obviously, there can be times when we work longer hours to meet a particular demand, but on a regular basis it does not tend to be terribly effective. Therefore, there are challenges around compressing the work week. We know from some of the trials that there have been challenges and feedback from employees, who said that they found it very stressful to try to work at the increased pace of the shorter working week, that it did not necessarily fit in to certain organisations or even certain departments within organisations, and that it was better to spread the hours over the full week rather than try to compress the work into four days. I am not necessarily referring to working longer days, but compressing out all the general day-to-day interactions, perhaps by taking out some of the breaks, shortening lunch breaks and doing away with a lot of the social engagement that is very important for people's mental health and well-being in the workplace, like the chat and the opportunity to spend some time together and know their colleagues outside of just their particular work interests.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Ms McElwee has a point there. The question is what to do about that. For me, what to do about that is not to have a model whereby we try to extract 25% more productivity from workers on a per-hour basis, precisely because workers are already very heavily managed, their time is heavily managed in many cases and they already have stressful lives. We should accept that there is a four-day week and an employer will pay a certain cost for that.

It relates to another question I wanted to ask Ms McElwee. I just finished reading a book by Jason Hickel called *Less is More*. He makes the point that gains in labour productivity have been appropriated by capital. Instead of shortening the working week and raising wages, companies have pocketed the extra profits and required employees to keep working just as much as before. In other words, productivity gains have been used not to liberate humans from work, but rather to fuel constant growth. Those who have looked at the evolution of working hours over recent decades have found that productivity has increased, yet workers find they continue to work the same amount. Looking at the share of wealth created, as GDP or GNI, that is going to profit over that period of time, it has increased pretty much year on year. Going back to 1960, 32% of GDP was going to profit; now it is over 50% and, proportionately, the share going to labour has gone down. Given the massive increase in profit share that has happened in this country, would Ms McElwee share that assessment of what has taken place and accept the introduction of a four-day week is one way of rectifying that?

Ms Maeve McElwee: It is probably a much bigger question, with respect to the Deputy, than the issue around how we might trial or implement a four-day work week. Clearly, we have seen very significant advances in productivity and how people work, much of which has been augmented by industrialisation, technology and new and more efficient ways of working. Without a doubt, we have seen very significant changes in how people work. We hear back from member companies and what their employees are telling them is what they are looking for in terms of their work-life balance is around additional flexibility. It is the ability, quite rightly, to disconnect when their working day is done, to be able to flex around childcare and education, and perhaps to be able to take time out of the working day or the working year to pursue other interests, rather than one single model. Therefore, when we are looking at this particular question, we are looking at what are the best opportunities and what sustains our economy into the long term. We are looking at how we can continue to operate successfully and ensure we sustain and maintain employment and employment growth, but it has to be in that wider lens of a strong stakeholder model.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I will finish with a questions for the witnesses representing the four-day week campaign. I appreciate they are trying to get some level of buy-in from employers and convince them it can work, and so on. As part of this they have emphasised that strictly speaking they are not saying it will be a four-day week with a three-day weekend and that they are open to flexibility. There was a study in France on a 35-hour week that found the quality of time away from the job and who controls when it is taken and its regularity and usability is often as important as its quantity. It found employees of lower social rank often received time of lesser quality since they had less control over its scheduling. How do we ensure that flexibility is not used in such a way? It is why the TUC in Britain has explicitly called for a four-day week and a three-day weekend.

Mr. Joe O'Connor: I will address the question on work intensification over four days. We have only two barriers to entry for companies to join this programme as it stands. The first is they must agree to participate in the research. The second is that if a company contacts us and

says it wants to compress its work schedule to ten hours a day over four days, that is not what we are researching or advocating for. It needs to be in keeping with the general principle of the “100-80-100” model we have outlined.

To answer the Deputy’s other question, I appreciate what Ms McElwee said earlier. We think employees should have choice. A company in Wales introduced this very successfully for its 15 staff. Because of personal circumstances one member of staff preferred a compressed work schedule with five shorter days rather than the four-day week. Giving staff this option is a positive thing. Most of the studies we have done suggest that 85% or 90% of staff when surveyed on work time reduction have a preference for an additional day. Could some companies, such as a small PR firm or communications agency, that does project work for other businesses effectively shut the business on Friday and do their work from Monday to Thursday? They probably could. For the vast majority of companies we are dealing with this is about continuing to operate over five days with people having a different day off. It might be Monday, Wednesday or Friday. One company involved in the programme operates over six days with employees on a four-day week. They schedule around it. The demand for this on the business side and the worker side is heavily geared towards one less day. It is also heavily geared towards having a three-day weekend. Facilitating flexibility within this is probably a good thing.

Deputy Louise O’Reilly: I apologise for missing the first few minutes of the meeting. I was speaking in the Chamber. I thank the witnesses for their presentations. I had a chance to read them prior to the meeting. I echo what has been said. There is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come. The fact we are all speaking about this is good. We need to be clear about what we are speaking about. We are not talking about the capacity to do all of the work in a shorter space of time. I do not think that would necessarily create benefits. It would disproportionately impact on workers who are not of a high rank. There have to be benefits to this. We need to look at what those benefits are and how we can maximise them. I want to put on the record that it is very regrettable that a member of the committee used the phrase “taking the piss”. We do not need to introduce that concept. Workers are mature enough, as are employers, to be able to have this discussion like adults and to work out something that works for everyone. Workers do not want to put their bosses out of business. Of course they do not.

I want to refer briefly to a World Health Organization study published earlier this year. It found that long working hours are literally killing people. It found that 745,000 people died in 2016 from stroke and heart disease due to excessive hours. Perhaps Mr. Barnes will be able to address this question. Benefits for workers are consequent benefits to employers because if workers are healthy, fit and well they will be more productive. There is no value to an employer working a worker to death and no one would suggest there is. Perhaps Mr. Barnes will speak to us about the international examples of the benefits. I am specifically referring to the health benefits. They are as important as the other issues we have been discussing.

Mr. Andrew Barnes: I thank the Deputy. She is absolutely right. One in four to one in five of the workforce at any point in time will have a stressful mental health issue. This means they are not in that time as productive as they might be. If we can give them a day off a week, which could often be mid-week, the ability for them to contribute fully to the business and contribute more broadly to their own lives is absolutely enhanced. This is what we are arguing. The cost to the economy of people being not at their best from a health perspective is that more people go into the health system. People are also less productive at work. Equally we find that the health system itself is overburdened. The Americans kill 250,000 people a year in the health system as a consequence of misdiagnosis occasioned by stress and overwork. The real opportunity

here is that, amazingly, a healthy balanced workforce produces at a higher level. This is why it is a win-win for everybody. This seems to be the research coming from all over the world. A healthy balanced workforce produces more but also reduces the burden on government coffers.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Excellent. I thank Mr. Barnes for that. It is important by way of context that when we discuss this we discuss the actual benefits not just to the worker but those passed on in terms of productivity.

My next point has already been mentioned and I would like to hear from Ms McElwee on it. Clearly there is an issue with regard to the right to disconnect and people being contacted and working in excess of their hours. This relates to the health issue I have just raised. This has come to me specifically from speaking to young workers but it is not a phenomenon just among young workers. This is the culture of always being on. Ms McElwee is here to represent employers. Not all employers do it and I do not suggest that they do but it is a feature and something that impacts on the health and safety of the workforce. In tandem with any pilot there has to be a robust right to disconnect from excessive contact outside normal office hours. These things have to go together. Do Ms McElwee and Mr. O'Connor have a view on whether the two things have to happen simultaneously? There has to be a robust right to disconnect alongside any move towards a four-day working week. It is a bit counterintuitive to say we would have a three-day weekend or an extra day that people are not required to be in work but they would be on the phone or checking their emails and this would become expected. Technically on paper people would have a four-day week but it would not work out as such. Do the witnesses have a view on this?

Ms Maeve McElwee: I have a very strong view on this particular issue. I have also seen the World Health Organization report. It is important to recognise that we have robust legislation already on our Statute Book on the organisation of working time. It is very prescriptive on the maximum number of hours that can be worked. In effect, it provides a right to disconnect. It very clearly states what hours people work, what hours are considered to be rest and what breaks must be taken. We were fully engaged with the Workplace Relations Commission on foot of the Department's request to bring together a code of practice on the right to disconnect. I fully agree with Deputy O'Reilly. This is a very challenging situation, particularly for our younger generations who have grown up with a device in their hands. There is work to be done in organisational cultures on what is an appropriate out-of-hours call. Every role may well have a time when some flexibility will be required. We all accept there is reason and time. There are also needs to be an understanding of what this is. It should not be a regular event. We need to support this culture as at a time when people are sitting with their devices on Twitter or watching TV and they are also scanning through their email there is a general sense that people are never disconnected. There are cultural things that, as organisations and as a society, we need to think about in the context of our ever-connected environments. We all have a broader responsibility in that regard. I agree that as the world of work is changing, particularly with the imminent introduction of a right to request remote working, but also with the fact that many organisations are already moving to blended and hybrid working, those are issues on which we need to educate people. Many people have never worked remotely or in hybrid models in the long term and there are new ways to one manage one's own work.

With my employer's hat on, we need to think about the many challenges for employers in this regard. How does one regulate employees on their personal device, or even on their work device, without overstepping their privacy in their homes and workplaces? There is a significant amount to be worked through but, in general, it is really important that people rest and

work.

Deputy David Stanton: I welcome our guests. It is very nice to see the former Senator, Ms Margaret Cox, again. Almost 25 years ago, one of the first parliamentary questions I asked related to Sunday trading. Tom Kitt was the Minister in the previous Government. While in opposition, he brought forward a Bill to regulate Sunday trading and I was anxious to see whether the Bill would progress. Obviously, it did not because now we have trading seven days a week all around. As Deputy O'Reilly stated, things move on and change. This is a fascinating discussion. Of course, it is not a new idea. As Mr. O'Connor noted in his written submission, John Maynard Keynes mentioned it in the 1930s. I note that Richard Nixon spoke about it in 1956 as well, and so on. It has been around for a while.

Mr. O'Connor referred to the 100-80 model, whereby an employee works 80% of the hours previously worked but productivity stays at 100%. There are certain roles where that may not work. If a teacher or another worker in a classroom is giving 100% five days a week but then goes to four days, how can he or she be expected to produce 100% as was the case previously? The same applies in the case of nursing. If nurses are currently being paid for five days a week or whatever hours they work and are working at 100%, but their working hours go down to 80%, how can their productivity remain the same given that they are already at their limit? If the working time is reduced, how can productivity be increased in certain hands-on jobs such as that?

I note research carried out at Ohio State University and elsewhere that highlighted concerns relating to stress. If employees are producing the same output or, in some instances, as some of the presentations alluded to, more in less time, is there a risk of stress on the employees? Ms Cox referred to streamlining, cutting down on waste and so on but, for many people, work is enjoyable, a social outlet and rewarding. It is not always a drudge. Unfortunately, it is a drudge for some people but for many it is not. In England they now have a minister for loneliness because loneliness is becoming an issue there, as it is in Ireland, particularly for people who have retired and are at home all day. They have nothing to do and all day to do it. All present are aware of the growth in men's sheds and so on, where people find an outlet and social interaction. For many people, work provides that social interaction.

The idea of a four-day working week is fascinating. It has significant merit and I am delighted the Government has put money towards the research project. I will certainly take up the invitation relating to letting other companies know about it. We need to discuss this issue. The discussion today has been very good.

Mr. O'Connor referred to competition between employers and suggested that a four-day working week could be used as a competitive tool to attract workers to areas where it is difficult to get staff. Obviously, quality of life is important. At some stage, we should probably have a discussion on artificial intelligence and its role in the future because it is moving very fast indeed. Ms McElwee and others rightly stated that we are going through a paradigm shift at the moment that may have been forced or brought on by the pandemic in many ways. Many things are changing significantly and this is one of those things.

Mr. Andrew Barnes: I will address a little of that if I may. The 100-80 concept is borne out of the fact that a significant amount of research indicates that people are only productive - not busy, but productive - for approximately three hours a day. That is often caused by inefficiencies in the way work is structured or the fact that there are disruptions and distractions that impact what they are doing. What we are trying to say is that if one empowers the workforce to

rethink how they do things, they will find a way to do it better and more efficiently. If employees are working eight hours a day but only productive for three of those hours, a four-day working week will not turn the workplace into a heads-down, working-all-the-time environment. It is about trying to get more productivity out of people within each hour while still leaving a large amount of time for socialisation. My company has been doing this for more than three years. We have found that our social interaction has increased, as have our teamwork and productivity, while the number of employees has decreased. It is not about just focusing on time taken; it is about what is coming out of that. That equally applies whether it is education, nursing, manufacturing or the service industry.

Deputy David Stanton: I need to do more research into how it works in nursing. Nurses are already producing 110% during the time they work. If they reduce their hours further, I do not know how they would be able to produce 100% given that they are already at that level, are working extremely hard and are very tired at the end of the day. The debate is quite good.

I ask Mr. O'Connor to explain and expand on the issue of voluntary agencies tendering for State contracts on the basis of hours rather than output and to give an example of that.

Mr. Joe O'Connor: In recent months, we have specifically engaged with four voluntary agencies that attended our information events. They were very interested in trialling this and remain so and hope to join the pilot programme at a later stage. However, they have all been successful in tendering for State contracts that, effectively, are funded on the basis of hours worked rather than output or productivity attained. The organisations consider that to be a significant barrier to their participation in such a pilot programme. There may be a need for a conversation on how organisations tender for those contracts and whether it should be done on a results basis rather than an hourly basis. I hope that answers the Deputy's question.

Deputy David Stanton: That is fine. On the issue of the future of work, where do our guests see this going? Obviously, there is a pilot project. I note that the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform stated that if the public service went to a four-day week it would add €4.2 billion to the public service pay bill. Are our guests aware of that? Do they know anything about it or how it is calculated? Does it give rise to concern?

Mr. Joe O'Connor: It is clear how that has been calculated. It has been calculated on the basis of an estimate that if one reduces time by 20%, one reduces productivity by 20% and increases employment costs by 20%. It is clear from our discussion today and from the research and evidence that has been put forward that while there certainly are discussions that need to be had regarding how this could be implemented in certain sectors, it is a falsehood to say that reducing time automatically leads to a reduction in productivity and, therefore, an increase in employment costs. In fairness, that figure was provided in response to a parliamentary question. It is very similar to a response to a parliamentary question on this issue back in 2017. As members are probably aware, parliamentary questions are often answered on the basis of the most recent information to hand. We look forward to engaging with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform on this. We have had positive interactions with the Ministers, Deputies Varadkar and Darragh O'Brien, on this issue and we have had a great deal of interest from all three Government parties and the other parties across the political system. We are keen to engage on the basis we believe this can be trialled in aspects of the public service and the Civil Service in a way that will not impact on productivity and, therefore, will not impact on employment costs. We think it is important for this to be a feature of the trial because much of the research suggests the public sector can play a pioneering role in introducing this. There is significant private sector interest. Even since I joined the committee meeting earlier, I have re-

ceived four emails from companies in Ireland that are interested in being part of the programme next year. We are keen for the pilot to be as broad as possible.

Deputy David Stanton: I have an open mind on it. In 1908, when people moved to five-day week, it was revolutionary, so this too would be a paradigm shift. With the impact of AI, flexible working, remote working and so on, much is happening and many changes are occurring. This proposal is certainly worthy of debate.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: I would like to associate myself with the comments of Deputy Stanton regarding the quality of the debate. It is a very important conversation. I am struggling a little with the issue of the measurement of productivity. Businesses' key performance indicators and how they are used will vary, such as a call centre or coffee shop compared with a design house or a company in the construction sector, where business is really caught up with the scheduling of other contractors. It is difficult to say how productivity could be increased in the context of a shorter working week, yet productivity expansion, by its nature, is a competitive driver in all businesses. Is the general thrust of this concept of a four-day working week aimed largely at the technology sector, rather than being expansive to all industry? Other speakers have highlighted how difficult it would be in the context of care work and so on, where the working week cannot be compressed in that way. How many other sectors do our guests foresee this as capable of being incorporated into?

It would be good if we could be kept abreast of the results of the pilot as they arise. There might be much more interest in this concept if, as the pilot is developed, some of the early data that emerge could be made public.

Chairman: We will keep in touch with the campaign to ensure any information that emerges will come back to us.

Mr. Joe O'Connor: I might defer the question on different sectors to Ms Cox and Mr. Barnes because I do not think they have yet commented on that part of the discussion. As for the research, the Deputy is absolutely correct. Comparing a call centre and its productivity to that of a retail unit or that of a software development company would not work. We are keen to design productivity metrics that are relevant at the company level and, therefore, we work directly with companies to determine the most appropriate metrics for them and how they will determine the success of the trial. That might vary for different companies and it might be sales or service standards.

We also need to ensure the data are nationally comparable, so we are using national indicators that are currently used in Ireland to determine productivity and output, and we are keen to ensure this will be internationally comparable, so we are examining how those broad productivity metrics can be compared. We are trying to get the balance right between the company level, the national level and the international level. We are working with a research team led by Professor Juliet Schor, economist and sociologist at Boston College, who has been researching working time and the future of work since the 1990s, and Dr. Orla Kelly, assistant professor at University College Dublin. We are confident we will have the results from the first phase of the research project in September or October of next year and we hope to run further trials thereafter. We will produce a full research report into the three phases of the trial, probably at some point in 2023. We will be delighted to keep in touch with the committee as that unfolds.

Ms Margaret Cox: I thank the Deputy for his great questions. We have found that the increase in productivity is happening automatically. I might remind everyone about what hap-

pens in a week with a bank holiday. We all get our work done in that week, regardless of the fact that we have had one fewer working day, because we are more focused, we have more energy and we have come in happier to work, so we have a greater output. That is the focus. It does challenge organisations but the technology is now there for any organisation to measure how a job is done, what the inputs into it are and what is needed to ensure the outputs. We are a service organisation, not a tech organisation. Across the board in many organisations, not just in tech, a four-day working week might be a solution for people in managing productivity. It is important to remember that the ask and the reward are that in exchange for continuing to maintain 100% productivity, there will be an additional day off in people's lives every week in order for them to do something with it for themselves, their family and their community.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: How will the expansion of productivity impact on the quality of output? If people are being pushed to do, say, 20% more in their every working day, there must be some add-on effect to the quality of the output or of the gizmo being produced? Does Ms Cox have any thoughts about how that is to be monitored going forward?

Ms Margaret Cox: That is down to the individual organisation. In our organisation, we talk about 100% customer satisfaction and 100% productivity, and the team members work to that standard. We have set the standard but the standard has developed organically from everybody working there because we know what we have to do to retain this benefit as an organisation. The value of having an additional day off each week is so great to each one of our lives. The intention is to do it once, to do it right and to do it in the best way possible. We have had to provide retraining and cross-training with colleagues. We might have to send an email on a Thursday to our colleagues picking up some work from us on the Friday. On a Friday evening, I might have to send an email to a colleague who will be in on the Monday to give details of the work I have been doing in order that the colleague can pick it up on the Monday because I will not be back in until the Tuesday. Mr. Barnes used the word "gift" and it is in many ways a gift we have created for ourselves that we want to keep. In order to do so, we need to be able to deliver inspirational customer service and 100% customer satisfaction. I hope that has answered the Deputy's question.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: I thank our guests. That was very informative.

Senator Ollie Crowe: I thank Ms Cox for explaining the need to work within the company in order that employees will buy in, there will be a better work-life balance and there will be great rewards from that. It has to come that way.

I raised this issue earlier but I will do so again in order that I am clear. If there are certain sectors or areas where this is not possible to implement, are there concerns about creating a two-tier workforce? Healthcare strikes me as an area where a four-day week cannot possibly be implemented. Are there concerns as to the challenges this would cause? This year, it is much more difficult for students to be accepted to study medicine or nursing. Is there a concern, however, that five or ten years down the line, this could turn people off going into those professions? That is something we have to be conscious of and seek to address.

Finally, does Mr. O'Connor have specific numbers on 2022 and on how many companies throughout the country have taken up the pilot scheme at this stage?

Chairman: I call Mr. Barnes as he indicated during Senator Crowe's contribution.

Mr. Andrew Barnes: The key thing is who would you rather be operated on by? The doctor

who has been working ten hours a day and is tired and stressed, or the doctor and the nurse who are refreshed, healthy and able to deliver a high quality of healthcare? One of the problems is we already know our doctors and nurses are not working seven days a week, albeit our health system works seven days a week. That is just a question of scheduling. Will we need more doctors and nurses under a four-day week, reduced hours concept? Absolutely. The Government then has to look at the quality of the healthcare service being produced. We find there is a shortage of doctors and nurses in healthcare. All of them are coming out of the industry because they are burnt out. If you can maintain them, you will not have to continually recruit, retrain or bring in temporary nurses or doctors to fill gaps. If the profession is made more attractive, you are likely not only to get better outcomes from health but you will be better able to deliver it.

The key thing here is we all assume it will not work in this or that area. I can probably point the committee to an employer or industry somewhere in the world that is working a four-day week very successfully because it has just reimagined how it is to deliver that service.

Chairman: Senator Crowe asked Mr. O'Connor a specific question about companies who are involved in the trial.

Mr. Joe O'Connor: We have 17 companies at the moment. A number of others are still in the process of deliberations and it may be at their board. Others are saying they might like to join at a later phase of the trial rather than the trial we are rolling out from next February. Even today when we announced the number of companies that have signed up, we received interest from a number of others only this morning. We anticipate and are quite hopeful that we will get to a space where we will be looking at somewhere between 20 and 30 companies participating in this first phase of the trial. As I said, we are hoping, if we can demonstrate this is something that can work in those companies as part of the first phase of this trial, it will lead to further interest from the private sector. We are hoping that, as we develop this pilot programme, we will be able to get to a point where there is voluntary sector and public sector participation in a very discreet and targeted way that will help to inform policy choices in the medium term.

Deputy David Stanton: If I heard him correctly, Mr. Barnes introduced another line of argument in which he suggested, quite correctly, that many doctors, nurses and others are working extremely hard and are burned out at the moment. His line of argument is that we should reduce their stress and the amount of work they are undertaking by bringing in a four-day week. However, as I said, for many professions, such as childcare, productivity is linked directly to the amount of time workers put in, at the moment. If somebody is working five days per week minding a certain number of children and that is reduced to four days a week, productivity has to drop. We can talk about the quality of work but it comes back to how productivity is measured. If you assume right now, let us say, that a childcare worker is of very high quality and you reduce his or her time by 20%, his or her work and productivity is linked to the time he or she puts in. It is the same with teaching in the classroom. If you are teaching in a classroom, as I did for many years, and you work extremely hard and put the time and effort in, how can your productivity be exactly the same? By definition, you will be engaging with fewer students to start with if your time is reduced to fewer classes. It is a question I am struggling to get an answer to.

Mr. O'Connor mentioned the public sector. I take it the companies he is trialling with do not include public sector workers. It will probably be important at some stage to have a trial that includes public sector workers before we can pronounce on it. We just have private sector workers who, as Ms Cox and Ms McElwee said, are in a different area. It is different from the public sector.

I might get in trouble for saying this, but has anyone ever looked at the time politicians put into the work we do? We do not switch off at all, as Ms Cox will tell you. I know I will get in trouble for this, but we are always on and the phone is always there.

Chairman: We need an extra week for ourselves. Does Mr. O'Connor want to come back on that one?

Mr. Joe O'Connor: I might let Mr. Barnes take that because it was a direct follow-up to his contribution.

Mr. Andrew Barnes: The Deputy is correct. As he said, in some areas, and childcare is one, you will have to bring in more staff. I do not dispute that. One of the things we are talking about here is understanding what output is as opposed to the amount of time spent. The Deputy used the example of education. A number of American education districts introduced a four-day week as a consequence of certain issues last year and found the children's education standards improved by reducing the number of hours they were taught. They also found they could bring in teachers and get better teachers, and because they were bringing in better teachers or attracting people to the profession, the quality of the teaching went up.

There will always be exceptions that prove the rule, but we are trying to argue that we should rethink radically how we work and what it is we are trying to do so we are focused on the outcomes and not the time we spend. That is what we should be focusing on. If we can get better outcomes, why is it we assume a five-day week, brought in for repetitive, manufacturing processes in the 1920s, is the way to deliver the best outcomes in the 21st century when we are largely not doing that? It is a difficult point to understand how we find that. My question when I went to my staff was, quite simply, "Tell me how I should judge you; how will you get better productivity?" That was the start of the conversation.

Deputy David Stanton: I understand that because I know certain people in the childcare and nursing sectors who went on reduced hours and were very happy to do that. What I am getting to is the argument put forward by Mr. O'Connor and others that pay stays the same, time goes down but productivity stays the same. Mr. Barnes is now saying that it is not just productivity but that it also has to do with improved outcomes, which is another argument and another issue we have to look at. I accept what he is saying. I am not arguing with him on this but it is important to tease these things out. I thank Mr. Barnes for his response.

Chairman: Nobody else has indicated. That concludes our consideration of the matter for today. I thank the witnesses, especially those from Four Day Week Ireland and IBEC, for assisting the committee in its consideration of the topic. This concludes the committee business in public session. I propose the committee goes into private session to consider some other business we have on our agenda. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 11:39 a.m. and adjourned at 11.51 a.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 13 October 2021.