



Natalie Masterson, Chief Officer at Stirlingshire Voluntary Enterprise, reflects on how changing working patterns could shape the future of volunteering in Stirling.

As we head into Volunteers' Week, I have found myself wondering about a simple but increasingly relevant question. If more of us had a little more time, would we choose to give some of it back?

The rise of the four day working week has been one of the most talked about workplace shifts in recent years. Often framed as a win for wellbeing and productivity, it is also quietly becoming part of a wider conversation about how we spend our time, and the role that volunteering and social connection might play in that.

So, could this shift create new opportunities for volunteering in Stirling? And, just as importantly, are we ready for it?

A changing working week

The idea of a shorter working week is no longer theoretical. Across the UK and internationally, large-scale trials have demonstrated that working fewer hours does not necessarily mean less output. In fact, the opposite can be true.

Here in Scotland, the public sector has been actively testing the model. A Scottish Government pilot saw two public bodies move to a 32 hour, four day week without any loss of pay. The results were encouraging. Productivity was maintained, service delivery remained stable, and there were notable improvements in staff wellbeing, stress and overall job satisfaction. Staff reported feeling more motivated and better able to balance work and life commitments, with significant reductions in stress and improvements in mental health.

This mirrors findings from wider UK trials, where reduced hours led to lower burnout and made it easier for people to balance work with family and social life.

And that last point is where things get interesting for the third sector.

Because alongside wellbeing and productivity, another benefit is often mentioned, sometimes a little more quietly. Time. Time to connect, to participate, to contribute.

Time for what?

When people talk about the benefits of a four day week, they often talk about rest. And that absolutely matters. Many of the wellbeing gains come from people having more time to recover, sleep better, and spend time with family.

But there is also a growing narrative around using that extra day for something meaningful. That might be learning, creativity, community activity, or volunteering.

We know from research in Scotland that volunteering offers significant wellbeing and social benefits, yet participation has declined in recent years, with many people citing lack of time and competing pressures as key barriers.

So in theory, a four day week could help unlock some of that lost potential.

But theory and practice are not always the same thing.

The challenge for the third sector

If more people do find themselves with additional free time, are we ready to meet them there?

Traditional models of volunteering do not always fit easily into modern lives. Fixed weekly commitments, long shifts, and rigid role descriptions can be a barrier for people who want flexibility, variety, or simply the chance to try something new.

A new cohort of potential volunteers, shaped by shorter working weeks, might be looking for something different:

- Flexible, informal opportunities that fit around their lives
- Short term or project based roles rather than long commitments
- Opportunities for social connection and community building
- Activities that feel enjoyable and energising, not like another obligation

And this last point feels especially important.

If the four day week is, in part, about improving wellbeing, then volunteering on that fifth day cannot feel like a burden. It needs to feel like something people choose because it enriches their lives, not because it fills a gap in their diary.

That is both an opportunity and a challenge for organisations.

A personal reflection

I have been reflecting on this from my own experience.

Since returning to work after maternity leave, I have worked a four day week. In theory, that extra day might have been an opportunity to volunteer more. In reality, caring for my little boy has filled that time completely.

There has not been the space for additional commitments, however worthwhile they might be.

But I can already see how this might change. When he starts school next year, that day may open up in a different way. It could become an opportunity to get involved in his school, to support a cause I care about, or to reconnect with my community through volunteering.

And I suspect I will not be alone in that.

People's capacity to volunteer shifts with life stages. The four day week may not immediately translate into more volunteers, but over time it could create new patterns of participation.

Whats next for Stirling?

For those of us working in the third sector in Stirling, this is a moment to be curious and proactive.

The four day week is not just a workforce issue. It is a societal shift that could reshape how people engage with their communities.

If we want to realise the potential of that, we need to think carefully about the kind of volunteering opportunities we offer. Are they flexible enough? Are they accessible? Do they provide genuine connection and enjoyment?

Most importantly, do they meet people where they are?

Volunteers' Week is always a chance to celebrate the incredible contribution volunteers make across our communities. This year, it also feels like an opportunity to look ahead.

Because if time is one of the biggest barriers to volunteering, then a world with a little more of it could be transformative.

But only if we are ready to respond.