



# 21 hours

Why a shorter working week can help  
us all to flourish in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

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# Executive summary

This report sets out arguments for a much shorter working week. It proposes a radical change in what is considered ‘normal’ – down from 40 hours or more, to 21 hours. While people can choose to work longer or shorter hours, we propose that 21 hours – or its equivalent spread across the calendar year – should become the standard that is generally expected by government, employers, trade unions, employees, and everyone else.

## The vision

Moving towards much shorter hours of paid work offers a new route out of the multiple crises we face today. Many of us are consuming well beyond our economic means and well beyond the limits of the natural environment, yet in ways that fail to improve our well-being – and meanwhile many others suffer poverty and hunger. Continuing economic growth in high-income countries will make it impossible to achieve urgent carbon reduction targets. Widening inequalities, a failing global economy, critically depleted natural resources and accelerating climate change pose grave threats to the future of human civilisation.

A ‘normal’ working week of 21 hours could help to address a range of urgent, interlinked problems: overwork, unemployment, over-consumption, high carbon emissions, low well-being, entrenched inequalities, and the lack of time to live sustainably, to care for each other, and simply to enjoy life.

## 21 hours as the new ‘norm’

Twenty-one hours is close to the average that people of working age in Britain spend in paid work and just a little more than the average spent in unpaid work. Experiments with shorter working hours suggest that they can be popular where conditions are stable and pay is favourable, and that a new standard of 21 hours could be consistent with the dynamics of a decarbonised economy.

There is nothing natural or inevitable about what’s considered ‘normal’ today. Time, like work, has become commodified – a recent legacy of industrial capitalism. Yet the logic of industrial time is out of step with today’s conditions, where instant communications and mobile technologies bring new risks and pressures, as well as opportunities. The challenge is to break the power of the old industrial clock without adding new pressures, and to free up time to live sustainable lives.

To meet the challenge, we must change the way we value paid and unpaid work. For example, if the average time devoted to unpaid housework and childcare in Britain in 2005 were valued in terms of the minimum wage, it would be worth the equivalent of 21 per cent of the UK’s gross domestic product.

## Planet, people, and markets: reasons for change

A much shorter working week would change the tempo of our lives, reshape habits and conventions, and profoundly alter the dominant cultures of western society. Arguments for a 21-hour week fall into three categories, reflecting three interdependent ‘economies’, or sources of wealth, derived from the natural resources of the planet, from human resources, assets and relationships, inherent in everyone’s everyday lives, and from markets. Our arguments are based on the premise that we must recognise and value all three economies and make sure they work together for sustainable social justice.

*Safeguarding the natural resources of the planet.* Moving towards a much shorter working week would help break the habit of living to work, working to earn, and earning to consume. People may become less attached to carbon-intensive consumption and more attached to relationships, pastimes, and places that absorb less money and more time. It would help society to manage without carbon-intensive growth, release time for people to live more sustainably, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

*Social justice and well-being for all.* A 21-hour 'normal' working week could help distribute paid work more evenly across the population, reducing ill-being associated with unemployment, long working hours and too little control over time. It would make it possible for paid and unpaid work to be distributed more equally between women and men; for parents to spend more time with their children – and to spend that time differently; for people to delay retirement if they wanted to, and to have more time to care for others, to participate in local activities and to do other things of their choosing. Critically, it would enable the 'core' economy to flourish by making more and better use of uncommodified human resources in defining and meeting individual and shared needs. It would free up time for people to act as equal partners, with professionals and other public service workers, in co-producing well-being.

*A robust and prosperous economy.* Shorter working hours could help to adapt the economy to the needs of society and the environment, rather than subjugating society and environment to the needs of the economy. Business would benefit from more women entering the workforce; from men leading more rounded, balanced lives; and from reductions in work-place stress associated with juggling paid employment and home-based responsibilities. It could also help to end credit-fuelled growth, to develop a more resilient and adaptable economy, and to safeguard public resources for investment in a low-carbon industrial strategy and other measures to support a sustainable economy.

### **Transitional problems**

Of course, moving from the present to this future scenario will not be simple. The proposed shift towards 21 hours must be seen in terms of a broad, incremental transition to social, economic and environmental sustainability. Problems likely to arise in the course of transition include the risk of increasing poverty by reducing the earning power of those on low rates of pay; too few new jobs because people already in work take on more overtime; resistance from employers because of rising costs and skills shortages; resistance from employees and trade unions because of the impact on earnings in all income brackets; and more general political resistance that might arise, for example, from moves to enforce shorter hours.

### **Necessary conditions for tackling transitional problems**

Work is beginning at **nef** (the new economics foundation) to develop a new economic model that will help to engineer a 'steady-state' economy and address problems of transition to 21 hours. There is much work yet to be done and suggestions set out in this report are there to stimulate further debate and thought, rather than offer definitive solutions. They focus on achieving shorter working hours, ensuring a fair living income for all, improving gender relations and the quality of family life, and changing norms and expectations.

*Achieving shorter working hours.* Conditions necessary for successfully reducing paid working hours include reducing hours gradually over a number of years in line with annual wage increments; changing the way work is managed to discourage overtime; providing active training to combat skills shortages and to help long-term unemployed return to the labour force; managing employers' costs to reward rather than penalise taking on extra staff; ensuring more stable and equal distribution of earnings; introducing regulations to standardise hours that also promote flexible arrangements to suit employees, such as job sharing, extended care leave and sabbaticals; and offering more and better protection for the self-employed against the effects of low pay, long hours, and job insecurity.

*Ensuring a fair living income.* Options for dealing with the impact on earnings of a much shorter working week include redistribution of income and wealth through more progressive taxation; an increased minimum wage; a radical restructuring of state benefits; carbon trading designed to redistribute income to poor households; more and better public services; and encouraging more uncommodified activity and consumption.

*Improving gender relations and the quality of family life.* Measures to ensure that the move towards 21 hours has positive rather than negative impacts on gender relations and family life include flexible employment conditions that encourage more equal distribution of unpaid work between women and men; universal, high-quality childcare that dovetails with paid working time; more job-sharing and limits on overtime; flexible retirement; stronger measures enforcing equal pay and opportunity; more jobs for men in caring and primary school teaching; more childcare, play schemes and adult care using co-produced models of design and delivery; and enhanced opportunities for local action to build neighbourhoods that everyone feels safe in and enjoys.

*Changing norms and expectations.* There are many examples of apparently intractable social norms changing very quickly – for example, attitudes to the slave trade and votes for women, wearing seatbelts and crash-helmets, and not smoking in public places. The weight of public opinion can shift quite suddenly from antipathy to approval as a result of new evidence, strong campaigning, and changing circumstances, including a sense of crisis. There are some signs of favourable conditions beginning to emerge for shifting expectations about a ‘normal’ working week. Further changes that may help include the development of a more egalitarian culture, raising awareness about the value of unpaid labour, strong government support for uncommodified activities, and a national debate about how we use, value, and distribute work and time.

We are at the beginning of a national debate. The next step is to make a thorough examination of the benefits, challenges, barriers and opportunities associated with moving towards a 21-hour week in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. This should be part of the *Great Transition* to a sustainable future.

# Introduction

Suppose the 'normal' working week in Britain lasted for 21 hours. Not 35 hours, not even four days, but 21 hours. It's flexible and variable, but it's normal and generally expected, by government, employers, trade unions and most public opinion.

Anyone can disagree and many will do things differently. But we propose that 21 hours of paid work should eventually replace what is considered normal today: nine-to-five, five days a week and often much more. Twenty-one hours need not mean three seven-hour days, or five days of just over four hours. Perhaps the best way to think about it is distributing 1,092 hours across a calendar year, with a range of options for how this might be done. The key point is to imagine a radical shift in the distribution of paid working time, and all that can follow from that.

Why is this worth thinking about? What would make it possible? What would be the effects?

## The vision

A move towards 21 hours is, in our view, essential if we are to achieve three vitally important goals: 1) a decarbonised economy not dependent on infinite growth; 2) social justice and well-being for all and 3) a sustainable environment.

Today, poverty and hunger sit alongside overconsumption. In high-income countries we are consuming well beyond our economic means, well beyond the limits of the natural world, and in ways that ultimately fail to satisfy us. Natural resources are critically depleted and we have a ticking climate clock that, at worst, could see the end of conditions fit for stable civilisation.

We are in a very tight corner and it not easy to see where we can turn. What buttons can we press? Which wheel can we turn to steer ourselves in a new direction? How can we move towards guaranteeing a secure livelihood and a decent level of well-being for everyone, whilst living within our environmental means? There are few options that have not been exhaustively debated and tested, with varying and seldom impressive results.

One alternative, though, has had almost no public debate as an active, potentially desirable, policy choice. This is to move towards much shorter hours in paid employment – a forgotten, or previously unimagined, variable for trying to solve the triple crises of widening inequalities, a failing global economy, and threatened environmental catastrophe.

A 21-hour paid working week, or its equivalent in hours spread across the year, underpinned with the right safeguards, could help to address a range of urgent, interlinked problems: overwork, unemployment, overconsumption, high carbon emissions, low well-being, entrenched inequalities and the lack of time to live sustainably, to care for each other, and simply to enjoy life.

Highly competitive, rich consumer economies promise satisfaction for all but actually tend to deliver the opposite. Those who can afford to participate are never truly satisfied, however much they consume. That's because the system is designed to promote dissatisfaction precisely to keep us all spending to boost and justify continuing growth. Meanwhile, those who cannot afford to take part are excluded socially and economically. Overall the model drives environmentally destructive materialism. Continuing growth in high-income countries cannot be 'decoupled' from carbon emissions sufficiently and in time to avoid catastrophic damage to the environment (Box 1).

## Box 1. Why growth is not sustainable

The amount of primary energy needed to produce each unit of the world's economic output has fallen more or less continuously over most of the last half-century. This sounds promising, but it is counteracted by population growth and economic growth. To stabilise climate change on relatively optimistic assumptions will require global carbon emissions of below 4 billion tonnes per annum by 2050 – a global reduction of some 5 per cent every year from now until then. By 2050 the average carbon content of economic output would need to be less than 40 kg per thousand dollars, a twenty-fold improvement on the current global average. The growing consensus that a level of 350 parts per million (ppm), not 450 ppm, will be required to avoid dangerous climate change only worsens the arithmetic. And even if this were accomplished, it would allow for no greater catch-up by the developing world, leaving inequalities to widen. To achieve social justice globally alongside continuing growth in high-income countries, with the entire population enjoying an income comparable with European Union citizens today, the world economy would need to grow six times between now and 2050, implying a technical shift of still higher orders of magnitude to avoid climatic disaster. There is thus 'no credible, socially-just, ecologically-sustainable scenario of continually growing incomes for a world of nine billion people'.

Source: Jackson T (2009) *Prosperity without Growth?* (London: UK Sustainable Development Commission, [http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/publications/downloads/prosperity\\_without\\_growth\\_report.pdf](http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/publications/downloads/prosperity_without_growth_report.pdf)).

This is one reason why time is so important and why we are proposing a 21-hour paid working week. Since we cannot grow the market economy, we cannot expect much expansion of tax revenues to invest in health, education, social care, and other essential services. The only real potential for growth lies in the human resources of the 'core' economy. As we explain later, distributing paid and unpaid time more equally across the adult population makes it possible to supplement scarce public funds with abundant and uncommodified human assets. That way we can increase the resources we deploy collectively for helping each other and meeting our respective needs.

In 1930, John Maynard Keynes imagined that by the beginning of the twenty-first century, the working week could be cut dramatically – not just to 21 hours but to 15 hours. He anticipated that we would no longer need to work long hours to earn enough to satisfy our material needs and our attention would turn instead to 'how to use freedom from pressing economic cares'.<sup>1</sup> Keynes was wrong in his forecast, but not at all wrong, it seems to us, to envisage a very different way of using time.

A deliberately chosen shorter working week could provide the foundations for a more universal good life for two vital reasons. First, redistributing paid work will lead to a more equal society. Secondly, spending less time working to feed our consumer habits (which fail to deliver happier lives), means we will find it much easier to do the things we value but haven't enough time for: looking after children and other family members and friends; spending time with each other; volunteering; getting out and about; reading; or learning that skill or language that we always said we would. These are all things that can increase our own well-being and that of others, making society a better and more convivial place to be. Importantly, these other ways of using time also have a much lighter footprint on the Earth.

Our report sets out these arguments in more detail. It considers the potential benefits of a 21-hour working week, explores problems arising from the shift, and identifies possible policy responses to overcome or mitigate these problems.

### Why 21 hours?

Let's be clear: there'll be no time police roaming the call centres and coffee bars. We are not proposing a sudden or imposed change on this scale. We are inviting you to take part in a thought experiment. We want to start a serious debate about what would happen if, over the next decade or so, the numbers of hours that people are expected to spend in paid employment moved in this direction. With a radical vision of 21 hours as our end-point, we want to consider how we might get from here to there, and what possible effects – if any – such a shift could have in what **nef** calls '*The Great Transition*'<sup>2</sup> to a sustainable economy.



Our daily lives, our ideas about who we are, how we are valued, what we value, our intimate relationships, what we need and what we do are shaped and textured by paid employment – partly by the way we actually experience it and mainly by the assumptions we and others make about it. This applies across the board, regardless of whether individuals actually do any paid work at all. For example, when we talk about the ‘working week’ we usually mean paid labour, not all the other work we do that isn’t paid for. We plan our own lives and our children’s lives around what paid employment seems to expect from us and what we hope or assume it will deliver for us.

Large parts of the welfare state are designed to complement and support this layer of human endeavour. People on benefits are encouraged to move from welfare to work – meaning into paid employment. When the government claims its policies are designed to support ‘hard-working families’, it doesn’t mean families who work hard for no pay, as some do. Other work, though even more essential for human survival and well-being, is rendered invisible or frowned upon. ‘Idleness’, meaning the state we are allegedly in when we are not in paid employment, was identified by William Beveridge, architect of Britain’s welfare state, as one of the great evils – the ‘five giants’<sup>3</sup> – he sought to vanquish. Today, the absence of paid employment – unemployment – is still widely regarded as a scourge to society as a whole and a shame on those who succumb to it. Yet, in terms of the transition we must make for a sustainable future, these interpretations do not make a lot of sense.

As we shall see, 21 hours is very close to the average time that men and women of working age actually spend in *paid* employment each week. And it is just a few minutes more than the average time per week they spend in *unpaid* work at home. So we are suggesting a closer match between these averages and what is regarded as the ‘norm’ for paid employment. Of course, such averages mask the way paid and unpaid hours of work are unevenly distributed, especially between women and men but also between rich and poor. Our proposal seeks to address these inequalities by redistributing working hours. Simply changing expectations about how we use time will not, on its own, achieve greater equality, but in our view it can make an important contribution. In addition, less time spent earning leaves more time to do all the other things we need to do to safeguard the environment and to sustain well-being for ourselves and those around us.

### **The shape of this report**

In the following sections, we first describe the way people use their time today. Next, we look at experiments with shorter working hours and some of their effects. We consider how our notions of ‘normal’ working hours emerge, and then set out reasons why a move towards 21 hours could help meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. Finally, we explore the main problems that arise and how these might be addressed.

## How we all use our time today

The idea of a 'normal' job as a contract of paid employment for a nine-to-five, five-day week (or more) has a heavy grip on us all. But it doesn't reflect the way most people live their lives, which is infinitely more varied. It doesn't begin to convey the great diversity of hours worked for payment between and within different groups – not least between women and men. Formal structures and social expectations are at odds with lived experience.



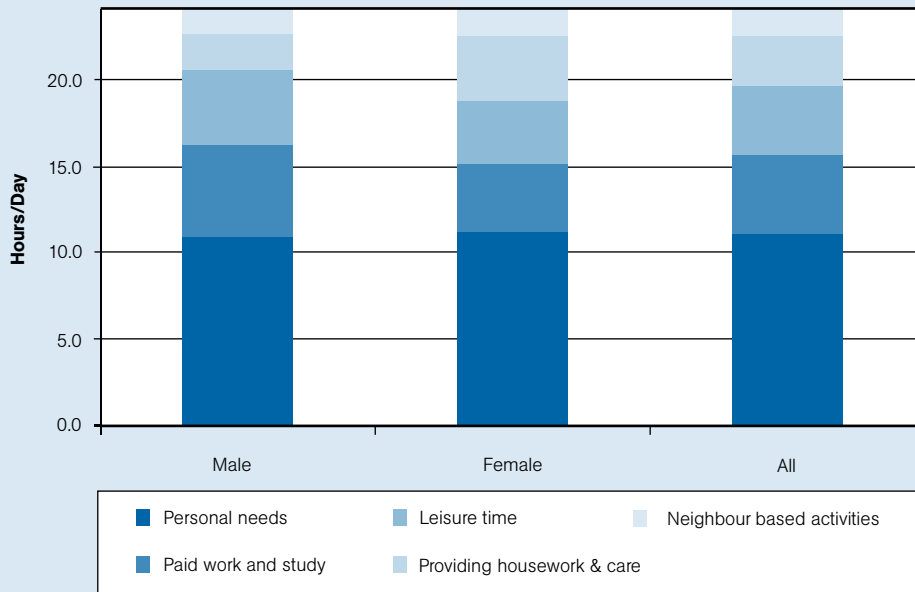
The British Time Use Surveys offer a detailed portrait of how people in Britain allocate their time over the 24 hours in a day, averaged out over a seven-day week. They include men and women of 'working age', which means 16–64 for males and 16–59 for females. A table summarising the main activities in which people engage, and for how long, is set out in the Appendix.

The survey covers everyone within the 'working age' band – employed, unemployed and those described as 'economically inactive', which means they are not employed or looking for a job. On average, they spend 19.6 hours a week in paid work – 24.5 hours for men and 15.4 hours for women. So these averages are close to our suggestion for a 'normal' working week.

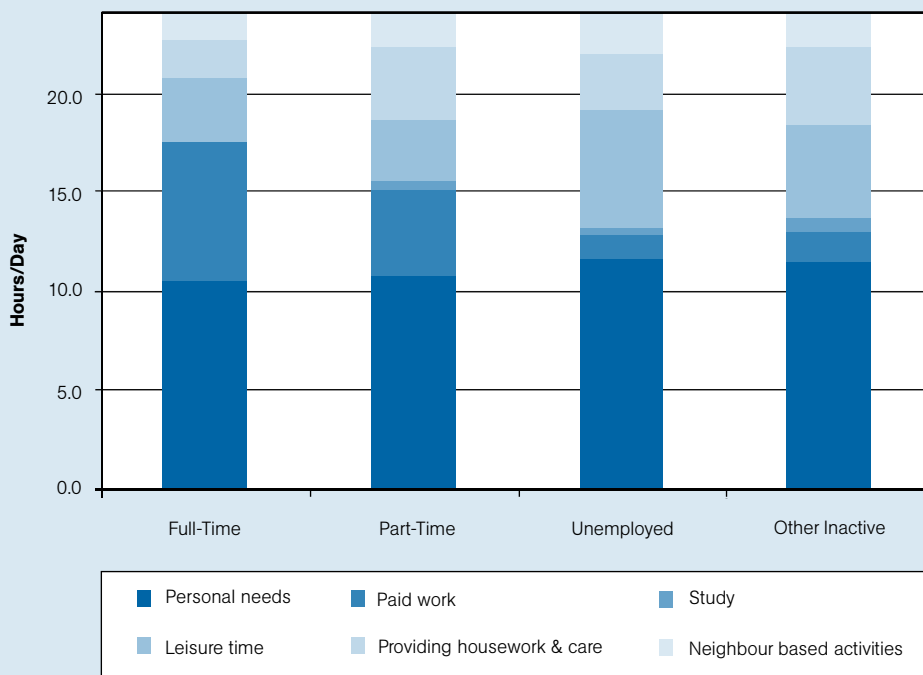
Officially, full-time workers are those who put in no less than 35 hours a week, with a maximum, under the EU Working Time Directive, of 48 hours. Part-timers are defined as anyone working fewer than 35 hours a week. According to the Time Use Survey, 'full-timers' work an average of 37.2 hours a week and 'part-timers' 19.1 hours.

As we have noted, these averages do not reveal how some are severely overworked, often because they can't earn enough unless they put in very long hours, and others are chronically underemployed, often because they cannot

**Figure 1. Time spent on main activity by gender (working age only) – 2005.**



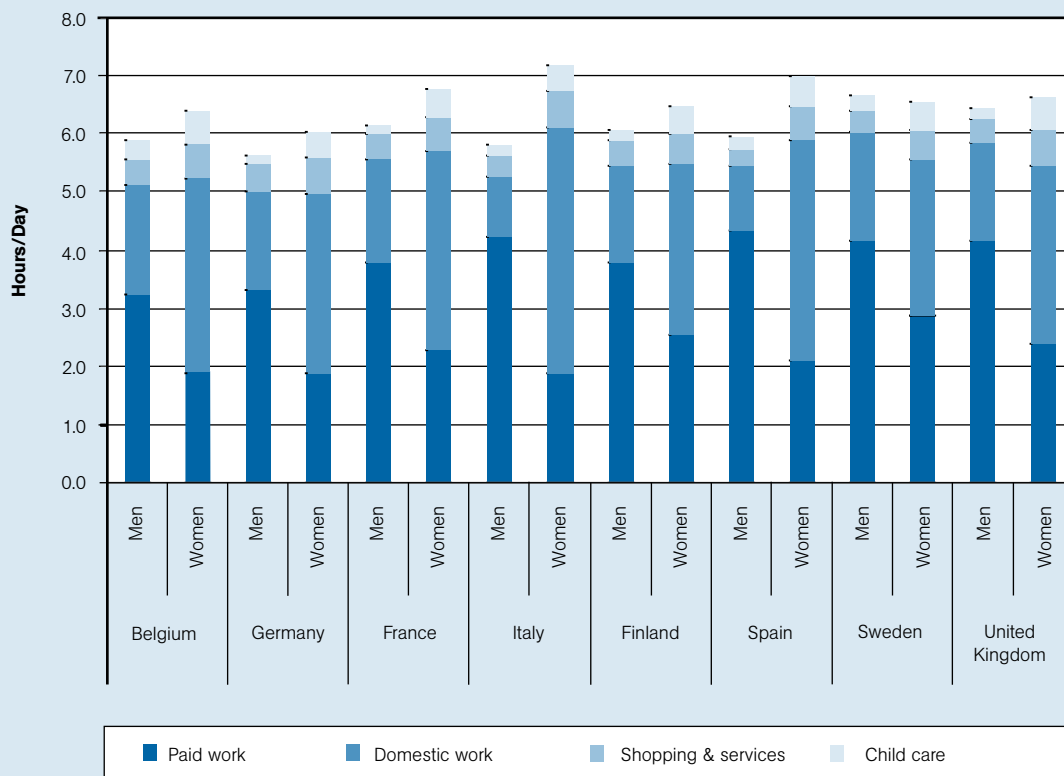
**Figure 2. Time spent on main activity by employment status (working age only) – 2005.**



find suitable jobs with longer hours. In the UK in 2007, 13.1 per cent of all employees were usually working 48 hours per week. Tania Burchardt has shown that the bottom income decile group have 57 hours and 5 minutes of 'free' time per week, while the top income decile group have 44 hours and 40 minutes. 'Those with the lowest income are also least likely to be in paid work... Nearly three-quarters (73 per cent) of the bottom income group are not in paid work compared to just one-fifth (21 per cent) of the top income group.'<sup>4</sup>

According to Burchardt, there is a strong income gradient across the working age population. This is 'partly driven by the higher proportions of the upper income groups who are in work, but partly also by hours of work. Among those with some paid work, the total time given to paid work (including travel to work) is 36 hours 30 minutes in the bottom income group, rising to 49 hours 53 minutes in the top income group.'<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 3. Paid work and domestic activities of women and men aged 20 to 74 – Eight European countries (Average hours per day 7 days per week).**



When it comes to unpaid work – housework and caring for children and/or adults – women and men spend, on average 20.4 hours a week. If we add time spent on neighbourhood-based activities (volunteering, spending time with friends and families, attending meetings) this goes up to 30.9 hours a week. These are all essential functions that underpin our well-being, without which human society could not function, let alone the formal economy. Women spend more time doing unpaid work than men do, whether or not they are in full-time employment – with consequences for social justice that we discuss later.

If we compare the UK with other European countries, we find yet more variations on the theme of 'normal'. Eurostat data (where the age range is 16–74) show that UK women spend an average of 16.8 hours a week in paid work and 29.75 hours in unpaid work. The figures for UK men are reversed: 29.16 for paid work and 16.1 unpaid. UK women spend more time in paid work than women in all the other comparator countries except Finland and Sweden and more time on childcare than all except Belgium. Taking all domestic labour together, UK women spend more time than all others except Spanish and Italian women. And they outstrip all others in time spent on 'shopping and services'. In all countries, women spend much more time than men in the total number of hours worked (paid and unpaid together). The gender gap is largest in Italy, where women work 9.5 hours more than men each week, and smallest in Sweden, where women work only 56 minutes more (not least because Swedes have universal access to high-quality childcare). UK women work just under an hour and a half more than men.

# Practical examples of doing things differently

We have seen that the ways in which people use their time for paid work and unpaid work vary widely between and within countries. There have also been many experiments, for a range of reasons, where governments and employers have introduced changes to the 'normal' working week. Those described here have been imposed in times of crisis, with the exception of the French example. Taken together, they enable us to glimpse what is possible and to see some of the positive and negative effects.



## UK: The 'three-day week', 1974

For the first two months of 1974, the Conservative government under Edward Heath imposed a three-day week to save energy during a time of soaring inflation, high energy prices, and industrial action by the National Union of Mineworkers. Commercial users of electricity (with exemptions for essential services) were limited to three consecutive days' use with no overtime. Some people went on working by candlelight but altogether 1.5 million joined the dole queues. The miners launched an all-out strike on 9 February. A general election was held at the end of February and Heath lost his majority. Labour's Harold Wilson became Prime Minister, a deal was struck with the miners which finished the strike, and the three-day week was officially ended on 8 March 1974.<sup>6</sup> When the crisis ended, analysts found that industrial production had dropped by only 6 per cent. Improved productivity, combined with a drop in absenteeism, had made up the difference in lost production from the shorter hours.<sup>7</sup> More than 1.5 million people registered as unemployed as a result of the three-day working week.<sup>8</sup>

### **France: The 35-hour week, 2000–2008**

In 2000, the French government introduced a maximum working week of 35 hours, with the aim of reducing unemployment and gender inequality, and enhancing the work/life balance: 'Work less – live more' was the slogan.<sup>9</sup> Accompanying legislation enabled employers to impose longer hours in any week, without notice or having to pay overtime, provided the yearly total did not exceed 1600 hours.

Research into the effects of the 35-hour week has produced mixed results. A trade union survey shortly after its introduction<sup>10</sup> found that 58 per cent of respondents said the reduction in hours had a positive impact on their lives. This was mainly because it improved the work/life balance, especially for women with young children. On the negative side, the option to 'annualise' hours made working more variable and less predictable, especially for low-skilled workers.<sup>11</sup> Most adverse effects of the 35-hour week on employee satisfaction and well-being can be attributed to this imposed 'flexibility'.<sup>12</sup> Employees with more control over their working schedule, who were generally in middle- and higher-income groups, were more likely to welcome it. The government claimed 350,000 new jobs were created as a result,<sup>13</sup> although there is some doubt about the net effects on employment.<sup>14</sup> In 2008, the Sarkozy government changed the law, giving employers a free hand to impose longer hours. ('Work more to earn more' became the new slogan.) It was later reported that most workplaces had left the old arrangements unchanged – possibly because France was by then feeling the effects of the global economic downturn.

### **Utah, USA: The four-day week, 2008/2009**

In June 2008, the state of Utah in the USA became the first to instigate a mandatory four-day week for public sector workers, in order to save energy and cut carbon and costs. The 'Working4Utah' initiative shifted the standard week from five 8-hour days to four 10-hour days, Monday to Thursday.<sup>15</sup> So the total number of hours that people spent in paid employment stayed the same, while they had three full, consecutive days each week away from the workplace. Altogether, 18,000 of the state's 25,000 employees were involved in the one-year experiment. Evaluations of the first year, reported for a symposium of the Connecticut Law Review,<sup>16</sup> showed positive responses from employees as well as users of state services. Satisfaction rates increased as the experiment went on. In May 2009, more than half said they were more productive working a four-day week and three-quarters said they preferred the new arrangement. Reductions in absenteeism and overtime saved the state £4.1 million dollars. The four-day week helped reduce carbon emissions by 4,546 metric tons, other greenhouse gas emissions by 8,000 tons and petrol consumption by 744,000 gallons. Miles travelled in state-owned vehicles dropped by 3 million, saving Utah \$1.4 million over the first year. Eighty-two per cent of employees said they wanted the four-day week to continue when the year was up.<sup>17</sup>

### **UK: Emergency measures during recession, 2009**

In 2009 in the UK, the recession prompted a number of large companies to cut staff hours instead of making people redundant. BT offered staff up to a year's holiday if they took a 75 per cent pay cut. British Airways, Ford, Honda and JCB asked their staff to reduce their hours of work, and the accountancy firm KPMG offered a four-day week to staff, with 86 per cent signing up. Across the country, between July and September 2009, full-time employment fell by 80,000, while part-time employment rose by 86,000, to reach a record high of 7.66 million. Altogether, 997,000 people worked part-time, because they could not find a full-time job, a rise of 30,000 over the previous quarter and up 38 per cent since the previous year.<sup>18,19</sup> The effects of 2009 recessionary measures have not yet been assessed.

In general, these initiatives have made minor and temporary adjustments to the traditional model of paid working time. They show that, over several decades, shorter hours have been part of many people's work routines. They are not a universal blessing, least of all for workers with low pay and little control over their time. But shorter, or more compressed, working hours are popular where conditions are stable and pay is favourable. And there are signs that shorter working hours may be consistent with the dynamics of a no-growth economy.

# How the 'working week' was invented

There is nothing fixed or inevitable about the way we regard work and time today. It is a legacy of industrial capitalism.

With the shift from field to factory, work separated into two spheres of activity: the public or formal sphere, which was paid, and the private or informal sphere, which was unpaid. In the formal sphere, people were paid by the hour or week and this paid time structured the way unpaid time was used. Work in the informal sphere, which was mainly left to women, was edged to the margins of the capitalist economy, but remained vital for the well-being and survival of society.<sup>20</sup> The Factory Acts at the end of the nineteenth century limited the paid working week and by the beginning of the Second World War, the eight-hour day and the five-day week were beginning to be seen as 'normal'. Even today, with 'flexitime', longer paid holidays, sick leave, and maternity and parental leave, paid work remains firmly at the centre of people's lives, providing access to benefits and pensions as well as wages and salaries, and shaping how we use the rest of our time.<sup>21</sup>

Like work, time in industrial societies has been commodified. It is considered precious and is used to control people in paid work to create efficiency and profit. To a large extent, time in the private or informal sphere has also been commodified, as people are increasingly urged to use their unpaid time for consumption.<sup>22</sup>

## The power of the clock

As part of this relatively recent development, paid time at work has come to be regulated by the clock, and clock time has become the regulating feature of modern societies – widely regarded as natural, although it is nothing of the kind.



## Box 2. Valuing what matters

**nef's** *Valuing What Matters* programme is developing ways of measuring and valuing that will help to build effective public services. Investment in public services has increased since the foundation of the welfare state in the 1940s, yet economic inequality is wider now than it was 60 years ago. The research, across three very different policy areas – economic development, children in care, and criminal justice – found that making visible and valuing the outcomes that matter most to individuals, communities, and society leads to more informed policy-making, using Social Return on Investment (SROI) principles. **nef** recommends measurement for social, economic and environmental outcomes: that is, the positive and negative changes in people's lives, communities or the environment that occur as a result of policy. It also recommends carrying out measurement with people who are closest to or most affected by an activity and are uniquely positioned to identify its effects, whether positive or negative. They should therefore be involved as deeply as possible when creating and revising indicators. Without this input, measurement is unlikely to capture what really matters to people.

Source: Nicholls, J., Neizert, E. & Lawlor, E. (2009) *Seven principles for measuring what matters: a guide to effective public policy making* (London: **nef**).

Fewer workers clock in and out of their jobs these days, but the logic of industrial time still ticks away in our heads, shaping how we understand our lives, in terms of cause and effect, progress, stability, clarity and usefulness. We have become used to the clock directing us from one place to another throughout the day, so that we readily associate certain hours with specific activities and locations. However, just as there is a poor match between our ideas of a 'normal' working week and how many hours we actually work, so these links between time and space are less and less inclined to reflect contemporary experience. In this post-industrial era of instant communications, mobile technologies, and global reaches across multiple time-zones, people can increasingly work anywhere, anytime.<sup>23</sup> The logic of a nine-to-five routine for five days a week is out of step. But the new era carries new risks of exploitation, as well as exclusions and inequalities: there is no end to what employers can demand, and no end to what is demanded of our unpaid time as we play our pivotal role in the consumer economy. While the old industrial clock ceases, in fact, to regulate our lives in discrete chunks of time and space, the tempo quickens inexorably. The pressures mount, both to work to earn and to earn to consume,<sup>24</sup> with effects that are far more burdensome for some than for others. So the challenge for us now is to break the power of the clock without adding to these pressures, by freeing up time for living sustainable lives.

### What is work worth?

It is not only the power of the clock that shapes our assumptions about what is, and is not, worth spending our time on. It is also the power of money. We generally attach more value to work that is paid for. The higher the pay it attracts the more valuable we tend to think a job is – and the more worthy of someone's time. But calculations by **nef** suggest that value derives from highly complex inter-related factors, not just short-term financial returns.<sup>25</sup> As **nef** argues, 'Early theories of value neglected the extent to which the production and trade of goods and services may have a wider impact on society that is not reflected in the cost of producing them. These "externalities" are often remote but that does not mean that they are not real or that they do not affect real people – either now or in the future.'<sup>26</sup>

When someone's work is assessed in terms of medium and long-term impacts on society and environment as well as financial efficiency, it can be seen to have a very different value (Box 2).

Taking this approach, **nef** has compared a range of jobs, finding that low-paid work often produces considerably more value than high-paid work – and, indeed, that high-paid work can even incur a negative value, by having a destructive effect on society and/or the environment. The study found that:

- Leading bankers collect salaries of between £500,000 and £10 million; top advertising executives are paid between £50,000 and £12 million a year; some tax accountants earn between £75,000 and £200,000. For each £1 of value these workers generate, they destroy, respectively, £7, £11 and £47 of value.



- Childcare workers, hospital cleaners and waste recycling workers – all paid little more than the minimum wage – are found to generate value of between £7 and £12 for each £1 they earn.

The same study demonstrates that, contrary to conventional wisdom, pay does not always reward underlying profitability: steep rises in top executive pay have not been matched by rising economic performance in the corporate sector. Nor do workers in highly paid jobs 'deserve' their superior rewards because they work harder: it is people on low pay who are most likely to work punishingly long hours, with many doing multiple jobs to make ends meet. And, of course, levels of pay take no account of hours worked outside the market economy. Thus, it is not just how time is distributed that matters, or how time is rewarded; it is how time is used, and to what effect.

If the average time spent on housework and care for children and adults in 2005 in Britain were given a monetary value, based on the national minimum wage (then £4.85 an hour), it would together be worth almost £253.7 billion, equivalent to 21 per cent of the British Gross Domestic Product in that year.

Of this, women's unpaid work would be worth £166.2 billion (equivalent to 14 per cent of GDP), while men's would be worth £87.2 billion (7 per cent of GDP).<sup>27</sup> Of course these are the most conservative estimates of the value of housework and care, because they use the minimum wage. Many would say they are worth much more than work done by bankers, advertising executives or tax accountants. These calculations are just one way of beginning to appreciate the value of the 'core economy'

# Reasons why we want to move towards 21 hours

In *The Great Transition*, **nef** argues for urgent and fundamental changes to avert social, economic and environmental catastrophe.

These changes are 'necessary, desirable, and possible'. They include a 'Great Redistribution' of income, wealth and ownership, as well as a redistribution of *time*, starting with a four-day week: 'By sharing working hours and tasks more equally, everyone would be able to undertake more meaningful work and, by shortening the working week to four days we could create a better balance between paid work and the vital "core economy" of family, friends and community life.'<sup>28</sup>

Of course, a four-day week would be a significant step in the right direction. But it would leave undisturbed the current norm in which everyday life is structured around delineated hours of paid work, shaped by its overriding demands, and imbued with associated values. A 21-hour week, or its equivalent in hours spread across a month or year, overturns that scenario. It forces us to consider a different set of relationships between time, money, and consumption, as well as how these new co-ordinates might affect the distribution of power between people and groups, what really matters for human well-being, and how we can carve out a *sustainable* future.

We have argued in *Green Well Fair* that there are three 'economies' or sources of wealth, derived from people, planet and markets, that are essential for sustainable development (Box 3). These are entirely interdependent and 'must work together... underpinned by inclusive, participative and accountable governance and by the best available knowledge'.<sup>29</sup> This analysis reflects the five principles for sustainable development, published by the UK government and devolved administrations in *Securing the Future*, 2005. As the White Paper says, 'We want to achieve our goals of living within environmental limits and a just society, and we will do it by means of a sustainable economy, good governance, and sound science.'<sup>30</sup> Without sustainable policies, human societies will not thrive in the medium term and may well not survive in the long term.

In the following two sections we look first at the potential benefits of a much shorter working week and then at the transitional problems that must be addressed. Arguments in favour of a much shorter working week fall into three broad categories: environmental, social, and economic, reflecting the three economies.

## Box 3. Green Well Fair

**nef** has developed a systemic approach to policy-making based on an understanding of the dynamic interplay between economy, society, and environment. In *Green Well Fair*, we argue that a welfare system that's fit for the future cannot rely solely on the market economy. Instead, it must value and nurture two other economies that have so far been largely overlooked. These are the natural economy, the resources of the planet on which all human life depends, and the core economy, the human resources that comprise and sustain social life. The role of the state is to get all three economies – people, planet, and markets – working together for sustainable social justice. A key policy question is how to promote equality and social justice when economic resources are contingent on growth which is increasingly unsustainable.

A welfare system that creates conditions that enable everyone to flourish must tackle the complex and often intractable factors – economic, social, and environmental – that distribute 'life chances' unequally, leaving some poor, powerless, and insecure, while others are prosperous, self-confident, and powerful. It must get the 'three economies' working together to eliminate avoidable risks and disadvantages and to compensate for those that are unavoidable.

Source: Coote, A & Franklin, J (2009) *Green Well Fair: three economies for social justice* (London: **nef**)

## Safeguarding the natural resources of the planet

Environmental sustainability is central to the case for a 21-hour week, for three main reasons.

### 1 Consuming less and differently

A 21-hour week would help get people off the consumer treadmill. If a much shorter working week became the norm, with everyone using their time differently and many people earning less, ideas would change about what really makes a good life and how much money is 'enough' to live on. To serve the interests of 'hyper-capitalism' over the last half-century, we have grown used to the idea that we live to work, work to earn, and earn to consume. We consume not just to survive and flourish and enjoy our lives, but to signal who we are and where we stand in the world, especially in relation to others. What we feel we need and what satisfies our needs are inflated well beyond what is actually required to live a good and satisfying life. We buy much more than enough stuff. Directly or indirectly, the stuff we buy consumes finite natural resources on which our lives ultimately depend. A much shorter working week would transform the logic of paid employment and help to change how we value things. By helping to develop a more egalitarian culture, it might also reduce the kind of consumption that is driven by status anxiety, or the need to keep one's place in society.<sup>31</sup> We might become less attached to carbon-intensive consumption and more attached to relationships, pastimes, and places that absorb more of our time and less of our money.

Juliet Schor has observed that, while people say they would trade time for money in future (more unpaid time, less income), they generally say they are satisfied with the way they currently use their time, even as their hours in paid work get longer. In other words, we adapt our preferences, ending up wanting what we get, not getting what we want. Schor concludes that if policy-makers want individuals to develop more sustainable lifestyles, they should not rely on asking people to reduce their current levels of income and consumption: 'approaches that structurally stem the flow of increased income into consumer's hands are more promising'.<sup>32</sup>

The Canadian economist Peter Victor has begun to model how a developed economy can manage without growth, through steady and continuous reduction in working hours, in order to avoid environmental disaster. He points out that in normal circumstances an expansion of employment will add to total output, but a way to avoid this is 'to reduce the average time that each person spends at work and to spread the same amount of work, income, and leisure across a larger number of people'.<sup>33</sup> The arithmetic is simple and compelling, according to Victor, but successful implementation is another matter. Research into the effects of working hours reductions in Europe suggests that a gain of '25–70 per cent of the arithmetically possible effect' can be achieved under the right conditions. These include 'an active training policy designed to minimise skill shortages in the labour market, the modernisation of work organisation, wage increases in conjunction with productivity gains, and more equal income distribution'.<sup>34</sup>

### 2 Time for living more sustainably

Many of the 'consumer choices' we make are in the name of convenience. We buy processed food, ready-meals, pre-prepared and packaged vegetables, motorised vehicles, airline tickets, and a range of electric appliances because they are supposed to save us time. Most of these purchases involve a lot of energy, carbon, and waste. If we spent much less time earning money, we would have more time to live differently, and less need to purchase for the sake of convenience. We could grow, prepare, and cook more of our own food; repair things more often rather than replace them; travel more slowly on foot, bicycles, buses, or trains. We could learn more practical skills, make more things ourselves and generally become less dependent on energy-intensive technologies. This is neither a sentimental longing for a 'News from Nowhere' idyll, nor nostalgia for the days of hippie communes. It is rational anticipation of essential low-carbon living, which can only be achieved by slowing down the pace and using time more than money and consumer goods to deliver what we need to live a good life.

### 3 A smaller footprint

The average carbon dioxide footprint of an adult in the UK is 11 tonnes a year. This must drop to less than four tonnes to meet essential targets. Low-carbon living depends on consuming differently, and certainly buying less energy-intensive stuff. Shorter hours in paid employment, less spending power for higher earners, more time to live sustainably, and a shift towards non-materialist values will all help to reduce carbon emissions and safeguard natural resources.

### Social justice and well-being for all

A move towards a 21-hour week offers considerable social gains, by distributing control of time more evenly across the population and opening up new opportunities for reducing income inequalities, and living healthier and more caring, engaged, and satisfying lives. In this section, we consider the benefits. Problems and barriers are discussed in the following section.

#### 1 Improved well-being for the jobless and the overworked

A shorter working week would help distribute paid work more evenly across the population. At present, nearly two and a half million<sup>35</sup> people in the UK would like to have jobs but cannot get them. And there is increased polarisation between 'work-rich' families, where two adult partners are in paid employment, and 'work-poor' families, where neither has a job.<sup>36</sup> The challenge becomes more acute when planning for transition to an economy without growth, which is why we are proposing such a considerable reduction in paid working hours.

Depending on how it is distributed, rewarded, and organised, paid work can make an important contribution to well-being (Box 4). The negative effects of unemployment on well-being have been extensively documented.<sup>37,38,39</sup> Paid work can be good for us not only because it provides an income, but also because it promotes social ties and can provide an arena for meaningful engagement in tasks, from which we derive feelings of self-worth and satisfaction.

On the other hand, too much paid work can undermine well-being by putting employees – especially women – under considerable stress, as they try to combine workplace obligations with the demands of caring and housework. In the UK, hours in paid employment have risen substantially, with two-adult households adding six hours to their joint weekly workload between 1981 and 1998. New technologies and changes in organisation and management have made paid employment more intense and unrelenting over this period, too. Successive surveys show increasing proportions of workers perceiving that their job "requires (them) to work very hard". Those with little or no control over when or for how long they have to work are particularly vulnerable to stress.<sup>40,41,42,43,44</sup>

#### 2 Changing sources of control

A major reduction in working hours across the board would open up opportunities for changing the way people control their lives. Inherent in the 21-hours scenario is a revaluation of uncommodified time, as we reassess the

### Box 4. Well-being

Individual and social well-being emerges in the dynamic between individual, social, and material resources and circumstances. An individual's well-being is defined by **nef** as a 'dynamic process, emerging... through the interaction between their circumstances, activities, and psychological resources... Aside from feeling "good", it also incorporates a sense of individual vitality, opportunities to undertake meaningful, engaging activities which confer feelings of competence and autonomy [and] is also about feelings of relatedness to other people'.<sup>45</sup> Well-being for all is the primary objective of sustainable social justice: it is what a socially just welfare system seeks to achieve. It means every individual being able to engage in society, to act and do, to have a sense of purpose and to fulfil their potential. There is strong evidence that unequal societies are less conducive to well-being, not just for the poor but for all income groups.

Sources: Cox, E, Abdallah, S & Stephens, L (2009) 'Living better, using less – rebuilding a more sustainable and socially just regional economy' A think piece for Yorkshire & the Humber Regional Forum on the Integrated Regional Strategy (London: **nef**).

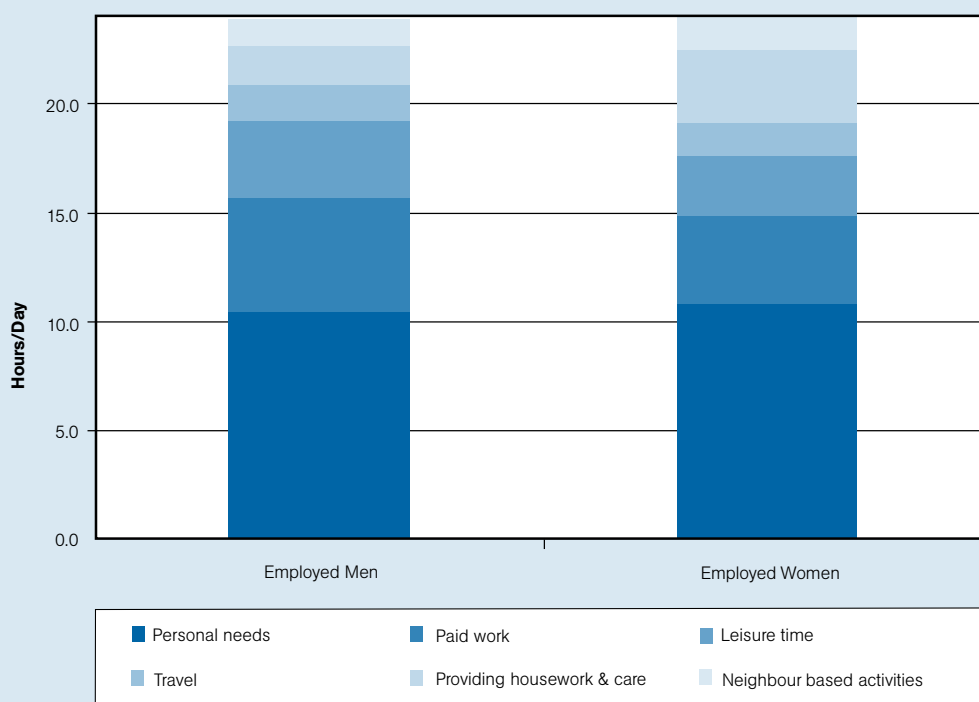
modern capitalist model of working to earn to consume, and consider what it takes to safeguard and improve well-being for all in a low-growth, low-carbon future. Instead of lives dominated by the demands of paid work in the formal economy, there would be a stronger focus on how people use unpaid time, with more value attached to unpaid activities in the informal economy, including 'reproductive labour'. Our sense of autonomy (that is, being able to decide for ourselves what should happen in our lives and take action to realise our decisions) would derive less from our power to earn and consume, and more from the amount of control we have over our time. Less time in paid work could mean more time within our own control.

The Whitehall Studies, which look at the health of white-collar civil servants over successive years, demonstrate a strong negative influence on health and life expectancy from a combination of high demand and low control – which usually depends on where people stand in the workplace pecking order. 'People in jobs characterised by low control had higher rates of sickness absence, of mental illness, of heart disease and pain in the lower back.'<sup>46</sup> When a higher value is attached to time outside paid employment, and when much shorter hours prevail across the workplace hierarchy, the impact on health of low control in paid employment may become less pernicious. In any event, spending less time in stressful working conditions will probably reduce their harmful effects.

### 3 Fairer shares between women and men

A much shorter working week could help distribute unpaid work more evenly between women and men. As Figure 4 shows, women spend more time than men doing unpaid work. This pattern has persisted in spite of a massive influx of women into paid employment over the last three decades. Profoundly entrenched assumptions about what is 'natural' employment and time-use for women and men affect the types of work they do, the hours they spend in paid employment and the value attached to their respective occupations. As a consequence, women continue to be channelled towards a narrow range of paid occupations that are seen as 'women's jobs', to command lower pay in the labour market and – often because of this – to 'choose' to do part-time jobs when they have children, leaving more time for

**Figure 4. Time spent on main activities by employed people (working age only) – 2005.**



unpaid childcare and housework. There is a circular effect, reinforcing norms and expectations, perpetuating inequalities in income, time use and opportunities, and shoring up the general assumption (if not the reality) that men are the main breadwinners for their families. In a world where market-based values predominate, this combination leaves women with less money and power than men, and little scope to do things differently.<sup>47,48</sup>

If a much shorter working week became the norm, this would open up opportunities for sharing paid and unpaid work more equally between women and men. There is little evidence that men do more housework and childcare just because they spend less time in paid work; however, changing expectations about what is 'normal' could help, over time, to change attitudes and patterns of time use, and gradually to break down gendered divisions of labour. We deal later with the negative effects on individual and family incomes. It is worth considering separately how gender inequalities would be affected if men spent much more time engaged in housework and childcare. Arguably, this would change the way work of this kind is valued, improve pay for 'caring' jobs, give women more autonomy and undermine the roots of gendered inequalities in income, status and opportunity. Over the years – as cultural and psychological adjustments are made – it might also improve quality of life and well-being for men.

#### **4 A better deal for parents and children**

Spending much less time in paid work could, of course, leave parents with much more time to spend with their children. In particular, it could help fathers to be more engaged with their children, which would benefit children and mothers as well as the fathers themselves.<sup>49,50</sup> However, the effect of a significant shift of time-use towards family settings would not simply create more time for 'parenting' – the troubled craft that is subject to so much political soul-searching – it could also change the way we all think about the worlds of adults and children, and relationships between them.

Childhood is what we make of it. In the course of time, assumptions are generated and reinforced about what are 'childish' and 'grown-up' characteristics and activities, with strong expectations that these should be age-related.<sup>51</sup> The demands of a 'normal' working week entrench such distinctions. By appropriating so much adult waking time for paid work, they cast home and family in a subordinate role, supporting the formal economy – with invidious effects on parent-child relationships.

To illustrate the point, let's consider the efforts of Family 360, a US consultancy engaged by major corporations to help busy executives become more efficient parents without sacrificing office time. It advocates quantifiable 'high-leverage' activities. For example, a father is advised not to find out how his son got on at school today, but to 'do something the son will remember', because there is 'a scale to quantify efforts to "create memory"'. The idea is to speed up 'the very activities that most deeply symbolise fatherhood', in order to prepare the executive and his family 'to live in a total market world'.<sup>52</sup> Measurable efficiency at home and at work is the goal – with unpaid time assiduously attuned to the interests of paid employment. It's an extreme example, perhaps, but not far removed from arguments put forward in the UK, where organisations are said to be 'increasingly aware of the business case for a work-life balance'.<sup>53</sup> The Work Foundation seeks to position 'families in the minds of policy-makers and business as generators of the national wealth and a valuable resource from which everyone... benefit[s]'.<sup>54</sup>

There is much to be said for recognising the value of families and unpaid time. But these are not just resources to be cashed in by the market. They are essential for people and the planet and for the pursuit of sustainable social justice.

A much shorter working week would leave time for mothers and fathers to do more than supervise homework, share meals, imbue discipline, and otherwise impress 'positive parenting' upon their children. It certainly shouldn't become a means of confining children to individualised home-based care, deprived

of the proven benefits of learning in groups and mixing with a wider range of children and adults.<sup>55</sup> High-quality, socialised care for children is essential for breaking down inter-generational cycles of disadvantage, and reducing social and economic inequalities. A 21-hour week would help create the conditions for universally accessible and affordable childcare.

It would also make time for extended conversation between parents and their children, for two-way teaching and learning, for games and adventures, and for sharing a whole range of experiences. In other words, it would break down some of the barriers between the worlds of adults and children. This might help children to widen their horizons, share responsibility and grow up more easily, as well as bringing adults closer to the simplicity, wonder, and spirited inventiveness we have come to associate with childhood. These are vital human resources that we shall all need to develop if we are to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.

## 5 Making more of later life

If everyone spent fewer hours in paid employment, the transition in later years from 'work' to 'retirement' would be very different. People could go on earning for much longer, if they were only required to work for the equivalent of 21 hours a week. Gradually reducing hours from that base would be easier, too, because an even shorter working week would still be near the norm, with everyone's time more evenly balanced between paid work and other activities.

Many people want to retire as soon as they can because their jobs are stressful, physically exhausting, and make high demands on their time. Yet their sense of purpose and identity, social networks, and daily routines and preoccupations are often closely bound up with paid employment, so that sudden retirement can be experienced as shock and bereavement, leading to illness and premature death. According to one study, complete retirement can 'lead to a 5–16 percent increase in difficulties associated with mobility and daily activities, a 5–6 percent increase in illness conditions, and 6–9 percent decline in mental health over an average post-retirement period of six years'.<sup>56</sup> Involuntary retirement can exacerbate these effects,<sup>57</sup> while people with higher socio-economic status are more likely to benefit from retirement.<sup>58</sup>

By staying in paid work longer while putting in fewer hours, people can retain work-place friendships, remain active and engaged, and go on enjoying whatever satisfactions their employment offers. All these factors help to avoid illness, to maintain health and well-being, and to prevent frailty and dependence in later years. Retiring gradually and later would also enable people to defer all or part of their pension, reducing costs for the taxpayer. One estimate suggests that deferring the pension age by just one year would save £13 billion a year.<sup>59</sup>

## 6 More time to care

A much shorter working week would free up time to care for other people – relatives, friends, and neighbours. This is both about making life easier for people who are already carers, and about sharing care more widely.

Around six million people in the UK are 'informal' carers, meaning they look after people who need care because they are frail, sick, or disabled. Of these, 58 per cent are women and 42 per cent men. They are said to save the economy £87 billion a year by doing unpaid work that would otherwise need to be carried out by paid care workers. Three million of them manage – often with great difficulty – to combine caring and earning; one in five is forced by the demands of caring to give up paid work altogether.<sup>60</sup> More than one million currently experience ill health, poverty, and discrimination at work and in society because they are carers.<sup>61</sup>

A much shorter working week would make it easier to combine caring and earning without suffering discrimination in the workplace or being consigned to low-paid, casual jobs. A carer's need for plenty of time outside paid employment would fit more comfortably with normal working patterns. It would also be easier for everyone to take on caring responsibilities, sharing them between women and men, between family members, and between neighbours. Carers would

be less isolated, less restricted in their opportunities, and less strained by shouldering responsibilities alone. It would be good for them and for the people they care for – who would be less cut off from the rest of human society, less likely to be stigmatised as ‘burdensome’ and possibly more likely to receive a better quality of care.

## 7 More time to be active citizens

It takes time to be an active citizen – joining and participating in local activities and organisations, getting to know neighbours, volunteering. Democracy takes time – to learn about political issues, to get involved in decision-making, to join and support political parties, to campaign and to vote. Voter turn-out in UK general elections declined by nearly 20 per cent between 1950 and 2001, to 59 per cent, rising slightly in 2005 to 61 per cent.<sup>62</sup> Turn-out at local elections is much lower – continuing ‘to hover at about one-third’ of the registered electorate.<sup>63</sup> Government regularly calls for citizens to be more ‘engaged’. A robust democracy depends on a strong turn-out at elections as well as more participation by citizens in political decisions, through consultation, citizens’ panels and forums, and extended deliberative dialogue. Low levels of participation may have more to do with cynicism about the political process than lack of time, but long hours in paid employment add to the disincentives and help to create a vicious cycle of disengagement. If people don’t participate or feel involved, they are less likely to vote, and more likely to remain distanced from politics and cynical about the role of government. A much shorter working week could help to reverse that cycle – freeing up time to participate, enriching civil society, strengthening democratic processes and making it easier for voters to hold politicians to account.

## 8 Growing the ‘core economy’

The welfare state in Britain has grown exponentially since it was founded in the mid 1940s. Its growth has always depended on continuing economic growth producing more tax revenues to pay for more and better public services. That assumption no longer holds. A return to sustained economic growth or ‘business as usual’ is doubtful because of the nature of the global crisis; it is also undesirable for environmental reasons, because growth cannot be ‘de-coupled’ from greenhouse gas emissions. As Tim Jackson has argued persuasively (Box 1), growth must be curtailed in high-income countries in order to achieve urgent targets for carbon reduction.<sup>64</sup> So we must plan for no growth, with all that it implies for the welfare state.

In any event, the extent of government indebtedness following the bail-out of banks in 2008/2009 makes heavy cuts inevitable across public services. If we want to go on providing education, health and social care, public transport, childcare, income support and pensions, and all the other things currently provided through the state so that everyone can benefit regardless of their means, then we shall have to tap into new resources. We have identified three economies that must work together for sustainable social justice. We have seen that we can’t grow the market economy. Nor can we grow the natural economy, but only hope to save it from catastrophic failure.

We can, however, grow the human or ‘core’ economy (Box 5). This is made up of the abundant and priceless assets that are embedded in people’s everyday lives – time, energy, wisdom, experience, knowledge and skills – and in the relationships between them: love, empathy, watchfulness, care, reciprocity, teaching, and learning. If they are neglected they will weaken and diminish. If they are recognised, valued, and supported, they will flourish and grow. They hold the key to making the welfare state sustainable and fit for the future. But growing the core economy depends on changing the way we use time.

As it currently stands, the ‘core’ economy depends heavily on unpaid female labour because women have more time for it, for reasons already discussed. If we are to make more use of human resources without increasing inequalities, it will be important to do so in ways that reduce rather than intensify the gendered distribution of time between paid and unpaid labour. It will also be important to do so in ways that don’t dump more work on people who are already disempowered and disadvantaged.



## Box 5. The 'core economy'

The human or 'core economy' refers to individual and social resources, to reciprocal everyday things people do as they care for each other, bring up their children, look after elderly friends and relatives, and sustain different kinds of friendships. It also refers to wider social networks and activities in civil society. In short, it stands for intimate, informal and formal practices, and the physical, cultural, material, and emotional resources that sustain human life. Since these resources are shaped by economic and social structures, the core economy is also the site where inequalities and social conflicts are played out and maintained. Thus, to promote social justice in the short and long term, policy-making needs first to recognise and value individual and social resources; and second, to change the ways that the unequal distribution of resources, work and time reproduce social and economic divisions and inequalities.

Source: Coote, A. & Franklin, J. (2009) *Green Well Fair: three economies for social justice* (London: nef).

Moving towards 21 hours would distribute paid work more evenly across the population. It would leave more time for unpaid activities and so help the 'core' economy to flourish and grow.

### 9 Co-producing well-being

Co-production is a key mechanism for growing the core economy. Spending much less time in paid employment would enable us to spend more time co-producing well-being for ourselves and those around us. This means getting together with others, including professionals, to identify what we need, to work out how best to meet those needs, and to deliver practical solutions. Examples are set out elsewhere.<sup>65,66</sup> Co-production makes more use of human resources and less of monetary resources to meet individual and shared needs. It transforms the theory and practice of public service. Put another way, the 21-hours scenario makes it possible to decommodify parts of the welfare state that are unsustainable in their present form.

Co-production engages people who would otherwise be passive recipients of services, in active and equal partnership with professionals – and with other 'users' and 'providers' – in designing and delivering services. It recognises that everyone has assets, not just problems to be solved by experts, and that everyone has something of value to contribute. It combines professional and lay knowledge. It acknowledges the value of time – a resource that everyone has in equal measure, although control over time is *unequally* distributed.

So time is a vital factor in developing co-production. Hours not devoted to paid employment would enable people to learn from and help each other, to rediscover confidence in what they already know and to develop skills that have been neglected in the last 60 years. Along with many professionals and public service workers, we want to change the top-down, centralised, doing-to culture of the welfare state that has nurtured dependency rather than autonomy and agency.

By giving people more control over what happens to them and by tapping into their own knowledge and experience, co-production helps to prevent needs arising or intensifying, and to achieve better outcomes. This makes better use of public resources and helps to ensure the long-term viability of public services.

### 10 More time for 'free time'

We all need time to spend on everyday activities, beyond basic personal maintenance, that we choose. These are the things we do for ourselves and for or with people close to us – seeing friends and neighbours, walking, cycling and other kinds of exercise, playing games, making and listening to music, inventing and creating, watching movies and TV, cooking, reading, studying, reflecting, hanging out, doing 'nothing'... however described, our 'free time' is not strictly part of any productive or reproductive regime, but important nonetheless. It gives texture, space, and individuality to human experience, and underpins our sense of autonomy.

## **A robust and prosperous economy**

Our plans for sustainable social justice emerge from and reinforce the development of a decarbonised economy. The aim is not to adapt society to the needs of the market economy, which has been the pattern until now, but to adapt the economy to the needs of society and the environment. In any case, a robust and prosperous economy depends on a strong, healthy, and just society as well as on the natural resources of the planet. We want a flourishing and resilient economy that can rise to new challenges, not one that just grows. Our 21-hours scenario raises important transitional problems for the economy, which are dealt with in the next section. There are also potential benefits.

### **1 Benefits for business**

Redistributing paid and unpaid time more evenly, especially between women and men, offers important gains for business. Women's talents can be more fully realised if they find it easier to combine paid work with other responsibilities. Men will have the chance to become more rounded and emotionally intelligent individuals as their daily routines, identities, and values are more closely connected with home and family. Integrating paid employment with the rhythms and interests of domestic life will make managing or 'juggling' the two spheres less stressful and divisive. Emotional intelligence and better balanced lives are both known to produce better outcomes in the workplace.<sup>67</sup> There is evidence, too, that people who work shorter hours are more productive, hour for hour.<sup>68</sup>

### **2 Helping to end credit-fuelled growth**

The 'credit crunch' was largely a consequence of household debt escalating out of control. Economic growth in high-income countries has depended for at least the last three decades on a combination of low wages, declining government support for all but the very poor, greater household insecurity, more borrowing and easy credit fuelling high consumption. Together, these factors have driven workers to borrow money beyond their means in order to buy goods, which in turn boosted profits. But it was an unsustainable and ultimately highly destructive pattern of behaviour, leading to the collapse of the 'sub-prime' mortgage market, the subsequent implosion of the international finance system, and a steep global economic downturn. Now households are bearing the brunt of the government's efforts to deal with the crisis. They are 'expected to absorb the prescribed tax increases and further reductions in government services to remedy the fiscal deficits incurred to fund the massive bailouts of the financial service industry... As unemployment increases, and business squeezes wage growth further, working families face more of the same conditions that created households' financial insecurity in the first place'.<sup>69</sup>

We have already noted that a return to 'business as usual' is unlikely and undesirable. As Johnna Montgomerie argues: 'Political interventions to stem the current economic downturn need to address the financial instability facing the household sector... What is needed is political reform of economic governance priorities, which until now have overwhelmingly privileged financialised growth.'<sup>70</sup>

Redistributing paid working time would be part of a much broader transformation of the economic order. Tim Jackson points out that in a future economy that flourishes without growth, we need 'to look at the production function in a different way'.<sup>71,72</sup> It may be sensible to maintain labour productivity, at least in key export and import sectors, but in that case the only way to stabilise output is for the total hours worked by the labour force to fall. Typically, that would mean rising unemployment: 'But there is another possibility here... reduced working hours, a shorter working week and increased leisure time... sharing the available work has much to recommend it'.<sup>73,74</sup>

In a modern economy that is fit for the future, the driving force towards prosperity is not credit and consumerism but financial stability for households and good work distributed fairly across the population.

### **3 A more resilient and adaptable economy**

If a more even redistribution of earning time were combined with higher hourly rates for the lower paid, this could help to narrow social and economic

inequalities. More equal societies tend to be more successful and to have stronger economies.<sup>75</sup> There is also some evidence that societies with strong welfare systems and regulated economies (of the kind that would be necessary to support a socially just transition towards 21 hours) are not only more equitable, but are also better at adapting to external pressures such as climate change and at planning for environmental sustainability. In social, economic, and environmental terms, they are more resilient – and therefore more likely to prosper in the face of the challenges anticipated in the coming decades.<sup>76</sup>

#### 4 Safeguarding public resources

As we noted earlier, freeing up time to grow the core economy and enabling people to co-produce their own well-being will help to transform public services, prevent ill-being and produce better outcomes. This will make services more cost-effective and therefore more resilient in times when public funds are scarce. The market depends on public services to provide education, health and social care, income transfers, pensions and other forms of support – all of which help to maintain a productive workforce. Using time differently to ensure the long-term viability of these services will help the market economy to prosper in future.

Redistributing employment and enabling people to continue in paid work for longer could reduce public spending on pensions, unemployment benefits, and other costs associated with joblessness. This will help to safeguard public funds for investment in a low-carbon industrial strategy and other measures to support a sustainable economy.

#### In summary

A much shorter working week would change the tempo of our lives; it would re-shape habits and conventions and profoundly alter the dominant cultures of western society. It would help to promote sustainable social justice, well-being, and the good life, to safeguard the natural resources of the planet, and to build a robust and prosperous economy.



# Transitional problems

In this section, we consider the main problems posed by the 21-hour scenario. We call them ‘transitional’ because they must be seen in terms of a broader and incremental shift towards social, economic, and environmental sustainability. In the final section we set out ideas for addressing these problems and moving towards a much shorter working week.

## 1 Impact on poverty

The most obvious transitional challenge is that a shorter working week would reduce the amount of money people can earn. Those on low rates of pay would be hardest hit. So moving towards 21 hours could be seen as adding to the burden of people who are already poor and powerless. Many now have to work very long hours just to make ends meet.

At the current minimum wage of £5.80 an hour, a 21-hour week would bring in £121.80 a week, well short of the current median of £489 for men and women in ‘full-time’ occupations.<sup>77</sup> It is a little higher than today’s basic state pension, which is £95.25 per person per week. Amounting to £6,333 per annum, it is less than half the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s Minimum Income Standard for Britain, which estimates that a single person needs to earn at least £13,900 a year before tax in 2009, in order to afford a basic but acceptable standard of living.<sup>78</sup>

Where people have children or other dependent relatives, and where housing costs are high, the pressure on low earners to work 40+ hours a week, or to do more than one job, is especially high. To reach JRF’s Minimum Income Standard, a couple with two children would need to earn £27,600. Average household expenditure varies in different regions of the UK. In London, 2006/2007 it was £529.30 per week; in the North East £388.70.<sup>79</sup>

It will be important to avoid penalising the low paid, especially families with children, and to prevent housing costs making shorter hours prohibitive in high-cost areas such as London. The problem is not insuperable – for at least two reasons. First, these figures assume spending in line with current patterns of consumption. The shift towards 21 hours is part of a wider transition that includes decarbonising the economy, promoting prosperity without growth, and changing assumptions about how much consumption is ‘enough’. The criteria for deciding how much income is ‘enough’ may be adjusted accordingly. Secondly, the shift is intended to be incremental, with gradual reductions in working hours over a decade or more. This gives people time to adapt expectations and lifestyles. It gives policy-makers time to design and implement supportive measures. And it gives employers the chance to raise hourly rates gradually as incentives improve and hour-for-hour productivity increases.

## More overtime

There is a danger that reducing the official number of hours people are supposed to work each week will simply increase the amount of overtime they put in. Some people work long hours because they find it personally satisfying, because they are anxious to safeguard or increase their social status, or because they want to get away from home. If a key aim of moving towards 21 hours is to help redistribute paid and unpaid time more evenly across the population and between women and men, it won’t help if those who already have jobs just do more overtime to make up the difference. It may intensify rather than diminish the gender gap, if women continue to do most of the unpaid domestic labour, while men work overtime to supplement household earnings.

## 2 Resistance from employers

Employers are likely to resist a move to shorter working hours unless their business is in trouble and they need to reduce their outgoings. The current structure of the labour market and employment regulations do little to encourage employers to take on more workers. On the contrary, costs of national insurance, staff management, training, and development increase with each new employee. For some jobs, particular skills or experience are at a premium, making new vacancies hard to fill. These are serious practical difficulties, but they are only part of the problem. Moving even a small way towards 21 hours would violate deeply entrenched business values, which subordinate all interests to the immediate pursuit of profit. As Johnna Montgomerie puts it: 'Over the past two decades, Anglo-American business culture has been gripped by the logic of permanent restructuring. Outsourcing, downsizing, streamlining. ... have all been justified to make business more competitive or to realise shareholder value.'<sup>80</sup> Changing the business culture will need to be central to the transition we envisage. There will also have to be practical changes in taxation and other incentives for employers, so that they are not penalised financially – and are preferably rewarded – for taking on extra staff.

## 3 Resistance from employees

We have noted the danger of a much shorter working week adding to the pressures on people with low rates of pay. There is a risk of strong resistance not only from low-paid workers and their trade unions, but also from the middle classes and their unions and professional bodies. Even without considering how people on even higher pay would be affected by the shift (such as 'health professionals' who had the highest earnings in 2008 among people with full-time occupations, with median pay at £977 a week, followed by 'Corporate Managers' at £727<sup>81</sup>), we shall need to take account of how people on middle incomes (say £20–35,000 per annum) are likely to respond if their pay is reduced because of shorter working hours. Many in this bracket already feel the pinch. They are locked into patterns of spending – on items such as housing and utilities that are essential for everyone, as well as items that may in theory be dispensable, such as cars, holidays abroad, domestic appliances, children's outings and toys, multiple items of clothing and electronic equipment. These are all the normal accoutrements of middle-class life in high-income countries, on which people's identity, status and sense of worth routinely depend.

If the shift towards 21 hours makes it easier for one-earner families to become two-earner families, that will soften the impact on some household incomes. As part of a bigger transition to low-carbon living for all income groups, consumption habits will have to change, along with the values that people routinely attach to work, time, and pay. As with employers, it is important to look for solutions to the problem of employee resistance in a broader set of changes to cultural norms and expectations.

## 4 Political resistance

We have noted the likelihood of resistance from employers and employees, and their respective organisations. Political resistance may come from other quarters, too. How people are encouraged to change has implications for civil liberties. Much depends on what regulations and incentive structures are deployed, how they are phased in, how much compulsion is involved, what effects they have on power relations, inequalities, opportunities and the quality of people's lives, and whose interests are threatened or damaged.

# Necessary conditions

What can be done to make sure that the advantages of our 21-hours scenario outweigh the disadvantages? Put another way, what will help create the necessary conditions for a much shorter working week that is socially just and economically sustainable?

In addressing these questions, three things must be borne in mind. First, 21 hours is not a prescription, but a provocation. We want to overturn current assumptions about work and time, and change what is considered 'normal'. That's why the vision is a radical one – to shake up ideas and get people thinking about a significant shift in the direction of travel. Secondly, a much shorter working week cannot be suddenly imposed and will not happen overnight. The aim is to consider how to make small steps towards a radical transformation. Thirdly, our proposal for a significant reduction in paid working hours is part of a bigger picture that includes a no-growth economy and zero carbon emissions. Work is beginning at **nef** to develop a new economic model that will help to engineer a steady-state, decarbonised economy and to address the problems of transition to 21 hours (Box 6).

In this section, we set out suggestions for addressing some of the problems of moving to a shorter working week. It is just a beginning – there is much more work to be done. Our suggestions are intended to fuel debate and stimulate further thinking, not to offer definitive solutions. They fall into four categories: achieving shorter working hours; ensuring a fair living income; improving gender relations and the quality of family life; and changing norms and expectations. We recognise that important pre-conditions are a strong democracy and an effective and accountable government.

## 1 Achieving shorter working hours

Building on work by Gerhard Bosch, Peter Victor has identified policies that have a bearing on reducing hours of paid work.<sup>82</sup> We draw on these and on other material as a useful starting point for developing policies for the shift towards a 21-hour working week in the UK.

- *Wage compensation negotiated as part of a package including reduced hours.* Employers and workers' organisations could negotiate a deal – or a sequence of deals – in which pay is increased at a lower rate than would otherwise be acceptable, in exchange for shorter hours. As Victor remarks: 'this could become more difficult with no or low growth'.<sup>83</sup> If hours are to be reduced incrementally, however, over, say, 15 years, it may still be possible to increase hourly rates gradually during that time to offset, at least partially, the effects on total earnings.

## Box 6. Building a new economic model

Standard economic models take no account of the use of finite resources and environmental constraints, and are blind to social outcomes in terms of equity and human well-being. Growth is the primary output of interest. Inputs feed in, interact with each other, achieve balance (or equilibrium) and outcomes result.

Our aim is to reverse this. Our new modelling approach will start with the hard outcomes we need: environmental sustainability, equitable social and economic justice, and high levels of human well-being. We then propose to link these to relevant economic determinants within the model, such as aggregate output, income distribution and working hours, and to 'reverse engineer' what this would imply for the levels and types of differing inputs. Such a model is not a luxury but an essential foundation for making the transition to a sustainable future.

Source: Spratt S, Ryan-Collins J, Nietzert E and Simms A (2009) *The Great Transition: A tale of how it turned out right* (London: **nef**).

- *Changes in work organisation and standardisation of working hours to keep overtime in check.* The way work is managed in any organisation can be adapted to discourage overtime, so that hours released from the existing workforce are taken on by new employees.
- *Active training policies to combat skills shortages and inter-generational worklessness.* We have noted that in some parts of the labour market, where skills are at a premium, vacancies created by shorter working hours may be especially hard to fill. It will therefore be necessary for government and employers to anticipate where skills are likely to be in short supply and develop apprenticeships and other training and induction programmes for job seekers, so that they are better prepared to step into skilled jobs. Customised training and support will be needed to help people overcome social and cultural barriers to paid employment, especially for those in families where unemployment has been the 'norm' for generations.
- *Moving from cost-per-employee measures to cost-per-hour measures so that employers are not penalised for taking on more workers.* Employers' national insurance contributions currently have the effect of increasing costs to employers for every new worker they employ. This arrangement operates as a penalty, which can be exacerbated by additional costs associated with extra staff, such as management, training and development. If workplace levies were raised on hours worked rather than on individuals employed, this could ease employers into taking on more workers. Further incentives could be put in place, for example, tax breaks and grants for training and staff development – with the net effect of rewarding rather than penalising workforce expansion.
- *More stable and less unequal distribution of earnings.* As Bosch observes, a continuing decline in real wage rates in most industrial countries has reduced the scope for implementing cuts in working time and wage rises at the same time.<sup>84</sup> One way to offset this problem is to introduce measures to reduce the gradient between high and low earners, as this will tend to lessen resistance to shorter working hours, especially from lower-paid workers. People's view of whether they are paid fairly, or enough, tends to be influenced by how they see themselves in relation to others.
- *Standardisation with flexibility.* At government level, regulations will be required to standardise working hours. The EU Working Time Directive is a step in the right direction but a long way from where we want to go. Current standards will have to be reduced steadily over the coming years. They must be designed to exert a strong influence over the actual hours that people work, not to trigger more overtime. But regulations must allow flexibility in the way hours are distributed, to help people combine paid and unpaid work. Arrangements such as job sharing, school term shifts, extended care leave, and sabbaticals should be encouraged. There is an important balance to be struck between clear limits to the number of hours worked, flexibility for workers, and leeway for employers to vary hours to meet fluctuations in demand.
- *More and better support for the self-employed.* The self-employed sector doubled in the UK from 6.6 per cent in 1979 to 13 per cent in 2007. Among many ethnic minority and immigrant groups, self-employment rates are higher – often double the national average. Seven in ten self-employed people in the UK operate as sole traders. Often they are taken for granted or dismissed by policy-makers as 'just lifestyle businesses'. Low pay, long hours and job insecurity are endemic in this sector, yet they are unprotected by either employment law or company law. **nef** and others, including the European Commission, have recommended that the self-employed be brought within the regulatory framework, adopting the Danish system of 'flexicurity' (which combines labour market flexibility with social protection and an active labour market policy) across the EU.<sup>85</sup>

## 2 Ensuring a fair living income

How can time for paid and unpaid work be redistributed, while at the same time ensuring that everyone has a fair living income? Here, we set out options – which are not definitive or mutually exclusive – for dealing with the impact on earnings of a much shorter working week in the context of transition to social justice and a decarbonised economy.

- *Redistributing income and wealth.* This will require a range of measures that are currently being explored by **nef** as part of our work on the Great Transition (Box 6). They include a more progressive system of income tax and redistribution of assets through wealth, land and/or inheritance taxes, as well as an increased minimum wage and improved state benefits.
- *Increasing the minimum wage.* We have noted that the current national minimum wage would be less than half what is thought to be a sufficient minimum income in today's economic context, if paid for 21 hours a week. Some increase would therefore be essential, even if criteria for judging income sufficiency were changed.
- *Improved state benefits.* How far could state-funded income support offset the effects of earnings lost through working shorter hours? Examples might include higher benefits for children and housing to help with these costly elements of household expenditure; benefits to employees that directly supplement low wages; credits for certain kinds of unpaid work such as caring and co-production; and a universal guaranteed allowance, or 'citizens' income', for everyone. The latter idea has a long history, many supporters and several variants,<sup>86,87,88,89</sup> but one fundamental flaw: if everyone had an allowance from the state, without huge hikes in taxation, funds would be so thinly spread that no-one would actually have anything like enough to live on. When the government is heavily indebted from bailing out the banks, and when a key objective is to manage without further economic growth, it is hard to see where the money would come from to increase funding for children and housing, low-wage supplements, or credits for unpaid work, let alone a universal citizens' income (but see below).
- *Individual carbon trading.* Among many potential schemes that policy-makers are exploring for reducing individual carbon emissions, one is that individuals each have a specific annual carbon allocation, varied according to circumstance and need. Allocations would be reduced year by year to meet emissions targets, but they could be tradable, either through government brokerage, or through markets. Thus, individuals with smaller carbon footprints would be able to sell parts of their allocation to others who wanted more. Rates of carbon emissions tend to rise with affluence, so this could be one way of redistributing income from higher to lower income groups, without recourse to taxation. So far, this approach has been found too complicated and politically risky to be practicable. But if ways could be found to design and implement a viable individual carbon trading scheme (possibly through collaboratives or mutual schemes), it could become part of a package of measures to compensate for earnings lost through shorter working hours.
- *More and better public services.* Public services such as healthcare and schooling, childcare and adult social care, comprise a 'social wage' that helps to determine how much earned income people consider 'enough'. The extent to which they relieve pressures on household income depends on their accessibility, reliability, quality, and overall affordability. This also applies to a wide range of state-funded services, including public transport, refuse collection, libraries, parks, sports and recreation centres, 'social' housing, neighbourhood policing, and higher education. Over the last three decades, most public services have been curtailed for the majority and targeted on the poorest, stripped to essentials by outsourcing and competitive tendering, or have had some costs transferred to the user – as in the case of higher education. More, better and free public services – for everyone, not just the very poor – would certainly make it easier to live on lower levels of earned income. But this would depend very largely on increasing tax revenues, which is unlikely as we have noted. Co-production offers a way of improving



some services while constraining costs, and shorter working hours are intended to free up time to enable people to play a bigger part in defining and meeting their needs. Co-production could be part of the solution, but it will take time to develop and can probably be integrated more easily with some services than with others.

- *More uncommodified activity and consumption.* Perhaps a more promising avenue to explore is how far the need for earned income can be reduced by paying for less – through taxation as well as through individual spending. This means doing more things ourselves, using time freed from paid employment. We could grow, prepare, preserve, and cook more of our own food, repair things more often rather than replace them, travel more by foot and bicycle, learn practical skills and make clothes and furnishings, use leisure time for activities that require little or no commodified equipment, such as making music, art and theatre, gardening, walking and playing games. We could do things with and for each other that we might otherwise have to buy – exchanging knowledge and skills, running errands and caring in ways that have been tried and tested for generations through mutual aid schemes and timebanks.<sup>90</sup> More formally, some public services can be transformed by involving people directly in co-producing their own well-being, so that services and the people intended to benefit from them would depend less on tax revenues and more on uncommodified exchange.

### **3 Improving gender relations and the quality of family life**

Reducing paid working hours will give people more time to spend with their families, friends, and neighbours. But this will not guarantee any improvement in the balance of power and opportunity between women and men, or in the quality of family life. There is a limit to how far public policy can intervene in people's domestic arrangements, but certain measures may help to ensure that the move towards 21 hours has positive rather than negative impacts on gender relations and family life.

- More flexible employment conditions to encourage more equal distribution of unpaid work between women and men, particularly extended paid parental leave for fathers with entitlements to time off to look after sick children, attend school meetings, etc.
- Universal, high-quality childcare that dovetails with paid working time.
- More job-sharing, including sharing between spouses and partners.
- Limits on overtime, to spread opportunities for employment and discourage men from doing long hours of paid work while women do more unpaid work at home.
- Flexible retirement to enable people to go on earning for longer while working much shorter hours.
- Stronger measures enforcing equal pay and opportunity in paid work.
- More jobs in caring and primary school teaching for men to help change attitudes about what is 'naturally' men's work and what is 'naturally' women's work, and to give more children experience of men as role models in caring and teaching.
- More childcare and play schemes, organised through time banks and other co-produced models of care for children, to ensure that children have opportunities to meet and play with other children outside the home.
- More co-produced care for disabled adults, so that they and their carers are not isolated, and so that the caring can be more widely shared.
- More opportunities for local activities to build neighbourhoods that people of all ages feel safe in and enjoy.

## 4 Changing norms and expectations

We tend to think that social norms are deeply entrenched and very hard to shift, but there are plenty of examples of attitudes changing dramatically over the course of just a few years. Examples include ending the slave trade and slavery, giving votes to women, passing laws enforcing equal pay and opportunity, wearing crash helmets and seatbelts, corresponding by email, using mobile phones, not smoking in bars and restaurants, and seeing global warming as a serious man-made threat to the planet. They also include eating processed foods, seeing unfettered global markets and escalating growth as the key to human prosperity, and having television as the main source of family entertainment. In each case, the weight of public opinion shifted quite suddenly from one end of the spectrum (outrage, antipathy or indifference) to the other (acceptance, approval, staunch support), and reversing the change soon became inconceivable. This usually occurred when certain things coincided: new evidence, strong campaigning, and changing circumstances. Sometimes a sense of crisis can help to tip the weight of opinion – for example, to accept rationing in wartime or to see it as a fine thing to nationalise the banks after the credit crunch. We may be a long way from the point where majority opinion tips towards favouring much shorter hours in paid work. That said, there is a growing body of evidence about the environmental, social, and economic benefits of shorter working hours. Circumstances are changing as carbon reduction becomes an increasingly urgent focus of national and international politics, and as the idea of economic 'business as usual' becomes less and less tenable. While this report may help to inform campaigning for a shorter working week, other measures are also needed. These include:

- Developing a more egalitarian culture; for example, by reducing income inequalities and improving public services as discussed above.
- Raising awareness of the value of unpaid labour; for example, by pricing it according to the minimum wage and publishing national accounts.
- Strong government support for uncommodified activities, including co-production and local exchange schemes – through research and development, and through commissioning for public services.
- A national debate about how we use, value, and distribute work and time.

### In conclusion

We are at the beginning of a national debate. This report makes the case for a substantial reduction in paid working hours, aiming towards 21 hours a week as the norm. The current norm of a nine-to-five, five-day week in paid employment does not reflect the way most people use their time. Unpaid work is generally overlooked and undervalued. A much shorter working week offers very considerable benefits to the environment, to society, and to the economy. There are serious problems to confront in the transition from where we are to where we want to be: they are mainly concerned with the impact on earnings and on employers' balance sheets. We have set out suggestions for addressing these problems, acknowledging that an important pre-condition is a strong democracy and an effective and accountable government. Our suggestions include ways of incentivising employers, compensating lost earnings, sharing unpaid time more equally between women and men, and changing the climate of opinion. None of these options will work on its own and there are doubtless many more possibilities. The next step is to make a thorough examination of the benefits, challenges, barriers, and opportunities associated with moving towards a 21-hour week over the next decade. This will be part of the 'Great Transition' to a sustainable future.

# Appendix

## Time spent on main activities with rates of participation by gender, 2005

Main activity	Male		Female		All	
	Hours/Day	%	Hours/Day	%	Hours/Day	%
Doing housework	1.7	7	3.0	12	2.3	10
Cooking, washing up	0.44	26.7	0.91	30.5	0.68	29.2
Cleaning, tidying	0.22	13.2	0.79	26.6	0.52	22.0
Washing clothes	0.06	3.9	0.31	10.3	0.19	8.1
Shopping, appointments	0.44	26.7	0.67	22.4	0.56	23.9
Repairs and gardening	0.38	23.0	0.19	6.4	0.28	12.1
Pet care	0.11	6.5	0.11	3.8	0.11	4.7
Providing care	0.43	2	0.77	3	0.61	3
Childcare	0.37	86.2	0.70	91.3	0.54	89.5
Adultcare	0.06	13.8	0.07	8.7	0.06	10.5
Neighbour-based activities	1.4	6	1.6	7	1.5	6
Voluntary work	0.05	3.9	0.06	3.6	0.06	3.7
Spending time with family/friends	1.28	93.0	1.45	92.7	1.37	92.8
Attending religious and other meetings	0.04	3.2	0.06	3.7	0.05	3.5
Paid work	5.0	21	3.6	15	4.3	18
Paid work	3.5	69.5	2.2	61.7	2.8	66.2
Travel	1.5	30.5	1.4	38.3	1.4	51.1
Study	0.24	1	0.24	1	0.24	1
Personal needs	10.9	45	11.2	47	11.1	46
Sleep	8.1	74.2	8.3	73.9	8.2	74.1
Rest	0.7	6.5	0.8	7.2	0.8	6.9
Personal care	0.7	6.2	0.8	7.2	0.7	6.7
Eating and drinking	1.4	13.0	1.3	11.8	1.4	12.4
Leisure time	4.3	18	3.7	15	4.0	17
TV and videos/DVDs, radio, music	2.83	65.4	2.41	65.5	2.61	65.5
Reading	0.38	8.7	0.44	11.8	0.41	10.2
Sport and outdoor activities	0.22	5.0	0.11	3.0	0.16	4.0
Entertainment and culture	0.08	1.8	0.09	2.5	0.08	2.1
Hobbies	0.36	8.4	0.28	7.5	0.32	8.0
Using a computer	0.25	5.7	0.11	3.0	0.18	4.4
Other specified/not specified	0.22	5.0	0.25	6.8	0.23	5.8
<b>Total Day</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>100%</b>

Sources: ONS – Time Use Survey (2005)

\* 16–64 for males; 16–59 for females

# Endnotes

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This report is part of **THE GREAT TRANSITION** ∞

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