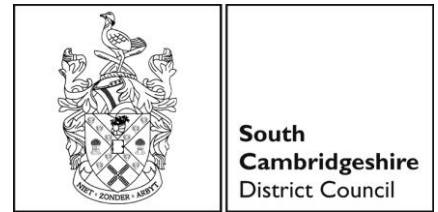


South Cambridgeshire Hall
Cambourne Business Park
Cambourne
Cambridge
CB23 6EA

t: 01954 713000
f: 01954 713149

www.scambs.gov.uk



14 November 2023

To: Chair – Councillor Peter Fane
Vice-Chair – Councillor Peter Sandford
All Members of the Council

Quorum: 15

Dear Councillor

This is a supplement to the previously-published agenda for the meeting of **Council** on **Monday, 20 November 2023**, containing those reports which had not been received by the original publication deadline.

Yours faithfully

Liz Watts

Chief Executive

Agenda

4. **Best Value Notice**

**Pages
3 - 38**

As per Council Standing Order 3.1 'Calling extraordinary meetings', the Chair of the Council has called an extraordinary meeting of Council to consider the following business:

"This Extraordinary Council is to discuss the subject of the Best Value Notice received by South Cambridgeshire District Council on 3 November 2023."

This page is left blank intentionally.

Agenda Item 4



**South
Cambridgeshire**
District Council

Report to:	Extraordinary Council	20 November 2023
Lead Cabinet Member:	Cllr Bridget Smith (Leader)	
Lead Officer:	Anne Ainsworth Chief Operating Officer	

Best Value Notice

Executive Summary

1. This report updates members on the Best Value Notice received from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, on 3 November 2023 and the proposed response by the Council.

Recommendations

2. To note the report and agree that the Council engage with DLUHC to provide the data requested.

Reasons for Recommendations

3. To ensure all members are sighted on the Best Value notice and have an opportunity to comment on the proposed response by the Council.

Details

4. On 3 November 2023 the Council received a Best Value notice from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). The notice is attached at Appendix A. Alongside the notice, a letter was received from the Minister which is attached at Appendix B. This followed two previous letters received from Minister Lee Rowley, on 30 June and 5 September 2023, asking the Council to voluntarily stop the Four Day Week trial. These are referenced at Appendix C and E. The Leader of the Council responded to the Minister on 1 July 2023, attached at Appendix D, and the Chief Executive responded to the Department on 12 September 2023, attached as Appendix F.
5. DLUHC also issued non-statutory guidance on the four-day week to all councils on 26 October 2023, which is referenced at Appendix G.

6. It is understood that Minister Rowley also wrote to each individual member of the Council on 6 November, and this letter is referenced at Appendix H.

7. Best Value Notices

8. The Best Value Duty relates to the statutory requirement for local authorities and other public bodies defined as best value authorities in Part 1 of the Local Government Act 1999 (“the 1999 Act”) to “make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness”. The Council is a Best Value local authority.

9. Best Value authorities must demonstrate good governance, including a positive organisational culture, across all their functions and effective risk management.

10. Appendix K sets out the Best Value notices issued this year by the Government.

11. The Best Value Notice received by the Council

12. The Council received a Best Value Notice dated 3 November 2023 from Max Soule, who is a civil servant in The Department of Levelling Up Housing and Communities (‘DLUHC’). The notice describes itself as *“issued outside the statutory powers.... under the Local Government Act 1999 to inspect or intervene in Local Authorities where there is evidence of Best Value failure and under Section 230 of the Local Government Act 1972”*.

13. In other words, no legislation has been relied upon to issue this notice; it is simply a request for data.

14. Neither the Local Government Act 1999 nor the Local Government Act 1972 refer to a “best value notice”. DLUHC Guidance (July 2023) refers to “early engagement”, about which the Guidance says (para35):

“The purpose of this form of early engagement is to prevent any challenges experienced by the local authority from escalating by seeing how the authority is engaging with, or plans to engage with, sector support and identifying what form of additional support (if any) is needed. Local authorities demonstrating early indications of failure may also be invited to discuss their arrangements for securing continuous improvement with the minister responsible for local government. Where sufficient assurance is not provided, the department may write formally to obtain assurance that the authority is taking steps to manage its challenges. This may include the formal issuance of a Best Value Notice, the models for which are set out below.”

15. A “non-statutory Best Value Notice” referred to in the 3 November 2023 Best Value Notice, is a civil servant writing to express concerns. While the Guidance states that the Best Value Notice “will normally remain in place for 12 months” and can be “withdrawn or escalated at any point on the available evidence”, the notice received by the Council states that it will remain in place for six months, ‘to

cover the remainder of the trial and allow for further data analysis'. The notice could then be reissued, should the Department deem it necessary.

16. Data requested by DLUHC

17. The data request from DLUHC was received on 8 November, although the clock only started ticking on the requirement to make returns when the data request was posted on the DLUHC portal.
18. The request is in two parts. The first part is weekly returns on staffing, costs, service delivery, performance against a range of SCDC's Key Performance Indicators and resident feedback. The second part is retrospective data on staff, costs, service delivery and performance against a range of SCDC's Key Performance Indicators from 2018/19 to 2022/23, as well as: qualitative data about the cost of the trial; improvements outside of the trial; Annual Governance Statements; HR policies that have been implemented to address recruitment; retention and wellbeing challenges outside of the trial; and our Flexible working policy. The second part needs to be completed by 8 December. The data requests are referenced at Appendix I and J.
19. Initially officers have worked to address the weekly data request. Some of the data sets are routinely collected and assessed monthly (for example as KPIs or as Business Performance Indicators). The impact of extracting and reporting this data weekly depends on the systems being used and whether further manual checking or analysis is required. For example, weekly planning data can typically be extracted more readily than finance data; accounting systems are configured for monthly reporting. Some of the data requested is provided for us by contractors (for example Mears) and the feasibility and cost of doing so on a weekly basis is being assessed. Some data does not exist (for example business rates are not due weekly) and we are also seeking clarification of some of the request which appears onerous (logs of every email to the council, including response time and outcome). We are seeking clarification of the request, where relevant suggesting more meaningful monthly returns, and will record the resources used to fulfil these. A further update will be provided at the meeting.

Options

1. To note the report and agree that the Council engage with DLUHC to provide the data requested. This is the recommended option.
2. The Council could refuse to respond to the data request.
3. The Council could request the Best Value Notice to be withdrawn on the proviso that the Four Day Week trial is stopped before March 2024, noting that time would be required to bring the trial to an end. There is no guarantee that DLUHC would agree to this request.

Implications

20. In the writing of this report, taking into account financial, legal, staffing, risk, equality and diversity, climate change, and any other key issues, the following implications have been considered:-

Financial

21. There will inevitably be a cost to supplying the data and this is yet to be quantified.

Legal

22. This is a non-statutory notice; there are no specific legal implications.

Staffing

23. There will inevitably be additional demands on some colleagues to collate and provide data; which may have an impact on productivity and costs still to be quantified.

Risks/Opportunities

24. The Four Day Week Trial is on the Corporate Risk Register. In the short time that there has been to prepare this report, a full analysis of the risks created by the Best Value Notice has not been undertaken. However, the Best Value Notice states that “a failure to demonstrate continuous improvement may be judged to contribute to Best Value failure and the Secretary of State will consider using these powers as appropriate” (See Appendix A).

Equality and Diversity

25. Equality and Diversity data has been requested as part of the data returns.

Alignment with Council Priority Areas

A modern and caring Council

26. The Council is expected to respond to a request for data from DLUCH and this is the proposed course of action.

Appendices

Appendix A: Best Value Letter received on 3 November 2023

Appendix B: Minister Lee Rowley's letter of 3 November 2023

Appendix C: Minister Lee Rowley's letter of 30 June 2023

Appendix D: Leader of the Council 1 July letter

Appendix E: Minister Lee Rowley's letter of 5 September 2023

Appendix F: Chief Executive's letter of 12 September 2023 to the Department

Appendix G: Minister Lee Rowley's letter to all councils with non-statutory guidance

Appendix H: Letter from Minister Lee Rowley to Councillors

Appendix I: Weekly data request

Appendix J: Retrospective data request

Appendix K: Best Value notices issued this year.

Report Author:

John Murphy- Deputy Head of Legal 3C and Monitoring Officer

Telephone: (01223) 457194

This page is left blank intentionally.



Department for Levelling Up,
Housing & Communities

Max Soule
*Deputy Director, Local
Government Stewardship*

Liz Watts
Chief Executive
South Cambridgeshire District Council

*Department for Levelling Up,
Housing and Communities*
4th Floor, Fry Building
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF
www.gov.uk/dluhc

3 November 2023

South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) Best Value Notice issued on 3 November 2023

The Department expects authorities to identify and implement arrangements to secure continuous improvement. Ministers are concerned as to SCDC's compliance with its Best Value Duty under the Local Government Act 1999. The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State has therefore made the decision to issue SCDC with this Best Value Notice ("Notice").

This Notice is a formal notification that the Department has concerns regarding an authority and is a request that the authority engages with the Department to provide assurance of improvement.

This Notice is issued to SCDC ('the Authority') following concerns about its trial of a 'four-day working week'. These concerns were highlighted in Minister Rowley's letters to the Leader of SCDC dated 30 June and 5 September, which also requested that the Authority ends the trial, and are supported by guidance on four-day working week arrangements in local authorities issued by the Department on 26 October. Concerns include that:

- Given the insistence of the Council that it will continue the trial contrary to the guidance issued, the Council is not fully analysing the impacts of the trial on services or the productivity of its workforce.
- The removal of up to a fifth of the capacity of the Council means that it is unlikely, in aggregate, for it to be able to support continuous improvement.
- In insisting on continuing the trial, the working arrangements chosen by South Cambridgeshire could impact on the delivery of its Best Value Duty.

If South Cambridgeshire chooses to continue with this trial following receipt of this letter, the Department is now formally requesting additional detail on its impact, both on individual employee productivity, the Council and the provision of services as a

whole. Ministers are clear that they expect the Authority must now demonstrate to the Department how it is delivering its Best Value Duty, by:

- providing robust evidence of the impacts of the trial on services offered to residents and on the organisation itself
- setting out how it is evaluating Best Value in relation to the trial, specifically:
 - to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness
 - that it has in place and properly deploys an effective internal control environment to safeguard the use of resources, and clear and effective processes to secure value for money
 - that human resources and fixed assets are managed efficiently and effectively
- working with an independent expert in considering data and making assessments about impacts and Best Value
- responding to the Department's requests for information fully and promptly

A data form will follow shortly after receipt of this letter. We request that this is completed and returned on a weekly basis starting one week from its receipt. This form seeks data on staffing, costs, service delivery, performance against a range of relevant KPIs, and resident feedback. It also allows for qualitative information, including around how decisions about the trial have been reached and any other policies the Council has introduced or is exploring to address recruitment, retention and wellbeing challenges with an appraisal of their impact. The Department also requests the data form to be completed on a retrospective basis, within one month of the date of receipt. Should it be necessary, based on our initial evaluation of the data you provide, we reserve the right to request further information to ensure a proper evaluation takes place.

This Notice will remain in place for 6 months, to cover the remainder of the current trial and allow for further data analysis. After this time, should the Department deem it necessary to continue to seek assurance through such a Notice, the Notice will be reissued. The Notice may be withdrawn or escalated at any point based on the available evidence.

This Notice is issued outside the statutory powers held by the Secretary of State under the Local Government Act 1999 to inspect or intervene in local authorities where there is evidence of Best Value failure and, separately, under section 230 of the Local Government Act 1972 to request information from local authorities. However, a failure to demonstrate continuous improvement may be judged to contribute to Best Value failure and the Secretary of State will consider using these powers as appropriate.

It is important to ensure transparency in relation to the challenges faced by local authorities and the Department's engagement on these. A copy of this Notice will therefore be published on gov.uk. It has also been copied to your Section 151 officer and Monitoring Officer. I encourage you to make a copy of this Notice available on the Authority's website, and to share a copy with the full Council and the audit committee. In line with this, we will notify your external auditor of this action.

We also expect the Authority to engage regularly with the Department during the period of the Notice. A member of my team will be in touch with you to make arrangements. I look forward to receiving updates on your progress.

We will continue our discussion with Cambridge City Council on their policy and workforce choices separately to this specific correspondence.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Max Soule', written in a cursive style.

Max Soule
Deputy Director, Local Government Stewardship

This page is left blank intentionally.



Department for Levelling Up,
Housing & Communities

Lee Rowley MP

*Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Local
Government and Building Safety*
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

Councillor Bridget Smith
South Cambridgeshire Hall
Cambourne Business Park
Cambourne
Cambridge
CB23 6EA

3 November 2023

Dear Councillor Smith,

I am writing to inform you that the Department has today issued a 'Best Value Notice' ('Notice') to South Cambridgeshire District Council as a result of your introduction of a policy to offer full time pay for part time work (known as 'the 4-day work week'). The Notice has been published on gov.uk.

I have now written to you twice to express my profound concerns about the experiment you are undertaking with taxpayers' money in South Cambridgeshire. You have chosen to ignore my requests on both occasions. Last week, we issued guidance clearly stating that the Department does not support the use of the so-called '4-day working week' in the local government sector. I understand you have confirmed your intention to ignore that guidance, too. As a result of your actions, the Department is consequently taking the first formal step in a process to protect taxpayer value for money in South Cambridgeshire.

This Notice is a formal notification that the Department has concerns regarding an authority and is a request that your authority engages with the Department to provide assurance of Best Value. I hope that this Best Value Notice will cause you to immediately reconsider, and end, your experimentation with taxpayers' money. Should you not do so, however, we reserve the right to take further action in due course.

As part of this Notice, we are also formally requesting greater disclosure by your Council on the impact of your actions and policies in the regrettable event that you continue this policy following the serving of this Notice. You will have seen questions that have been raised in recent months regarding the so-called independent evaluation which you commissioned on your initial trial. I also note that concerning allegations have been made about the level of influence that the Council had over an independent report, including potentially removing elements of it before publication. Consequently, I do not have confidence that you are evaluating this experiment in the level of detail, or with the level of rigour, that would be expected. There is, for example, no attempt on your part to publicly offer an evaluation of the individual productivity of your employees, controlled against actual hours work and other considerations. These are basic assessments which are missing from your trial. Consequently, we now formally request that you submit, on a weekly basis from next week, full information to the Department covering a wide range of measures including staffing, costs, service delivery, performance against a range of relevant KPIs and resident feedback. Retrospective data is also being requested to establish a clearer baseline than the evaluations which you have so far commissioned.

As Leader of your Council, you have a clear responsibility to seek continuous improvement of South Cambridge District Council. It is highly regrettable that you are choosing to ignore the Government's clear guidance on this area of policy and that we have, consequently, had to issue this Best Value

Notice. We reserve the right to take further action, as necessary, in the weeks and months ahead to protect taxpayer value for money in South Cambridgeshire.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Lee', is centered on the page.

LEE ROWLEY MP
Minister for Local Government & Building Safety



Department for Levelling Up,
Housing & Communities

Lee Rowley MP

*Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Local
Government and Building Safety*

**Department for Levelling Up, Housing and
Communities**

2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

Cllr Bridget Smith
The Leader - South Cambridgeshire District
Council

30 June 2023

Dear Cllr Smith,

I am writing to express my concerns regarding the extension of South Cambridgeshire's 'four-day working week' trial until the end of March 2024 and to request formally that you end this experiment immediately.

As I am sure you are aware, all Councils are expected to ensure that finite and valuable taxpayers' money is used in a way which demonstrates value for money – something which paying employees for an extra day of work that is not carried out is unlikely to demonstrate. I strongly believe in the ability of Councils to innovate and find new ways to discharge their responsibilities – yet, removing up to 20% of the capacity to do those activities is not something which should be acceptable for a council seeking to demonstrate value for money for its taxpayers and residents.

Whilst some private sector organisations may choose to experiment with their own capital and capacity regarding '4-day working weeks', local government should not do the same. Continuous improvement should be central to how a local authority structures its operating model and removing up to a fifth of capacity is unlikely, in aggregate, to be able to support this. Such working arrangements should not be adopted and could impact on your 'Best Value Duty' as required by the Local Government Act 1999, should it be continued. I would ask that you end your experiment immediately.

The Department will shortly be issuing clear guidance for the sector on the idea of a 'four-day working week'. In addition, and whilst I hope it will not be necessary to pursue further, the Department is also exploring other, even clearer indicators to ensure that the sector is clear that this innovation should not be pursued.

I look forward to your confirmation that South Cambridgeshire will be returning to established norms around local government workforce capacity in the coming weeks ahead.

Yours ever,

LEE ROWLEY MP

This page is left blank intentionally.



Minister Lee Rowley MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Local Government and Building Safety
Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

Email: cllr.bridgetsmith@scambs.gov.uk

1 July 2023

Dear Minister Rowley

I was surprised to receive your letter regarding the Council's trial of a four-day week and would like to request a meeting with Ministers to discuss this matter.

South Cambridgeshire has struggled for many years to recruit and retain staff. It is a very expensive place to live, and the job market is incredibly buoyant. Although the Council had implemented several measures to address this issue, last year we could only recruit to 80% of our vacancies, and in one quarter, only 50%. The problem is even worse when considering high skill areas such as Planning. The Council was regularly losing well trained employees to the private sector. This was the primary reason that the Council decided to trial a four-day week for all desk-based colleagues, between January and March 2023.

The independently assessed evidence of the initial three-month trial was presented to our Cabinet in May. Key Performance Indicators from across the Council were analysed by a research team at Cambridge University's Bennett Institute for Public Policy. They said that performance was maintained at the level shortly before the trial, while some areas of performance data saw significant improvement compared to recent data. They also said there were no serious outliers that require concern.

Prior to the four-day week trial, the Council was carrying a £2 million agency staff bill to cover 23 permanent roles we were finding it hard to recruit to. Most of these posts are in the Planning Service where an agency worker (including fees) costs approximately twice the amount a permanent employee costs. Four roles have been recruited to during the trial which has reduced the annual bill by £300,000. There are wider non-financial savings associated with a reduction in agency staff – especially in services like Planning where consistency of staff is vital to the smooth processing of planning applications. As time goes on it is becoming increasingly clear that recruitment has been positively affected, both in terms of the quality and number of applicants, and the consequent success in filling vacant posts.

We continue to improve the council's ability to provide high quality, consistent, resilient services, and save taxpayer money.

Please find through this link the evidence we considered at our Cabinet meeting on 15 May when we agreed to extend the trial to the end of March 2024 – [4dw to May 2023 Cabinet.pdf \(modern.gov.co.uk\)](#).

I look forward to hearing from you and the opportunity to meet to discuss this matter more fully.

Yours sincerely



Cllr Bridget Smith
Leader, South Cambridgeshire District Council



Department for Levelling Up,
Housing & Communities

Lee Rowley MP

*Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Local
Government and Building Safety*
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

Councillor Bridget Smith
South Cambridgeshire District Council

5 September 2023

Dear Councillor Smith,

Thank you for your letter dated 1 July 2023.

Whilst I acknowledge the further explanation you have provided, the Government's position remains as outlined in June: we do not support so-called '4-day weeks' in local government and I request again that you voluntarily end your experiment with taxpayers' money immediately.

The Government takes a first principles position on this matter: this is a contested area of workplace-related policy, could impact the ability of councils to deliver their clear 'best value' duties.

Your current position appears to draw heavily on an external evaluation report which asserts that the trial has been a "success"^[1]. To a lay person reading that report, and reviewing at least some of the Council's own performance indicators during your first trial of this change, that is a somewhat curious conclusion to draw:

- The Council continued to miss its own target to re-let housing stock on every month of the trial;
- The Council saw a reduction in the number of calls answered by its call centre – and the number, when answered, that were resolved first time;
- That South Cambridgeshire residents had to wait longer for those calls to be answered by your call centre during the trial;
- The Council missed its own target to collect rent from its housing tenants on one month of the trial – something which would have been two months if the Council hadn't amended its own target downwards;
- The Council missed its own target to collect council tax from ratepayers in two of the three months of the trial;
- The Council saw a significant increase in the time taken to process housing benefit claims and changes, and;
- The Council's own target for housing repair satisfaction was missed.

I am further surprised by some of the narrative in the evaluation report which seeks to posit non-'4 day working week' reasons for these changes without offering a strong evidential basis for doing so; assertions which, to an average reader, might question the independence of the whole report.

At the start of your decision-making process, I note that Cllr Williams' 12 September 2022 report to Cabinet clearly stated that a measure of success would be that the Council was able to "show that there had been no adverse impact on performance"^[2]. When residents don't get houses as quickly as they should, when residents can't resolve their issues as rapidly as they have previously been

^[1] <https://www.scambs.gov.uk/your-council-and-democracy/four-day-working-week-trial/>

^[2] <https://scambs.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s128377/Trialing%20a%20four-day%20week%20at%20the%20Council%20-%20Report%20for%20Cabinet.pdf>

able and when they have to wait longer for important benefits payments to be processed, that would not, in the view of many, constitute a “success”.

Thus, I reiterate again, as I did in my letter of 30 June: the role of a Council is to secure continuous improvement. The removal of up to a fifth of the Council’s operating capacity seems unlikely, in aggregate, to be able to support this. This experiment should end.

On an associated matter, I also note that the Council did not appear to run any form of formal consultation on this proposal before its decision to begin a trial in September 2022, nor in its extension on 15 May 2023. This could be seen as irregular, particularly given the highly atypical nature and significance of this proposal. The Council will, I am sure, be aware of its duties under the Local Government Act 1999 and that failure to consult properly on key decisions may expose the Council to legal proceedings which, if pursued by another body, would likely cost taxpayers of your Authority significant funds if defended. Given the potential for serious questions to be asked about the nature of the decision-making process undertaken on this matter to date, this would appear to be another reason for the immediate cessation of this experiment.

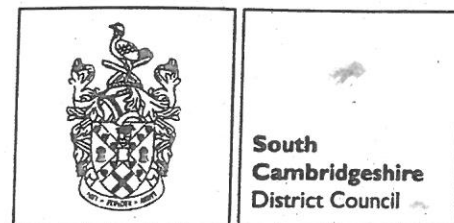
Finally, and whilst we remain hopeful that it will not be necessary, I wish to reiterate that we are currently considering other financial options available to us regarding ending ‘4-day weeks’ in the local government sector, should it remain necessary to do more later in the Autumn. We will be announcing further details in due course, should they still be necessary.

It is time for this experiment to end. I look forward to your rapid confirmation that you will do so.

Yours sincerely,



LEE ROWLEY MP



REDACTED

Local Government, Resilience and Communities
Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.
2 Marsham Street
London W1P 4DF

By email:

Our ref:
12 September 2023

Corporate
Contact: Liz Watts
Email: liz.watts@scambs.gov.uk

Dear

I write to follow up on the letter to Cllr Bridget Smith from Minister Lee Rowley MP, received on 5 September. The Minister suggests that the data in the Cabinet report from May 2023 raises questions about the Council's performance being maintained through the 3-month trial.

The main goal of the four-day week trial is to address the persistent and intractable recruitment and retention issues that we face in Greater Cambridge, particularly in our Planning Service, as it supports one of the most important research and innovation employment locations in the UK. Expensive agency staff cost the Council significant amounts of money and reduce service quality due to lack of consistency. The 3-month trial was a test to see if we could maintain performance, in order that we could undertake a longer, year-long trial – to address the issue of recruitment and retention.

The Council sets ambitious stretch targets to keep us on a path of continuous improvement and uses a variety of benchmarking data from other councils and sectors. Taking data out of context can be misleading. When Ministers received advice about the trial it does not appear to have considered wider performance trends for the Council and the sector or taken into account positive policy changes from government and SCDC which affected the data.

Missed target to re-let housing stock on every month of the trial

Although we missed our internal target of 17 days during the 3-month trial, this is *very much a stretch target*, aimed at creating continual improvement within the service. Statistics from Housemark, the social housing benchmarking group, show that within our peer group of similar providers, the *upper quartile for re-let times is 32.6 days*. To be clear, we are performing way above the average for how councils perform in this area.

Reduction in the number of calls answered by the Contact Centre, and the number, when answered, that were resolved first time

January, February, and March are generally our busiest months. In January and February, we continued to exceed our target of 90% before a slight reduction in March, when an additional 3,000 more calls were received compared with February (due to Council Tax bills landing on doormats and the introduction of a Mayoral precept, resulting in calls about a relatively complex and novel matter linked to funding buses). Our 2023 Q1 (June, July, and August) results are above our target for all three months and better than the average for all monthly results since 2016.

Had to wait longer for those calls to be answered by your call centre during the trial.

Call waits always have peaks and troughs, depending on the time of year and issues that arise. This is a matter that we do keep under close and regular review. Our target of answering calls within 100 seconds (i.e., under two minutes) is another stretch target. However, call answer times in the quarter being referred to were generally within levels we would expect for the time of year, and improved slightly in Q1 2023/24.

Missed rent collection target on one month of the trial – something which would have been 2 months if the Council had not amended its own target downwards

Our housing rent collection targets have not been amended. We exceeded the target in January but were 0.12% and 0.04% below target in February and March, respectively. This was due to the timing of payments hitting rent accounts. The actual collection rate for 22/23 (including payments made on the last day of March but received after year end) met the target, and targets have been exceeded throughout Q1 of 2023/24.

Council Tax collection targets missed

Our end of year collection rate for the 2022-23 financial year placed us as the *joint top performing District Council for Council Tax Collection in the country*. While the target was missed in January and February, this was due to our flexibility in allowing people to spread payments across 12 rather than 10 months of the year, due to the cost-of-living crisis.

Increase in the time taken to process Housing Benefit Claims and Changes

The average number of days to process new Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support claims remained within our 15-day target timescale. The average number of days to process changes also remained comfortably within timescale. The slight increase in processing times during these months is a regular trend that is seen as we approach each year end. Benchmarking data places us *23rd out of 178 District Councils in the Country* for processing of new Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support claims Q4 of 2022/23 – comfortably within top quartile. For Benefits changes, we also performed better than our target.

Housing Repair Target Missed

Although our own internal target of 97% was missed, benchmarking data from 171 social housing providers shows that satisfaction rates of 93% and above equate to *top quartile performance for the sector*.

Although our performance during the three-month trial was at 92% satisfaction, the latest data published for this week's Scrutiny and Overview Committee puts the figure at 96%. It is also worth noting that this target relates to the performance by an external contractor.

The Council continues to open Monday – Friday, and as a result of new working patterns has been able to trial *extending its opening hours* to provide an early evening service for our customers one day a week.

Finally, in terms of addressing the main goal of solving our recruitment and retention crisis, we believe we are making good progress. As reported to 15 September 2023 Employment and Staffing committee¹, we have now recruited to 9 of the 23 hard to fill posts (saving £550,000 annually). As mentioned above, a full complement of permanent employees is key to our continuous improvement journey. It is too early to draw a firm conclusion yet. That's why we believe it is important that we continue the trial and review the evidence after one year. Cllr Smith is still keen to meet Minister Rowley to discuss the evidence emerging from the trial.

Yours sincerely,



Liz Watts
Chief Executive

¹ [HR Stats June -July 23 2023 v2.pdf \(moderngov.co.uk\)](#)

This page is left blank intentionally.



Department for Levelling Up,
Housing & Communities

Lee Rowley MP
*Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Local
Government and Building Safety*

**Department for Levelling Up, Housing and
Communities**
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

26 October 2023

Dear Council Leaders and Chief Executives,

PUBLICATION OF LOCAL AUTHORITY FOUR-DAY WORKING WEEK GUIDANCE

I am writing to you today as the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities publishes guidance to the sector regarding the use of part-time work for full-time pay (otherwise referred to as the four-day working week) in the local government sector in England.

Local government plays a pivotal role in the delivery of core public services. In normal circumstances, the Government of course respects the right of councils to make their own decisions on key issues and, as a former Councillor, I strongly believe in the ability of local authorities to innovate and find new ways to discharge their responsibilities. There are also times, however, when it is proportionate for Government to take a view on what is happening in the sector in order to protect value for money for residents. The issue of the four-day working week is one of those times.

Asking the taxpayer to shoulder the full-time expense for part time hours by deleting 20% of the working week is not compatible with a council's requirement to demonstrate value for money. The publication of this guidance today makes unambiguously clear that the Government does not, and will not, support the use of part-time work for full-time pay by local authorities.

Those councils which are continuing to pursue the four-day working week are, in my view, letting down the sector as a whole. It would be a massive shame for the sector's strong and long-standing track record as a whole on effectiveness, efficiency and value for money to be undermined by the ideological actions of a few. As a consequence, should those individual councils continue to disregard this advice, the Government is clear that it will take the necessary steps in the months ahead until it is heeded.

The full guidance can be viewed here: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/four-day-working-week-arrangements-in-local-authorities>.

Yours sincerely,

LEE ROWLEY MP

This page is left blank intentionally.



Department for Levelling Up,
Housing & Communities

Lee Rowley MP

*Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Local
Government and Building Safety*
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

6 November 2023

Dear Councillors,

I am writing today to remind you of your personal duties, as a Councillor, to ensure that the Authority upon which you serve fulfils its Best Value duties.

Under the Local Government Act 1999, all Authorities must make arrangements to “secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.” (Section 3).

As elected Councillors, you are all responsible for ensuring the Council delivers against its Best Value Duty.

On 26 October 2023, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities issued guidance which clearly outlines its expectation that councils will not adopt the operation of part time work for full time pay (otherwise known as the ‘4-day working week’). That expectation applies to South Cambridgeshire District Council.

I have attempted to engage the Leader of your Council on several occasions over recent months to highlight our concerns about this ideological experiment. That has now resulted in South Cambridgeshire District Council being only one of a small number of councils in the entire country served with a Best Value Notice because of our concern about your actions. To date, this policy has not yet been changed. It is important that the Department is clear with your Council, as a corporate body, and with you all, as elected representatives of that body, that we will take all necessary action to protect taxpayer value for money in South Cambridgeshire. I would urge you to review this policy with urgency and to immediately end an approach which is now clearly contrary to the expectations of the Department.

Yours sincerely,

LEE ROWLEY MP
Minister for Local Government & Building Safety

This page is left blank intentionally.

Four-day week data collection – Weekly data collection

Introduction

The Department requests that SCDC completes the following **weekly data collection**. The form requests ongoing data on: staffing, costs, service delivery, performance against a range of SCDC's KPIs, and resident feedback.

As stated in the Best Value Notice, the Department requests that this form is completed and returned on a weekly basis starting one week from its receipt. To allow time to gather the relevant information, each weekly submission should correspond to the weekly period two weeks prior to the date of submission.

Please note that **no personal data** should be provided in this form.

Section 1: Organisational data

- Number of staff employed by the organisation during the trial, broken down for each local authority department and team taking part in the trial.
- Number of temporary staff (temporary or agency) in the organisation during the trial, broken down by each local authority department and team taking part in the trial.
- Total staffing costs during the trial, broken down by each local authority department and team taking part in the trial. This will cover both staff employed by the organisation and temporary or agency staff.
- Contracted hours for staff during the trial and actual number of hours worked during the trial, broken down by working pattern.
- Breakdown of all staff taking part in the trial, as well as overall for the organisation (include both temporary and permanent staff) by protected characteristic, where known
- Total number of days lost due to staff sickness during the trial, broken down by each local authority department and team taking part in the trial (include both temporary and permanent staff).
- Percentage of vacant roles during the trial, broken down by each local authority department and team taking part in the trial.
- Percentage of advertised roles successfully filled during the trial, broken down by each local authority department and team taking part in the trial.
- Percentage of all staff employed by the organisation who left during the trial (turnover rate), broken down by each local authority department and team taking part in the trial.

Section 2: Service information

- Operational opening hours for contact centres and other areas taking part in the trial.
- Logs of calls to contact centres and other areas taking part in the trial, this should include call answer time and outcomes of calls. Please ensure that no personal data is included.
- Number of in-person visits to contact centres and other areas taking part in the trial.
- Logs of emails to areas taking part in the trial, including response times and outcomes. Please ensure that no personal data is included.
- Forecast and actual revenue spend for each service area taking part in the trial.
- Forecast and actual capital spend for each service area taking part in the trial.

Section 3: SCDC KPIs

This section will ask for weekly data on a range of SCDC's KPIs, along with relevant contextual data, for example, numerators and denominators where the KPI is a percentage.

Finance – Benefits

- Average number of days to process new Housing Benefit claims
- Total number of new Housing Benefit claims

- Average number of days to process new Council Tax Support claims
- Total number of new Council Tax Support claims

- Average number of days to process new Housing Benefit change events
- Total number of new Housing Benefit change events

- Average number of days to process new Council Tax Support change events
- Total number of new Council Tax Support change events

- Number of undisputed invoices paid within 30 days
- Total number of undisputed invoices
- Percentage undisputed invoices paid within 30 days

Finance – Revenues

- Total housing rent collected (£)
- Total housing rent due (£)
- Percentage housing rent collected

- Total business rates collected (£)
- Total business rates due (£)
- Percentage business rates collected

- Total council tax collected (£)
- Total council tax due (£)
- Percentage council tax collected

Greater Cambridge Planning services - Development management

- Number of major applications including Public Service Infrastructure Developments determined within 8 weeks.
- Number of major applications including Public Service Infrastructure Developments determined within 8-13 weeks.
- Number of major applications including Public Service Infrastructure Developments with an associated planning agreement (e.g. extension of time) that were decided on time
- Total number of major applications decided upon.
- Percentage of major applications determined within 13 weeks or agreed timeline.

- Number of non-major applications including change of use and householder developments determined within 8 weeks

- Number of non-major applications including change of use and householder developments determined within 16 weeks (EIA) or the agreed time limit
- Total number of non-major applications including change of use and householder developments decided upon
- Percentage of non-major applications determined within 8 weeks or agreed timeline
- Number of householder development applications determined within 8 weeks
- Number of householder development applications determined within 16 weeks (EIA) or the agreed time limit
- Total number of validated householder planning applications decided upon
- Average time to determine validated householder planning applications (weeks)
- Number of appeals against major planning permissions refusal allowed
- Total number of appeals against major planning permissions decided upon
- Percentage of appeals against major planning permissions refusal allowed
- Number of appeals against non-major planning permission refusal allowed
- Total number of appeals against non-major planning permission decided upon
- Percentage of appeals against non-major planning permission refusal allowed

Greater Cambridge Planning services - Land Charges

- Average land charges search response days
- Number of land charges searches

Housing – Housing Advice

- Number of households with children leaving B&B accommodation after longer than 6 weeks

Housing

- Number of tenants satisfied with responsive repairs
- Total number of repairs
- Percentage of tenants satisfied with responsive repairs
- Average days to re-let all housing stock
- Number of emergency repairs completed within 24 hours
- Total number of emergency repairs
- Percentage of emergency repairs completed in 24 hours

HR and Corporate Services – Democratic Services

- Number of public hybrid meetings run without issues causing downtime exceeding 5 minutes
- Total number of public hybrid meetings
- Percentage of public hybrid meetings run without issues causing downtime exceeding 5 minutes

Shared Waste and Environment

- Total tonnes of household waste collected
 - Total tonnes of household waste sent for reuse, recycling and composting
 - Percentage of household waste sent for reuse, recycling and composting
-
- Number of bins collected on time
 - Total number of bins collected
 - Percentage of bins collected on time

Transformation - Complaints

- Number of formal complaints resolved within timescale
- Total number of formal complaints
- Percentage of formal complaints resolved within timescale

Transformation - Contact Centre

- Number of calls to the contact centre resolved first time
 - Total number of calls to the contact centre
 - Percentage of calls to the contact centre resolved first time
-
- Total number of calls to the contact centre that are answered
 - Total number of calls to the contact centre
 - Percentage of calls to the contact centre that are answered
-
- Average call answer time (seconds)

Section 4: Resident feedback

Provide the following in relation to SCDC's online feedback form about the four day working week trial:

- Number of online forms received by the organisation that are positive, negative, or indifferent.
- Number of complaints received on service delivery and whether these services are taking part in the trial.
- Methods of publicising feedback form to residents
- Details of all feedback or complaints received.
- Details of the process for handling complaints

Four-day week data collection – Retrospective data collection

Introduction

Following the issue of a Best Value Notice to South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) on Friday 3rd November 2023, the Department requests that SCDC completes the following retrospective data collection. The form requests data on: staffing, costs, service delivery, and performance against a range of SCDC's KPIs.

The form also requests qualitative information, including around how decisions about the trial have been reached and any other policies SCDC has introduced or is exploring to address recruitment, retention, and wellbeing challenges, with an appraisal of their impact.

As stated in the Best Value Notice, the Department requests that this retrospective collection be completed within one month of the date of receipt of this form.

This will be followed shortly by a further collection form seeking data on a weekly basis.

Please note that **no personal data** should be provided in either of these forms.

Section 1: Organisational data

Annual data for the period 2018/19 to 2022/23:

- Number of staff employed by the organisation before the trial, broken down for each local authority department and team taking part in the trial.
- Number of temporary staff (temporary or agency) in the organisation before the trial, broken down by each local authority department and team taking part in the trial.
- Total staffing costs before the trial, broken down by each local authority department and team taking part in the trial. This will cover both staff employed by the organisation and temporary or agency staff.
- Contracted hours for staff before the trial, broken down by working pattern. This should reflect your organisation's definition of full and part time.
- Total number of days lost due to staff sickness before the trial, broken down by each local authority department and team taking part in the trial (include both temporary and permanent staff).
- Percentage of vacant roles before the trial, broken down by each local authority department and team taking part in the trial.
- Percentage of advertised roles successfully filled before the trial, broken down by each local authority department and team taking part in the trial.
- Percentage of all staff employed by the organisation who left each year (turnover rate), broken down by each local authority department and team taking part in the trial.

Section 2: Service information

For the period 2018/19 to 2022/23:

- Operational opening hours for contact centres and other areas taking part in the trial.
- Logs of calls to contact centres and other areas taking part in the trial, this should include call answer time and outcomes of calls. Please ensure that no personal data is included.
- Average daily number of in-person visits to contact centres and other areas taking part in the trial.

- Logs of emails to areas taking part in the trial, including response times and outcomes. Please ensure that no personal data is included.
- Forecast and actual revenue spend for each service area taking part in trial
- Forecast and actual capital spend for each service area taking part in trial

Section 3: SCDC KPIs

This section will ask for annual retrospective data on a range of SCDC's KPIs for the period 2018/19 to 2022/23, along with relevant contextual data, for example, numerators and denominators where the KPI is a percentage.

Finance – Benefits

- Average number of days to process new Housing Benefit claims
- Total number of new Housing Benefit claims

- Average number of days to process new Council Tax Support claims
- Total number of new Council Tax Support claims

- Average number of days to process new Housing Benefit change events
- Total number of new Housing Benefit change events

- Average number of days to process new Council Tax Support change events
- Total number of new Council Tax Support change events

- Number of undisputed invoices paid within 30 days
- Total number of undisputed invoices
- Percentage undisputed invoices paid within 30 days

Finance – Revenues

- Total housing rent collected (£)
- Total housing rent due (£)
- Percentage housing rent collected

- Total business rates collected (£)
- Total business rates due (£)
- Percentage business rates collected

- Total council tax collected (£)
- Total council tax due (£)
- Percentage council tax collected

Greater Cambridge Planning services - Development management

- Number of major applications including Public Service Infrastructure Developments determined within 8 weeks.
- Number of major applications including Public Service Infrastructure Developments determined within 8-13 weeks.

- Number of major applications including Public Service Infrastructure Developments with an associated planning agreement (e.g. extension of time) that were decided on time
- Total number of major applications decided upon.
- Percentage of major applications determined within 13 weeks or agreed timeline.
- Number of non-major applications including change of use and householder developments determined within 8 weeks
- Number of non-major applications including change of use and householder developments determined within 16 weeks (EIA) or the agreed time limit
- Total number of non-major applications including change of use and householder developments decided upon
- Percentage of non-major applications determined within 8 weeks or agreed timeline
- Number of householder development applications determined within 8 weeks
- Number of householder development applications determined within 16 weeks (EIA) or the agreed time limit
- Total number of validated householder planning applications decided upon
- Average time to determine validated householder planning applications (weeks)
- Number of appeals against major planning permissions refusal allowed
- Total number of appeals against major planning permissions decided upon
- Percentage of appeals against major planning permissions refusal allowed
- Number of appeals against non-major planning permission refusal allowed
- Total number of appeals against non-major planning permission decided upon
- Percentage of appeals against non-major planning permission refusal allowed

Greater Cambridge Planning services - Land Charges

- Average land charges search response days
- Number of land charges searches

Housing – Housing Advice

- Number of households with children leaving B&B accommodation after longer than 6 weeks

Housing

- Number of tenants satisfied with responsive repairs
- Total number of repairs
- Percentage of tenants satisfied with responsive repairs
- Average days to re-let all housing stock
- Number of emergency repairs completed within 24 hours
- Total number of emergency repairs
- Percentage of emergency repairs completed in 24 hours

HR and Corporate Services – Democratic Services

- Number of public hybrid meetings run without issues causing downtime exceeding 5 minutes
- Total number of public hybrid meetings
- Percentage of public hybrid meetings run without issues causing downtime exceeding 5 minutes

Shared Waste and Environment

- Total tonnes of household waste collected
- Total tonnes of household waste sent for reuse, recycling and composting
- Percentage of household waste sent for reuse, recycling and composting
- Number of bins collected on time
- Total number of bins collected
- Percentage of bins collected on time

Transformation - Complaints

- Number of formal complaints resolved within timescale
- Total number of formal complaints
- Percentage of formal complaints resolved within timescale

Transformation - Contact Centre

- Number of calls to the contact centre resolved first time
- Total number of calls to the contact centre
- Percentage of calls to the contact centre resolved first time
- Total number of calls to the contact centre that are answered
- Total number of calls to the contact centre
- Percentage of calls to the contact centre that are answered
- Average call answer time (seconds)

Section 4: Qualitative data

- Cost of trial - Evidence that the trial, including the cost of its design and independent evaluation, has been rigorously costed and supported by a business case.
- Improvement beyond the 4DW outside of the trial - The report 'Results of the Four-Day Week Trial and Next Steps' states "There is a general feeling that the organisation is not using software efficiently". What steps has the Council taken / is taking to improve IT infrastructure and provide more ICT training to staff to improve productivity?
- Annual Governance Statement for years 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23 - To help understand what other HR policies, prior to the start of the trial, the Council has introduced and/or trialled to address longstanding staff recruitment, retention and wellbeing challenges and an appraisal of these past policies.
- Flexible working policy

Appendix K: Best Value Notices for local authorities

The Best Value Notices issued by the Government are available to view [on the Government website](#). In addition to the Notice issued to South Cambridgeshire District Council on 3 November 2023, three other Notices have been issued this year (2023). Below is a list of the Notices issued – along with a summary of why they were issued. The full detail for each notice can be found [on the Government website](#).

- Best Value Notice issued to Middlesbrough Council on 24 January 2023 owing to serious concerns highlighted by an external auditor around governance arrangements, along with cultural and governance issues.

- Best Value Notice issued to Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority on 24 January 2023 because of issues including:
 - o Significant concerns highlighted by an external auditor in relation to the 2021/22 audit year, confirming significant weakness in the Authority's governance arrangements.
 - o Significant delivery concerns in some of the programmes delivered by the Authority.
 - o Concerns around Partnership working.
 - o Concerns in respect of procurement of services to the Authority.

- Best Value Notice issued to Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council on 3 August 2023 owing to concerns around:
 - o Member relationships and relationships between councillors and officers.
 - o The Authority's Medium Term Financial Plan and budget.
 - o The governance and remit of a regeneration company that was established by the Council in 2021.
 - o The need to further develop and better support the Council's leadership team, both individually and as a collective.

This page is left blank intentionally.