



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/Trialling%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