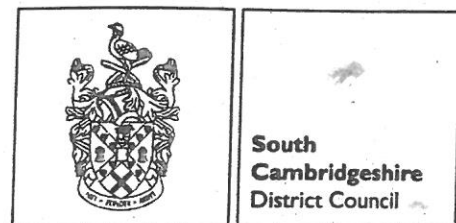


South Cambridgeshire Hall  
Cambourne Business Park  
Cambourne  
Cambridge  
CB23 6EA  
t: 03450 450 500  
www.scambs.gov.uk



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 committee<sup>1</sup>, 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

---

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