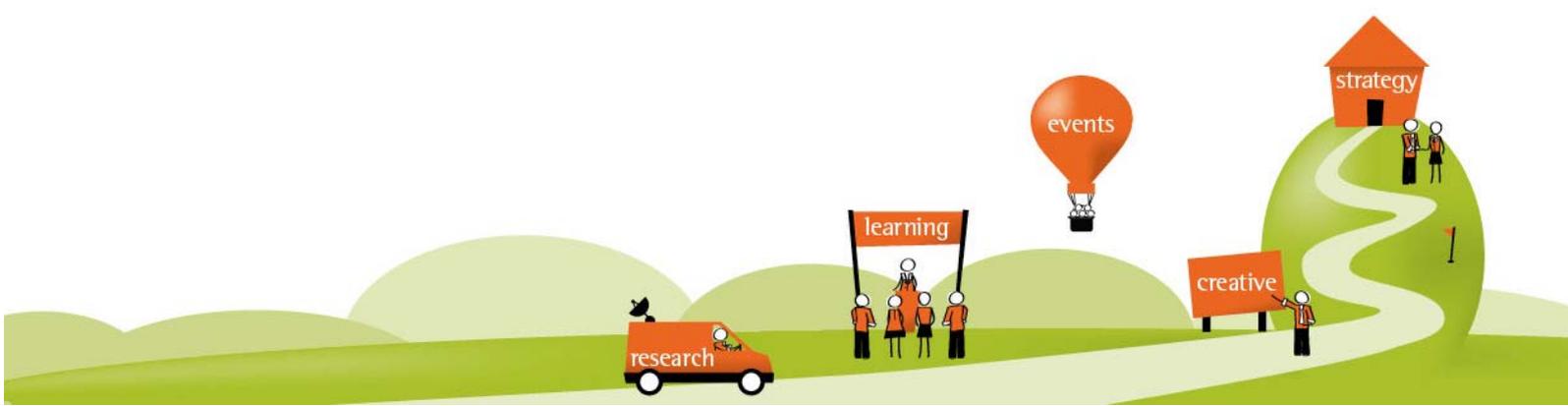


# Benchmarking Services Report

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# 1. Executive Summary

This report presents the results of a benchmarking exercise of the service quality and cost of Southampton City Council's (SCC) external and internal services, and brings together benchmark information from a wide range of both publically available and available to purchase information sources. The indicators and metrics adopted are based on industry standard performance metrics or SCC's Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) where possible.

Benchmarking may be described as a process that provides an indication of performance and as such is not a performance measurement tool. Whatever methods are used in undertaking benchmarking, it is important to compare like for like, otherwise findings will be misleading, making it difficult to progress towards improvement. Whilst this report aims to drive service improvements it is important to recognise the limitations of comparative data and the results should be judged carefully. There are significant differences between peer organisations, measurement criteria and the date of measurement, and all data is subject to the interpretation of the individuals involved in its preparation and submission.

Careful judgement must be exercised when interpreting performance data. On the one hand a low call handling time may appear efficient, however on the other it may leave a service user feeling rushed or result in subsequent avoidable contact. Similarly, a short recruitment period may result in an inappropriate hire. In other words, service cost and service quality must be balanced.

Looking at the overall picture, the report demonstrates that SCC exceeds or matches peer organisations in terms of service delivery in almost all areas. An area of particularly good performance is Customer Services, where benchmark data is easy to obtain and service levels are consistently high.

Data for cost comparisons is generally difficult to obtain and subsequent conclusions should be heavily qualified due to the complexities and discrepancies in the way Local Authorities record and report on the cost of their services. Against this background the study shows that most services are delivering value for money, with Customer Services and HR / Payroll performing particularly well. No meaningful conclusion can be drawn regarding Procurement due to the lack of comparable data.

The analysis presented here represents a snapshot of the current position. Trend analysis based on data from previous years may identify impacts of past decisions and help to understand underlying causes of data discrepancies. Over time this benchmarking exercise should provide the basis for such analysis.

The real value of benchmarking is in in-depth analysis of the data, not just in compiling high level information. As this data is based on an outsourced service, the relationship between the two outsourcing partners and the processes involved are key to understanding what is driving the results.

It is from this analysis that continuous improvement and best practices will be identified. This report presents the key findings of the benchmarking exercise, together with some initial conclusions. Full data analysis is available in a separate appendix.



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## 2. Introduction, Objectives and Method

### 2.1 Introduction

This report presents the results of a benchmarking exercise undertaken during January to March 2011 by Customer Plus on behalf of Southampton Strategic Service Partnership.

Southampton Strategic Service Partnership is a partnership between Southampton City Council (SCC) and Capita, designed to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of a range of Council services for staff and citizens.

The Partnership's external services, provided to citizens, are Customer Services and Local Taxation and Benefits. Its internal services are HR / Payroll, IT, Print, Procurement and Property. The Partnership contract requires that costs and service levels of all these services are benchmarked against relevant Local Authorities.

Benchmarking is integral to the performance measurement and management of services. By comparing services amongst peers it can both inform decisions on future performance targets and drive improvements by identifying gaps between current performance and best practice services or functions.

Whilst this report aims to drive service improvements, it is important to recognise the limitations of comparative data and the results should be judged carefully. There are significant differences between peer organisations, measurement criteria and the date of measurement and all data is subject to the interpretation of the individuals involved in its preparation and submission.

It is important to note that any benchmark, for example agreed between members of a benchmarking club, can only ever represent a performance reference point – either achieved or desired – at a given point in time. As performance improves towards the goal of best practice, so the benchmark might need to be re-evaluated and re-defined.

It is also important not to draw conclusions about organisations based purely on the data. Different organisations will have different business models, quality of services, complexities, nature and size of business. The real value in this benchmarking work comes from its subsequent use in the peer group discussions and analysis. The data and information gathered will provide for evidence based discussion and decision making.



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## 2.2 Objectives

- To benchmark Southampton Strategic Service Partnership's internal and external services against appropriate peer organisations.
- To provide information to support Southampton Strategic Service Partnership's decision making process.

## 2.3 Method

Fundamental to an understanding of benchmarking is an equal appreciation of a benchmark. Essentially a benchmark can be considered as a standard or point of reference, i.e. it is a performance reference point. The standard or level for a particular service can be set either internally within one organisation, or externally for the same or similar function across a group of organisations.

Benchmarking clubs or networks are the most likely vehicles to progress this work. This report brings together benchmark information from a wide range of either publically available or available to purchase information sources. The indicators and metrics adopted are based on industry standard performance metrics or SCC's Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) where possible. It should be noted that benchmarking of SCC's KPIs is limited within the report due limited availability of comparable benchmark data.

The sources and method used to collect cost and service benchmark data for each of the services under consideration are available in a separate appendix. Benchmark data for Print Services is not readily available, however the KPIs already assigned to this service are considered effective in driving service optimisation. Additional benchmarking has therefore not been undertaken for Print Services.

"Who to benchmark against?" is an important consideration when conducting benchmarking exercises. As this report brings together data from a wide range of information sources, consistency in the comparator groups is not possible. Organisations have therefore been chosen based on the type of Authority (i.e. Unitary Authorities where possible), the size of the Authority and the availability of benchmark data. The report compares SCC's performance against the following Local Authorities:

- |                     |                    |                   |                          |
|---------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|
| • Bedford           | • Hull             | • N.Ireland       | • Stockton               |
| • Birmingham        | • Isle of Wight    | • Northumberland  | • Stoke-on-Trent         |
| • Blackburn         | • Kirklees         | • Nottingham      | • Test Valley            |
| • Blackpool         | • Leeds            | • Plymouth        | • Wakefield              |
| • Bracknell Forest  | • Leicester City   | • Poole           | • West Berkshire         |
| • Bradford          | • Liverpool        | • Portsmouth      | • Winchester             |
| • Brighton and Hove | • Luton            | • Reading         | • Windsor and Maidenhead |
| • Bristol           | • Manchester       | • Rushmoor        | • Wokingham              |
| • Cornwall          | • Medway           | • Sheffield       |                          |
| • Derby             | • Middlesbrough    | • Slough          |                          |
| • Havant            | • Milton Keynes    | • Southampton     |                          |
| • Herefordshire     | • Newcastle        | • Southend-on-Sea |                          |
|                     | • N.E Lincolnshire |                   |                          |

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Benchmarking groups are made up of different Local Authorities depending on location or the type of services offered. Throughout the report, SCC services are therefore compared against different samples of the above list of Local Authorities.

In some cases the report also compares SCC's performance against that of existing Capita partnerships including:

- Blackburn
- Sheffield
- Swindon

## 3. Key Findings and Recommendations

The following section of the report draws on the key findings of the benchmarking exercise, highlighting in particular:

- How SCC is performing
- How SCC's / Capita's performance compares with peer organisations
- Lessons learned from other organisations
- If Capita is providing value for money

The key findings are split into service and cost findings with recommendations for action also provided.

### 3.1 Recommendations for future benchmarking

As with any data gathering exercise of this scale, there have been significant challenges. In particular it has been a complex task to define a common language and definitions to capture consistent and comparable data. This has been achieved in part, but it is clear that more remains to be done to improve consistency and comparability of information.

It should be noted that although most Councils keep a record of the volume of activity for their services, there is no national system in place to capture the data and thus assess the impact this may have on costs. Comparison of raw data is complicated and there are many factors that influence the figures with costs, for example, fluctuating from year to year.

Councils are involved in local benchmarking groups, but there is no real knowledge from them as to which Council is the most efficient. A significant amount of benchmarking information is therefore open to interpretation.

SCC should maintain a business focused approach to benchmarking, ensuring that resources are targeted towards value adding areas and that safeguards against wasted effort or meaningless comparisons are put in place. What is best for one organisation may not be appropriate for another. SCC should therefore be keen to build a strong network, where the organisation can learn from the experiences of others, building a network where best practice can be shared and the benefits of benchmarking can be exploited.

The full value of benchmarking is realised only with successive years of data. It is important to be able to analyse trends and identify the impacts of past decisions. Through understanding the underlying causes of data discrepancies organisations are able to take steps to address or account for them. Over time this benchmarking exercise should provide the basis for such analysis.



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### 3.2 Customer Services

The report benchmarks the cost and service performance of SCC's Customer Services against other Local Authorities of similar size, geographic location or Authority type (i.e. Unitary Authorities).

#### 3.2.1 Service

The report highlights that Local Authority Customer Services performance varies considerably. Comparison with external benchmarks demonstrates that SCC exceeds or matches peer organisations in terms of service delivery.

SCC is performing above the peer group average in the following service performance areas:

- Total call handling time per full time equivalent (FTE)
- Average monthly contact volume (all channels)
- Average speed of answer
- Calls offered
- Calls answered
- Average call duration

SCC is performing equal to the peer group average in the following service performance area:

- Proportion of customers giving the maximum customer satisfaction rating

Average talk time per call and average call handling time are lower than the peer group average. In terms of speed of responding to enquiries by contact channel, although there are significant gaps in the data provided, SCC's scores are below that of peer organisations for the proportion of front of house customers seen within ten minutes and just below the proportion of email correspondence responded to within five working days.

#### 3.2.2 Cost

In terms of cost, it is evident that Capita is providing value for money with significant cost savings compared to peer benchmark data.

SCC's cost per contact is lower than costs provided by SOCITM and lower than indexed Varney costs, excluding cost per telephone call, which is marginally higher.

Capita's overall costs are significantly lower than indexed Varney report costs and the data produced by SOCITM in 2010.

#### 3.2.3 Recommendations

Benchmark information for contact centres is widely collected and available and SCC takes part in a number of benchmarking groups allowing for regular performance comparisons and adjustments to be made. SCC is performing particularly well in terms of service, which may be partly attributable to this consistent monitoring of performance compared with peer organisations and associated adjustments made.

Cost information was harder to obtain. SCC may look to join a benchmarking group such as SOCITM's Customer Access Improvement Service in order to compare costs and performance with those recorded by other, comparable organisations.

### 3.3 Local Taxation and Benefits Services

This report benchmarks the cost and service performance of SCC's Local Taxation and Benefits Services against other Local Authorities of similar size, geographic location or Authority type (i.e. Unitary Authorities).

#### 3.3.1 Service

##### *Benefits*

SCC is above the peer group mean in the following Benefits Service areas:

- Housing Benefit (HB) right time indicator (average time to process a new HB claim or a change in circumstance of an existing HB claim)

SCC is equal to the peer group mean in the following Benefits Service areas:

- Council Tax Benefit right time indicator (the average time to process a new Council Tax Benefit claim or a change in circumstance of an existing Council Tax Benefit claim)

##### *Local Taxation*

In terms of Council Tax recovery, the efforts of SCC to improve its cash flow and the difficulties it encounters are illustrated by comparing Council Tax recovery statistics with that of other Unitary Authorities in England.

This report shows that SCC has a higher than average number of accounts raised at the time of initial billing and a higher than average number of Council Tax enforcement actions taken for the following:

- Reminders (including final notices)
- Liability orders
- Applications for deductions from income support
- Cases referred to bailiff to levy distress
- Charging orders
- Committal summonses issued
- Arrest warrants granted
- Committal orders obtained and postponed
- Committed to prison and who served a prison term

SCC has a lower than average number of Council Tax enforcement actions taken for the following:

- Summonses
- Attachment of earnings orders
- Insolvencies commenced by the Authority

Although the number of summonses issued by SCC is lower than the peer group average, this is likely due to high direct debit uptake and effective early collection.



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For National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR) SCC has a lower than average number of hereditaments than its peers but a higher than average number of enforcement actions taken for the following:

- Reminders (including final notices)
- Cases referred to bailiff to levy distress

SCC has a lower than average number of NNDR enforcement actions taken for the following:

- Summonses
- Liability orders
- Committal summonses issued
- Arrest warrants granted

Again, the lower number of summonses shows that SCC is effective at early collection.

### *3.3.2 Cost*

There are large variations in administration costs between Local Authorities dealing with similar amounts of activity in this area. Direct comparison between organisations is complex and a number of factors need to be taken into account.

SCC's net expenditure per head on Council Tax collection is below the peer group mean.

In terms of the Benefits Service, SCC's cost per fraud sanction, cost per appeal resolved, cost of quality assurance by total turnover of work and the cost of training is lower than the peer group average. The cost of subsidy monitoring by deficit is higher than the peer group average. (Subsidy monitoring ensures benefit subsidy is maximised and reduces potential risk of subsidy loss to the Council.)

SCC has a higher than average cost per benefits caseload, however the number of days to process claims or changes is significantly lower than the peer group average.

### *3.3.3 Recommendations*

When considering the performance of the Local Taxation Service, it is clear that SCC is issuing a higher than average number of reminders to customers during the recovery process. It is however important to note that some Local Authorities only send a reminder, for example, when the customer has missed two or three instalments, whereas SCC sends a reminder after one missed instalment. The data therefore shows that the Service is more proactive in the recovery process than its peers in order to improve its collection rate.

When considering the value for money of the Benefits Service, although the cost per caseload is higher than the peer group average, the speed of processing cases is considerably faster.

Value is added through faster processing of claims as this leads to reduced complaints and reduced customer contact.

Although the cost of subsidy monitoring is higher than the average, this is to ensure benefit subsidy is maximised and potential risk of subsidy loss to the Council is reduced. This investment has contributed to two successive years when the Council has incurred no subsidy losses.



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Further analysis of areas of high cost (such as subsidy monitoring and cost per caseload) compared to benchmarked Authorities could identify areas where efficiency savings could be gained. Monitoring the action taken to achieve that aim is recommended.

### 3.4 HR / Payroll Services

The report benchmarks the cost and service performance of SCC's HR / Payroll Service against other Local Authorities of similar size, geographic location or Authority type (i.e. Unitary Authorities), in addition to benchmarking against existing Capita Partnerships.

#### 3.4.1 Service

SCC has fewer payroll errors than the average of the peer group and is performing well with 100% of payments made on time.

Regarding the percentage of queries received by the helpdesk that are resolved in one day or less than one day, SCC is performing below that of the comparator group, with average one day query resolution across a four month period being slightly lower than the peer group average.

In terms of the percentage of queries received by the helpdesk that are resolved in three or ten days, SCC has a higher proportion of queries resolved in these timescales than the peer group average.

SCC has a higher number of calls answered and a lower number of calls abandoned by the helpdesk than the peer group average, however there is no data to show the levels of avoidable contact.

SCC has a lower ratio of total number of HR staff to total number of SCC employees than the peer group average.

SCC has lower absence, lower sickness levels and lower staff turnover than the peer group average. In terms of recruitment performance, time to fill a vacancy is above the peer group average; however the percentage of vacancies filled first time is higher.

#### 3.4.2 Cost

HR recruitment costs and training spend per employee are lower than the peer group average.

SCC also has a low labour turnover which is likely to reduce the following costs:

- The costs of replacing the leaver (both direct costs, such as recruitment and selection, and indirect costs, such as time and induction)
- The transition costs (e.g. agency staff and / or overtime payments)
- Work-related costs (e.g. reduced output or productivity and / or reduced customer-care levels)

SCC's gross expenditure on HR Services and cost per staff are above the peer group average. In this section of the HR Service analysis all of the peer organisations' HR Services are an in-house service therefore caution should be taken when interpreting these results.

#### 3.4.3 Recommendations

This analysis should take account of the chosen HR delivery model (business partnering, shared services, etc.) within different organisations. It should also be considered in relation to the HR role in the individual organisation, i.e. organisations with a strong focus on employee engagement and organisational development will tend to have higher ratios than those utilising HR from a compliance perspective.



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The lower proportion of HR staff to total number of employees and low costs of recruitment and training are indicators of efficient and effective management.

### 3.5 IT Services

The report benchmarks the cost and service performance of SCC's IT Service against other Local Authorities of similar size, geographic location or Authority type (i.e. Unitary Authorities), in addition to benchmarking against existing Capita Partnerships.

#### 3.5.1 Service

SCC's website achieved six out of the ten essential criteria set out in SOCITM's 'Better Connected' survey designed to benchmark Local Authority website performance. In 2010 SCC achieved an overall reviewer rating of two out of three and is therefore classified as a two star website, achieving the standard for three out of six of the most well used of parts of a typical Council website.

Analysis shows there is room for improvement particularly regarding some of the 'top topics' that are important to Council website users (Library Services, Schools or Planning).

In SOCITM's latest website review (2011) SCC achieved a high three star rating and has been named as one of the top eight Unitary Authority websites in England. Data on peer group performance is not yet available.

Compared to its statistical 'nearest neighbours' SCC's website is performing equally well, with the majority also being classified as two star websites with overall reviewer ratings of two out of three.

In terms of IT user satisfaction SCC performs significantly above the peer group average with a user satisfaction score well above both the UK internal and outsourced IT Service average.

In terms of service efficiency SCC performs just below the average, with incident resolution falling just behind this group.

For service availability SCC has an index of availability significantly above the peer group mean.

#### 3.5.2 Cost

To benchmark the SCC IT Services costs this report compares workstation acquisition costs and support costs per workstation with the UK internal and outsourced IT Service average.

The average desktop workstation cost for SCC is below the internal and outsourced IT Service average. For laptop workstations SCC's costs are above the average.

SCC's support cost charges per workstation are above the comparator group average. It should be noted that internally provided IT Service monthly support costs vary from £4 to £23 (SOCITM, 2009). These findings highlight that organisations may not be supplying like for like comparable data.

SCC's gross expenditure on IT and cost per staff are above the peer group mean. It should be noted that in this section of the IT Service analysis all of the peer organisations' IT Services are in-house services, therefore caution should be taken when interpreting the results. Disparities in the results may also be due to how organisations report IT costs, whether IT Service costs are centralised and variations in levels of investment in IT infrastructure.

### 3.5.3 Recommendations

Although in general SCC performs equally to peer organisations in terms of its website, the following recommendations have been made:

- Use SOCITM's Better Connected survey results as a checklist for raising the website to a new level of performance
- Identify the top tasks for the website and find out how successful visitors think they are (this could be done through a live on-line polling system)
- Build improvement priorities from the analysis of top tasks, supported by information from SOCITM's assessment of the SCC website

The website is critical in enabling the Council to deliver significant savings at a time of shrinking budgets and cost-cutting measures.

According to SOCITM research, outsourced services are better at resolving incidents within agreed timescales than in-house operations. This is reflected in the current report, with external IT services achieving a higher incident resolution than internal services.

SCC should look to increase IT service efficiency as incident resolution is lower than the average of other externally provided IT services. It should be noted that the criteria for calculating incident resolution will vary significantly between organisations and interpretation of these results should take this into account.

SCC should ensure that there are appropriate systems and organisational arrangements to capture operational incidents reported and track their successful conclusion, recording the time that has been taken to resolve the problem and any subsequent follow-on actions required.

In addition, the systems should enable analyses of the origin of problems (e.g. by service department) and the type of problems that are being encountered, so that longer term remedies might be made rather than just resolving the immediate problems.

### 3.6 Procurement Services

An Operational Efficiency Programme (OEP) review<sup>1</sup>, published in April 2009, confirmed that there is a lack of robust and consistent management information on public sector spending on back office operations, and this presents a challenge to Local Government to:

- Identify accurate costs
- Benchmark performance against others
- Deliver proven improvements in procurement

Making comparisons between organisations has the potential to deliver misleading results for the following reasons:

- The wide range in size and magnitude of third party spend
- The wide range in the scale and complexity of the work undertaken by the procurement function
- The difference in the type of organisation and type of procurement function, whether that be large and centralised or small and decentralised

Although CIPFA offers a value for money benchmarking service of Local Authority Procurement functions, current and historic peer group data is not available.

Due to the complexity of the work undertaken by different Procurement functions and the difference in methods of recording performance data, comparable benchmark information regarding savings is not available from peer group organisations.

#### 3.6.1 Recommendations

Due to a lack of benchmark data available and the difficulties in finding like for like comparisons, it is recommended that SCC reviews the efficiency and value for money of the service based on third-party savings made to date. SCC should continue to seek comparators for savings made and ensure the service provides true value for money.

It is also recommended that SCC considers using CIPFA data sources for future Procurement benchmarking exercises.

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<sup>1</sup> See HM Treasury website [http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/vfm\\_operational\\_efficiency.htm](http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/vfm_operational_efficiency.htm)

### 3.7 Property Services

The report benchmarks the cost and service performance of SCC's Property Service against other Local Authorities of similar size, geographic location or Authority type (i.e. Unitary Authorities).

Robust and comparable data on property performance is difficult to collect. There is a wide range of types of property, property sizes and property uses, as well as different models of asset ownership therefore care should be taken when interpreting the results.

#### 3.7.1 Service

Client satisfaction with Projects is below the peer group mean for '*understanding goals and objectives*', satisfaction with '*being kept informed*' and lower for '*overall satisfaction*' with Projects. It should be noted that the comparison is not like for like as the majority of Authorities provided satisfaction data for projects of value greater than £100,000 whereas SCC data is for projects of all values.

For the Repairs and Maintenance service SCC's performance is just below the peer group mean for satisfaction with '*professionalism and courtesy of staff*'. In terms of '*overall satisfaction*' with the service SCC is performing amongst the lowest of the peer group, with satisfaction levels below the peer group mean.

SCC performs well in terms of Valuations, with satisfaction scores consistently above the peer group mean.

SCC's contract performance results are generally below that of other Local Authorities, particularly regarding completion of final accounts within 5% of original contract sum. In terms of the percentage of final accounts completed within three months of the defects liability period, SCC performs above all organisations that submitted data for this metric, with 100% of final accounts completed within this timeframe.

Differences in contract performance results between Authorities may be a result of variations in customer demands following original agreements.

#### 3.7.2 Cost

The report shows that total income per fee earner and total income per pound of staff costs are below the peer group mean. Percentage of fee charged is higher than the peer group mean although only one other Local Authority submitted data for this metric and variations between Authorities can be expected due to variations in the services delivered.

SCC's gross expenditure on Property Services is above the peer group mean; however cost per staff is significantly lower than the mean, highlighting the efficiency of the service. Again, it should be noted that all of the peer organisations' that supplied gross expenditure data to CIPFA run an in-house Property Service therefore caution should be taken when interpreting these results.

#### 3.7.3 Recommendations

Efficient management is dependent on the availability of good information and the ability to interpret it meaningfully. It is common practice for property management analysis to be built up from varied sources of data held throughout an organisation. Property costs however are often not

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clearly identifiable in accounts, and are recorded differently between organisations, with variations in how costs are defined and analysed. Due to the range of types of property and operating models used by Local Authorities the results of this exercise should be interpreted with caution.

It is recommended that SCC looks to increase satisfaction with Projects and the Repairs and Maintenance Service and investigates potential drivers for low satisfaction ratings. Care should be taken when interpreting satisfaction results as respondents may be judging the outcome of a project or repair / maintenance job rather than the quality of the service itself.

Given the low scores provided by clients for service quality a client care training programme should be considered.

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