

Audit Committee – 12 November 2024 – Public Questions

Annexe A – Public Questions	
Name of person submitting	Question
David Orr	<p>Statement to Audit Committee 12th November 2024 by David Orr</p> <p>There was a year to prepare for this new Council. The private sector would have used that opportunity to develop a Full Business Case and a New Operating Model, so that they “hit the ground running” come vesting day. Somerset Confidential reports that neither of those best practice things happened here. The external auditor reports that a post-Financial Emergency Business Case is only 25% complete and due in under 3 weeks. The Director in charge was also responsible for planning and preparation prior to vesting day. How can this Council be making significant redundancies without a revised Operating Model driving the workforce restructuring?</p> <p>There are valued non-statutory services that deserve funding and should not be cut, devolved without budget or lost to “over-budgeting” in any statutory service. I had longstanding concerns about unassured, massive budget increases in Adult Social Care. I am reassured that the external auditor has a task “model and challenge demand and cost data to ensure budgets are based on accurate projections” for ASC. Anecdotally, significant sums from overly precautionary ASC budgeting have already been returned.</p> <p>How is savings delivery going? When will the Statement of Accounts and the Value for Money report be available? We don’t know. The Council is a self-declared distressed seller of investment assets in a poor commercial market. Individual sales are confidential, but summary reports of the totals are not. What are the total losses on assets sold to date? How much in total of the funds raised are going to fund day to day operations and how much to pay down debt? How much debt and interest remains outstanding? What is the total annual income lost?</p> <p>Incredibly, internal audits for Savings Delivery and Asset Management are yet to begin. Surely, in a financial emergency, additional funding for audit and risk management should have been made available a year ago. Is there a danger that “these horses will have long bolted” before these key audits report to you?</p> <p>SWAP produced a critical report on the Ignite-led transformation in Somerset West and Taunton Council, which disrupted service delivery and lost at least £10m. However, in South Somerset Council the same Ignite-led transformation was hailed a great success. Given the very late South Somerset Council accounts (costing £90K and counting) and their dysfunctional planning service, with a huge backlog, it is now clear that South Somerset Council is the albatross around the neck of this new unitary council.</p>

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	<p>The SEND systemic management failures to some of the most vulnerable should not have occurred or been tolerated. In much improved internal risk reporting, is there a mismatch between auditors' reports and the current internal risk scoring? I am concerned that "warm words", aspirations and optimism bias may lead to a lack of corrective action, in time to prevent serious service failures.</p> <p>This Audit Committee is key to oversight and public reassurance during all of the current uncertainty. The Public Accounts Committee in parliament is robust and forensic in its deliberations, with a formidable reputation and commands respect from all who attend. I commend their approach to this vital committee.</p>
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