

Public Forum

Audit Committee

25 September 2023 at 2pm



1. Members of the Audit Committee

Questions		
Number	Agenda Item	Name
1	16 – Annual report of Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman Decisions	Jen Smith
2	4 – Minutes of the meeting of 24 July 2023	Joanna Booth

Statements		
Number	Agenda Item	Name
1	16 – Annual report of Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman Decisions	Jen Smith



Q1. Can Bristol City Council urgently pay all ALP providers for all outstanding Send provision before Send kids lose their educational provision yet again?

Response.

The associated teams, within the LA, receive a very high volume of payments to process. We fully acknowledge there has been difficulties with capacity affecting both payments and associated queries. The Officers, across teams, have been working hard to resolve any outstanding queries and/or payment issues experienced.

In July, the LA took positive action to improve; 4 Finance Operational Support Officers (3 permanent & 1 temporary) were moved back into the SEND service area. In September 2023, successful recruitment took place for an additional BG10 role specifically dedicated to Personal Budget Direct Payments. In addition, a temporary resource of 1 officer was agreed and is now in post from September 2023 until March 2024.

Commitment has been made by all teams to simplify and speed up the payments process whilst continuing to ensure we uphold a compliant and transparent process.

Q2. Who is the 'commissioned delivery partner' and please include the cost of this service in the answer?

Response.

The delivery partner is Price Waterhouse Cooper commissioned through the Management Consultancy Framework Three (MCF3).

This work form's part of the wider 'Our Families' Transformation project, with funds approved through cabinet in June 2023. The cost for the EHCP improvement work is commercially sensitive and is not included.

The EHCP improvement work will incorporate the delivery and implementation of robotic process automation (RPA) technology to automate elements of the process.

The cost does not come from a service budget.

Hi Democratic Services,

I have the following questions for Audit please:

In the previous minutes for July's meeting, it states: There was some discussion regarding approval for corporate property disposals being delegated or being required to go before Cabinet. It was agreed that a definitive answer be sought and reported back to the next Committee;

1. I encourage audit to ensure that all disposals go through cabinet and I would like the following information from October 2022 to October 2023:

- the value of each property disposed of
- how much it is estimated to be disposed of in the future
- a comprehensive list of disposals, how much they were disposed for and their value.
- I would also like a pipeline of disposals deemed as 'surplus' and the reasoning behind their determination as surplus.

2. In the Cabinet report in January, EY claimed the council advised them to use 1.5% for the PWLB loan for the Bristol Beacon. In the same paper, they also stated that they judge the interest rate will be closer to 5%, which is actually in line with PWLB interest rates. Please provide the revised estimate of the cost of the loan (whether it be taken out or not) for the Bristol Beacon. The estimates provided by EY cannot be relied on to be accurate.

3. Arcadis have been tasked with investigating the work / contracts on the Bristol Beacon project. Arcadis have received £16.7 million from the council since 2020 (compared to £0 published spending on them in the three years prior to that,) and £3m on phase 4 of Bristol Beacon/Colston Hall construction.

Please provide the due diligence done in appointing Arcadis as the 'independent' investigators of the Bristol Beacon/Colston Hall project, and the assessment and sign off from legal services to deal with the conflict of interests in getting Arcadis to investigate their own work.

I hope to attend the meeting but I'm not sure I can. Please provide the written answers to the questions, and I urge audit to be webcast as well.

All the best,

Joanna

Joanna Booth
Journalist

Response

The information requested has been forwarded to the FOI team as the appropriate route for response.

One of the LGO complaints published in this document is mine. The clinical and factual description of an academic year of Send failure in no way represents another year of misery this council has inflicted on my family.

The vast majority of that complaint could not even be investigated because we were waiting for a Sendist tribunal hearing. As we know, the LGO won't investigate that time period. This is lucky for the council as my son missed an entire academic year of maths lessons among other things. So that could have been really pricey.

Papers also discuss overdue payments concerning Send. But the council is continuing its 'improvement journey' so that's fine. I suspect that journey has been held up at the station, because I will be back here when the next lot of LGO complaints are published, one of which is mine again.

In my second recently published complaint, there is comment about the council's failure to pay for provision leading it to be suspended.

At this very moment, the council owes one of my son's tutors around nine months worth of money. They are simply not paying it and there is no way to make them pay. We are incredibly fortunate in that the person has been prepared to carry on tutoring my son to make up for the many lost years of education – including the academic year of maths lessons missed – without suspending this tutoring.

But I strongly suspect the people currently working for nothing might have bills, rent or mortgage payments to make. Treating people with this level of contempt is disgusting.

I wonder if Bristol has a policy of making people work for free? Because that is what you are doing. Further inflicting your Send disaster on the wider community and putting hard fought for provision once again in jeopardy.

I am currently going through the council's complaints system yet again for more missing EHCP provision. This was because it was spitefully revoked by one manager who did not like a complaint I was forced to make because they weren't implementing provision in the EHCP.

This will be going all the way to the LGO again. There is no place in this city for the kind of caustic spite families appear to be facing simply for speaking out against Send failure. Which is what is happening in some services.

Your 'journey' is taking way too long. It's unethical.

You need to pay the people who work for you and make sure SEND pupils are getting their basic right to an education.

Jen Smith