



Speech By  
**Ann Leahy**


**MEMBER FOR WARREGO**

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Record of Proceedings, 24 August 2023

**STATE DEVELOPMENT AND REGIONAL INDUSTRIES COMMITTEE**

**Report, Motion to Take Note**

 **Ms LEAHY** (Warrego—LNP) (3.12 pm): I wish to thank the State Development and Regional Industries Committee for their report titled *Examination of Auditor-General reports on the local government sector*. At the outset I would like to thank the Auditor-General and the Queensland Audit Office for their work in compiling the reports which have enabled the committee to look at audit matters on a longitudinal basis. This report also gives the opportunity to track if the state Labor government is providing sufficient support to local governments to enable them to do their job of making local decisions for local communities.

I note the committee's recommendation that all local governments are to be required to establish an independent audit and risk management committee. On the surface, that seems like a very reasonable request and it is one that is expected of those in charge of the expenditure of ratepayers' funds and doing the job that councils are tasked to do for their local communities. There is a concern though that in those smaller communities there may be difficulty in sourcing suitably qualified people or people willing to sit on those audit and risk committees.

Unfortunately, we have seen the state Labor government haul some mayors and councillors before the Office of the Independent Assessor for blocking someone on Facebook or seeking to raise matters of vaccine rollouts in their community. It raises the question of which local in a small community would want to sit on an audit and risk committee for their local council when they see the treatment this Labor government has dished out to some of our mayors and councillors. The very people who would have the necessary skills and abilities to undertake the audit and risk role are often the people who shy away from such controversy—and even more so if they feel they will be caught in political machinations created by the state Labor government.

I note the committee has suggested that the chairs of audit committees should be independent of council and council management. I can fully appreciate why the committee has made that recommendation. However, in many small communities it is difficult for individuals to be fully independent. There is nearly always a connection from either family or business relationships in these communities to council. The question should be asked that, if the chairs of audit committees come from outside the community, will these audit committees be able to keep a sufficient watching brief over the outcomes in that community? It is often much easier if the person is at the coalface and living in the community. Perhaps working with the ROCs or different clusters of local government might actually give some better outcomes for ratepayers and also for councils. I have no problem with ensuring the proper and transparent use of ratepayers' funds; however, this recommendation may not be that easy to implement on a local basis.

I note the comments about weakness in information system controls. That is a very important area for governments. History tells us that it cost nearly a billion dollars to fix up a previous health payroll system. Cybersecurity awareness is an important area for councils. Councils run many essential services in local communities. It is only a matter of time before the cyberthreats or the extortion threats find their way to disrupt local government. I note the Auditor-General highlights that cybersecurity awareness training should be mandatory for all staff. However, this again is not always easy to access. One would think this could be done virtually. However, the telecommunications infrastructure shortcomings across the state will not allow this to be a seamless process.

It is difficult for some councils to have virtual meetings. I was on a ROC meeting just recently from Cunnamulla and we struggled with the IT connection. It is quite disruptive to those meetings and that training when you have those IT issues. Sometimes it takes a bit of time to resolve those IT issues and then they continue to drop in and out and it is really not an efficient use of people's time. It will be challenging to deliver that cyber training virtually to all councils due to the connectivity issues in regional Queensland. It is not the fault of the councils; the fault lies with the telcos and the federal government.

I thank the committee for their report. However, there is much more work to be done to support councils and help them meet their obligations.