Residents sigh of relief if Government bail out bankrupt Woking

The government's whopping £500m bailout for debt-ridden Woking Borough Council may not be the last. The cash injection, announced as part of Surrey's local government reorganisation on October 28, will cover roughly a quarter of Woking's debt. But ministers have described it as only the "first tranche" of support. Surrey County Council leader Tim Oliver said commissioners appointed to oversee Woking's finances are still selling off property assets to reduce the total debt and the government has left the door open to further payments.

"They've called it a first tranche. So this is £500 million now to get on with selling down the assets, reducing the debt as much as you can, and then we'll have a conversation about that balance," he told the Local Democracy Reporting Service. "The expectation is that whatever the rump of the debt remains, the government will pick it up."

Woking's debts, which peaked around £2bn, stem from a series of risky property investments that left the council effectively bankrupt. The government's intervention prevents the shortfall from being passed on to other Surrey residents, something Cllr Oliver said ministers have been "very clear" would not happen. "It's nobody's fault, least of all residents', but they were at risk of being penalised just for living in the wrong place," the council leader said. "We worked hard to make sure that didn't happen."

He added that securing government support for Woking's debt was a collective effort between Surrey's council leaders and MPs. Cllr Oliver added that ministers were keen to stress Woking's situation was "exceptional" to prevent other indebted councils seeking similar bailouts. Although Woking council may be able to breathe a slight sigh of relief with the government's handout, residents are still left wondering what will happen with the rest of the debt across Surrey.

Cllr Oliver said the coming months would be focused on "getting the detail right" and ensuring that the reorganisation delivers simpler, stronger local government. "It's great to get a decision, but now the hard work starts," he said. "We'll make sure this works for residents and that the government honours its commitment to clearing Woking's debt."

The announcement came alongside confirmation that Surrey will be split into two new unitary councils, replacing the current county and district system by 2027. While more than half of those who responded to the public consultation backed a three-way split, ministers said the two-unitary model was "more likely to be financially sustainable". Local government minister Alison McGovern said the decision "does not set any precedent" for other areas, but acknowledged Surrey's "unique financial context": a hint that more support could still be needed. The Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government have been asked for comment.

Emily Dalton LDRS

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Image: Woking Victoria Square Towers (View From North)

Dorking's "behemouth" of a "black hole"

The "behemoth" that is Dorking Halls has been labelled a "black hole" that sucks in all resources around it after an additional £3.34million in maintenance work was approved.

The new money comes on top of the originally agreed £11.2m the refurbishment project was expected to cost after delays and lead paint saw the bills spiral.

The work has been labelled as essential by those who see the building as a Dorking icon that must be preserved for future generations. Critics have accused Mole Valley District Council of treating the public purse like 'Monopoly' money.

The decision was made at the October full council meeting where the second stage of the project was signed off and confirmed

Dorking Halls would again close, this time from April 2026 through until early December.

Councillor Nick Wright, cabinet member for leisure and community assets, said: "Dorking Halls is the largest publicly owned performance venue anywhere in east Surrey.

"Dorking Halls typically gets about 180,000 visitors, there are over 60,000 registered customers of which only about half live in Mole Valley.

"Of the Mole Valley residents, approximately one third have postal codes in Dorking itself, 26 per cent from Leatherhead and the north of the district, and about 40 per cent from rural areas. So the Halls really do serve the entire Mole Valley community.

"But it's not just Mole Valley, with its 900 seated grand hall plus two other halls, two cafe bars and a conference room, this is the largest performance venue anywhere in Surrey and it's owned by us, the public. This iconic building should and must be cherished and preserved for future generations.

"It's old, it's built in 1931, but it has national significance as a venue for classical and choral music and now embraces everything from rock pop musicals, theatre pantomime, comedy lectures, to cinema and circus."

The building came into public ownership in 1947 and had its first big upgrade and expansion in the 1990s when much of the current tech was installed.

He added: "But after 30 years of continuous daily use, it was showing its age, breakdowns were occurring and running costs increased." The council had originally approved £11.2million of spending across the two phases; the first was completed late last year in time for the Christmas panto season.

Costs leapt when lead paint was found in the building and needed to be removed – so the council has had to top up the pot with an additional £3.34m this time around. The phase one work concentrated on replacing the ceiling of the grand hall which was failing but the discovery of the toxic paint made the entire project more complex.

This time the council will upgrade the Halls heating cooling, air-conditioning and electrical systems – as well as the technical infrastructure inside the grand hall – bringing it up to modern standards. Council said the extra costs of phase one, together with three years of inflationary pressures has meant a further £3.34 million is needed to finish the job.

The money also includes a one-off "unavoidable growth" of £584,000 to cover the loss of earnings during the Halls' closure. Cllr Wright said: "Without phase two this building would run the risk of falling into disrepair".

Cllr Chris Hunt (Independent: Ashtead Lanes and Common), said was one of the first to speak out against the added costs. He said: "This isn't fair on council tax payers. Nobody is saying it's a bad building. I was arguing that the scheme should be built quicker. The administration said 'no slow it down', they have got to be responsible to this overspend, this monopoly (money) approach to council tax."

Cllr Patricia Wiltshire (Independent: Ashtead Lanes and Common) said: "This is a massive, massive, overspend and there are people in Mole Valley who are desperately resentful of all these resources going into this one building. Every time we ask for something, little things we get told 'there's no money', or 'the budgets are too tight'.

"Yet here we are with this behemoth of a building, like a black hole absorbing the resources going into it. It's a nice venue, it's useful, people enjoy themselves, but don't kid yourself that every single person in Mole Valley enjoys it or uses it. It's a relatively small number in comparison to the whole population.

She added that the burden should fall on those who use Dorking Halls instead and that, if you want to go to the theatre you should pay without expecting everyone else to cover the cost.

Defending the project however was Cllr Stephen Cooksey (Liberal Democrats : Dorking South). He said: "It's a big chunk of money but if we don't spend it we could lose Dorking Halls."

Chris Caulfield LDRS

Image: Dorking Halls - Google.

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Epsom and Ewell Borough Council reveals scale of vacancies and agency costs

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council is currently carrying 56 vacant posts, according to figures released under the Freedom of Information Act. The disclosure sheds light on the staffing challenges facing the Borough at a time when discussions continue over local government reorganisation (LGR) across Surrey.

The Council confirmed that five senior officers have left since April 2022, with all but two of those positions permanently replaced. Two roles were deleted as part of an internal reorganisation.

Despite the vacancies, the Council reported no "vacancy savings" for the current financial year. In previous years, however, unfilled posts generated savings of £286,000 in 2023/24 and £340,000 in 2022/23.

EEBC's expenditure on agency, consultant and temporary staff remains significant, totalling £1.47 million so far in 2024/25, following £1.76 million in 2023/24 and £1.89 million in 2022/23.

The figures show that Operational Services consistently account for the largest share of agency spending — around £985,000 this year — followed by Property Management (£181,000) and Venues (£130,000). Other notable areas of spending include Community Services, Environmental Health, Finance and HR.

No senior management posts are currently filled by consultants or agency staff. The Council also said it holds no internal reports identifying recruitment difficulties or pressures linked to potential LGR changes, and no shared service arrangements have been entered into as a result of staffing shortages.

While EEBC stated it aims to operate "as an open, transparent authority", the figures highlight the extent to which local authorities are relying on temporary staffing amid wider uncertainty over Surrey's local government future.

Sam Jones - Reporter



Surrey gets a sinking feeling over cost of its holes

Has Surrey become Britain's sinkhole capital? Well, the figures certainly point in that direction.

Surrey County Council is on track to spend a staggering £1.6m fixing the collapsed 65ft hole in a section of Godstone High Street – a bill that dwarfs what most local authorities spend on sinkholes.

Figures obtained through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests show councils across the UK have spent more than £6.2m tackling over 7,000 sinkholes since 2020. But Surrey alone accounts for almost half of that total, shelling out over £3.1m making it by far the country's biggest spender.

The Godstone collapse, which first appeared in February, has left the part of the High Street shut for months and businesses struggling.

Surrey County Council has already spent £850,000 on emergency responses, surveys, roadworks and consultancy fees, including £360,000 on just site establishment.

Another £800,000 is forecast for stabilisation work, filling in the mine tunnels, and further repairs – taking the final bill to £1.65m. This will amount to just over a quarter of the total UK bill on sinkholes for the last five years.

What is driving the cost?

The British Geological Society has stated that Surrey is particularly prone to sinkholes due to the underlying sands in the county, which are weakly cemented.

According to council documents, the ground beneath Godstone sits on the Folkestone Sandstone Formation – a weak, sandy foundation that made the area vulnerable to collapse. CCTV images provided under FOI request confirm the collapse was worsened by an old sand mine tunnel running beneath the High Street.

While the council insists the road should reopen by December 16, locals are not holding their breath. Residents have been struggling for months with the road closure, diversions, fall in trade and general feel of chaos. That being said, an official report shown to SurreyLive by the council does state that the project is tracking towards a final inspection date of December 16th.

A Surrey County Council spokesperson said: "This continues to be a highly complex incident involving a number of investigations led by our Highways Officers and other agencies, including specialist teams and utility companies.

"Work is underway to reconstruct the final footpath affected by the collapse and we're now planning how we stabilise the collapsed area and fill in the tunnel network.

"We are updating local residents and businesses as we progress through each stage of the process and expect the final two residents to be back in their properties by the end of September.

"Once our stabilisation work and the SES works to reconnect and relay the mains through the collapse area are completed, the area will be refilled and repaired permanently. We are currently planning to complete our repairs and reopen the High Street during December."

A nationwide problem

The Godstone collapse may be dramatic, but it's part of a wider and growing problem. Since 2020, sinkholes have been recorded everywhere from Reading to Scotland, with councils spending millions to patch them up.

The top spenders after Surrey include Reading (£976,500), East Sussex (£767,238) and Transport Scotland (£602,000). If you take away the Godstone sinkhole expenditure, Surrey still comes up top with over £2.2m being put towards sinkholes.

Lloyd Allen, Infrastructure Team Manager for Surrey County Council, on Godstone high street. (Credit: Surrey County Council).

Emily Dalton LDRS

Additional reporting from Sam McEvans

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Epsom reserves vs investment

A bid to raid a Epsom and Ewell council's multi-million pound property reserves to pay for crumbling public buildings has been thrown out by councillors.

Epsom and Ewell Borough councillors blocked a move to dip into a £7m 'rainy day' fund to pay for important repairs to community venues.

Opposition councillors argued that money locked away in the 'property income equalisation' (PIE) reserve could be better spent fixing leaky roofs, broken boilers and delayed upgrades at places like Bourne Hall, the playhouse and the Harrier Centre.

Cllr **Alex Coley** (Independent Ruxley) told a Strategy and Resources Committee meeting on September 25: "Why prioritise handing over a well-financed property empire to a new unitary at the cost of the huge burden of deferred works on our crumbling public buildings? Do we want to see our venues sold off or handed over to charitable trusts and then closed soon after because they can't afford much needed repairs?"

Cllr James Lawrence (LibDem College) backed the call, saying the council's property income was now more secure and that modestly trimming the reserve could free up £1.5m to plug the gap in the capital budget: "We've come out of COVID uncertainty and we've got secure rental income." He argued the council can safely reduce reserves and use the money to fund the projects residents actually need.

But senior councillors and officers pushed back hard, warning that the reserve was vital to protect the council from sudden losses if tenants went bust or properties stood empty. They said cutting it down to £1m would be "reckless" given the risks tied to £64m of commercial property borrowing.

Council leader, **Hannah Dalton**, (RA SAtoneleigh) said: "You kind of need to take a whole system to view and not just pick bits out." She explained the council is working through the assets and reserves and will continue to work, keeping members updated.

Cllr Dalton said: "We're also waiting to see what the fair funding review could mean for Surrey alone. They're thinking there could be a deficit of 45 million pounds in the county so we're having to look at everything."

Cllr **Neil Dallen** (RA Town) said: "We're in the unusual position of not staring at bankruptcy like other councils — and that's because we've been prudent. We've got reserves to cover things that have gone wrong and things have gone wrong and the reserves have actually been used to satisfy that."

Council finance chiefs also reminded members that a full review of reserves and council-owned assets is already under way, with results due in November.

The Section 151 officer confirmed that if reserves are found to be "over-prudent", some money could be released for other priorities, and that selling off struggling assets remained an option.

An attempt to water down the proposal — including disposing of 70 East Street and using the cash to top up building repairs — was also rejected. In the end, councillors voted to "note but take no action" on the motion.

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council town hall. (Credit: Emily Dalton/LDRS)

Emily Dalton LDRS

Surrey Heath steps up sell-off drive as council debts mount

Surrey Heath Borough Council is accelerating the disposal of local assets to reduce its debts, with both car parks and town centre shops now on the block.

At its September executive meeting councillors agreed to sell part of Yorktown car park in Sullivan Road, Camberley. Seventy-three of its 137 bays will go, leaving 64, after officials reported average daily use of only 43 vehicles. The site generates just £9,000 a year - £1.26 per bay per week - and is earmarked for housing in the borough's local plan. The sale is expected to provide "much-needed capital" before year end.

The same meeting also approved the disposal of a two-storey retail block in Obelisk Way. Despite being fully let to three shops and producing a gross rental income of £45,000, once landlord costs and service charges were taken into account the site posted a net loss of £4,500 last year. Substantial repairs were also looming. Councillors decided the 15,564 sq ft property, which includes eight parking spaces, would be "more valuable sold than retained" and could be converted for mixed residential use.

The council must cut £1.74m from its budget this year and £3.14m overall, alongside reducing interest payments on external debt and making a further £500,000 from service reviews. Cllr Kel Finan-Cooke, portfolio holder for property and economic development, said the financial case for both sales was "compelling". Conservative deputy leader Cllr Jonny Cope called the Obelisk Way disposal "sensible".

The sales place Surrey Heath in a wider national picture of local authorities struggling to balance their books. Years of shrinking central government funding, soaring social care costs and inflationary pressures have driven several councils close to collapse. Woking, Birmingham, Thurrock and Croydon have all issued effective bankruptcy notices in recent years, with asset sales and service cuts becoming the default response.

Critics warn that one-off disposals risk stripping town centres of public assets for good, but supporters argue such sales are

unavoidable if councils are to stave off financial failure and protect statutory services. For Surrey Heath, further reviews of underperforming sites are expected as the borough seeks to navigate its way through England's growing local government funding crisis.

Sam Jones - Reporter



Surrey Police tax set to rise

Council tax bills could keep climbing despite warnings residents could be getting less bang for their buck. Surrey's Police and Crime Commissioner has insisted she "will not ask the public to be less safe" as she defended plans to raise council tax for policing.

At a Police and Crime Panel meeting last week (September 4), PCC Lisa Townsend explained the decisions on the annual precept rise were driven by the Chief Constable's assessment of what the force needs to keep the country safe.

"It's not me plucking a figure out of thin air," she told councillors. For Ms Townsend, the choice is clear: "Surrey Police are cutting their cloth, but what I am not prepared to do is ask the public to be less safe."

Surrey Police must find £14.8m savings by 2029 with pay (which makes up 80 per cent of its spending) ramping up costs, a report states. Each 1 per cent pay rise for police officers adds £2.4m to the budget, equivalent to £4.80 on the average council tax bill.

The report revealed: "Whilst the force is making every effort to not impact services as a result of savings required, there is a risk that this will not be possible".

Ms Townsend's comments came after councillors questioned whether constant tax rises could be justified when Surrey Police must still deliver sweeping budget cuts to balance its budget.

Cllr Richard Wilson challenged: "At some point Surrey Police has to cut its cloth. You can't keep asking the public for more and more money when it's a regressive tax." He asked the PCC to "give the public a break" from the ever-increasing tax bills.

But finance officers warned that the ability to make further cuts "become more difficult every year" despite efforts to standardise IT systems, renegotiate contracts and improve procurement. They warned if Surrey Police do not increase the precept in a particular year then it has "missed that chance" in every following year to raise funds for the Force.

Although the Government has promised to fund some police pay rises above 2.8 per cent, Surrey is still waiting for clarity on how much of this money it will actually receive. The long-awaited Police Reform Bill could also see some functions stripped away to a national body or Surrey forced into merger talks — changes with potentially "major financial implications."

Surrey remains one of the lowest government-funded forces in the country, leaving residents to shoulder more of the burden through local taxation.

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council debt update

Councils across the UK have added a further £7.8bn to their collective borrowing in the last year, leaving local authorities with debts of £122.2bn - the equivalent of £1,791 for every resident. The figures, released by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government show that council debt rose seven per cent in a single year from £114.5bn in 2024.

For Epsom and Ewell Borough Council (EEBC), debt at the end of the 2024/25 financial year stood at £64.4m - or £785.80 per head of population. Surrey County Council's position is much larger in absolute terms, with borrowing of £1.07bn, equating to

£873.69 per resident. EEBC's debt level is exactly the same as the previous year. "This is because the council has not taken on any additional borrowing, and no debt was paid between the two financial years", said Cllr **Neil Dallen** (RA Town Ward), Chair of EEBC's Strategy and Resources Committee.

Both figures sit below the UK-wide average of £1,791 per head but illustrate how deeply embedded borrowing now is in local government finance.

Why councils borrow

Local authorities are permitted to borrow to fund projects such as schools, leisure centres, theatres and housing. Many also borrowed heavily over the past decade to acquire commercial property - from office parks to shopping centres - intended to generate rental income to offset cuts to central government funding.

But short-term borrowing from central government has almost tripled in recent years, in some cases used to plug day-to-day budget gaps rather than pay for long-term investments. Jonathan Carr-West of the Local Government Information Unit warned the approach was "extremely worrying", likening it to "payday loans for local governments".

Surrey's position

Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council, said that while the council had "a stable budget position", it was not immune to national financial pressures. He added: "All our key services – including social care, children's services, and highways maintenance – are facing higher demand, higher costs, and reduced funding. We must find ways to continue to support those residents who need us most, and to deliver the services that people rely on every day.

"As part of our budget setting process, the levels of balances and reserves have been determined to ensure that the level is justifiable and manageable in the context of local circumstances and risk."

Surrey's capital spending ambitions include new school places, highways upgrades, green initiatives, social care accommodation and library improvements, but the council has been forced to hold more expensive short-term debt while waiting for interest rates to fall.

National concerns

Warnings about the sustainability of council borrowing are not new. Six authorities – Croydon, Slough, Thurrock, Birmingham, Woking and Nottingham – have effectively declared bankruptcy in recent years, in some cases due to failed investment schemes. Thurrock alone faces a £469m funding black hole from collapsed solar farm projects.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has calculated that local authority "core spending power" remains 18% lower per resident than in 2010 despite some increases since the pandemic.

In June, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer pledged an overhaul of the council grant system to simplify the funding formula and shift resources towards the most deprived areas. While welcomed by urban councils, rural authorities have raised concerns that redistribution could "overcompensate" and leave them exposed.

Cost of servicing debt

Separate analysis by the *Times* found that councils across Great Britain now spend the equivalent of a fifth of council tax revenues on servicing their debts. Annual interest costs are estimated at over £4bn – more than the combined national spend on emergency housing and libraries, culture and tourism.

The Local Government Association's finance spokesperson, Cllr Pete Marland, said council finances "remain in a fragile position", adding: "A sustainable, long-term financial model for local government must lead to all councils having adequate resources to meet growing cost and demand pressures."

The local picture

Epsom and Ewell's £64.4m debt may appear modest compared with Surrey County Council's £1.07bn, but both authorities – like councils nationwide – must balance their budgets each year while contending with higher borrowing costs, reduced grant funding and rising demand for services.

With 30 more councils seeking exceptional financial support from government this year, including permission to use loans or asset sales to cover day-to-day spending, the pressure on local finances is set to remain intense.

The table below lists all of Surrey's districts highest debt first for 2024/2025:

Surrey's Districts	Total debt	Per person
Woking	£2,155,641,000	£20,601.33
Spelthorne	£1,065,761,000	£10,252.24
Runnymede	£597,712,000	£6,608.79
Guildford	£311,532,000	£2,088.35
Surrey Heath	£183,436,000	£1,990.24
Waverley	£140,286,000	£1,061.60
Tandridge	£92,816,000	£1,038.11
Mole Valley	£73,850,000	£836.68
Epsom & Ewell	£64,427,000	£785.80
Elmbridge	£48,624,000	£346.08
Reigate & Banstead	£5,000,000	£32.05

Guildford Council's CEO's salary touches the UK Prime Minister's

Guildford and Waverley Borough Council's chief executive's new salary will be £169,950 after a three per cent pay rise was agreed – despite the likelihood the two councils will soon be dissolved as part of local government reorganisation.

[The annual salary for a UK Prime Minister is £172,153, which includes £80,807 for the role of Prime Minister and an additional £91,346 for being an MP.]

Pedro Wrobel was appointed as the new joint chief executive in 2024, having previously been Westminster City Council's executive director for innovation and change. He replaced former boss Tom Horwood, who said he was standing down from the then £150,000 job due to health concerns.

Other options that had been on the table at the Thursday, July 31 Guildford and Waverley Joint Senior Staff Committee included a 3.2 per cent bump, welcomed by the Union for Local Authorities CEO's and Senior Managers, as well as a bumper one-off £25,500 lump sum that would have ramped the position's salary up to £185,000. The council said this would have brought the role in line with similar shared CEO roles such as Broadland District and South Norfolk, as well as Boston Borough, East Lindsey District, and South Holland District.

In the end, the committee took all of two minutes to agree on a three per cent rise — the equivalent of an extra £4,950 a year. The union UNISON has already agreed a three per cent award for Waverley Borough Council employees. No agreement for Guildford Borough Council employees has been agreed.

A spokesperson for Waverley Borough Council said: "This decision aligns with the pay award agreed with UNISON for Waverley Borough Council employees, and the councils' Joint Leadership Team. Maintaining a competitive remuneration package is

essential to attract and retain high-calibre leadership. The benchmarking data shows that many councils with similar or even smaller populations and fewer employees offer higher salaries. A modest increase helps to ensure the council remains competitive in a challenging recruitment market."

Mr Wrobel's new salary is among the highest received by council bosses in the Southeast and Surrey – although on a per head of population basis it is the lowest among similar councils with a joint role. This, the council argues, reflects the significant scale and complexity of the Guildford and Waverley job – with a combined population of more than 270,000 and responsibility for a workforce of more than 1,100 employees and 100 borough councillors.

The councils rejected the 3.2 per cent offer as it would have created inconsistency with the rest of the leadership team. While the one-off uplift to £185,000 would have represented a 12 per cent increase, significantly above local and national pay trends, it was therefore considered inappropriate and difficult to justify financially at this time.

Epsom and Ewell Times adds:

Chief Executive Salaries - Surrey Councils

Figures are the most recently published base salaries or salary bands. Some councils report ranges, others exact figures, and a few include allowances or car benefits.

Council	Chief Executive Salary (approx)	
Surrey County Council	£234,600 (former CEO)	
Guildford & Waverley	£169,950	
Epsom & Ewell	£131,000 - £152,000 + 4% allowance	
Mole Valley	£122,000 - £136,000	
Elmbridge	Up to £140,000+ (approval required)	
Reigate & Banstead	£137,500 - £144,500	
Runnymede	£100,000+ (not specified)	
Spelthorne	Up to £131,000	
Surrey Heath	£136,800 + £2,000 car allowance	
Tandridge	£122,000 - £138,000 (grade range)	
Woking	Not disclosed	

New CEO Pedro Wrobel (image GBC) and UK PM Starmer

A Surrey Council debates its bank's "support" for Gaza genocide

Pro-Palestinian campaigners have urged a Surrey council to cut financial ties with Barclays Bank, accusing the firm, of funding what they called Israel's "genocide of the Palestinian people". But no formal decision on divestment was made at the meeting.

Simon Higgins, on behalf of West Surrey Palestine Solidarity Campaign, delivered a statement to Guildford Borough Council on July 30, calling for the authority to take an "ethical and moral stand" by divesting from Barclays.

He claimed research shows Barclays holds billions in shares and loans to arms companies whose weapons are being used in Israel in attacks on Palestinians.

"If Guildford Borough Council keeps investing in Barclays, it's helping fund this genocide," Mr Higgins said. "This cannot continue." He added the bank helps the Israeli government raise money by acting as a dealer for its bonds.

Mr Higgins said: "Data obtained by independent research organisation, Profundo has revealed that

- Barclays holds over £2 billion in shares and provides £6.1 billion in loans and underwriting to nine companies whose weapons are being used by Israel in its genocidal attacks on the Palestinian people.
- Investment and financial services to these arms companies facilitates the provision of weapons for Israel's attacks.
- Barclays acts as a 'primary dealer' for Israel's government bonds, enabling it to raise money to fund its genocidal policies. By investing in Barclays, GBC is aiding this genocide."
- He said over 700 local people have signed a petition calling for the council to divest, adding both the Mayor of Guildford and the council's finance lead have acknowledged the seriousness of the situation.

Responding to the claims, Cllr Richard Lucas, lead for finance and property said he shared Mr Higgins' horror at what is happening in Gaza, but did not believe the case against Barclays was clear-cut.

Cllr Lucas said: "[Guildford council] share Mr Higgins' revulsion of what is going on but we don't think he has made a clear case against Barclays and furthermore we are not in a position to make a detailed judgment on this.

"We're already moving away from Barclays as part of our wider investment strategy," he added. "We understand the concerns, but we have to make decisions responsibly."

He said the research quoted by Higgins contradicts Barclays' own statements, which say the bank doesn't use its own money to invest in arms companies and that it pulled out of Israeli government bond deals last summer.

Cllr Lucas also explained how the council's investment policy works. "We follow national guidelines that tell us to prioritise security and liquidity, and to act as responsible investors," he said.

The council currently has two investments with Barclays - £3 million in a 95-day notice account (which is already being withdrawn), and £1.5 million in bonds that mature in 2027. Lucas said pulling out of the latter early would result in a significant financial loss.

"We're already moving away from Barclays as part of our wider investment strategy," he added. "We understand the concerns, but we have to make decisions responsibly."

Speaking afterwards, Mr Higgins said: "At the meeting I was shut down and denied a right of reply. This is unfair, undemocratic and unconstitutional."

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