

Woking Council private school loan scandal

28 March 2025



A private school loaned millions of pounds at favourable rates by bankrupt Woking Borough Council has still to pay its overdue debts – with the local authority saying it is “taking appropriate legal advice” to get its money back. Greenfield School in Old Woking was lent £13.3 million by the now-bust borough, with the previous administration saying the money would help free up capacity within state schools.

Last year, £2.4 million of that was due to be paid back, but the school said it was short of cash and instead offered the council a town centre building it owned in exchange, worth considerably less than that. The council, which is in the process of offloading assets to pay off its own multibillion-pound debt, told the school in November last year that it did not have the capacity to take on any additional buildings.

Four months on, the two parties appear to remain apart on terms, with questions now being asked at Woking Borough Council’s March 20 executive meeting over whether the school will be able to “regularise” its position. Councillor Dale Roberts, lead member for finance, said: “We made it clear that the strong preference of this council was that the school simply met their existing commitments. They are also aware that they are required to provide independent and professional advice on the viability of their plans to repay. Our needs must be front and centre to provide assurance that the school will be able to honour any revised terms and of course that means not just the repayment in November last year but for the whole of the arrangement.”

Cllr Roberts described the loans as “inappropriate” and that the “former administration had no business entering into any such arrangement”. He said: “I’d prefer not to comment on the legalities but I can say with some confidence that it was ultra reckless. The (previous administration) may or may not have acted beyond their legal powers but they certainly sprinted with blind ambition past the boundaries of good judgement.”

According to the papers published by Woking Borough Council, the unsecured loans between 2019 and 2021 helped the school to relocate into another catchment area and enter a different segment of the private education market. Woking Borough Council declared itself effectively bankrupt in 2023 and had to cut services while increasing tax by 10 per cent to help cover its financial meltdown. Greenfield School, which charges up to £17,010 a year, has previously told the council it “may not be in a position” to repay money owed.

Related reports:

No wonder Woking went bankrupt. Scandal of private school loans

Image: Greenfield School Woking (image Google)

Surrey Councils launch Local Government Reorganisation engagement

28 March 2025



Surrey residents can have their say on the future of local government in the county, in a new survey launched by eight of Surrey’s district and borough councils.

An initial proposal for Local Government Reorganisation, which would see the county divided into two or three unitary councils, was published by district and borough councils last week, and they are now asking for the initial views of residents and local businesses.

Given that the current system of local government has been in place for the last 50 years, this is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to change things for the better. Eight district and borough councils are therefore offering local people the opportunity to give their feedback on plans for the future governance of the county, to influence the next phase of the process.

Most district and borough leaders in Surrey support a move to three unitary authorities. They believe this would strike the best balance between efficiency and maintaining genuine local accountability, as well as maximising opportunities to support economic growth by ensuring that unitary authorities reflect the economic geography of the county. But regardless of any stated preferences, all district and borough leaders are keen that local people should have the opportunity to contribute to the debate.

The new unitary authorities would assume responsibility for the services currently delivered by Surrey County Council and the 11 district and boroughs. This transition would pave the way for the creation of a new strategic authority covering the county.

Councillor Hannah Dalton, Chair of the Epsom & Ewell Borough Council Residents’ Association (Majority Group) and co-chair of the Surrey Leaders Group, said:

“This is a pivotal moment for local government in Surrey. There are a number of compelling advantages to unitary councils – and cost savings is only one of them. We also need to ensure we create new organisations that can manage economic growth more effectively, and which recognise the importance of community, identity, and local democracy.

“Local Government Reorganisation provides us with an important opportunity to secure Surrey’s future prosperity, safeguard high-quality public services and ensure that decisions continue to be made close to the people they impact.

“The voice of our residents is what really matters. We want to hear what you think about the future of your local councils. Please get involved in the survey and give us your views.”

The survey is open for comments until Sunday 20 April.

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Godstone “Sink-hole” residents to return

28 March 2025



After a long wait, good news may finally be coming to some who were forced to evacuate after a massive sinkhole opened up in a Surrey town. Families living on the impacted street in Godstone have been told they may be allowed to return home this weekend.

The huge hole appeared on Godstone High Street on February 17 and was quickly declared a major incident due to its seriousness and complexity. Now scaled down to a ‘significant incident’ investigations are still ongoing as to what the cause is and how to solve it.

“We have some really good news for residents,” said Lloyd Allen, Infrastructure Team Manager for Surrey County Council. “We’re expecting them to return this weekend.”

Wearing a hi-vis jacket and standing in front of part of the enormous hole, Mr Allen said families on Godstone high street can once again sleep in their own beds. He warned that the news is subject to a couple of issues the team is investigating and depends on them getting the all-clear that water quality is up to standard.

Five weeks after the high street was almost swallowed up by the sinkhole, highway officials still do not know what caused the major incident. “The plan for the future is to carry on doing what we are doing,” said Mr Allen with no clear indication of when the saga might end. The infrastructure manager said he and the team, as well as specially hired geo technical engineers are analysing the investigation results and seeing if there is a tunnel network.

In a new video released by the county council, the highways team gave a latest update on Godstone with some crucial insights. Surveys have revealed a lot of anomalies in the area which could be deep sewers, series of tunnels or even potentially soak away from properties. Further investigations are still needed to pin down exactly what they are, the team said.

Afterwards, the team will plot a series of bore holes on the site that they can carry out to look under the surface. If more tunnels or voids are found, they can put cameras down and do some more testing. “But that work might take several months longer,” Mr Allen said.

Matt Furniss, Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Economic Growth at Surrey County Council, said: “Highways Officers have used foam concrete to temporarily fill the hole to stabilise the area and to ensure it doesn’t get any bigger.”

“Specialist surveys are continuing in areas which were previously inaccessible, to determine the underlying cause of the collapse and how best to permanently repair the area so it doesn’t reoccur.”

“Due to the unprecedented nature of this incident, we expect the full-scale repair of the site to take several more months although we expect residents will be able to return to their homes whilst works are carried out, once it is safe to do so. We thank them for their ongoing patience as we deal with this complex incident.”

Related report:

[Surrey sink-hole major incident](#)

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

Banstead Dog licensing scheme deemed ‘foul’

28 March 2025



Professional dog walkers say they were told “if you don’t like what we’re doing, take your dog somewhere else” at a public meeting about a new licensing scheme being introduced for several Surrey beauty spots.

Dog walkers have claimed the land managers are using the new licensing project as a ‘pay or go away scheme’ which they say it is more expensive than neighbouring schemes and has been “appallingly” managed.

New rules could see professional dog walkers pay £360 to use a Surrey beauty spot, Banstead Common, from April 1. Banstead Common Conservators (BCC) said the main reason for setting up the scheme was to ensure the safety of everyone who uses the Commons and to control commercial business on the land.

“There’s disdain for the profession and that’s been made very clear,” said Emma, a self-employed dog walker. She previously spoke to Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) of the BCC staff being “heavy handed”. Now, Emma said the BCC are “bullying people into submission” with the new licensing rules.

Calling the land managers “prejudiced”, the professional dog walkers said the BCC have presented “no evidence” that they are a danger to the public or conservation compared to any other person who walks over the heath.

“They are refusing to supply the legal standing for the scheme,” said Emma, “I just don’t know what else to do.” Dog walkers have said they welcome the licensing

scheme in principle but accused the BCC’s proposition as ‘unworkable’, more expensive than others and without engagement or input from dog walkers.

Rather than just a side-hustle, professional dog-walking is a job or business that people pay their mortgage with. Jen, a dog walker for nearly 10 years said: “The chairman and another committee member were dismissive and incredibly rude when concerned dog walkers asked legitimate questions about the licensing scheme at a January meeting.”

For months the professional dog walkers have complained they have been “left in the dark” and there has been “no dialogue” with the managers implementing a scheme which could significantly change their working conditions. “Their attitude has spurred so much misery and alienation,” an anonymous local dog walker said.

The chairman of the BCC accused professional dog walkers of “lying” in their complaints and “being insulting” against the BCC at a public meeting earlier this year. Another member advised dog walkers if they were not willing to pay for the license they should “go back to where they came from”.

A BCC spokesperson said: “All of our engagement with any user of Banstead Commons is done with respect and in accordance with our statutory duties.” The BCC have said they have responded to all enquiries they have received “in a professional and timely manner” and have hosted three informal meetings about the licensing scheme with positive feedback.

The land managers have said they are using their powers under paragraph 18 of the Metropolitan Commons Banstead (Supplemental) Act 1893 act to restrict commercial activity. Despite repeated requests from LDRS and interested groups, the conservators chose not to specifically highlight which part of the act they are referring to.

The BCC said the scheme was a response to the increase in the number of dogs being walked commercially on the Commons in recent years and the pressure it puts on the land, wildlife and visitors. As land managers, the conservators said, they need to ensure businesses are insured and identifiable when they are operating on our sites.

Spanning 1,350 acres, the land – owned by Reigate and Banstead Borough Council – includes Banstead Heath, Banstead Downs, Park Downs and Burgh Heath. Although the BCC claim the £360 annual license fee offers a good deal for users at just less than £1 a day, professional dog walkers argue it is extortionate compared to other Surrey and London boroughs which are council-run.

Similar schemes are also being trialled elsewhere in Surrey. Nonsuch Park in Epsom, is running a pilot commercial dog licensing fee of £200 a year with a limit of six dogs walking at any one time. The licence will be managed by Epsom and Ewell Borough Council as well as the London Borough of Sutton Council. Charging £164.50 to use open spaces across the whole district, Tandridge District Council also runs a licensing scheme.

Although some dog walkers may call the response “overblown”, the BCC said it has clear legal responsibilities to “protect the integrity of Banstead Commons and visitor safety”. The group added it has also catered its response in line with a prevention of future deaths report for Natasha Johnston, a professional dog walker who tragically was mauled to death by eight dogs she was walking in Caterham in 2023.

“Unknown people shouldn’t approach unknown dogs,” said Jen. She said the part of the scheme she was most concerned about was BCC staff being able to walk up to her and the dogs and check collars which could put the dogs and herself at risk. “It goes completely against my GDPR policy,” Jen said.

As it stands, if a dog walker’s license is revoked there is no process of appeal and no refund. “They are judge, jury and executioner,” Jen said. She lamented that neither Reigate and Banstead Borough Council, the landowners, nor the Department for Environmental Food and Rural Affairs want to get involved and the BCC are “unaccountable”.

“What’s different between dog walkers and members of the public walking dogs?” the anonymous dog walker challenged, explaining everyone uses the land and has to pick up dog poo. Speaking to the LDRS, the dog walkers said they take out local community dogs that live in the area and provide a needed service.

A BCC spokesperson said: “Banstead Commons Conservators are looking forward to working together with licensed dog walkers operating on our Commons. We have set up clear reporting procedures with licensed businesses which as well as a direct staff member to report concerns, includes hosting an annual review meeting open to all licensed businesses and an invitation for two representatives to join our Banstead Commons Consultative Group.

“Banstead Commons are wonderful open spaces enjoyed by many residents and visitors from further afield. Under our Act commercial activity is controlled in order to protect the integrity of the Commons and the welfare of its users. With the increasing volume of professional dog walkers, including displacement from other areas that have already implemented restrictions, it has become necessary to take the responsible step of licensing this activity. This scheme will help regulate the numbers of dogs being walked commercially on our sites and ensure that companies are operating safely and treating Banstead Commons, its users and wildlife with respect and consideration.

“Unless there is an incident to manage, Banstead Commons Conservators will not be interfering with licensed dog walking companies when they are operating safely and adhering to the licence scheme [...] Banstead Commons Conservators are always compliant in their operations.”

Related reports:

[A dog’s dinner of a licensing scheme?](#)

[Should Nonsuch Park go to the dogs?](#)

Image: Four dogs in Banstead wood, ahead of the licensing scheme to be introduced. (Credit: Dog walker Emma)

Surrey leads lateral thinking about vertical farming

28 March 2025



Can vertical farming be the key to improving and safeguarding the United Kingdom’s food system? This is the central question behind a new research project led by the University that has been awarded £1.4 million by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

The Vertical Farming to Improve UK Food System Resilience (VF-UKFSR) project will investigate how vertical farming can improve the country’s supply of nutritious leafy greens, essential for a healthy diet.

Vertical farming is a method of growing crops in stacked layers, often indoors, using controlled environments. Unlike traditional farming, it doesn’t rely on soil or natural sunlight. It uses soilless techniques and artificial lighting to create optimal conditions for plant growth. This allows crops to be grown year-round, regardless of weather conditions and makes more efficient use of space and resources.

Dr Zoe M Harris, project lead from the University of Surrey’s Centre for Environment and Sustainability, said:

“Our project is keen to explore how vertical farming can provide local, diverse, and culturally appropriate food, given its potential to grow a wide variety of crops. So far, there’s been little in-depth analysis of the risks to our country’s leafy greens supply nor a thorough examination of the benefits and trade-offs vertical farming could bring to the UK’s food system. Thanks to this grant from UKRI, we’re excited to change that and create a clear roadmap to unlock this potential on a larger scale.”

The research team will work closely with farmers, industry, government and the community to make sure that the outputs of the project focus on real-life and immediate benefits.

The core team is made up of whole-system, environmental and social scientists, UK Urban AgriTech (UKUAT) and five farm partners – Flex Farming, Innovation Agritech Group, Farm Urban, GrowPura, and LettUs Grow.

Dr Lada Timotijevic from the University of Surrey said:

“Our research is all about identifying and understanding the risks to our food system and seeing how vertical farming can help tackle these challenges. We want to create tools that make it easy to see the impact of expanding vertical farming on considerations including food supply, land use, and the environment, so we can make smart decisions for the future.

“We’re also focused on understanding the public’s perceptions of vertical farming and the social conditions needed for vertical farming to succeed, as well as on working closely with farmers, industry, and policymakers to build a roadmap that supports its growth across the UK.”

The project’s leadership team consists of:

- University of Surrey: Dr Zoe M Harris, Dr Lada Timotijevic, Dr Lirong Liu, Dr James Suckling, Dr Damiete Emmanuel-Yusuf
- University of Aberdeen: Professor Astley Hastings
- University of Sussex: Dr Alexandra Penn
- UKUAT: Mark Horler

Image: Vertical farm. Credit ifarm.fi Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International

Will sale of Dorking offices compromise housing plans?

28 March 2025



Dorking’s former Aviva building has been put up for sale. The offices in Pixham Lane are being marketed by Savills – with the asking price only available on application. Currently owned by Stonegate Homes, it was set to play a key role in Mole Valley District Council’s housing targets, having sat empty for years following the decision of insurance company Aviva to leave the Pixham Lane site in the town at the end of 2016. Failure to meet its targets can have a lasting impact and leave boroughs open to unwanted development.

Owners Stonegate Homes were contacted but did not respond, and calls have been going straight to answer machine. Planning permission was granted for the site – often referred to as the former Aviva Building – for 369 homes in a mixture of flats and townhouses. Savills describes the land as “a substantial former office building”. Built in 1957, it was eventually bought by Dorking-based developers Stonegate with a view to converting it into homes, but its future is now shrouded with uncertainty.

Savill’s marketing brochure reads: “The site is considered to be an excellent opportunity to acquire one of the most prominent development sites in Dorking to deliver a mix of flats and houses that are in close proximity to Dorking Station. The location enjoys views of the Surrey Hills and is within close proximity of open countryside. The site has potential for some additional planning gain for further additional houses to be delivered, subject to planning and any technical constraints. There is the option to acquire the whole or to purchase phases with offers invited on an unconditional and subject to planning basis.”

Senior Mole Valley District councillors have said they are keeping a close eye on the sale and how it will affect housing delivery. Councillor Margaret Cooksey, portfolio holder for planning, said: “We need the homes to be built; they were supposed to be affordable homes on the site plus other community facilities. We need those to happen. We will be watching closely.”

Image: Former Aviva site in Pixham Lane, near Dorking (image Google)

The Hidden Link Between Metabolic Syndrome and Joint Pain

28 March 2025



Many people have heard of *metabolic syndrome* as a risk factor for heart disease, stroke, and diabetes — but it’s now becoming clear that it also takes a serious toll on our bones, joints, and muscles.

Metabolic syndrome is a cluster of conditions, including obesity, high blood pressure, raised blood sugar, high triglycerides, and low levels of “good” cholesterol (HDL). Affecting nearly one in three adults in the UK, it’s driven largely by sedentary lifestyles and poor diet.

But beyond its impact on the heart, metabolic syndrome causes long-term inflammation in the body, which in turn affects musculoskeletal health in several key ways:

- **Joint Pain & Arthritis:** Chronic inflammation from visceral fat can damage cartilage and accelerate the development of osteoarthritis, particularly in the knees and hips.
- **Tendon Problems:** Conditions like Achilles tendinopathy and shoulder pain are more common in people with metabolic syndrome. High blood sugar can stiffen tendons, making them prone to injury.
- **Bone Health:** There’s a strong link between metabolic syndrome and reduced bone density. Inflammation and insulin resistance disrupt normal bone repair, increasing the risk of fractures and osteoporosis.

The condition also interferes with the body's ability to heal and maintain tissues, meaning injuries can linger and become chronic.

The good news? Physiotherapy and regular exercise play a crucial role in managing the effects of metabolic syndrome on the musculoskeletal system. By improving mobility, reducing inflammation, and supporting healthy weight loss, targeted movement and rehab strategies can make a real difference.

So if you're living with joint or tendon pain and also have risk factors for metabolic syndrome, it might be time to take a more holistic view — and seek advice from a physiotherapist or your GP.

The Role of Physiotherapy and Exercise

Despite its challenges, metabolic syndrome's effects on musculoskeletal health can be mitigated through physiotherapy and exercise.

1. Exercise as an Anti-Inflammatory Intervention

Regular exercise reduces chronic inflammation by promoting anti-inflammatory cytokines such as IL-10 while lowering pro-inflammatory markers. A study in *Diabetes Care* (2014) showed that aerobic exercise significantly reduced CRP and TNF- α levels in individuals with metabolic syndrome.

Weight loss through exercise reduces visceral fat, a major source of pro-inflammatory cytokines, easing joint pain and improving musculoskeletal function.

2. Physiotherapy for Joint Pain and Tendinopathies

Physiotherapy plays a key role in managing musculoskeletal conditions related to metabolic syndrome. Personalized exercise programs focusing on strength, flexibility, and joint stability help manage OA and prevent further joint damage.

For tendinopathies, physiotherapists recommend strengthening exercises, which promote tendon healing and reduce pain. A *British Journal of Sports Medicine* (2017) study found that eccentric exercises significantly improved function and reduced pain in Achilles tendinitis, even in individuals with metabolic syndrome.

Additionally, physiotherapists provide guidance on body mechanics and joint protection strategies, reducing strain on joints and tendons during daily activities.

3. Bone Health and Resistance Training

Resistance training is essential for bone health in individuals with metabolic syndrome. Weight-bearing exercises, such as strength training and resistance bands, stimulate bone formation and help maintain density. A *Journal of Bone and Mineral Research* (2018) study found that resistance training improved BMD in postmenopausal women with metabolic syndrome, reducing osteoporosis and fracture risk.

Balance and coordination exercises can also be incorporated to prevent falls, particularly for individuals with weakened bones.

Conclusion: Addressing Metabolic Syndrome for Better Musculoskeletal Health

Metabolic syndrome significantly increases the risk of osteoarthritis, tendinopathies, and osteoporosis due to chronic inflammation and tissue dysregulation. However, these negative effects can be mitigated through physiotherapy and regular exercise.

By reducing inflammation, improving metabolic health, and promoting tissue repair, exercise and physiotherapy enhance musculoskeletal function and overall well-being. Individuals with metabolic syndrome can benefit from tailored exercise programs and physiotherapy interventions to manage joint pain, prevent injuries, and maintain strong bones and healthy tissues.

Luke Schembri, *Advanced Physiotherapy Practitioner*

<http://www.genuinephysio.com/>

Image by Tung Lam from Pixabay

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28 March 2025



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The Team at Epsom and Ewell Times

Surrey Arts Gala went live in Guildford

28 March 2025



Surrey Arts held its latest Gala concert on Saturday, 15 March, at G Live in Guildford, showcasing the incredible talent of over 300 young musicians from 15 different ensembles. The event featured a diverse array of performances, including original compositions and well-known pieces, highlighting the inclusive spirit of Surrey Arts. The event included Surrey Arts inclusive orchestra UP! alongside its newest ensemble, World in Music, a diverse group which aims to introduce young people to unfamiliar cultures through both western and non-western musical traditions.

Sarah Lee, Head of Service for Surrey Arts said: *“The Gala is a fantastic event which showcases the talent of our young people from many of our bands, orchestras and choirs. The concert allows young musicians to collaborate with others they would not normally have the chance to play with and gives an opportunity to play in a professional theatre.”*

At the event, Councillor Denise Turner Stewart, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Customer and Communities, said: *“It is lovely to be here tonight at the Surrey Arts Gala 2025. I’m really impressed with how hard the children are working. They are really enjoying themselves this evening and the audience are having a great time. It’s actually really moving to see the effort they are putting into their performances, so I would like to say a big thank you to all the staff and everyone who has organised this tonight.”*

The groups performed to a delighted audience with one parent commenting *“Thank you to all the members of Surrey Arts staff for putting on such an epic concert! We thoroughly enjoyed it, and it was a pleasure to see the wide range of ensembles run by Surrey Arts, many of which I’d never come across before.”*

Performances from the Gala will soon be available to view on the **Surrey Arts YouTube channel**.

Surrey Arts’ ensembles perform at locations across Surrey throughout the year. Visit the **Surrey Arts Ensembles webpage** to find out more.

Anyone for free Summer tennis in Epsom and Ewell?

28 March 2025



Epsom & Ewell Borough Council will provide free morning tennis sessions in all council-owned tennis courts across the borough this summer, between 22 July and 29 August 2025. The decision, made by the Environment Committee last week, follows a similar initiative which took place last year. In addition to the summer program, starting April 1 residents can enjoy free Sunday morning sessions at Gibraltar and Poole Road Recreation Grounds. The council already offers two hours of free, bookable tennis sessions at courts every weekend throughout the year.

Epsom & Ewell moved to a pay-to-play model for tennis last year. The scheme aims to ensure that council tennis courts are well-maintained as well as providing funding for future improvements. Maintenance carried out so far includes clearing and treating all courts for moss; improved signage; new court-side benches at Poole Road and Auriol Park; and installing windbreakers at Court Recreation Ground, Gibraltar Recreation Ground and Poole Road. New laser line marking at Alexandra Park will take place later this year.

Councillor Liz Frost, Chair of the Environment Committee, commented: “We were really pleased with how well received the free tennis sessions were last summer and we’re very happy to be able to offer them again. They provide a great opportunity to give a tennis a try for free – whether you are a complete beginner, haven’t played for a few years, or just want to get some extra practise in.

“I hope residents will take advantage of the various free sessions on offer now and this summer. Booking details are available on the council’s website.”

Court sessions are available to book online 24 hours a day on the ClubSpark website, and paid coaching sessions are also available to book at Court Recreation Ground, Alexandra Park and Auriol Park: Find & book a tennis court near you | LTA.

Free summer tennis sessions are available up to midday (12 noon) from 22 July 2025 to 29 August 2025.

To take advantage of the free tennis offer, individuals must first register with ClubSpark and then use the platform to book their free sessions.

In addition to the free morning sessions available in the summer, free sessions are available year-round at the following times:

- Alexandra Park
 - Saturday: 9am-10am
 - Saturday: 10am-11am, this session is run by a coach or volunteer
- Auriol Park
 - Saturday: 9am-10am
 - Saturday: 10am-11am, this session is run by a coach or volunteer
- Court Recreation Ground
 - Saturday: 10am – 11am
 - Sunday: 10am-11am, this session is run by a coach or volunteer



- Gibraltar Recreation Ground
 - Saturday: 9am - 11am
 - Sunday: 9am - 11am
- Poole Road
 - Saturday: 9am - 11am
 - Sunday: 9am - 11am