

The knives are out in Woking

23 June 2023



The Epsom and Ewell Times has covered the bankruptcy of Woking Council. Recently we have received daily updates from our partners at the BBC's Local Democracy Reporting Service but spared you from the flood. This report, however, demonstrates the importance of a vibrant quality local media. The baffling commitments that were made by Woking are unlikely to be made by our Epsom and Ewell Borough Council. Nevertheless, a free press reporting on Council business is an important contribution to sensible decision making. Chris Caulfield reports:

Woking Borough Council's bankruptcy crisis is so insane the authority even agreed to be responsible for "buying the Hilton Hotel's cutlery".

It is the first of many revelations to come as the authority agreed to an "asset disposal strategy" as part of its efforts to cut into its £2.6 billion projected debt on Tuesday (June 20).

Many eyes were immediately drawn to the council's flagship town centre development in Victoria Square - a central driver behind the council's £1.2 billion deficit.

But the recent news that it had been written down in value to almost half what it cost to build means it is unlikely to be sold at a massive loss straight away. It's the assets inside the building that made many drop their spoons.

Addressing the extraordinary council meeting was borough leader Cllr Ann-Marie Barker. She said: "Let's have a look at a couple of projects. Victoria Square going from £150 million to £460m to £700m. Huge difference in the scale of what went on there. Huge changes to the project as it went through. Much that wasn't known by opposition councillors as that project developed.

"I found out at a very late stage that Woking Council was responsible for buying all of the cutlery for the Hilton Hotel. That was where the hotel was run, we've got to buy all the stuff that goes inside there. It just seems quite astonishing that that was the approach and how much responsibility and risk the council has taken on. That's where the huge issues lie."

The opening of the Hilton Hotel, part of the Victoria Square development, is already about three years overdue. It was originally set for completion in November but the pandemic and other delays pushed this back 16 months. Later remedial work to address cladding issues added another 20 months on to the opening date.

Meanwhile the knives and forks have sat unused in drawers.

Cllr Barker added: "To get things under control you have to understand the totality of the problem."