

Good morning, Chair, and members of the Committee.

My name is Julia Thomas, and I am an employee of Bristol City Council as well as a contributor to the Avon Pension Fund. I am here today to speak about **apartheid**. The Avon Pension Fund is perpetuating this dehumanizing system of oppression by investing over £12 million in companies that profit from their operations in the Occupied Territories of the West Bank.

The Israeli government has encouraged the building of many colonial settlements all over the West Bank. These settlements are connected by "**settler-only**" roads, which lead back to Israel. **Palestinians** can only travel via a complex system of permits and military checkpoints. These barriers restrict Palestinian access to education, healthcare, and livelihoods. **And**, the Israeli separation wall, built on stolen Palestinian land, isolates farmers from their fields and olive groves. Israel also controls 80% of the water resources in the West Bank, further compounding the hardship for Palestinian communities. These policies amount to **apartheid**.

In the 1960s, revelations about **South African apartheid** led many local councils to reassess their investments in pension funds. In 1981, Sheffield Local Authority led the way by pledging to end all links with apartheid South Africa and its subsidiaries, and by barring South African sports teams from its playing fields. In 1985, the Local Authorities Against Apartheid was set up to coordinate action, and over 120 local councils had followed suit.

The United Nations Centre Against Apartheid published a report commending these coordinated efforts. It was clear that divesting from apartheid South Africa was an effective tool for driving change. This same logic must be applied today, to our investments in companies supporting Israeli settlements.

The Avon Pension Fund must also take into account the International Court of Justice's declaration that Israel's occupation of the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem is illegal. In July 2024, the ICJ ruled that Israel's legislation and actions violate the international prohibition on racial segregation and apartheid. The Court mandated that Israel end its occupation, remove the settlements, provide full reparations to Palestinian victims, and facilitate the return of displaced people.

Our pension fund must align with the ICJ's ruling.