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Dorking’s “behemouth” of a “black hole”

23 October 2025

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.”

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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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Dorking Halls to get refit

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