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Ideas for empty Council premises in Reigate and Redhill

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Calls to make use of empty town centre units could see charities and pop-up shops take over in Surrey towns as councillors ask for short-term leases to be made available on council owned buildings. Over £600k is spent every year on maintaining empty shops and offices in Reigate and Banstead borough, according to council data.

Reigate and Banstead Borough Council (RBBC) own several wholly or partially empty commercial properties which they have to pay expensive business rates, utility bills and insurance for. Half of business rates are absorbed by the council, with the other half sent to the central government.

Councillors found that £619k has been spent on the upkeep of vacant commercial units in the borough this year. Three quarters of this is spent on properties in Redhill, including the new Rise shopping centre and Wheatley Court on Cromwell Road.

Around £174k is spent every year on four completely empty properties, including Beech House in Reigate which has been vacant since 2021. The three-storey office block is now up for sale.

While some prime retail commercial units are sitting empty in Redhill town centre, Cllr Neha Boghani (Green Party) has proposed a “common sense” motion to put the spaces to work. She has suggested using short-term ‘Meanwhile leases’ to save the council from paying extortionate business rates by making the space available to volunteer groups until full rental for these buildings is agreed.

‘Meanwhile’ leases essentially allow for the temporary occupation of a retail unit in a town centre without the lengthy administrative and legal process. It means non-commercial occupiers, who would otherwise not be able to afford the rent, can take advantage of the site as soon as possible.

She said: “Let’s open some of our empty spaces for Christmas on Meanwhile Leases. We could create space for community uses, for entertainment, to serve the most vulnerable and provide a decent size temporary venue until the Harlequin reopens. What’s not to like?”

The Green Party has suggested the multiple empty spaces in The Light shopping centre, Redhill, could be used for Christmas charity appeals or community groups. They also referenced the Harlequin Theatre needing a new temporary venue, which the council could provide in one of the empty shops in the centre.

Although charities and voluntary organisations pay peppercorn rent on a prime location store, it is only for a short period of time while the landlord finds a permanent tenant. Charities are often faced with unpredictable funding streams which can make it difficult for them to operate, so having a short-term let could potentially add further uncertainty.

“This arrangement can create something out of nothing,” the Green Party councillor said. “It could be put to good use to support the charities using the space for the short term.”

The Reigate and Banstead Council executive will consider using temporary leases and its potential economic benefits at a future date.

Cllr Neha Boghani outside an empty retail unit in Redhill. (Credit: Green Party)

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