

# Redhill theatre gone to rack and ruin?

9 August 2024



There are currently no plans to reopen a much loved Surrey town centre theatre according to a new report.

**The Harlequin Theatre in Redhill** closed its doors in September 2023 after the discovery of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC). Nearly one year on, surveys to establish the extent of the issue have not been completed and there is no indication of when any work may start, or the venue re-open.

Reigate and Banstead Council (RBC) will discuss the future of the theatre at a Strategies Meeting on Thursday (August 15).

RBC said: "We hoped it would be a temporary closure, but due to the extent of the RAAC identified so far and the complex structure of the building, we do not expect to be able to re-open the theatre in the foreseeable future."

In a report by council officers, it has been recommended to stop current Harlequin arts and cultural activities, including the December show and the pop-up in The Belfry shopping centre. The report also warned that "many loyal, hardworking staff" could face redundancy if the recommendation was adopted.

"I'm outraged," Cllr **Andrew Proudfoot** told the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS). He said: "This is an absolutely essential hub for local arts and schools. This is the suggestion of a Conservative attack on community life."

Cllr Proudfoot put forward a motion at last month's council meeting to reaffirm RBC's commitment to the arts, secure an interim facility and develop a reopening plan for the theatre. The Green Party member said at the meeting that the theatre is home to many local organisations, providing cultural identity and nurturing young talent. They added there are no other similar facilities for large cultural events in the borough.

Locals have expressed their disappointment at the recommended decision and the ongoing uncertainty for the provision of arts and culture in the area. Some said they were "heartbroken" as the Harlequin Theatre gave them opportunities to develop in the creative arts.

RBC said it was "keen to keep access to the arts alive" while the building has been closed by delivering the successful Big Top Panto in Memorial Park and its regular 'Harlequin Outdoors' summer programme in Reigate's Castle Grounds.

Options tabled in the report include putting on the Christmas 2024 show and then making all Harlequin staff redundant in 2025, and working on a renewed opening in April next year. Costing the council an estimated overspend of £250-300k, it is the cheapest proposed option other than to stop all activity of the Harlequin theatre.

In a press statement, Cllr **Nadean Moses**, Executive Member for Sustainability and Leisure, said: "Our commitment to providing an arts and cultural offer in the medium and long-term remains strong." With no more events scheduled after the Outdoor Theatre closing on September 7, Cllr Moses said it can review the costs and benefits of the theatre as well as developing future options for the arts.

The council is looking at new venues such as a school or a cabaret-style performance space. Work is being done for a full business plan of the council's offering of creative arts to its residents for 2025.