

Brunton Theatre months from running out of money after council cut funding

The Brunton Theatre Trust has warned it is months away from running out of funds after its council grant was cut by £200,000 a year.

The group was forced to move out of its main theatre in Musselburgh 18 months ago after crumbling concrete, known as RAAC, was found in the roof.

And at a council meeting this week, theatre bosses warned uncertainty over the building and their reduced grant meant their future was in "severe jeopardy".

The trust has been dipping into reserves to continue its performance and education events at venues including Haddington Corn Exchange, Loretto School Theatre and Northesk Church.

Richard Butt, from the trust, told the meeting of audit and governance committee, said: " Looking at the accounts in the next financial year within a month we will be breaching our reserves policy assuming the cut in funding from the council continues and so we are having serious discussions as to whether we can sign off the accounts as a going concern because essentially we will breach our reserves policy and use up all our reserves in the following financial year.

We are doing this without knowing if or when we will be able to move operations back into the Brunton.”

He said had the grant from the council not been cut the Trust could have continued, while still needing to use some reserves ‘for a number of years’.

And fellow trust member Michael Stitt told the committee: “We urgently need the funding reinstated and we urgently need transparency around where we are with RAAC.

“It has now been 18 months, there is huge frustration from the trust and there is great frustration within the community as well and if there are two key messages to take away it is that we really cannot go on like this both from a funding perspective and transparency perspective”

East Lothian Council, identified the presence of RAAC (Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete) in the theatre building as well as two secondary schools during a review early last year.

At its February budget it agreed to reduce its annual grant to the theatre trust by £200,000.

Tom Reid, the council’s head of infrastructure, said the schools affected by RAAC had taken priority but work was being carried out into possible solutions for the theatre as well.

He said: “Obviously it has been an incredibly challenging period for the trust and they have my sympathy. Our team, along with external consultants, have been working flat out to respond to the RAAC. The two high schools diverted some of our resources and capacity based on the fact it was statutory and education had be prevalent.

“Since then we have been working on the Brunton. We still aren’t in a position to give clarity on the options appraisal but the hope is to bring it to council in October.”

And he warned any work approved would not mean a quick return to the venue.

He said: "Whatever the fix option for the Brunton is it is not going to be a short term fix to enable the trust to return to the Brunton."

Council leader Norman Hampshire told the committee that whatever solution was decided for the Brunton Theatre it was going to be a 'multi-million pound' solution which would need external funding.

He said: "We all want to see the arts continue in East Lothian and we think the Brunton does a great job for us however the financial challenges we face mean it is going to be difficult."

By Marie Sharp Local Democracy Reporter