

# Art in the park plan for an NHS tribute theatre

OUTDOOR EVENT SPACE IN MEADOWBANK COULD REVIVE STRUGGLING ART SCENE

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A NEW outdoor theatre could be a permanent tribute to the sacrifices made by key workers during the pandemic - and revive the struggling arts.

That's the case being made by Stephen Williams, who runs a choir and brass band in Dorking, and says his suggestion has support from council members and fellow musicians. It would give a much-needed boost to an arts scene devastated by the Covid-19 shut-down, he says.

Mr Williams suggests the building could be dedicated to NHS and key workers, similar to how many village and town halls were built in the aftermath of the First and Second World Wars to acknowledge the sacrifice made during the conflicts.

"I do think one of the pressing needs in Dorking is somewhere outside for a multi-functional performance space," Mr Williams said.

"We also need to somehow mark and provide a fitting legacy to celebrate the fantastic work of the NHS in getting us through the pandemic. I've had a lot of support and everyone I've spoken to seems to think it's a good idea. Several people have offered to help in pushing the idea forward and it's already been informally discussed at Mole Valley District Council.

"With a fair wind and the support of the council and other musical and dramatic groups I think it's very realistic to be honest, especially if you



Stephen Williams (centre) with local conductor of the Mickleham Choral Society and local singer Nick Wright  
GRAHAME LARTER

think about how popular the stage at Polesden Lacey is in the summer.

"Dorking has a vibrant arts culture and this will be a very useful contribution to promoting that.

"That's the feedback I've had from those members of the performing community who have contacted me."

Mr Williams would like to see the venue located in Meadowbank park, with the natural hillside beyond ideal for an open-air performing arts venue.

He is now planning to set up a working group to draw up a formal

proposal, which could then be considered by the council.

Councillors have put their weight behind the proposal, albeit with caution given the financial strain also caused by the pandemic. Councillor David Draper, cabinet member for leisure, said previous one-off performances proved the idea was popular.

"Six months ago Dorking Halls did a 'theatre in the park' event in Meadowbank and that was a sell-out for both performances - 600 people came to watch theatre in the park. It's obviously a popular plan.

"It's nice to remember significant things and for young people particularly this [pandemic] is probably the most pivotal thing they'll ever experience. It is significant in the history of our country, and Dorking.

"Undoubtedly councillors would like to support any project like this which helps bring people to the town, all of that is exactly what we're looking to do."

"It's early stages. We haven't thought about what we'd build, where we'd build it and how we'd fund it. All the practical things still need to be looked at," he added.