

PLAYHOUSE ANSWERS CRITICS BY OFFERING THEM CENTRE STAGE

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The management at Derby Playhouse is attempting to answer critics by reviving plans to stage a four-week festival of amateur dramatics.



Chief executive Karen Hebden is preparing a blueprint for working with community groups after being required to draw up an action plan by Derby City Council.

Playhouse chairman Michael Hall resigned 12 days ago after a four-hour board meeting about the theatre's finances. He was said to be unhappy about the level of support from the city council.

Councillor Alan Graves, cabinet member for culture, leisure and direct services, hit back, claiming that public money was being put into a "private company that is repeatedly showing signs of failing".

Ms Hebden met representatives of the council and amateur theatre groups last week to discuss future plans. Afterwards, she said: "We outlined proposals that were both practical and positive.

"The amateur theatre festival would give local groups the opportunity to show their work at a more convenient time of year and it's in response to feedback we've received from amateur groups."

Groups from across the county would be invited to present their work on the Playhouse stage and in the Studio Theatre. The first four-week festival could take place in April, 2009.

Keith Briars, chairman of the Derby New Theatre Association, which represents amateur groups, said: "I can see problems. Some people belong to more than one group and there's the question of whether audiences would want to see four amateur productions one after the other."

But he welcomed the initiative as a "major move forward" and welcomed the prospect of discussing details.

Darren Hall, chairman of Belper Players, who claim to have been priced out of city-centre venues, said: "This plan won't make a difference unless the Playhouse provides some form of assistance in funding productions. They have to make the venue more accessible for amateur groups. We're being driven out of the larger venues."

Paul Kirkland, chairman of the Derby Opera Company, said: "The suggestion is welcome because it's the first positive move we've had from the Playhouse.

"Of course, it still doesn't really address the cost of staging productions, which was the main problem the opera company had."

The idea of a four-week festival of amateur theatre was first put forward in 2003 after the

Playhouse decided to cut the number of weeks that amateur companies could use its main stage from six each year to four.

The council has been concerned about the Playhouse's commitment to amateur theatre. When drawing up the funding agreement for the Playhouse this financial year, it imposed conditions on its £395,275 provision.

One of the conditions was that the Playhouse would have to produce an action plan for working with amateur theatre groups.

The deadline for the plan was the end of June but that has now been extended to the end of December.

As well as the four-week festival, the action plan proposes master classes throughout the year for amateur performers led by theatre professionals.

It would also see the presentation of the Derby Amateur Theatre Awards (Eagles) on a Saturday evening - July 12 - for the first time in its history.