



COUNCIL CABINET
18 December 2007

Report of the Community Commission

Response of the Community Commission to a Petition from Derby New Theatre Association on Community Theatre

RECOMMENDATION

- 1.1 The Commission does not support the request for reductions in hire charges at the Assembly Rooms and the Guild Hall than currently being offered by the Assembly Rooms Manager.
- 1.2 The Commission recommends that the £45,000 included in the Derby Playhouse budgets earmarked for community theatre should be made available directly to the amateur theatre groups either in cash or in kind following discussions with the stakeholders.
- 1.3 The Steering Group recommended by the Locum Report should be reconvened as soon as practicable and include within its agenda amongst others the following items for discussion:
 - How £45,000 could be best used to support Amateur theatre
 - Derby Playhouse
 - Hippodrome Theatre
- 1.4 Council Cabinet supports the Derby New Theatre Association to access Capital funding and bring the Hippodrome Theatre back into use on condition that future running of the Hippodrome should be cost neutral to the Council Tax payers of the city.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 2.1 Following a request from the Scrutiny Management Commission the Community Commission held a special meeting on 28 November to consider a petition from the Derby New Theatre Association regarding difficulties faced by amateur groups in accessing suitable venues to give performances.
- 2.2 At the special meeting the Commission heard from the petitioners, who stated that there are 25 Societies based in and near Derby who perform in the Derby area. These societies have a total of 1160 adult members of which 840 live in the city of Derby. A comparison with similar sized authorities of membership carried out four years ago showed that Derby had one of the highest proportion of people involved in community theatre. However, the groups were facing difficulties in giving performances due to suitable venues being too expensive and/or not accessible during certain times of the year.

- 2.3 They explained that the hire charge including extras in 2007 at the Assembly Rooms was £16,500 and a further 7%-10% Commission on tickets. The charges at the Guildhall range from £2060 to £2695. The Playhouse charged £15855 plus £800 in extras. These charges are considerably higher those charged by theatres in other cities and towns. The Buxton Opera House with 902 seats for example charge £9,334 for 6 days whilst a weekly charge at the 1000 seat Kings Theatre in Southsea is £12,750.
- 2.4 The amateur groups would like the weekly hire charges at the Assembly Rooms to be around £10k - £12k.
- 2.5 The Association also stated that the Locum Report jointly commissioned by the City Council and the Arts Council recommended a steering group be established to look at performance space in the city. This group had last met in 2006 and requested it be reconvened.
- 2.6 Officers from the Council stated that the Assembly Rooms is largely run on commercial basis and provides mixture of programmes ranging from internationally acclaimed performances to dramas performed by local community groups. It has annual running costs of approximately £1m and challenging income targets are set by the Council in order to meet most of the costs. Amateur groups are offered discounts of up to 20% at the discretion of the manager. The Guildhall with 242 seats is primarily used by amateur groups and the charges equate to £1.10 per seat during weekdays and £1.49 at the weekends meaning that they would need to sell 27 and 37 seats respectively to break even.
- 2.7 The Cabinet Member for Leisure and Direct Services stated that Derby provides substantial political and officer support to the amateur theatre groups alongside the discounted rates at the Assembly Rooms and the Guildhall. It has also ring fenced £45,000 in the budget of the Derby Playhouse support to amateur groups.
- 2.8 On considering the evidence presented by the various parties the Commission concluded that it could not support reductions in hire charges at the Assembly Rooms. The Assembly Rooms are largely run on commercial basis and need to maximise their income and provide a range of arts and cultural facilities to Derby residents. A discount of up to 20% is already offered to groups at the discretion of the manager and any further reduction in hire charges could have significant impact on the Assembly Rooms budgets and affect their future provision.
- 2.9 Representatives from Derby New Theatre Association stated that they received no support financial or other support from the Derby Playhouse. Although the Council has an agreement with the Playhouse to support amateur dramatic groups this does not seem to be working effectively, especially as the Playhouse also faced financial difficulties. The Commission therefore recommends that the £45,000 included in the budget of Derby Playhouse should instead be offered to community arts groups in cash or in kind following consultation with community groups on how this could be used to support the whole sector.

2.10 The Commission also heard about the importance of the Hippodrome Theatre to community groups. There were strong feelings towards the Hippodrome and many people feel that this historic building should be brought back into use for arts and theatre. The Commission was assured that measures are being taken to secure the Grade II listed building and ensure it does not go into further disrepair following acquisition by a developer. The Commission is of the view that the Council should support Derby New Theatre Association in accessing necessary capital funds providing a strong business case is made for future running of the building without recourse to public purse for revenue funding.

2.11 In response to the request from the petitioners the Steering Group is being reconvened to look at the performance spaces. The Commission suggests that this takes place as soon as practicable and the steering group includes within its agenda amongst other items:

- how the £45,000 included in the Playhouse budget could be used effectively to benefit the amateur theatre groups in the city
- how the Hippodrome Theatre could be acquired for the use of community theatre
- future working relationship with Derby Playhouse

2.12 The Commission did not discuss the issue about Derby Playhouse as it was informed that the Derby Playhouse Board was due make an imminent announcement about its future.

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Background papers:	None
List of appendices:	Appendix 1 Implications

IMPLICATIONS

Financial

1. £45,000 is included in the budget 2007-08 of Derby Playhouse to support community theatre.

Legal

2. None arising from this report.

Personnel

3. None directly arising.

Equalities Impact

4. None directly arising from this report.

Corporate priorities

5. Creating a 21 Century city centre and increase the quality of open spaces and the range of cultural facilities.