

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Mountsett Crematorium Joint Committee** held in Chapel - Mountsett Crematorium, Dipton on **Tuesday 28 January 2020 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor O Temple (Chair)

Durham County Council

Councillors A Bainbridge, A Batey, J Carr, J Charlton and S Robinson

Gateshead Council:

Councillors D Bradford (Vice-Chair), Burnett, L Green, S Green and M Ord

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors C Hampson and O Milburn (Durham County Council) and K Dodds and J Lee (Gateshead Council).

2 Substitute Members

There were no substitutes.

3 Minutes of the Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 September 2019 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Quarterly Performance and Operational Report

The Committee considered the Quarterly Performance and Operational report of the Bereavement Services Manager that provided Members with an update relating to performance and other operational matters (for copy see file of minutes).

The Bereavement Services Manager informed the Joint Committee that the report covered the period from 1 September 2019 to 31 December 2019. He noted that there had been an increase of 47 cremations with comparative data in the same period last year. The increase was partly due to the introduction of direct cremations with 19 direct cremations being carried out that were not attended.

The Bereavement Services Manager notified the Joint Committee that the number and value of memorials had decreased with the introduction of the small memorial towers around the grounds. He confirmed that an application was to be submitted for the 2020 Green Flag award that Mountsett Crematorium had achieved for the last eight years running and progress would be reported at a future meeting.

Following the re-advertisement for the relief Crematorium Attendant posts the Bereavement Services Manager confirmed that two attendants had been employed, one to cover at Mountsett Crematorium and the other to cover both Mountsett and Durham Crematoriums.

In relation to the Business Administration Apprenticeship two-year fixed term contract the Bereavement Services Manager advised that it would come to an end on 2nd September 2020. He complimented the current postholder who had become a valuable member of the team and had settled in well. On conclusion of the fixed term contract there were two options available to address the post. One option would be to create a full time Technical post and freeze the Apprentice post and the second option would be to replace the Business Administration Apprenticeship post when the apprenticeship was complete.

Councillor Temple asked if a Technical Assistant post was created would another apprenticeship be on offer.

The Bereavement Services Manager confirmed that if the Technical Assistant post was created it was hoped the current apprentice would apply for this role, subject to the relevant HR recruitment procedures. He added that they would not take on another apprentice as that post would then be frozen until a future date.

The Bereavement Services Manager responded to Councillor Charlton's question that the Business Administration Apprenticeship would be happy to take on the new post of Technical Assistant if it was created and successful at interview.

The Bereavement Services Manager reported that a cheque had been received for £8,000 through the recycling of metals scheme that the Crematorium ran. The funds were donated to the Royal British Legion.

The Bereavement Services Manager notified Members that the dedicated website for the Crematorium went live on 16 December 2019. The site included the Book of Remembrance that could now be viewed on-line. The website had received positive feedback but could only be accessed through Google Chrome.

He noted that the website would be developed further in the future to possibly include the daily Order of Services.

Resolved

- (i) That the current performance of the crematorium be noted.
- (ii) That the continued success with regards to the Green Flag be noted.
- (iii) That the current situation with regards to the relief Crematorium Attendant's post be noted.
- (iv) That the creation of a full time Technical Assistant post was agreed.
- (v) That the updated position with regards to the recycling of metals scheme be noted.
- (vi) That the completion of the Crematorium website be noted.

6 Financial Monitoring Report - Position at 31/12/2019, with Projected Revenue and Capital Outturn at 31/03/2020

The Joint Committee received a joint report of Corporate Director of Resources / Treasurer to the Joint Committee and the Interim Corporate Director of Regeneration and Local Services that provided details of the updated forecast outturn position for 2019/20 and the project level of reserves and balances at 31 March 2020 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Principal Accountant referred Members to the table within the report that showed the provisional revenue outturn financial performance of the Mountsett Crematorium that included the significant variances between the original budget and forecast outturn. He advised that the projected outturn showed a surplus which was an improved position since the last report in September 2019.

Resolved

That the report be noted.

7 Provision of Support Services 2020/21

The Joint Committee considered a Joint Report of the Corporate Director of Resources / Treasurer to the Joint Committee and the Interim Corporate Director of Regeneration and Local Services that outlined the proposed Service Level Agreement (SLA) for Support Service provision by Durham County Council to Mountsett Crematorium Joint Committee for the period April 2020 to March 2021 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Principal Accountant advised that Durham County Council had provided services to the Joint Committee for the last seven years that included financial, administration and payroll services. He added that there were no changes proposed to the level of support to be provided however it was proposed that there would be an increase of 2.5% on recharges to reflect inflation costs such as the staff pay award. He noted that the budget schedule with costs broken down were included within the SLA to reflect transparency.

Resolved

That the Service Level Agreement for the year 2020/21 was approved.

8 Fees and Charges 2020/21

The Joint Committee deliberated a Joint Report of the Corporate Director of Resources / Treasurer to the Joint Committee and the Interim Corporate Director of Regeneration and Local Services that set out details of the proposed fees and charges for the Mountsett Crematorium for 2020/21 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Principal Accountant notified Members that following the Local Government Review in 2009 fees and charges at the Mountsett Crematorium were harmonised with the charges at Central Durham Crematorium. The report highlighted the potential extra income that could be received on the various fee increases but he noted that cremation fees should only be increased by £20 which was still below the average charges currently levied across the region. He remarked that other fees and charges would remain the same except the visual tributes that were supplied by Wesley Music System that would increase slightly to cover administration and equipment charges. The charging policy for child cremations would retain the nil fee.

Councillor Charlton was concerned that there was a huge increase from £12 to £48 for the web cast service. She felt this was too steep.

The Bereavement Services Manager replied that the increase for the web cast would only be £12 as they currently charged £30. He advised that the increase was to cover administration charges that at present were being incurred by the Crematorium itself.

Councillor Batey agreed that the fee for visual tributes should be increased to ensure that the Crematorium was not out of pocket. She wanted to know why it was not recommended that the fees for cremations were not increased further to provide extra income and be more competitive with neighbouring crematoriums.

The Principal Accountant informed the Committee that a strategic review of the fees and charges had established that the proposed modest increase would cover the cost pressures facing the crematorium, whilst also maintaining a healthy level of balances for the Joint Committee. It was also considered that the increase would not have an impact on future business at the crematorium.

Councillor Batey was concerned that if fees were too low then people from farther afield would use the service preventing availability for the local community.

Councillor Temple reiterated that Mountsett Crematorium was jointly owned which in itself created a wider community to service.

The Neighbourhood Protection Manager acknowledged that Mountsett Crematorium was a wonderful facility and did not want to detract business from outside the area by charging too much for services. In addition, he noted that funeral poverty was a huge issue within a very competitive market. There were concerns that some Funeral Director's lacked transgression on what they charged potentially taking advantage of vulnerable people. He added that the Crematorium being at the lower end of the charging scale was positive meaning that people had more money in their pockets.

Councillor Bradford stated that because Mountsett Crematorium was jointly owned the geographical area that the Crematorium served was larger using people from the West of Gateshead that had used Dipton as their local crematorium as an example. He added that people who lived in Northumberland should use Prudhoe over Durham as it was closer but there was no reason why they could not use Dipton. Reiterating funeral poverty, Councillor Bradford advised that if fees were too high it would have a detrimental effect on everyone who used Dipton including the local community as they would also be charged the higher fee.

In relation to operational matters the Neighbourhood Protection Manager noted that the Crematorium was not oversubscribed and had the capacity to carry out all cremations it was assigned.

Resolved

- (i) That the proposed fees and charges effective from 1 April 2020 including the increase cremation charges by £20 (2.9%) per cremation from £700 to £720 be approved.
- (ii) That the proposed fees and charges be incorporated into the 2020/21 budget.

9 External Audit Arrangements 2019/20 to 2021/22

The Joint Committee considered a Joint report of the Corporate Director of Resources / Treasurer to the Joint Committee and the Interim Corporate Director of Regeneration and Local Services that presented members with proposals for the continued delivery of the external audit by Mazars for the three financial years 2019/20 to 2021/22 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Principal Accountant informed the Joint Committee that Mazars had been appointed in January 2017 to undertake the external arrangements for the financial years 2016/17, 2017/18 and 2018/19. Another accountancy firm BDO Accountancy had also been used previously but they were based in Southampton and the distance had proved problematic to exchange information and hit deadlines. Mazars was locally based in Durham, accessible and had a quick turn around for deadlines. He added that Mazars had knowledge of the systems the Council used making the transition for the next three years seamless. The Principal Accountant noted that the charge for the service would increase but it was felt it was worth the extra money.

Resolved

That the appointment of Mazars to undertake the external audit arrangements for 2021/22, 2022/23 and 2023/24 financial years be agreed.

10 2020/21 Revenue Budget

The Joint Committee received a Joint Report of the Corporate Director of Resources / Treasurer to the Joint Committee and the Interim Corporate Director of Regeneration and Local Services that set out the proposals with regards to the 2020/21 revenue budgets for Mountsett Crematorium (for copy see file of minutes).

The Principal Accountant noted that the revenue budget had been developed with the Bereavement Services Manager that considered information from all previous reports presented at the meeting including fees, SLA, the external audit and the updated forecast outturn position for 2019/20.

The Principal Accountant explained that the main changes and reasons for those changes were highlighted in appendix two of the report. One-off repairs and maintenance budgets previously reported in the Service Asset Management Plan, a reduction in the business rates budget and the proposed increase in fees were given as examples of how the budget had changed from the 2019/20 budget.

The Bereavement Services Manager responded to Councillor Temple's request wanting to know the outcome of the energy improvement works to the building informing the Committee that a feasibility study had been undertaken to look at the ventilation, doors and windows. He added that the windows currently were single glazed and had not been replaced since the 1960s and those in the office leaked when it rained.

The Principal Accountant advised that a similar feasibility study had also been carried out at Central Durham Crematorium and it was estimated that the energy improvement works would cost around £65,000. He hoped that the work required and final costs at Mountsett would also be lower than the amount provided for in the budget.

The Bereavement Services Manager acknowledged Councillor S Green's query regarding climate change advising him that the cremator had a heater exchange to comply with climate change but unfortunately this was not connected.

This was reiterated by the Neighbourhood Protection Manager who stated that there had been talks with the Carbon Reduction Team to reduce the amount of energy used at the Crematorium and to look at alternative sources of heat other than gas like generators. However, this would require a business case to be submitted for any major change to take place.

Resolved

- (i) That the budget proposals be noted and approved.
- (ii) That the forecast level of reserves and balances at 31 March 2021 be noted.

11 Such other business as in the opinion of the Chairman of the meeting is of sufficient urgency to warrant consideration.

Councillor Temple addressed the Joint Committee to put forward an issue on behalf of Councillor Milburn in her absence. Councillor Temple informed the Committee that Councillor Milburn had received complaints that there was insufficient signage to direct people to Mountsett Crematorium from Flinthill. She wondered if this could be investigated to see if additional signage could be erected to make it easier for people to travel to the Crematorium.

Councillor Temple added that the Joint Committee need to be mindful that adequate signage should also be considered when travelling from both Hamsterley and even Stanley.

Resolved

That a joint report from the Bereavement Services Manager and Highways to improve signage be brought to a future meeting.

12 Exclusion of the public

Resolved

That under Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraphs 3 and 5 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

13 Minutes

The part B minutes of the meeting held on 24 September 2019 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

14 Update Report on Cremator Replacement and Contingency Planning

The Joint Committee considered a Joint report of Corporate Director of Regeneration and Local Services and the Corporate Director of Resources and Treasurer to the Joint Committee regarding an update on the Cremator replacement and the Contingency Planning (for copy see file of minutes).

Resolved

That the recommendations contained in the report be agreed.