

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

CENTRAL DURHAM CREMATORIUM JOINT COMMITTEE

At a Meeting of **Central Durham Crematorium Joint Committee** held **remotely via Microsoft Teams** on **Wednesday 28 April 2021** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor N Foster (Chair)

Durham County Council:

Councillors D Bell, J Blakey, D Brown, J Chaplow (Vice-Chair), A Hopgood, B Kellett, H Liddle, S Quinn, A Simpson and J Stephenson

Spennymoor Town Council:

Town Councillors R Highley and I Machin

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from County Councillor K Corrigan and Town Councillors B McAloon and C Sproat.

2 Substitute Members

Town Councillors R Highley and I Machin substituted for Town Councillors B McAloon and C Sproat.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 27 January 2021 were confirmed as a correct record and would be signed and initialled by the Chair.

The Chair noted at the last meeting, under any other business, an issue in respect of accessing the Book of Remembrance had been raised. He added that he had noted at that meeting that he, along with the Vice-Chair, would explore the issue with the Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar, Graham Harrison. The Chair explained that his understanding was that the Government guidance that was in place at that time had not changed and therefore operation should be within those guidelines. He added he would continue to monitor the situation.

Councillor A Hopgood noted Government guidance applied to the whole country, adding that many Councils had found a way to provide for the issue and she felt that Durham should be looking for a way to provide access. She explained that it had been suggested that it would not need impact on the current crematorium staff, as she appreciated how hard they were working and how their time was restricted. Councillor A Hopgood noted the finance would be available, as had been suggested at the last meeting, and added she felt the Council should lead by example. She noted the Council did not follow Government guidance on other matters when it was thought it was the right thing to do. She explained she felt that was the case in this instance, reiterating that many other Councils had found ways to have their Books of Remembrance accessible for grieving families to visit, adding she felt Durham should be looking for a way to do it. The Chair noted the comments, adding the appropriate guidance would be followed and added that the Book of Remembrance was available to view online and the grounds of the crematorium were open for those wishing to visit the site. He added that it was unfortunate that access could not be given currently to the Book of Remembrance building and noted he would monitor the situation while he was in the position to do so.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest submitted.

5 Performance and Operational Report

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar asked Members to note the performance figures from 1 January 2021 to 31 March 2021 and the comparison to the same period for 2020, highlighting that there was a net increase of 12 cremations and 3 NVF cremations year on year. It was noted there was a total of 670 for the three-month period with the January to March profile breakdown, as fully set out at Appendix 2, showing 207 from Durham, 25 from Spennymoor and 438 from outside of the area.

The Joint Committee were informed that the total number of cremations in 2020/21 was 2,738 compared with 2,350 in 2019/20, representing an increase of 388 cremations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. He reminded the Committee that the 2020/21 budget had been set at a prudent assumption of 2,200 cremations during the year. The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar noted the additional 538 cremations had resulted in an over achievement of cremation fee income of £325,839 in year and explained the number of cremations undertaken each year over the last ten years was set out within the report.

Members were asked to note that the number of memorials sold, 66, had increased by 18 in comparison to the same period the previous year, with income being £4,138 more than the comparable period last year.

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar reminded Members of the situation staff at the crematorium faced as a result of COVID-19 and highlighted that the staff had continued to demonstrate a high level of service. He added the staff were coping with the demand, were an asset to Durham Crematorium, and thanked all the staff for all their assistance during the pandemic. Members were asked to note that due to a recent COVID-19 outbreak at the crematorium, several staff were required to self-isolate and relief staff were brought in from within the Service Area to provide cover. The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar noted a number of those staff continued to assist and were considered an asset to the Authority. The Joint Committee were asked to note that additional cleaning of the crematorium had been required, with an additional cleaner being employed to assist crematorium staff during the day.

Members were asked to note that the crematorium did not currently offer a credit card payment option to members of the public and it was a service that was regularly requested. The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar explained that, following discussions with the Council's Income and Support Team as regards the crematorium offering this service, a Chip and PIN machine had been ordered for a monthly rental of £16 per month, plus nominal processing fees. He noted the cost could be absorbed within existing office budgets and the Chip and PIN facility would provide an enhanced service to families.

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar concluded by noting that the Joint Conference of the Federation of Burial and Cremation Authorities and the Cremation Society of Great Britain, due to be held in Southampton from 21 to 23 June 2021, had been cancelled due to the pandemic.

The Chair thanked the Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar and wished for the thanks of the Joint Committee to be passed to all staff for their hard work. He asked Members for their comments and questions.

Town Councillor I Machin noted thanks, on behalf of Spennymoor Town Council, for the continued great job carried out by the Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar and his team. He noted the competitiveness of the Chip and Pin costs obtained by the Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar.

Resolved:

- (i) That the current performance of the Crematorium be noted.
- (ii) That the additional cleaning undertaken as part of the COVID-19 outbreak be noted.
- (iii) That the introduction of credit card payment facilities at the Crematorium be noted.
- (iv) That the cancellation of the Joint Conference of the Federation of Burial and Cremation Authorities and the Cremation Society of Great Britain be noted.

6 Financial Monitoring Report - Provisional Outturn as at 31 March 2021

The Joint Committee considered a joint report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and Corporate Director of Resources (Interim) and Treasurer to the Joint Committee which set out details of income and expenditure in the period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021, together with the provisional outturn position for 2020/21, highlighting areas of over / underspend against the revenue budgets at a service expenditure analysis level.

The report further detailed the funds and reserves of the Joint Committee at 1 April 2020 and forecast final position at 31 March 2021, taking into account the updated provisional financial outturn (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Finance Manager, Neighbourhoods and Climate Change, Phillip Curran explained that the revenue outturn showed a surplus (before transfers to reserves and distribution of surpluses to the partner authorities) of £985,411 against a budgeted surplus of £761,132, £224,279 more than the budgeted Position, a slight change from the projection given in the Quarter Three report of £217,065. It was noted that details of the significant variances were set out within in the report, with an explanation set out from paragraph 13 onwards. Members were asked to note additional expenditure on employees of £44,001, relating to overtime and redeployment of staff as a result of the pandemic. It was added there were increased costs relating to supplies and services of £47,103, relating to additional Medical Reference costs and the period where the webcast facility was offered for free. The Finance Manager, Neighbourhoods and Climate Change noted that the additional income due to additional cremations of £320,323 had offset the increased costs, giving a net income of £224,279 more than the budgeted Position

Members noted the capital outturn for the Crematorium and the Finance Manager, Neighbourhoods and Climate Change explained it was £176,198 less than the budgeted position, with the main reasons being the reprofiling of three of the schemes within the capital programme so that they would take place in 2021/22, namely: replacement of the chapel dome; re-lining of two cremators; and the enlarging of Cremator One.

The Finance Manager, Neighbourhoods and Climate Change went on to advise that in terms of the retained reserves at 31 March 2021, they were forecast to be £1,638,566 along with a General Reserve of £517,770 giving a forecast total reserves and balances position of £2,156,336 at the year end.

The Chair thanked the Finance Manager, Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and asked Members for their comments and questions.

In relation to the capital programme, Councillor J Blakey asked for an update in respect of the works to be carried out to the entrance to the crematorium site. The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar noted he had met with the Designer two weeks ago and was awaiting the design for the gate with a hope that construction work would commence shortly after receipt of the design.

Town Councillor I Machin asked if the increase of 15 percent in the number of cremations, compared to previous years, had any operational impact such as increased wear and tear on equipment. The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar noted additional wear and tear had been observed in relation to the cremators, adding that the enlargement of Cremator One had just been completed, and servicing works were carried out throughout the year as usual. He added that the cremators were currently working and operational, with the situation as regards wear and tear being monitored.

Resolved:

That the April 2020 to March 2021 financial monitoring report and associated provisional revenue and capital outturn positions at 31 March 2021, including the projected year position with regards to the reserves and balances of the Joint Committee be noted.

7 Risk Register Update 2020/21 - 2

The Finance Manager, Neighbourhoods and Climate Change asked Members to note the Risk Register Update 2020/21 report, the Joint Committee considering updates on a six-monthly basis.

Members were reminded that the report set out service risk register and the health and safety risk register, with risks being regularly reviewed by the Durham County Council Risk Management Team, in conjunction with the Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar, in line with Council methodology.

The Finance Manager, Neighbourhoods and Climate Change noted the description of the managing excess deaths risk had been changed to better reflect the nature of the risk to “demand for cremations may exceed capacity”. He noted that while the past twelve to fifteen months had been extremely challenging, controls had been effective, and the risk had not materialised. It was added there was still potential for a third wave of COVID-19 and therefore the risk would be kept under review and the net impact has been updated from minor to moderate.

The Finance Manager, Neighbourhoods and Climate Change noted one new risk had been added to the register relating to COVID-19: "Non-compliance with coronavirus regulations by members of the public, leading to a local outbreak and capacity issues in deaths management services". He noted the service had worked to mitigate the risk in terms of clear explanation of the rules and limiting the number of mourners, with Funeral Directors assisting by issuing instructions and guidance to their clients. The net evaluation was a moderate impact with an unlikely occurrence, to be reviewed on an ongoing basis.

The Finance Manager, Neighbourhoods and Climate Change concluded by noting the details of risk registers were set out within the appendices to the report.

Resolved:

That the updated position in relation to the Risk Register be noted.

8 Annual Internal Audit Report 2020/21

The Interim Audit Manager, Durham County Council Internal Audit Service, Tracy Henderson explained that the Internal Audit Service provided the Internal Audit function for Durham Crematorium and the purpose of the Annual Internal Audit Report was to provide an opinion on the overall adequacy and effectiveness of the Committees Framework of Governance, Risk Management and Control.

The Interim Audit Manager explained the work undertaken by Internal Audit in 2020/21 was undertaken in accordance with Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS), and as part of the PSIAS the Chief Internal Auditor and Corporate Fraud Manager was required to deliver an annual audit opinion and a report that could be used by the Committee to inform its Annual Governance Statement.

The Interim Audit Manager noted the detailed report at Appendix Three set out the different approach taken to carry out the audit review as a result of COVID-19 restrictions, with the Audit having been carried out remotely. She explained that the Auditor collected records from the Crematorium and carried out the review remotely, working from home, in accordance with the latest Government guidance. It was noted that as a result the number of transactions reviewed was reduced in comparison to previous years, but met the requirements of delivering a full audit review, even though no testing was carried out on site.

The Interim Audit Manager explained that the report delivered a Substantial assurance opinion, with one medium recommendation made which had been implemented, and one best practice recommendation. She noted the Substantial opinion identified that there was a sound system of control, with the definition of Substantial being that any weaknesses identified expose some of the system objectives to minor risk.

The Interim Audit Manager noted that due to the ongoing coronavirus Pandemic the opinion was qualified, as the pandemic had resulted in a significant level of strain being placed on normal procedures and control arrangements. She noted the additional work being undertaken by the Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar and his Team was extra pressure, with an ongoing and developing situation. She added it was therefore not possible to quantify the additional risk that was placed; however, Members had received information within the Risk Register update during this meeting with regards to the work of the service

Resolved:

The content of the Annual Internal Audit Report and the overall 'Substantial' opinion provided on the adequacy and effectiveness of the Council's control environment for 2020/21 was noted.

9 Any other business

The Chair noted his thanks to all for their patience during his extended period in the Chair and thanked the Vice-Chair, Councillor J Chaplow for her support.

He noted it had been a very unusual time and noted that all would be grateful to the Crematorium, County Council and Town Council staff for their work in managing the situation. He thanked all Members and especially those retiring for their long service to the Joint Committee and their Authorities.

The Vice-Chair thanked all those that had served on the Joint Committee and noted special thanks to the Bereavement Coordinator, Tony Johnston for his help. She thanked the Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar, and all his staff, highlighting the work he had undertaken a few years ago in bringing apprentices to the Crematorium, an area that she felt had been a success. She concluded by wishing all the best for the future.