

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Mountsett Crematorium Joint Committee** held in Chapel - Mountsett Crematorium, Dipton on **Monday 29 January 2024 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor J Charlton (Chair)

Durham County Council

Councillors V Andrews, A Hanson, P Heaviside and K Rooney

Gateshead Council:

Councillors D Bradford, AGeddes, FGeddes and M Ord

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors L Green (Gateshead Council), G Binney (Durham County Council), C Hampson (Durham County Council), M Walton (Durham County Council) and S Green (Gateshead Council).

2 Substitute Members

There were no substitutes.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 27 September 2023 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Performance and Operational Report

The Joint Committee received a report of the Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar that provided Members of the Mountsett Crematorium Joint Committee with an update relating to performance and other operational matters (for copy see file of Minutes)

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar advised that from 1 September 2023 to 31 December 2023 there had been 442 cremations undertaken compared to 430 in the comparable period last year with an increase of 12 cremations during this period. In addition, there were 44 memorials sold compared to 37 in the same period with an increase of 7 with a value of £746. He noted that one Casual Relief Crematorium attendant had now left the role and the other was covering a 10-month appointment who had been appointed as a Bereavement Officer. He commented that an advertisement for 2 more Casual Relief Crematorium Attendants had been advertised. He confirmed that an application would be submitted for the Green Flag award in 2024 and would keep the Joint Committee updated on progress made. He stated that £7,000 had been raised for 2 charities – Marie Curie and Coping with Cancer North. He informed members that from 1st January 2027, all cremators would be required to be fitted with appropriate fuel and electricity metering due to the increase in emissions. Once these costings had been confirmed they would be factored into the budget.

Councillor J Charlton asked when the closing date was for the two job adverts.

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar responded that the closing date was 29 January 2024. He had not checked to see how many applications had been received so far.

Councillor J Charlton informed the Joint Committee that she attended an event to present a cheque to two ladies from the charity Coping with Cancer North East. The ladies were delightful and over the moon with the money. They had left lots of information as to what their charity did. She had not heard of the charity before but it was because they did most of their work in Newcastle and Northumberland and were now just venturing into Durham.

Councillor J Charlton queried if there were any ballpark costs associated with the implementation of the new guidance that would replace the existing crematoria guidance PG5/2 (12).

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar replied that he was not aware of the costs at present but would await what came back from his response to the consultation.

Resolved

- i) That the current performance of the crematorium be noted.
- ii) That the continued success with the Green Flag Award be noted.
- iii) That the position with regards to the recycling of metals scheme be noted.

- iv) That the consultation on the review of the Cremation Guidance PGN (5/12) be noted.

6 Financial Monitoring Report - Position at 31/12/23, with Projected Outturn at 31/03/24

The Joint Committee received a joint report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and the Corporate Director of Resources and Treasurer to the Joint Committee that provided Members of the Mountsett Crematorium Joint Committee with details of the projected outturn position for 2023/24 and the projected level of reserves and balances at 31 March 2024 (for copy see file of Minutes)

The Finance Manager Neighbourhoods and Climate Change gave highlights of the financial report for Quarter 3 of the financial year that detailed income and expenditure in the period 1 April 2023 to 31 December 2023, together with a forecast outturn position for 2023/24, emphasizing areas of over/underspend against the approved budgets. He noted that the projected revenue outturn was a surplus of £239,900 against a budgeted surplus of £225,474, which was £14,426 more than the budgeted position. There was an overspend for employees due to the national pay settlement for 2023/24 that would be offset by the increase in income due to the rise in the number of cremations. There was also an overspend on SAMP works relating to energy improvement works that had been delayed from last year. It was forecast to have a total reserves balance of £651,568 at the year end.

Resolved

That the April to December 2023 financial monitoring report and associated provisional outturn position as at 31 March 2024, including the projected year position with regards to the reserves and balances of the Joint Committee be noted.

7 Provision of Support Services 2024/25

The Joint Committee received a joint report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and the Corporate Director of Resources and Treasurer to the Joint Committee that outlined the proposed Service Level Agreement (SLA) for Support Service provision by Durham County Council to the Mountsett Crematorium Joint Committee for the period April 2024 to March 2025 (for copy see file of Minutes)

The Finance Manager Neighbourhoods and Climate Change detailed the proposed SLA for the next financial year that outlined the support services from Durham County Council. These included Management Services, Financial Services, Administration Services (including Committee support), Payroll Services and Human Resources Services. The proposed charge was £26,200 which was a 5% increase for the charge on this time last year that had considered the impact of the pay and inflation increases.

Resolved

That the Service Level Agreement attached at Appendix 2 (including the relevant schedule) for the year 2024/25 be approved.

8 Fees and Charges 2024/25

The Joint Committee received a joint report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and the Corporate Director of Resources and Treasurer to the Joint Committee that set out details of the proposed fees and charges for the Mountsett Crematorium for 2024/25 (for copy see file of Minutes)

The Finance Manager Neighbourhoods and Climate Change highlighted the proposal to increase the fees and charges for the cremations for 2023/24 by £30 which was a 3.92% rise. The price would increase from £795 to £825 which was still the lowest price in comparison to other Local Authorities except Durham which was the same. He also suggested a mid-year increase to bring the crematorium fees closer to the average cremation fees across the region and to ensure it did not fall too far behind.

Councillor D Bradford in relation to the increase in fees to 3% asked how much an individual cremation cost in the last year.

The Finance Manager Neighbourhoods and Climate Change responded that although it was proposed to increase costs this was not a reflection on a single cremation and included other factors like general inflation pressure. He added that the cost increase was slightly more than 3%.

Councillor P Heaviside commented that the cost per cremation would still save people money even with the increase. He noted that people in the south drove 100 miles for a cremation.

The Finance Manager Neighbourhoods and Climate Change replied that it was also better to consider a midyear increase instead of increasing costs in one lump to £60. The increase was not only to cover the costs of repairs to the cremator and capital works but also to build up reserves to meet any future costs. He added that taken everything into account the position could remain as it was or increase the fees and charges in two stages.

The Neighbourhood Protection Manager noted that it would be useful to look at the second increase in the September report. As the membership of the Joint Committee had changed over the years potentially making the decision difficult, he thought it would be helpful to include an insight to the history on the reasoning behind the developing gap between crematoriums in the region. He noted that fees and charges had been frozen for a couple of years that had initially created gaps but at the same time significant investments had been made at the crematorium. He added that costs per cremation had been affected by the increase in energy prices. There was a need to provide a good service for the community and confirmed that the fees for direct cremations would not change, prices for early slots in the day would not change and it would only be fees associated with peak time cremations in the middle of the day would change. It was unclear as to what decisions other local authorities would make in April regarding their fees and charges that potentially could widen the gap further making September an ideal time to revisit the topic.

Councillor J Charlton confirmed that the response had put her mind at rest. She was very proud of the brilliant services offered at the crematorium. She understood about having to increase the costs as things increased all the time. She agreed that the Joint Committee would need to think carefully on the second increase that was proposed later in the year. She did not like the thought of seeing the crematorium become the same as everywhere else on price. She commented that the crematorium got a lot of cremations from outside the area not just because it was cheaper but because the setting was unique which should stay that way.

Resolved

- i) That the proposed fees and charges at Appendix 2 effective from 1 April 2024 be agreed.
- ii) That consideration to a mid-year increase in fees and charges, due to the widening gap between fees at Mountsett Crematorium and the average cremation fee across the region be given.
- iii) That the proposed fees and charges be incorporated into the 2024/25 budget.

9 2024/25 Revenue Budget

The Joint Committee received a joint report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and the Corporate Director of Resources and Treasurer to the Joint Committee that set out for Members' consideration proposals with regards to the 2024/25 revenue budgets for the Mountsett Crematorium (for copy see file of Minutes)

The Finance Manager Neighbourhoods and Climate Change highlighted the proposed revenue budgets along with the forecast outturn position as at 31 March 2025. There had been minor changes that included the pay awards and repair and maintenance costs. The income had increased by £143,595 due to the estimated increase in the number of cremations and the increased amount of interest received. It was estimated that the total reserves would be £663, 781 as at 31 March 2025.

Resolved

That the budget proposals contained within the report (as set out at Appendix 2) and that the forecast level of reserves and balances at 31 March 2025 (also set out at Appendix 2) be noted and approved.