

# DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

## MOUNTSETT CREMATORIUM JOINT COMMITTEE

At the Annual Meeting of **Mountsett Crematorium Joint Committee** held in the Chapel - Mountsett Crematorium, Dipton on **Tuesday 2 July 2024 at 9.30 am**

### **Present:**

#### **Durham County Council**

Councillors C Hampson, P Heaviside, K Rooney and M Walton

#### **Gateshead Council:**

Councillors K Dodds, A Geddes, F Geddes, S Green and M Ord

## **1 Membership of the Joint Committee**

### **Resolved:**

That the membership of the Mountsett Crematorium Joint Committee be noted:

Durham County Council: Councillors: V Andrews, G Binney, J Charlton, C Hampson, A Hanson, P Heaviside, D Oliver, K Rooney and M Walton

Gateshead Council: Councillors K Dodds, A Geddes, F Geddes, S Green, M Hall and M Ord

It was noted that Gateshead Council had a vacancy which would be filled in due course.

## **2 Appointment of Chair**

Nominations were sought for the Chair of the Joint Committee for the ensuing year.

County Councillor J Charlton was proposed for the position of Chair to the Joint Committee for the ensuing year. No further proposals were made.

### **Resolved:**

That County Councillor J Charlton be appointed Chair of the Joint Committee for the ensuing year.

**COUNCILLOR J Charlton** in the Chair

### **3 Appointment of Vice-Chair**

The Chair sought nominations for Vice-Chair to the Joint Committee for the ensuing year.

Gateshead Councillor K Dodds was proposed for the position of Vice-Chair to the Joint Committee for the ensuing year. No further proposals were made.

**Resolved:**

Gateshead Councillor K Dodds be appointed Vice-Chair of the Joint Committee for the ensuing year.

### **4 Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors G Binney, D Oliver, M Hall.

### **5 Substitute Members**

There were no substitute Members.

### **6 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 29 April 2024 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

### **7 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

### **8 Changes to the Constitution/Terms of Reference**

The Joint Committee considered a report of the Clerk which provided details of a review of the Mountsett Crematorium Joint Committee's Constitution, in accordance with the Annual Governance Statement requirements (for copy see file of minutes).

The Legal Manager advised that the review had not highlighted any requirements for change to the current constitution and therefore reaffirmed continuation of the existing Constitution and governance arrangements set out in Appendix 2 of the report.

**Resolved:**

That following a review in accordance with Annual Governance Statement requirements, the Constitution as set out in Appendix 2 of the report be reapproved.

## **9 Forward Plan 2024/25**

The Joint Committee received a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which set out a suggested forward plan of meetings of the Joint Committee for the forthcoming year 2024/25 (for copy see file of minutes).

### **Resolved:**

That the report and forward plan of meetings be noted and approved.

## **10 Quarterly Performance and Operational Report - 1 April to 31 May 2024**

The Joint Committee received a report of the Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar which provided an update relating to performance and other operational matters (for copy see file of minutes).

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar reported that 233 cremations were undertaken during the period 1 April to 31 May 2024 which was a decrease of 1 cremation compared to the comparable period last year. It was noted that 126 families were from Durham, 62 from Gateshead and 45 families were from other areas.

The number and value of memorial plaques sold were 25 / £6,278 compared to 27 / £6,482 in the comparable period last year, a decrease of 2 memorials sold and £204 in terms of income.

As in previous years, arrangements would be made for representation at the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management ICCM Learning Convention and Exhibition which was being held at Chesford Grange Hotel, near Kenilworth from the 23-25 September 2024. It was proposed that the Bereavement Services Manager and the Chair attend the conference to represent Mountsett Crematorium Joint Committee.

With regards to the recycling of metals scheme, the nominated charities for 2024 were Daft As A Brush Cancer Patient Care and If U Care Share Foundation.

Members were advised at the last meeting, that they were in the process of implementing a new software system, PlotBox, to replace the existing BACAS system which would go live in October 2024. Durham County Council were currently in the process of transferring them to Oracle which would provide improvements in the way the crematorium operate, standardise reporting and increase efficiency.

Following the implementation of Plotbox, it was recommended that the Crematorium also move from using Sage as their financial system to using the Oracle system. Plotbox could then be fully integrated with Oracle for the crematorium, as well as the Burials Team, who already used the system. A 2025/26 implementation date for the Oracle system would allow time for bedding in the Plotbox system and reduce

pressure on crematorium staff. A progress update would be provided at a future meeting.

Councillor M Walton understood the challenges with software transitions and asked for reassurance that staff would see the benefits of the new financial system. The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar confirmed that a change management process had been implemented and the Data Team would be assisting Crematorium staff with data checks. The Neighbourhood Protection Manager added that staff were in support of the new financial system and explained the benefits of the new system. He acknowledged that the transition would be challenging and noted that the Plotbox system would go live in October 2024 allowing for the system to be established before the new financial system be implemented in 2025/26.

**Resolved:**

- i) That the current performance of the crematorium be noted;
- ii) That attendance at the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management ICCM Learning Convention and Exhibition 2024 be noted;
- iii) That the distribution of recycling income and subsequent charity nominations be noted;
- iv) That the financial integration of the Crematorium onto Durham County Council's Oracle software system in 2025/26 be approved.

## **11 Annual Governance Statement 2023/24**

The Joint Committee considered a Joint Report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and the Corporate Director of Resources and Treasurer to the Joint Committee which provided details of the Annual Governance Statement (AGS) for the year April 2023 to March 2024 (for copy see file of minutes).

**Resolved:**

- i) That the content of the 2023/24 Annual Governance Statement be noted;
- ii) That the Chair and Treasurer approve and sign the 2023/24 Annual Governance Statement as part of the consideration of the Joint Committees Annual Governance and Accountability Return for the financial year ended 31 March 2024.

## **12 Revenue Outturn and Joint Committees Annual Return for the Financial Year Ended 31 March 2024**

The Joint Committee considered a joint report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and the Corporate Director of Resources and Treasurer to the Joint Committee which sought approval of the Joint Committees

Annual Return for Mountsett Crematorium Joint Committee for the financial year ended 31 March 2024. The report also included details of the final outturn position against the approved budgets for 2023/24 (for copy see file of minutes).

**Resolved:**

- (i) That the revenue outturn position as at 31 March 2024, including the year end position with regards to the reserves and balances of the Joint Committee be noted;
- (ii) That the Annual Governance Statement 2023/24 of the Joint Committees Annual Governance and Accountability Return for the financial year ended 31 March 2024 be approved;
- (iii) That the Accounting Statements 2023/24 of the Joint Committees Annual Governance and Accountability Return for the financial year ended 31 March 2024 be approved;
- iv) That the Chair, Clerk and Treasurer sign the Joint Committees Annual Governance and Accountability Return for the financial year ended 31 March 2024.

### **13 Fees and Charges 2024/25 - Mid-Year Increase**

The Joint Committee considered a joint report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and the Corporate Director of Resources and Treasurer to the Joint Committee which set out details of a proposed mid-year increase in cremation fees for Mountsett Crematorium for 2024/25, as agreed at the January 2024 meeting of the Joint Committee (for copy see file of minutes).

The Principal Accountant highlighted that Central Durham Crematorium Joint Committee agreed a mid-year fee increase of £50 at its meeting on the 28 June 2024. It was felt that the proposed £80 increase was too high, therefore as Mountsett Crematorium and Durham Crematorium fees were harmonised, it was proposed that an increase of £50 effective from 1 October 2024 be supported.

The Principal Accountant presented the report and advised that benchmarking with other crematoriums across the region showed that 2024/25 cremation fees at Mountsett Crematorium were £162 lower than the average for the region and this gap had widening over recent years. Fee increases were usually only implemented in April, however, a mid-year fee increase was proposed to help prevent the gap from widening further. It was noted that with the £50 increase, Mountsett Crematorium would still be £112 below the regional average. The charges for direct cremations and discounted earlier slots to allow for choice and help families with cheaper options were proposed to remain the same for 2024/25.

The Chair commented that she was not in favour of fee increases. She acknowledged that the gap was widening between other facilities in the region and felt that the Crematorium were able to cover costs and still make money. However,

if the Joint Committee were minded to agree a mid-year fee increase, she felt that £50 was more acceptable than the original proposal.

Councillor P Heaviside looked at the figures suggesting that the cost for a cremation was roughly £693 per unit which highlighted a small loss with regards to direct cremations.

Councillor M Walton acknowledged the benefits in providing a low cost service, however commented on the financial pressures and the increase would help maintain the grounds and maintain Mountsett's good reputation.

The Principal Accountant advised that with the increase, Mountsett Crematorium fees would still be £112 below the regional average and other facilities in the area would be increasing fees which would widen the gap further. The Neighbourhood Protection Manager added that the Team had researched where people were traveling from and provided the figures from neighbouring Authorities in the report, noting that with the increase, Mountsett Crematorium remained the lowest price in the region. He highlighted the importance of building reserves to invest in the service and deliver projects outlined in the Asset Management Plan. He agreed that Mountsett Crematorium had a great reputation and commended the Crematorium staff from their dedication in providing a high-quality service.

Following further discussions, the Neighbourhood Protection Manager suggested that a survey be undertaken with funeral directors to gather further information and how they valued the service.

**Resolved:**

- i) That an increase of £50 per cremation from £825 to £875 (inclusive of £30 medical referee fee) be approved;
- ii) That off peak slots (£715) and direct cremations (£660 attended and £520 unattended) remain the same for 2024/25 to support choice and help with overall funeral costs;
- iii) That the fee increase be reflected in the forecast of outturn for Mountsett Crematorium which would be reported to the September 2024 meeting of the Joint Committee;
- iv) That plans for the use of the additional income be considered at the September 2024 meeting, alongside the Budget Strategy report which was supported by the SAMP (Service Asset Management Plan);
- v) That a survey be undertaken with funeral directors to gather further information.