

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Mountsett Crematorium Joint Committee** held in Saltwell Room, Civic Suite, Gateshead Council on **Friday 29 April 2016 at 2.00 pm**

Present:

Councillor O Temple (Chairman)

Members of the Committee:

Durham County Council

Councillors A Batey, I Jewell, T Nearney and M Plews

Gateshead Council:

Councillors D Davidson, L Green and J Lee

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors M Charlton (Gateshead Council) and Councillors K Dearden, C Hampson and O Milburn.

2 Minutes of the Meeting held on 29 January 2016

The minutes of the meeting held on 29 January 2015 were conformed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

3 Declarations of Interest, if any.

There were no declarations of interest submitted.

4 Quarterly Performance and Operational Report

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

The Bereavement Services Manager reported that during the quarter 349 cremations were undertaken compared to 388 in the comparable period last year, a decrease of 39. It was noted however that Funeral Directors were experiencing similar trends and could be attributed to the reduction in the death rate over the mild winter period.

Regarding the 2015/16 budget it was noted that this was set at a prudent assumption of 1,230 cremations during the year and had been exceeded by 66. This reflected an overachievement of income of £43,570 in year.

With regard to the sale of memorial plaques it was reported that sales were broadly in line with the comparable period last year, however across the year the number and value of memorials sold represented a year on year decrease of 10 / £3,631.

Moving on to operational matters the Bereavement Services Manager advised that following on from the last meeting the AED (Automated External Defibrillator) equipment had now been purchased and training was due to be carried out shortly.

As discussed at the previous meeting, Mountsett Crematorium would be celebrating its 50th year anniversary on 23 July 2016. It was reported that the Bereavement Services Manager had drafted an anniversary booklet which was available for members to view and comment upon. Further comments or suggestions regarding the event were welcomed.

The Bereavement Services Manager further reported on the Recycling of Metals Scheme and that a cheque for the sum of £4,444 had been received and would be presented to Derwentside Hospice Care Foundation in due course.

Further details were reported in respect of the Cremation and Burial Conference which was scheduled to be held on 4-6 July 2016 at Stratford-upon-Avon. It was reported that the Vice Chair of the Central Durham Crematorium Joint Committee and Bereavement Services Manager would be attending and views were sought on whether Mountsett also wanted to send a representative.

The Bereavement Services Manager then provided an update on the car park extension, advising that work was now completed. It was noted however that a service had taken place earlier in the week and the car park had again overspilled onto the highway.

In conclusion it was reported that, further to discussion and agreement at the last meeting to proceed with the replacement of cremators and the installation of mercury abatement equipment, a tender exercise had now been undertaken and 4 bids had been received. It was hoped that the tender would be awarded next week and further details would be reported to members in due course.

Councillor Temple at this point added that he had found the observation of the tender process extremely valuable and he was confident that a good and competitive tender had been received.

Moving on to arrangements for the 50th birthday celebration, Councillor Green commented that she was not in favour of the balloon release as they could cause damage and be harmful to animals. Councillor Batey further commented that she agreed and added the Joint Committee must be mindful of others and think about how this would or could be perceived by those who had had a family member or relative cremated at Mountsett. It was agreed therefore that this idea should not be taken forward.

Councillor Jewell commented that he was concerned that it was getting very close to the anniversary and not all arrangements had been made. He further asked whether the date had been set and all relevant parties notified. The Bereavement Services Manager advised that it was proposed that the anniversary celebrations take place on Saturday 23 July and that funeral directors were aware of provisional date. It was noted that Saturday was a quiet day for the crematorium with very few cremations taking place. In addition it was a

good day for the community to attend. It was therefore agreed that the anniversary celebrations would take place on this day.

Moving on discussion took place regarding the upcoming conference and exhibition at Stratford-upon-Avon in July 2016. It was noted that the Bereavement Services Manager and Vice Chair of the Central Durham Crematorium Committee were attending and views were sought as to whether the Joint Committee wanted to also send a representative from Mountsett.

After discussion, the committee agreed that Councillor Plews who was also the Vice Chair of the Central Durham Crematorium Joint Committee, attend on behalf of both Joint Committee's and that a verbal update would be given to the committee at the September meeting.

Regarding the car park extension, Councillor Jewell asked whether there would be any scope to allocate parking bays along the redundant road heading towards the Plough Inn and provide a footpath through to the Crematorium, in order to alleviate parking problems. Councillor Temple suggested that the Bereavement Services Manager reports back to a future meeting with further details and suggestions in line with the options previously submitted to the Joint Committee.

Resolved:

That the Joint Committee note:-

- The current performance of the crematorium
- The purchase of an Automated External Defibrillator
- That arrangements for the 50th anniversary celebrations be progressed. That no balloon release should take place and that the event shall be held on Saturday 23 July 2016.
- The distribution of recycling income received to the respective charity.
- That Councillor Plews, Vice-Chairman of the Central Durham Joint Committee along with the Bereavement Services Manager represent to the Joint Committee at the Burial and Cremation Conference.
- The current position with regards to the car park extension.
- The progress with regards to the cremator replacement project.

5 Financial Monitoring Report 2015/16: Provisional Outturn as at 31/03/2016

The Joint Committee received a joint report of the Corporate Director Neighbourhood Services and Corporate Director Resources and Treasurer to the Joint Committee which set out details of income and expenditure for the period 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016, together with the provisional outturn position for 2015/16, highlighting areas of over/underspend against the revenue budgets at a service expenditure analysis level (for copy see file of minutes).

The report further detailed the funds and reserves of the Joint Committee at 1 April 2015 along with the forecast final position at 31 March 2016, taking into account the updated financial outturn projections.

The Principal Accountant advised that the projected outturn showed a surplus before transfers to reserves and distribution of surpluses to the partner authorities of £449,012 against a budgeted surplus of £306,196 (£142,816) more than the budgeted position. The provisional outturn was therefore £126,894 more underspent than previous forecast.

Further details were reported with regard to significant variances within employees, premises and supplies and services, most significantly a refund of Business Rates totalling £91,117 which had been received in the final quarter of the year. It was also reported that there had been an increase of income of £43,080 and this was mainly due to an additional 66 cremations being undertaken during the year offset by lower sales of memorial plaques and an increase in miscellaneous income.

Moving on the Principal Accountant reported that contributions to earmarked reserves were forecast as £142,816 more than originally budgeted, primarily due to the increase in cremation income, the over provision in the CAMEO abatement budget and the refund of £91k for Business Rates. This was partially offset by additional costs relating to the car park extension. In line with the Reserves Policy a transfer to the General Reserve of £16,920 was required at year end and a resulted in a net transfer to the Cremator Replacement Reserve of £268,354.

Councillor Nearney asked whether there were any plans to bring forward any work on the crematorium improvements with the cash received from the refund of Business Rates. In response the Principal Accountant advised that there were no plans to bring forward any works and it was considered more prudent to hold onto the additional funds, which could potentially reduce loan repayments required to fund the cremator replacement works.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

6 Risk Register Update 2016/17

The Joint Committee received a joint report of the Corporate Director Neighbourhood Services and Corporate Director Resources and Treasurer to the Joint Committee which provided an update on the current position with regards to the Risk Register (for copy see file of minutes).

The Principal Accountant reported that both sections of the Risk Register had been reviewed by the Risk Officer and Bereavement Services Manager and net risk ratings had been agreed by consensus. Actions to mitigate and/or tackle issues arising from the individual risks had been agreed for the forthcoming year.

It was further reported that during the car park extension to avoid major disruption to services, all works had been carried out on Saturdays, Sundays and Monday every week. As a result there had been minimal loss of revenue by arranging cremations over the four remaining days.

With regard to major refurbishment work, involving the installation of new cremators and an extension to the crematorium to house new equipment it was noted that a full risk assessment for the project would be completed for the September 2016 risk report.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted and that the Risk Registers be kept up to date and reviewed by the Joint Committee on a half yearly basis.

7 Internal Audit Charter

The Joint Committee received a report of the Chief Internal Auditor and Corporate Fraud Manager which sought agreement on the revised Internal Audit Charter to take immediate effect and to be applied to reviews undertaken as part of the Internal Audit plans for 2015/16 and 2016/17 (for copy see file of minutes).

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted and the Revised Internal Audit Charter be approved.

8 Annual Internal Audit Report 2015/16.

The Joint Committee received a report of the Chief Internal Auditor and Corporate Fraud Manager which presented the Annual Internal Audit Report for 2015/16 (for copy see file of minutes).

It was reported that based on the work undertaken the Chief Internal Auditor and Corporate Fraud Manager was able to provide a Substantial overall assurance opinion on the adequacy and effectiveness of internal control operating across the Joint Committee in 2015/16.

Councillor Temple asked whether it was known what percentage of departments achieved a Substantial assurance across the council. In response the Chief Internal Auditor and Corporate Fraud Manager advised that around 30% of services were provided with a Substantial assurance opinion.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

9 DCLG Review of Crematoria Provision and Facilities

The Joint Committee received a report of the Bereavement Services Manager which informed members of a Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) consultation paper on Crematoria provision and facilities, seeking the views of crematoria providers (for copy see file of minutes).

The Bereavement Services Manager advised that the consultation posed 42 questions and answers to the 22 relating to crematoria providers were included within Appendix 3 of the report.

Discussion then ensued regarding Iconography as it was reported that Mountsett did not have the facility to enable the fixed iconography to be removed and be replaced with an alternative faith's symbol. Councillor Temple commented that this could be a concern due to the number of humanist funerals taking place at Mountsett. Councillor Jewell asked whether any comments had been made by any faith groups regarding the fixed iconography. The Bereavement Services manager advised that there had not. It was further noted that the cross had been in place since 1966 and was permanently fixed to the marble wall.

Councillor Temple further commented that Gateshead had a large Jewish population and would find it interesting to see what the cremation figures were for Saltwell Crematorium for this demographic. In response the Waste Recycling and Contract Manager (Gateshead Council) advised that only 1 Sikh cremation had taken place and no Hindu or Jewish cremations had been undertaken between Jan 2015 – Dec 2016. He further commented that they used a cover to conceal the cross for humanist funerals and agreed that this could also be a suitable solution for Mountsett.

It was therefore suggested that the Bereavement Services Manager verbally report back to a future meeting regarding how this issue was managed in other crematoria and enquiries be made as to a suitable solution for Mountsett given the growing number of humanist funerals being undertaken.

Resolved:

That the Department of Communities and Local Governments review of crematoria be noted along with the responses to the consultation questions.