

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Remote Meeting of **Mountsett Crematorium Joint Committee** held via Microsoft Teams on **Wednesday 7 October 2020 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor O Temple (Chair)

Durham County Council

Councillors A Bainbridge, J Charlton, C Hampson and O Milburn

Gateshead Council:

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

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor A Batey (Durham County Council and Councillors D Burnett, K Dodds and J Lee (Gateshead Council).

2 Substitute Members

There were no substitutes.

3 Minutes of the Meeting held on 17 June 2020

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 June 2020 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

4 Declarations of Interest, if any

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Performance and Operational Report

The Joint Committee considered 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).

In relation to performance, the Bereavement Services Manager reported that there were 1,150 cremations undertaken during the period 1 January 2020 to 31 August 2020, compared to 911 in the comparable period last year. This had been mainly as

result of increased numbers of cremations undertaken during April, May and June related to COVID-19.

The sale of memorial plaques had also increased with a further 7 plaques (£2,739) being sold in comparison to the same period the previous year.

With regards to staffing, it was reported that recruitment to the Full Time Technical Assistant post had initially been delayed due to COVID-19 however, interviews had subsequently taken place on 23 July 2020 and the successful apprentice commenced work on 3 August 2020.

Further details were reported with regard to operational issues which had occurred as result of COVID-19 guidelines and the immense pressure impact this had upon the team. Staff had been drawn in from other council services to help cope with demand and whilst this had been invaluable, it had placed pressure on existing staff who had to train new team members whilst also carrying out their roles. During the peak of the first wave staff had worked on a shift system to meet demand. The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar asked that his personal thanks to staff at the Crematorium be recorded.

He went on to further outline other measures which had to be introduced at the crematorium to ensure safe distances were maintained during services and additional safety measures which had been implemented to ensure the safety of both staff and visitors.

In relation to a suggestion raised at a previous meeting regarding directional signage to the crematorium, the Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar advised that following enquiries with the Highways team, he had been advised that current signage was in alignment with the council's signing policy and other crematoriums in the area. He added that advice received, further stated that the signage provided was adequate and provided clear instruction from the main roads and visitors from outside the area tended to rely upon satellite navigation. Any visitors travelling from the Flinthill area would be assumed to be local.

Moving on, details were reported in relation to the recycling of metals scheme. It was noted that following a second round of nominations being made available, a cheque for £10,000 was given to Willowburn Hospice on 20 July.

The Bereavement Services Manager then provided the Joint Committee with details and options regarding proposals to increase the cremation fee, which was frozen at the beginning of the financial year due to COVID-19. The decision taken at the time to freeze fees was in line with action taken by other councils, however as cremation numbers were falling back to normal levels and given that many other councils had now reverted back to the planned 2020/21 cremation fees, it was recommended that the Joint Committee agree to implement the previously budgeted cremation fee of £720 from 1 November 2020.

In addition, the Joint Committee had agreed in January 2020 to increase the Webcast charges from 1 April 2020 to £48. The Bereavement Services Manager explained that Members would recall that due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that it had been further agreed to provide the service free of charge due to reduced number of mourners allowed in the chapel during a service. Webcasts cost £30 each and they were currently being provided free at all services. This had resulted in a cost to the crematorium of £3,960 and a lost revenue of £6,336 assuming the charge of £48 had been charged.

Further to discussions with neighbouring authorities it was noted that all had now started charging the Webcast fee and therefore it was recommended that the Joint Committee agree to recommence the Webcast fee of £48 from 1 November 2020.

In conclusion of his report, the Bereavement Services Manager advised that the Service Asset Management Plan (SAMP) had been reviewed and updated to provide further direction and highlight future budget pressures and was attached to the report at Appendix 2 for information.

Councillor L Green commented that she was not satisfied with the response from Highways and suggested that it would be wrong to assume that you were local if travelling from the Flinthill area. She therefore requested that The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar go back to Highways for further discussions. Councillor Milburn reiterated these comments and along with Councillor Charlton who was also a local Member agreed that they would attempt to help in the negotiations with Highways.

Moving on to discuss Webcasts, Councillor Bradford added that given that restrictions on the number of mourners was still in place he wondered whether it was too early to reintroduce the £48 fee. Councillor Temple commented that whilst he appreciated the concerns raised he did have concerns regarding the loss of revenue and the risk of being out of line with the Central Durham Crematorium Joint Committee, who had already agreed to reintroduce the charge.

Councillor Charlton commented that she did agree with Councillor Bradford however appreciated that the crematorium was a business and queried whether the Webcasts could be provided at cost. The Bereavement Services Manager advised that this had been done in the past, however numbers were dramatically increasing.

Councillor Ord added that in her opinion the decisions taken by both crematorium should be consistent and asked whether any complaints had been received regarding the fee.

The Neighbourhood Protection Manager added that it was acknowledged that it was an extremely difficult time for people, and it was clear that there was an issue of consistency to consider. He did however note that the fee was already included

within the crematoriums main charges and was currently the cheapest offered in the region. He further made reference to the impact of continuing to provide the service at no cost and the impact this would have upon the budgeted position going forward.

Resolved: That the Joint Committee:

- (a) Note the current performance of the crematorium;
- (b) Note the updated position with regards to the Technical Assistant post;
- (c) Note the updated position with regards to the recycling of metals scheme;
- (d) Note the options available for the cremation fee and Approve Option 2 – reinstatement of the full 2020/21 fee from 1 November 2020;
- (e) Note the options available for the provision of webcasts and Approve Option 2 – recommencement of the fees from 1 November 2020; and
- (f) Note and agree the content of the Service Asset Management Plan attached at Appendix 2, which will be factored into budget planning in 2021/22 and beyond.

6 External Audit Annual Review of the Return for the year ended 31 March 2020

The Committee considered a joint report of the Corporate Director Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and Corporate Director of Resources and Treasurer to the Joint Committee which presented the External Auditors (Mazars LLP) Annual Review and of the Joint Committees Return for the year ended 31 March 2020 (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Head of Finance and Transactional Services advised that the audit had now been completed and it had not highlighted any material weaknesses around the Joint Committees system of internal control and accounting statements and no exceptions to the Return had been reported. The External Auditor had therefore issued an unqualified opinion.

Resolved: That the Joint Committee approve the Joint Committees Annual Return for the year ended 31 March 2020 including the External Report 2019/20 Certificate (attached at Appendix 2).

7 Risk Register Update 2020/21 - 1

The Joint Committee considered a joint report of the Corporate Director Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and Corporate Director of Resources and Treasurer to the Joint Committee which provided details of the outcome of the half-yearly risk review in September 2020 (for copy see file of Minutes).

Resolved: That the content of the report and updated position be noted.

8 Financial Monitoring Report - Position at 31/08/20, with Projected Outturn at 31/03/21

The Joint Committee considered a joint report of the Corporate Director Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and Corporate Director of Resources and Treasurer to the Joint Committee which provided details of the provisional outturn position for 2020/21 and the projected level of reserves and balances at 31 March 2021 (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Head of Finance and Transactional Services provided a summary of the significant variances highlighted within the report noting that the pandemic had impacted upon the budget and the facility due to some charges temporarily being suspended.

Resolved: That the content of the report be noted.

9 Internal Audit Charter

The Joint Committee considered a report of the Interim Chief Internal Auditor and Corporate Fraud Manager which sought agreement to the revised Internal Audit Charter to be applied to reviews undertaken as part of the Internal Audit plan for 2020/21 (for copy see file of Minutes).

Resolved: That the Joint Committee approve the Internal Audit Charter as attached at Appendix 2 to the report.

10 Annual Review of the System of Internal Audit

The Joint Committee considered a joint report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and Corporate Director of Resources and Treasurer to the Joint Committee which provided for information details of the review of the effectiveness of the Durham County Council Internal Audit Service, which was carried out by Durham County Councils Audit Committee in June 2020 (for copy see file of Minutes).

Resolved: That the Joint Committee note the information provided that demonstrates the efficiency and effectiveness of the Durham County Council Internal Audit Service.

11 Budget Strategy Report

The Joint Committee considered a joint report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and Corporate Director of Resources and Treasurer to the Joint Committee which provided details of issues to be considered by the Joint Committee as part of the medium-term financial planning for the Mountsett Crematorium. The report further set out proposals to finance the planned

replacement of the existing cremators (for copy see file of Minutes) and sought views on those issues in advance of the 2021/22 budget setting process.

The Head of Finance and Transactional Services provided an overview capital investments made to date and those which were planned for the coming years in line with the Service Asset Management Plan. He further detailed costs associated with the planned cremator replacement works and proposals for this to be financed from a contribution of earmarked reserves and prudential borrowing, via a 10-year annuity loan from Durham County Council.

In addition, he reported that Fees and charges, which were harmonised with Central Durham Crematorium, were currently set at £720 and a proposed increase of £20 to £740 would still mean that they were the lowest in comparison with neighbouring facilities and below the national average of £823.

Further details were report in respect of surplus distribution levels to partners authorities and proposals for these to remain at the current level for the coming years.

In conclusion the Head of Finance and Transactional Services advised that subject to the agreement of the fee increase next year the reserves balances of the Joint Committee were projected to be sufficient to meet the liabilities and commitments of the Joint Committee for the coming years.

Councillor Temple asked whether there was any scope for negotiation with Durham County Council regarding both the interest rate (to fall in line with the Public Loans Board equivalent) and penalties applied for early repayment. The Head of Finance and Transactional Services advised that the interest rate quoted in the report was for the purposes of medium-term financial planning however noted that the current base rate was at a historic low, despite PLB borrowing rates being artificially higher than they were 18 months prior. With regard to the issue of premature repayment, he advised that he would put forward the query to the Corporate Director of Resources for due consideration.

Councillor Bradford added that he agreed that it would be important to pay back the loan as soon as practicable to allow the Joint Committee to gather reserves.

Resolved: That the Joint Committee

- (i) Consider and note the contents of the report
- (ii) Approve the proposed increase in fees and charges, as identified in the report
- (iii) Approve the proposed loan from Durham County Council, as identified in the report; and
- (iv) Agree to review the budget strategy in two years' time in preparation for the 2023/24 budget setting year.

12 Any resolution relating to the exclusion of the public during the discussion of items containing exempt information

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 involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraphs 3 and Part 5 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

13 Minutes of the Meeting held on 17 June 2020

The Part B minutes of the meeting held on 17 June 2020 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair (for copy see file of Minutes).

14 Mountsett Cremator Replacement

The Joint Committee considered a joint report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhood and Climate Change and Corporate Director Resources and Treasurer to the Joint Committee which provided the joint committee with an update with regards to the existing equipment and the cremator replacement (for copy see file of Minutes).

Resolved: That the recommendations contained within the report be agreed.