

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Mountsett Crematorium Joint Committee** held remotely via Microsoft Teams on **Monday 26 April 2021** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor O Temple (Chair)

Durham County Council:

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

Gateshead Council:

Councillors D Bradford (Vice-Chair), D Burnett, L Green, S Green and J Lee

1 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor K Dodds.

2 Substitutes

There were no substitute members.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 28 January 2021 were agreed as a correct record to be signed by the Chair.

4 Declarations of Interest

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 on performance and operational matters (for copy see file of minutes).

It was reported that the number of cremations during the period had increased by 121 on the same period last year, with the total number of cremations in 2020/21 being 1,758, compared with 1,399 in 2019/20, an increase of 359. The 2020/21 budget assumed 1,300 cremations during the year, however the actual number of cremations undertaken was 458 more than the budget position, resulting in an over achievement of cremation fee income of £281,130.

The number and value of memorials sold had also increased, with 24 memorials being sold in the period, an increase of 11 memorials sold on the same period last year.

The Bereavement Services Manager gave credit to staff who had continued to deliver a high level of service, despite facing many challenges on a daily basis, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to a number of requests from the public wishing to pay for services by credit card, the Bereavement Services Manager informed the Joint Committee that, following discussions with the Income and Support team, a 'Chip and Pin' payment device had been ordered at a rental fee of £16 per month, the cost of which will be absorbed within existing office budgets.

Updating the Joint Committee on the installation of the two new cremators, the Bereavement Services Manager reported that the operation of the temporary cremator continues and this had been invaluable during the pandemic. Members noted the possible delay to the start of the project due to travel restrictions currently imposed and that work will continue with the cremator manufacturer in respect of this issue, with a revised timetable being set out in the report. The Bereavement Services Manager pointed out that detailed estimates of the cremator replacement and projected financing of the works had been set out in the budget strategy report of September 2020, however, further revisions to the designs had taken place and updated cost projections were outlined in the report.

The Chair, on behalf of the Joint Committee, commended the team for the hard work undertaken over what had been an extremely challenging time.

Resolved:

The Joint Committee:

- a. Noted the current performance of the crematorium;
- b. Noted the introduction of credit card payment facilities at the crematorium;
- c. Noted the cancellation of the Joint Conference of the Federation of Burial & Cremation Authorities and the Cremation Society of Great Britain;
- d. Noted the update with regards to the cremator replacement project.

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 Interim Corporate Director of Resources 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 Finance Manager for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change provided a summary of the significant variances highlighted in the report and informed the Joint Committee that no changes were expected to be made to the figures within the report, however the Joint Committee would be updated on any revisions made, at the next meeting.

The Joint Committee noted the position reported in January which forecast an overspend of £226,000 and this had reduced by £173,00 partly as a result of premises costs being lower than previously projected and additional income of £64,000 due to the increased level of cremations within the last three months.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

7 Risk Register Update 2020/21 - 22

The Joint Committee considered a joint report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and Interim Corporate Director of Resources and Treasurer to the Joint Committee on the half-yearly risk review in March 2021 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Finance Manager for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change explained that in relation to risk 1, the temporary cremator installed in July 2020 had reduced the risk in terms of the suspension notice. Since the previous review, the net impact of one risk, managing excess deaths/cremations capacity, had been upgraded from minor to moderate risk. Despite extremely challenging circumstances, controls had been effective and the risk had not materialised. A new risk had been added to the register, "Non-compliance with coronavirus regulations by members of the public, leading to a local outbreak and capacity issues in deaths management services", the net evaluation of which had been classed as moderate, with an unlikely occurrence.

In response to a question from Councillor A Batey regarding the webcasting of funeral services, the Bereavement Services Manager replied that webcasts had been available prior to the pandemic and these had proved increasingly popular during the pandemic. He confirmed that webcasts of funeral services will continue to be offered in the future, at a nominal charge.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

8 Annual Internal Audit Report 2020/21

The Joint Committee considered a joint report of the Interim Chief Internal Auditor and Corporate Fraud Manager which presented the Annual Internal Audit Report for 2020/21 (for copy see file of minutes).

In presenting the report, the Interim Audit Manager explained that due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, the number of transactions subject to review had been reduced to allow the work to be carried out remotely whilst continuing to meet the requirements of delivering a full audit review. The Interim Audit Manager highlighted the 'Substantial' overall assurance opinion on the adequacy and effectiveness of internal control operating across the Joint Committee in 2020/21, an opinion which confirms a sound system of control is in place. One medium recommendation and one best practice recommendation had been made, with the medium recommendation having been fully implemented. The opinion is qualified in light of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic which had resulted in a significant level of strain being placed on normal procedures and control arrangements. It had therefore not been possible to quantify the additional risk arising from the ongoing measures or the overall impact on the framework of governance, risk management and control that had been put in place.

The Chair commented it was pleasing to note the positive assurance of the internal audit and with quality assurance being provided through awards including the Green Flag award and with regular anecdotal evidence from members of the public regarding the care and support provided by staff, this all leads to a very satisfactory position.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

9 Any other business

At the conclusion of the meeting the Chair remarked that the meeting was the final meeting prior to the local election and he thanked members for their service on the Joint Committee, in particular those who would be stepping down at the election and he extended his best wishes to those members standing for re-election. Councillor Temple added that chairing the Joint Committee since the inception of the unitary authority, was a position which had been a great honour to him. He expressed his thanks to the Joint Committee and all the staff at the Crematorium and wished them well for the future.