

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

CENTRAL DURHAM CREMATORIUM JOINT COMMITTEE

At a Meeting of **Central Durham Crematorium Joint Committee** held in the **Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham** on **Wednesday 29 September 2021** at **2.00 pm**

Present:

Councillor J Chaplow (Chair)

Durham County Council:

Councillors D Brown, K Fantarrow, S Quinn, K Robson, M Stead, C Varty and M Wilson

Spennymoor Town Council:

Town Councillors N Foster, C Maddison and D Ranyard

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Blakey and A Simpson.

2 Substitute Members

No notification of Substitute Members had been received.

3 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 29 June 2021 were confirmed as a correct record and were signed by the Chair.

The Chair noted several matters arising, including a change in membership of the Joint Committee, with Councillor O Gunn being replaced by Councillor C Varty. The Chair welcomed Councillor C Varty to the Joint Committee.

The Chair noted that arrangements would be made for the January 2022 meeting of the Joint Committee to be held at Durham Crematorium, following services on the day, with a tour by the Bereavement Services Manager, Graham Harrison to follow the meeting.

It was added that should any Member wish to visit the Crematorium individually, prior to the January meeting, they could contact the Bereavement Services Manager to make arrangements.

The Chair noted that the next Annual General Meeting of the Joint Committee in June 2022 would be arranged to be held at Spennymoor Town Council.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest submitted.

5 External Audit Annual Review of the Return for the year ended 31 March 2021

The Joint Committee considered a joint report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and the Corporate Director Resources (Interim) and Treasurer to the Joint Committee relating to the External Auditors (Mazars LLP) issues Arising Report for the year ended 31 March 2021 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Finance Manager, Neighbourhoods and Climate Change, Phillip Curran advised that the audit had now been concluded, adding that there had been no material weaknesses highlighted around the Joint Committee's system of internal control and the Annual Return had been completed and signed off.

Town Councillor N Foster noted the positive report adding it was a reflection of the high quality of the work undertaken by Officers.

Resolved:

That the Joint Committee approve the Joint Committees Annual Return for the financial year ended 31 March 2021 including the External Report 2020/21 Certificate (attached at Appendix 2).

6 Performance and Operational Report

The Neighbourhood Protection Manager, Ian Hoult asked Members to note the performance figures from 1 June 2021 to 31 August 2021 and the comparison to the same period for both 2020 and 2019, noting a net decrease of 83 cremations year on year. It was noted the figures for 2019 were provided to give a comparison to pre-pandemic numbers, and it was highlighted that current performance was comparable to 2019.

It was noted there was a total of 512 for the three-month period with the June to August profile breakdown showing 160 from Durham, 18 from Spennymoor and 334 from outside of the area.

Members were asked to note that the number of memorials sold had increased in comparison to the same period the previous year, with sales being £6,248 greater than the comparable period last year. It was explained the increase was from a combination of renewals for plaques and the introduction of memorial leaves. Members were reminded of the new metal leaves which could be engraved and placed on an ornate metal tree, expanding the range of options by which people could pay their respects.

The Neighbourhood Protection Manager explained, for the benefit of new Members, the recycling of metals scheme operated by the Institute of Cemeteries and Cremation Management (ICCM). He noted metals were recycled and, from those contributions, funds were returned to crematoria to then be allocated to nominated local charities. The Neighbourhood Protection Manager explained the sum of £10,000 had been transferred to Little Angels Garden of Remembrance. Members noted a second round of funding had been released and Chyrelle Addams Breast Cancer Trust had been nominated. The Neighbourhood Protection Manager explained nominations could be brought forward to the Joint Committee for local charities that fit with the ethos of the Crematorium and added that over £200,000 had been provided to local charities as a result of the scheme.

The Neighbourhood Protection Manager asked the Joint Committee to note the success in once again achieving the Green Flag Award for Durham Crematorium.

Councillors noted that the Crematorium was to have taken part in the Durham "Heritage Open Days" programme and it was explained that those events had been cancelled as a result of continued uncertainty in relation to COVID-19. It was noted it was hoped that the regular activities would take place next year.

The Neighbourhood Protection Manager noted paragraph 14 of the report referred to a question that had been raised by a member of the public at the meeting of Durham County Council's full Council held on 14 July 2021 with the question and response from the Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change set out within the report. Members were reminded that the Joint Committee considered its fees and charges annually at its January meeting and it was noted that comparisons with other crematoria were set out within the report for information. The Neighbourhood Protection Manager highlighted that Durham Crematorium together with Mountsett Crematorium, also operated by the Council, offered the lowest cremation fees in the region at £740.

Councillors were asked to note the level of fees of several near neighbours including: Sunderland - £865; Coundon - £884; and Darlington - £930. Members were reminded of the significant investment that had been made at Durham Crematorium, approximately £4.1 million since Local Government Reorganisation in 2009 and noted the further planned investment as set out within the Service Asset Management Plan (SAMP) contained within the report.

The Neighbourhood Protection Manager noted that in recognition of those families that may experience funeral poverty, the Joint Committee had previously agreed to provide direct cremations, with unattended services having a reduced fee of £520. He added another option that the Joint Committee had agreed for the Crematorium to provide was for off-peak services at the beginning of the day, again with a reduced fee. Members were asked to note the information, with the issue of fees and charges to be considered at the January meeting of the Joint Committee. The Neighbourhood Protection Manager noted that awareness raising, in relation to those options for direct and off-peak services, would be looked at in terms of communications to care homes and hospitals to help the bereaved to be able to make informed decisions in terms of the services provided.

The Neighbourhood Protection Manager referred Members to the SAMP, appended to the report, which set out a number of proposed works including electric vehicle charging points and further options for heat recovery. Members noted the current system to recover heat for use by the building and were informed of feasibility work in terms of additional recovery that could help generate power. The Joint Committee were asked to note information on resomation as part of the SAMP, with the Neighbourhood Protection Manager explaining that the Bereavement Services Manager was a member of a national working group looking at resomation, and that a report would be presented to the Joint Committee at a future meeting setting out further information.

The Chair thanked the Neighbourhood Protection Manager and asked for comments and questions.

Town Councillor C Maddison noted it was an excellent report and it appeared that everything was being done right. He noted the points raised within the question that had been raised, adding that if the Crematorium was operating at a huge loss then hundreds of people would make representations. He added that, when looking at the comparison information between lowest and highest fees, the Joint Committee were forgoing around £400,000 in additional fees by maintaining the lowest fees in the region.

Town Councillor N Foster agreed with the comments from his colleague and noted the report and information within was comprehensive.

He added that the gentleman asking questions relating to the costs of funeral services may wish to ask local service providers as regards what percentage of their overall cost of a funeral the services provided by the Crematorium represented and what assistance in relation to costs those providers could offer. He noted the range of options made available for those wishing to use the Crematorium to make it as cost-effective as possible. He added he was delighted as regards progress in relation to energy recovery, and issue he had championed for a number of years.

Town Councillor D Ranyard echoed the sentiments of his colleagues and noted thanks to all staff for their exceptional work in achieving the Green Flag Award for the tenth year in a row and also in attaining ICCM Gold Star Status accreditation. He added that he was pleased that the report was forward looking, commended the work in terms of energy recovery and becoming a green crematorium, again thanking all the staff involved.

The Neighbourhood Protection Manager noted he had recently reflected upon the difficulties faced by the staff at the Crematorium over the last 18 months during the pandemic. He noted the hard work of those staff, working alongside funeral directors and Registrars to ensure that services were carried out with respect during such difficult times. He added that he wished to note that the staff at the Crematorium were a great credit and that their dedication and hard work were to be commended. He noted he agreed with the sentiments of Members and reiterated his thanks to the staff who worked on a day-to-day basis to make a difference for all those attending the Crematorium.

Resolved:

- (i) That the current performance of the Crematorium be noted.
- (ii) That the updated position with regards to the Recycling of Metals scheme be noted.
- (iii) That the updated position with regards the Green Flag scheme be noted.
- (iv) That the updated position with regards to the Durham Heritage Open Weekend be noted.
- (v) That the comparison of fees, the discounted fees available to help funeral poverty and the investments made at the Crematorium in consideration of the question from a member of the public be noted.
- (vi) That content of the Service Asset Management Plan attached at Appendix 3, which will be factored into budget planning for 2022/23 and beyond be approved.

7 Financial Monitoring Report - Position at 31/08/21, with Projected Revenue and Capital Outturn at 31/03/22

The Joint Committee considered a joint report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and the Corporate Director Resources (Interim) and Treasurer to the Joint Committee which set out details of income and expenditure in the period 1 April 2021 to 31 August 2021, together with the forecast outturn position for 2021/22, highlighting areas of over / underspend against the revenue budgets at a service expenditure analysis level.

The report also detailed the funds and reserves of the Joint Committee at 1 April 2021 and forecast outturn position at 31 March 2021, taking into account expenditure to date and forecasts to the year end (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Finance Manager explained that, factoring in overspends, the additional cremations as referred to by the Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar meant that the updated projected outturn showed a surplus (before transfers to reserves and distribution of surpluses to the partner authorities) of £42,727 more than the budgeted position, mostly as a result of income above budget. It was noted that the major variances were set out at paragraph 11 onwards, by subjective analysis area. It was added that paragraph 14 set out the details relating to the capital programme, with a projected underspend of £50,038. Members were asked to note the main variances were an overspend due to the requirement for the replacement of three cooler cassettes, offset as the re-lining of two cremators was no longer required.

The Finance Manager noted the report also set out details in terms of the retained reserves at 31 March 2021.

Resolved:

That the April to August 2021 financial monitoring report and associated provisional revenue and capital outturn positions at 31 March 2021, including the projected year end position with regards to the reserves and balances of the Joint Committee be noted.

8 Risk Register Update 2021/22 - 1

The Finance Manager asked Members to note the Risk Register Update 2021/22 report, the Joint Committee considering updates on a six-monthly basis. Members recalled that the report set out service risk register and the health and safety risk register, with risks being regularly reviewed by the Durham County Council Risk Management Team in conjunction with the Bereavement Services Manager.

It was explained that the risk relating to “*Demand for cremations exceeds capacity*” had been downrated from moderate impact, possible likelihood to minor/possible, reflecting the picture national in terms of the pandemic. It was added that the risk relating to “*Non-compliance with coronavirus regulations by members of the public leading to a local outbreak and capacity issues in deaths management services*” the likelihood was now “unlikely”, that again reflecting the national picture in terms of the pandemic and easing of national restrictions. It was noted there had been no new risks identified, and all risks were within the risk appetite.

Resolved:

That the updated position in relation to the Risk Register be noted.

9 Internal Audit Charter

The Interim Audit Manager, Tracy Henderson referred Members to a report relating to the Internal Audit Charter to be applied to reviews undertaken as part of the Internal Audit plan for 2021/22 (for copy see file of minutes).

Members were reminded of the previous update that had been made to the Charter to reflect changes made to the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS) in 2017, considered by the Joint Committee at its meeting held 1 October 2020. It was explained that the Charter was subject to annual review by the Chief Internal Auditor and Corporate Fraud Manager and that as no new revisions had been made to the PSIAS, it was considered that no further amendments to the Charter were required. It was explained that the Charter defined the Internal Audit Service’s purpose; authority and access to records, personnel, and physical properties relevant to the performance of engagements; defined the scope of internal audit activities; and set out the relationship to the Joint Committee.

Resolved:

That the Central Durham Crematorium Joint Committee approve the Internal Audit Charter as set out at Appendix 2 to the report.

10 Annual Review of the System of Internal Audit

The Finance Manager referred to the report setting out the Annual Review of the System of Internal Audit (for copy see file of minutes).

Members noted that part of the role of Durham County Council's Audit Committee was to scrutinise the performance and effectiveness of Internal Audit and had received a report at its meeting in June 2021, with evidence provided by way of self-assessment against key elements of the PSIAS. It was explained that this provided assurance to the Joint Committee that the work carried out by Internal Audit was in line with best practice and the latest PSIAS.

Resolved:

That the information demonstrating the efficiency and effectiveness of the Durham County Council Internal Audit Service be noted.