

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Mountsett Crematorium Joint Committee** held in **Chapel - Mountsett Crematorium, Dipton** on **Thursday 29 September 2022** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor A Batey (Chair)

Durham County Council

Councillors V Andrews, A Hanson, P Heaviside, K Rooney and M Walton

Gateshead Council:

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

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Charlton, C Hampson and D Oliver.

2 Substitute Members

There were no substitutes.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held 29 June 2022 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 External Audit Annual Review of the Return for the year ended 31 March 2022

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 presented the External Auditors (Mazars LLP) Annual Review of the Joint Committees Return for the year ended 31 March 2022 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Finance Manager 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.

Resolved:

That the Joint Committee approve the Joint Committees Annual Return for the year ended 31 March 2022 including the External Report 2021/22 Certificate

6 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 and Registrar reported there were 354 cremations undertaken during the period 1 June 2022 to 31 August 2022, compared to 345 in the comparable period last year. There were nine additional cremations undertaken in the period June to August 2022 compared to the same period last year. The sale of memorial plaques had decreased, with eight fewer memorials being sold in comparison to the same period the previous year. It was noted that the first 10 year renewal for plaques, as agreed in 2012, had come forward, and was included in the memorial figures.

Mountsett Crematorium had successfully obtained the Green Flag Award for the eleventh year running and had been awarded Gold Star Status in the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management Accreditation. In relation to the Recycling of Metals Scheme, a cheque for £12,000 was presented to Children's Cancer North on 2 September 2022 by the Chair and the Vice Chair of the Joint Committee.

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar noted the Service Asset Management Plan (SAMP) was attached at Appendix 3 to the report, setting out the four priorities of maintenance for the Crematorium: Priority 1; Priority 2; Priority 3; and longer-term works.

In response to a question from Councillor D Bradford relating to overtime, the Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar noted that there were still issues relating to staffing, with some casual staff required to ensure cover for sickness and holidays. Councillor D Bradford asked at looking at the cost of overtime to give a comparison, especially given the pressures on the existing staff. The Finance Manager, P Curran noted figures could be looked at, with the Chair noting it would be useful to have figures at the next meeting for the next few months.

Councillor M Walton noted that memorial sales were down and asked for any feedback on the decrease. The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar noted that there was the issue of cost of living crisis due to families not being able to afford plaques, with some families choosing not to renew plaques after 10 years as an example.

Councillor P Heaviside asked as regards resomation. The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar explained it was an alternative process to cremation that used alkaline and water to turn a shrouded body into ash, taking around 4 hours. He added that he would report back to the Joint Committee on progress in this area.

The Chair noted the honour in presenting the cheques from the recycling of metals scheme and asked as the promoting of the scheme and the benefits to local charities from the scheme. The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar noted that conversations at ICCM Conference were ongoing in terms of promotion and splitting amounts into smaller contributions.

Resolved:

- (a) That the current performance of the crematorium be noted;
- (b) That the current position with regards to staffing be noted;
- (c) That the updated position with regards to the Green Flag scheme be noted;
- (d) That the updated position with regards to the recycling of metals scheme be noted;
- (e) That the content of the Service Asset Management Plan attached at Appendix 2, which will be factored into budget planning in 2022/23 and beyond be noted and agreed.
- (f) That figures relating to cost of overtime and staffing be brought to the next meeting of the Joint Committee.

7 Financial Monitoring Report - Position at 31/08/22, with Projected Outturn at 31/03/23

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 2022/23 and the projected level of reserves and balances at 31 March 2023 (for copy see file of minutes).

Resolved:

That the April to August 2022 financial monitoring report and associated provisional outturn position at 31 March 2023, including the projected year position with regards the reserves and balances of the Joint Committee, be noted.

8 Risk Register Update 2022/23 Review 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 2022 (for copy see file of minutes).

Resolved:

That the contents of the report and updated position be noted.

9 Internal Audit Charter

The Joint Committee considered 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 Plan for 2022/23 (for copy see file of minutes).

Resolved:

That the Joint Committee note the content of the report and approve the Internal Audit Charter, as attached at Appendix 2 of 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 details of the review of the effectiveness of the Durham County Council Internal Audit Service, which was carried out by Durham County Council's Audit Committee in July 2022 (for copy see file of minutes).

Resolved:

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

11 Provision of Internal Audit and Risk Management Services 2023 to 2026

The Audit Manager presented the Joint Committee with proposals for the continued delivery of the Internal Audit and Risk Management Services by Durham County Council to cover the period April 2023 to March 2026 (for copy see file of minutes).

Resolved:

- (a) That the Internal Audit and Risk Management Services SLA with Durham County Council covering the next three financial years attached at Appendix 2 be approved.
- (b) That the Annual Audit Plan and fee set out in Schedule B of the SLA be approved.

12 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 Finance Manager noted that the report set out the significant capital investment of over £4 million since Local Government Reorganisation in 2009, together with the list of further investments of over £1.5 million as set out within the SAMP previously discussed.

He explained that when comparing fees and charges, including noting the harmonisation of those fees and charges at Mountsett with those at Durham Crematorium, a proposed increase of £30 would still result in the lowest fee when compared to neighbouring facilities and also would be below the current regional average.

The Chair noted the ongoing cost of living crisis and that it had been a while to wait until September to look at fees. Councillor D Bradford agreed, and Councillor P Heaviside asked as regards when the Joint Committee looked at fees. The Finance Manager reiterated that fees and charges were harmonised with those at Durham Crematorium and explained that the financial monitoring reports were given each quarter. He added that there would be an impact upon forecasts and that the increase in costs had been recognised and a comfort margin had been built in, together with prudent estimates in relation to the number of cremations, noting pre-pandemic figures. Councillors D Bradford and M Walton noted they would wish for budget pressures to be reviewed every three months, all Members agreed.

Resolved:

- (a) That the contents of the report be noted;
- (b) That the proposed increase in the fees and charges, as identified in the report be agreed;
- (c) To review the budget strategy in September 2023 in preparation for the 2024/25 budget setting year.
- (d) To review budget pressures every three months.

13 Exclusion of the Public

Resolved:

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 involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

14 Letter Regarding Potential Sale

The Joint Committee considered a report of the Neighbourhood Protection Manager relating to a letter regarding potential sale.

Upon discussion the Committee;

Resolved:

That the recommendations within the report be agreed.