

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Mountsett Crematorium Joint Committee** held in Chapel - Mountsett Crematorium, Dipton on **Wednesday 27 September 2023 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor L Green (Vice Chair in Chair)

Durham County Council

Councillors G Binney, C Hampson, A Hanson, P Heaviside, K Rooney and M Walton

Gateshead Council:

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

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Charlton (Durham County Council and K Dodds (Gateshead Council)

2 Substitute Members

There were no substitute members

3 Minutes of the Meeting held on 28th June 2023

The Minutes of the meeting held on 28 June 2023 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

In relation to item 8 of the minutes the Finance Manager explained that following further clarification the vested and monetary split should both read Durham 65% and Gateshead 35% and not 60/40 as outlined in the Constitution. The relevant changes would be picked up with the Legal Clerk.

4 Declarations of Interest, if any.

There were no declarations of interest.

5 External Audit Annual Review of the Return for the year ended 31 March 2023

The Joint Committee considered the report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and Corporate Director of Resources and Treasurer to the Joint Committee which presented for approval the External Auditors (Mazars LLP) Annual Review of the Joint Committees Return for the year ended 31 March 2023 (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 Governance and Accountability Return for the year ended 31 March 2023 including the External Report 2022/23 Certificate (attached at Appendix 2).

6 Performance and Operational Report

The Joint Committee considered the report of the Bereavement Services Manager & Registrar which provided an update on performance and other operational matters (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar reported that 348 cremations had been undertaken during the period 1 June 2023 to 31 August 2023, compared to 354 in the comparable period last year, 6 less cremations were undertaken in the period June to August 2023 compared to the same period last year. The number of memorials sold was recorded at 39 compared to 28 in the same period the previous year, which was an increase of 11 memorials sold and an increase of income of £1,838 year on year.

It had been remarked that once again, Mountsett Crematorium was successfully obtained a Green Flag Award for the twelfth year running. This had come on top of the award of Gold Star Status in the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management Accreditation. However, it was raised that Durham County Council had decided to withdraw from entering the green flag awards for cemeteries in future years.

In terms of staffing, it had been confirmed that the 2 recently appointed relief members of staff to assist in the operational areas of the crematorium had undertaken all training including having passed their cremator operator test. As a result both were now fully qualified in every aspect of crematorium operations.

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar noted the Service Asset Management Plan (SAMP) was attached at Appendix 2 to the report, which set out the priorities of maintenance for the Crematorium: Priority 1 essential works 24/25; Priority 2 25/26; Priority 3 longer-term works.

Councillor M Walton queried why Durham County Council were to not continue with applying for the Green Flag Award Scheme. In response the Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar advised that with the cemeteries having differing attributes and public aesthetics across the range of sites it inadvertently created a tier system across Bereavement Services.

Councillor Walton commented that Mountsett should not be penalised as a result of a perceived lower standard being achieved across other council owned cemetery sites.

Councillor Heaviside commented that he understood the reasoning for this decision and felt that it was fairer to allow an equal opportunity to achieve the Green Flag status across all cemeteries.

Following a question from the Chair, the Bereavement Services Manager advised that the cost of the award last year had been £368.

Councillor Binney commented that in his opinion the cost in applying for the award was minimal and the impact upon staff's moral from achieving the award each year was a good motivator.

Resolved:

- (a) That the current performance of the crematorium be noted;
- (b) That the current position with regards to the staffing be noted;
- (c) That the Green Flag scheme be entered into.
- (d) That the Service Asset Management Plan attached at Appendix 2, be noted and approved and factored into budget planning in 2024/25 and beyond.

7 Financial Monitoring Report - Position at 31/08/23, with Projected Outturn at 31/03/24

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 2023/24 and the projected level of reserves and balances at 31 March 2024 (for copy see file of Minutes).

Resolved:

That the April to August 2023 financial monitoring report and associated provisional outturn position at 31 March 2024, including the projected year position with regards to the reserves and balances of the Joint Committee be noted.

8 Risk Register Update 2023/24 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 informing the Mountsett Crematorium Joint Committee of the outcome of the half-yearly risk review in August 2023 (for copy see file of Minutes).

Resolved:

That the content 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 Internal Audit Charter to be applied to reviews undertaken as part of the Internal Audit plan for 2023/24 (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Audit Manager explained that with no new revisions made to the PSIAS there were no amendments to the Charter are required.

Resolved:

That the Internal Audit Charter be approved.

10 Annual Review of the System of Internal Audit

The Joint Committee considered the report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and Corporate Director of Resources and Treasurer to the Joint Committee which advised the Joint Committee of a review of the effectiveness of the Durham County Council Internal Audit Service, which was carried out by the County Council's Audit Committee in June 2023 (for copy see file of Minutes).

Resolved That the Joint Committee notes 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 the Joint Report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and Corporate Director of Resources and Treasurer which outlined a range of issues that would need to be considered as part of the medium-term financial planning for the Mountsett Crematorium. The views of

the committee were sought in advance of the 2024/25 budget setting process (for copy see file of Minutes)

The Finance Manager outlined significant capital investment of over £4.0 million had been undertaken at Mountsett Crematorium since Local Government Reorganisation in 2009, with further investments of over £1.6 million planned for the coming years in line with the Service Asset Management Plan.

He explained that Members would recall that fees and charges had been harmonised with Central Durham Crematorium and An increase of £30 was proposed in 2023/24 and would still mean that they remain among the lowest in comparison to neighbouring facilities, and was well below the current regional average.

The same principles that had been applied in Durham County Councils Medium Financial Plan had also been applied to the Mountsett Crematorium Medium-Term financial planning process.

Councillor Walton raised a query regarding the increase in 2022/23. In response the Finance Manager outlined the additional £5.00 increase on the previous year's agreed charge would be beneficial given external factors that had been forecasted to face the service whilst also acknowledging cost of living factors.

Resolved:

That the Joint Committee:

- i. Note and consider the contents of the report.
- ii. Approve the proposed increase in the fees and charges, as identified in the report.
- iii. Agree to review the budget strategy in September 2024 in preparation for the 2025/26 budget setting year.