

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

CENTRAL DURHAM CREMATORIUM JOINT COMMITTEE

At a **Annual Meeting of Central Durham Crematorium Joint Committee** held in the **Council Chamber, Spennymoor Town Council** on **Friday 28 June 2024** at **2.00 pm**

Present:

Durham County Council:

Councillors J Blakey, D Brown, K Robson, M Stead and C Varty

Spennymoor Town Council:

Town Councillors N Foster, G Fletcher (Substitute) and D Ranyard

1 Membership of the Joint Committee

Resolved:

That the membership of the Central Durham Crematorium Joint Committee be noted:

Durham County Council: R Adcock-Forster, J Blakey, D Brown,
J Chaplow, J Cosslett, S Quinn, K Robson,
A Simpson, M Stead, C Varty and M Wilson

Spennymoor Town Council: N Foster, C Maddison and D Ranyard.

It was noted that Durham County Council had a vacancy which would be filled in due course.

2 Appointment of Chair

Nominations were sought for the Chair of the Joint Committee for the ensuing year.

Town Councillor N Foster was proposed for the position of Chair to the Joint Committee for the ensuing year. No further proposals were made.

Resolved:

That Town Councillor N Foster be appointed Chair of the Joint Committee for the ensuing year.

COUNCILLOR N Foster in the Chair

3 Appointment of Vice-Chair

The Chair sought nominations for Vice-Chair to the Joint Committee for the ensuing year.

Councillor S Quinn was proposed for the position of Vice-Chair to the Joint Committee for the ensuing year. No further proposals were made.

Resolved:

That Councillor S Quinn be appointed Vice-Chair of the Joint Committee for the ensuing year.

4 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from R Adcock-Forster, J Chaplow, C Maddison, S Quinn, A Simpson and M Wilson.

5 Substitute Members

Town Councillor G Fletcher was substitute for Town Councillor C Maddison.

6 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 April 2024 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

7 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

8 Changes to the Constitution/Terms of Reference

The Joint Committee considered a report of the Clerk which provided details of a review of the Central Durham Crematorium Joint Committee's Constitution, in accordance with the Annual Governance Statement requirements (for copy see file of minutes).

The Legal Manager and Deputy Monitoring Officer advised that the review had not highlighted any requirements for change to the current constitution and therefore reaffirmed continuation of the existing Constitution and governance arrangements set out in Appendix 2 of the report.

Resolved:

That following a review in accordance with Annual Governance Statement requirements, the Constitution as set out in Appendix 2 of the report be reapproved.

9 Forward Plan 2024/25

The Joint Committee received a report of the Corporate Director of Resources and Treasurer to the Joint Committee which set out a suggested forward plan of meetings of the Joint Committee for the forthcoming year 2024/25 (for copy see file of minutes).

Resolved:

That the report and forward plan of meetings be noted and approved.

10 Quarterly Performance and Operational Report - 1 April to 31 May 2024

The Joint Committee received 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).

The Finance Manager, Neighbourhoods and Climate Change reported that 405 cremations were undertaken during the period 1 April to 31 May 2024 which was an increase in 30 cremations compared to the comparable period last year. It was noted that 118 families were from Durham, 14 from Spennymoor and 273 families were from other areas.

The number and value of memorial plaques sold were 47 / £11,891 compared to 41 / £10,347 in the comparable period last year, an increase of 6 memorials sold and £1,544 in terms of income.

As in previous years, arrangements would be made for representation at the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management ICCM Learning Convention and Exhibition which was being held at Chesford Grange Hotel, near Kenilworth from the 23-25 September 2024. It was proposed that the Bereavement Services Manager and the Chair attend the conference to represent the Central Durham Crematorium Joint Committee.

Durham Crematorium had been part of the Durham Heritage Open Weekend for several years and had agreed to participate this year which would be held from 12-15 September 2024.

With regards to the recycling of metals scheme, the nominated charities for 2024 were the Bradley Lowery Foundation and the British Heart Foundation.

Members were advised at the last meeting, that they were in the process of implementing a new software system, PlotBox, to replace the existing BACAS system which would go live in October 2024. Durham County were currently in the process of transferring them to Oracle which would provide improvements in the way the crematorium operate, standardise reporting and increase efficiency.

Following the implementation of Plotbox, it was recommended that the Crematorium also move from using Sage as their financial system to using the Oracle system. Plotbox could then be fully integrated with Oracle for the crematorium, as well as the Burials Team, who already used the system. A 2025/26 implementation date for the Oracle system would allow time for bedding in the Plotbox system and reduce pressure on crematorium staff. A progress update would be provided at a future meeting.

Responding to a query regarding financial implication in relation to the integration of the Oracle system, the Finance Manager, Neighbourhoods and Climate Change advised that any costs would be absorbed by the existing system, therefore there would be no additional costs.

Resolved:

- i) That the current performance of the crematorium be noted;
- ii) That attendance at the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management ICCM Learning Convention and Exhibition 2024 be noted;
- iii) That the date of the Heritage Open Weekend be noted;
- iv) That the distribution of recycling income and subsequent charity nominations be noted;
- v) That the financial integration of the Crematorium onto Durham County Council's Oracle software system in 2025/26 be approved.

11 Annual Governance Statement 2023/24

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 provided details of the Annual Governance Statement (AGS) for the year April 2023 to March 2024 (for copy see file of minutes).

Resolved:

- (i) That the content of the 2023/24 Annual Governance Statement be noted;
- (ii) That the Chair and Treasurer approve and sign the 2023/24 Annual Governance Statement as part of the consideration of the Joint Committees Annual Governance and Accountability Return for the financial year ended 31 March 2024.

12 Revenue Outturn and Joint Committees Annual Return for the Financial Year Ended 31 March 2024

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 sought approval of the Joint Committees Annual Return for Central Durham Crematorium Joint Committee for the financial year ended 31 March 2024. The report also included details of the final outturn position against the approved budgets for 2023/24 (for copy see file of minutes).

Resolved:

- (i) That the revenue outturn position as at 31 March 2024, including the year end position with regards to the reserves and balances of the Joint Committee be noted;
- (ii) That the Annual Governance Statement 2023/24 of the Joint Committees Annual Governance and Accountability Return for the financial year ended 31 March 2024 be approved;
- (iii) That the Accounting Statements 2023/24 of the Joint Committees Annual Governance and Accountability Return for the financial year ended 31 March 2024 be approved;
- (iv) That the Chair, Clerk and Treasurer sign the Joint Committees Annual Governance and Accountability Return for the financial year ended 31 March 2024.

13 Fees and Charges 2024/25 - Mid-Year Increase

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 set out details of a proposed mid-year increase in cremation fees for the Central Durham Crematorium for 2024/25, as agreed at the January 2024 meeting of the Joint Committee (for copy see file of minutes).

The Finance Manager, Neighbourhoods and Climate Change advised that benchmarking with other crematoriums across the region showed that 2024/25 cremation fees at Durham were £162 lower than the average for the region and this gap had widening over recent years. Fee increases were usually only implemented in April, however, a mid-year fee increase of £80 effective from 1 October 2024 was proposed to help prevent the gap from widening further. It was noted that Durham fees would still be £82 below the regional average.

The charges for direct cremations and discounted earlier slots to allow for choice and help families with cheaper options were proposed to remain the same for 2024/25.

The Joint Committee discussed the proposed increase and the varying levels of options available. It was felt that the proposed increase of £80 (9.70%) would put too much pressure on families that were already struggling in some of the most deprived areas of the country.

The Finance Manager, Neighbourhoods and Climate Change reiterated that there would be no increase to the discounted earlier slot and direct cremations which would help families and allow for choice. He added that the increase would help to reduce the gap from widening as other facilities would be increasing charges further and it would provide stability for the crematorium and help alleviate financial pressures with regards to new initiatives.

The Chair advised that the gap had almost doubled in recent years which was almost 20% behind the regional average. He added that Durham Crematorium provided a good quality service and value for money, however was concerned that the low cost could be perceived as providing a substandard service if fees fall too far behind other facilities. The percentage of cremation costs in terms of the overall funeral cost and the importance of determining the right balance was noted.

Councillors proposed that the increase be reduced to £50 (6.06%) which was agreed by the Joint Committee.

Resolved:

- i) That an increase of £50 per cremation from £825 to £875 (inclusive of £30 medical referee fee) be approved;
- ii) That off peak slots (£715) and direct cremations (£660 attended and £520 unattended) remain the same for 2024/25 to support choice and help with overall funeral costs;
- iii) That the fee increase be reflected in the forecast of outturn for Durham Crematorium which would be reported to the September 2024 meeting of the Joint Committee;
- iv) That plans for the use of the additional income be considered at the September 2024 meeting, alongside the Budget Strategy report which was supported by the SAMP (Service Asset Management Plan).

14 Any Other Business

Retirement of Durham Crematorium Technical Assistant

It was reported that L Lawton, Durham Crematorium Technical Assistant would retire in August 2024 after 19 years of service. The Joint Committee formally recorded their thanks and appreciation for her dedicated service during very challenging times and wished her well for the future.