

## **DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL**

### **CENTRAL DURHAM CREMATORIUM JOINT COMMITTEE**

At a Meeting of **Central Durham Crematorium Joint Committee** held in **Committee Room 1A , County Hall, Durham** on **Thursday 26 September 2024** at **2.00 pm**

**Present:**

**Councillor N Foster (Chair)**

**Durham County Council:**

Councillors S Quinn (Vice-Chair), R Adcock-Forster, J Blakey, D Brown, C Varty and M Wilson

**Spennymoor Town Council:**

Town Councillors C Maddison and D Ranyard

#### **1 Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from J Chaplow, K Robson, A Simpson and M Stead.

#### **2 Substitute Members**

There were no substitute Members.

#### **3 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 28 June 2024 were confirmed 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 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 presented the External Auditors (Mazars LLP) Annual Review of the Joint Committees

Return for the financial year ended 31 March 2024 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Finance Manager advised that the audit had been completed and no material weaknesses had been highlighted with regards to the Joint Committee's system of internal controls and accounting statements and no exceptions to the Return had been reported.

**Resolved:**

That the Joint Committees Annual Return for the year ended 31 March 2024 including the External Report 2023/24 Certificate (attached at Appendix 2) be approved.

## **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).

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar reported that 539 cremations were undertaken during the period 1 June to 31 August 2024 which was a decrease in 49 cremations compared to the comparable period last year. It was noted that 148 families were from Durham, 18 from Spennymoor and 373 families were from other areas.

The number and value of memorial plaques sold were 70 / £16,338 compared to 69 / £17,471 in the comparable period last year, an increase of 1 memorial sold a decrease of £1,133 in terms of income.

With regards to operational matters, a member of staff had indicated that they wished to undertake the ICCM Diploma in Cemetery and Crematorium Management with a total cost of £4,380.

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar was pleased to announce that Durham Crematorium had successfully obtained the Green Flag Award for the thirteenth year running, which was testament to the dedication of crematorium staff and comes on top of the Gold Star Status award in the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management Accreditation.

The Federation of Burial and Cremation Authorities had recently carried out a crematorium compliance visit. The report was attached at Appendix 3 for Members information.

Referring to the Service Asset Management Plan, the Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar advised that the plan had been reviewed and updated to provide further direction and highlighted future budget pressures.

It was noted that £244,000 had been estimated for Priority 1 essential works for 2025/26 and would need to be considered as part of the budget setting process for next year. Priority 2 works which would need to feature in 2026/27 budget plans had been estimated at £2,535,400 and Priority 3 works which would fall beyond the next two years had been estimated at £93,000. Longer term works had been costed at £407,400.

Town Councillor Ranyard commented that it was good for employees to improve qualifications and enhance their role within the organisation. He asked if there were any stipulations in terms of a set period for employees to remain with the authority. He advised that he would be happy to approve the request providing there was a stipulation to say that the cost of the qualification would have to be paid back if the employee were to leave the authority within a set period of time.

Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar explained that the first three modules had to be completed within the first two years and the full diploma would have to be completed within five years. He advised that he would discuss the issue with Human Resources and provide something in writing.

**Resolved:**

- (i) That the current performance of the crematorium be noted;
- (ii) That the current position with regards to the member of staff wanting to enrol in the diploma be noted and the funding of the diploma be agreed with a stipulation that costs of the qualification be paid back if the employee were to leave the authority within a set period of time;
- (iii) That the updated position with regards to the Green Flag scheme be noted;
- (iv) That the FBCA compliance report be noted;
- (v) That the content of the Service Asset Management Plan attached at Appendix 4 be agreed, which will be factored into budget planning in 2025/26 and beyond.

**7 Financial Monitoring Report - Position at 31/08/24, with Projected Revenue and Capital Outturn at 31/03/25**

The Joint Committee received a joint report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and the Corporate Director Resources and Treasurer to the Joint Committee that provided details of the provisional outturn position for 2024/25 and the projected level of reserves and balances at 31 March 2025 (for copy see file of minutes).

**Resolved:**

That the April to August 2024 financial monitoring report and associated forecast revenue and capital outturn positions at 31 March 2025, including the projected year end position with regards to the reserves and balances of the Joint Committee be noted.

**8 Risk Register Update 2024/25 Review 1**

The Joint Committee received a joint report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and the Corporate Director Resources and Treasurer to the Joint Committee that provided details of the outcome of the half-yearly risk review in August 2024 (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 2024/25 (for copy see file of minutes).

**Resolved:**

That the Internal Audit Charter set out at Appendix 2 of the report be approved.

**10 Annual Review of the System of Internal Audit**

The Joint Committee received a joint report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and the Corporate Director Resources and Treasurer to the Joint Committee that provided details 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 2024 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Principal Auditor reported that there was a requirement for the service to be externally assessed once every five years. The latest external assessment, carried out by the Chartered Institute of Public and Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), concluded that 'Durham County Council's Internal Audit Service's self-assessment was accurate and as such conclude that they FULLY CONFORM to the requirements of the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards and the CIPFA Local Government Application Note'.

Internal Audit then completed a further self-assessment, for 2023/24, against the key elements of the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS) and CIPFA Local Government Application Note, which demonstrated that the Section continues to conform to the Code's requirements and was based on the revised PSIAS brought into effect on 01 April 2017.

**Resolved:**

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

## **11 Budget Strategy Report**

The Joint Committee considered a joint report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and the Corporate Director Resources and Treasurer which outlined issues to consider as part of the Medium Term Financial planning for the Central Durham Crematorium. The report set out proposals to increase the fees and charges from 2025/26 together with details of the budget planning assumptions over the coming three years. The views of the Joint Committee were sought in advance of the 2025/26 budget setting process (for copy see file of minutes).

In response to a query from Councillor Varty regarding fee increases of neighbouring authorities, the Finance Manager advised that fees would not be available until April 2025, however the report to be considered in January 2025 would provide neighbouring authorities current figures at the time.

The Chair added that it was important that fees do not fall too far behind other facilities and highlighted the need to monitor vacant slots in comparison to neighbouring authorities.

Town Councillor C Maddison commented that the report was excellent and provided clarity. He noted that Durham Crematorium fees were £275 below the current charges at the nearest facility at Coundon which would provide more business. He added that the shared distribution had increased over the years which was very positive for Spennymoor.

Town Councillor Ranyard felt that the fee increase was reasonable and Durham Crematorium fees would remain among the lowest of other neighbouring facilities in the region. He noted that fees were harmonised with Mountsett Crematorium and queried the implications if both Mountsett and Central Durham Crematorium Joint Committee did not agree the same increase. The Finance Manager explained that in terms of procedure, there was nothing to say that fees had to be same, however it was in the interests of both Durham and Mountsett Crematoriums that fees remained harmonised.

**Resolved:**

- (i) That the contents of the report be noted;
- (ii) That the proposed increase in the fees and charges, as identified in the report be approved;
- (iii) That a review of the budget strategy in September 2025 be agreed in preparation for the 2026/27 budget setting year.

**12. Any Other Business**

The Chair agreed that in order to keep Members informed, the next items of business could be reported.

**Crematorium Seating**

Councillor M Wilson commented that she had recently attended a service at the crematorium and noted there was a lot of people unable to be seated with some elderly people standing at the back and asked that more long form seating be considered. The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar advised that seating had been increased as much as possible, however he would look at the issue further.

**Crematorium Conference**

The Chair provided the Joint Committee with an update following his attendance at the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management (ICCM) Learning Convention and Exhibition Conference on the 23-25 September 2024.