

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 **Wednesday 29 January 2025** at **2.00 pm**

Present:

Councillor N Foster (Chair)

Durham County Council:

Councillors S Quinn (Vice-Chair), R Adcock-Forster, D Brown, K Robson, A Simpson, M Stead, C Varty and M Wilson

Spennymoor Town Council:

Town Councillors C Maddison

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Blakey, J Chaplow and D Ranyard.

2 Substitute Members

There were no substitute Members.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 September 2024 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Quarterly 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 694 cremations were undertaken during the period 1 September to 31 December 2024, which was 99 cremations less compared to the comparable period last year. It was noted that 193 families were from Durham, 28 from Spennymoor and 445 families were from other areas.

With regards to the reduction of cremation numbers, a consultation with Funeral directors and Registrars had been undertaken which noted a decrease in cremations due to the recent introduction of the medical examiners, leading to delays in information being obtained from GPs following deaths in the community. Another reason for the drop in cremation numbers was the increase in direct cremations where families were not choosing to be carried out at Durham's facilities.

The number of cremations allowed for in the 2024/25 budget was 2,200, however this would be increased to 2,300 for the 2025/26 budget. The current projected number of cremations for 2024/25 was 2,333, which is 100 less than the 2,433 which were delivered in 2023/24.

The number and value of memorial plaques sold were 67 / £18,997 compared to 92 / £26,614 in the comparable period last year, a decrease of 25 memorials sold and £7,617 in terms of income generated.

With regards to staffing, one casual relief crematorium attendants had now left the Authority, therefore 2 casual reliefs had been appointed to cover both crematoriums.

An application for the Green Flag Award would be submitted for the 2025 award and progress would be reported back to a future meeting. A management plan to maintain the required standards would be updated and any required works will be covered by existing budgets.

Collections in the second round of Metals nominations for 2024/25 had resulted in another round of nominations being made available, therefore two charities were nominated, the Bradley Lowery Foundation and the British Heart Foundation. A payment of £5,800 had been made to each charity. A second round of nominations had now opened for 2025, therefore, If You Care Share Foundation and St Cuthbert's Hospice had been nominated with a closing date of 31 January 2025.

St. Cuthbert's Hospice had requested that they be allowed to continue to provide a Christmas tree again in 2025. The Hospice would supply the tree and decorations at no cost to the Central Durham Crematorium Joint Committee. No requests had been received from any other organisations.

In response to a query from Councillor Varty regarding a shelter from the wind and rain, the Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar advised that new canopies had been installed to protect against the rain. A shelter had been built in the past, however visitors were using this as a smoking shelter therefore it had to be removed due to the number of complaints.

The Chair added that in terms of the building, the site was small and unfortunately when services were in progress, there was no spare capacity for a waiting area inside for people attending the next service. He commented that this could be considered when discussing the budget for next year.

Following a query from Councillor Brown, it was explained that 'If You Care, Share' was a recognised charity originally set up by a family affected by suicide which focused on mental health and suicide prevention.

Resolved:

- i) That the report be noted;
- ii) That St. Cuthbert's provide a Christmas tree for 2025 be agreed.

6 Financial Monitoring Report - Position at 31/12/24, 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 of 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 December 2024 financial monitoring report and associated provisional revenue and capital outturn positions at 31 March 2025, including the projected year position with regards to the reserves and balances of the Joint Committee be noted.

7 Provision of Support Services 2025/26

The Joint Committee considered a joint report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and the Corporate Director of Resources and Treasure to the Joint Committee that sought approval of the proposed Service Level Agreement (SLA) for Support Service provision by Durham County Council to the Central Durham Crematorium Joint Committee for the period April 2025 to March 2026 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Finance Manager, Neighbourhoods and Climate Change advised that the proposed charge for 2025/26 was £41,900 and £7,468 for the Internal Audit and Risk Management SLA that was agreed for a 3 year period by the Joint Committee in September 2022. This represented a 7.5% increase on the recharges levied in 2024/25 and took into account the impact of pay and price inflation and now also included time spent by the Neighbourhood Protection Manager on strategic input into reports and attendance at Joint Committee Meetings.

Resolved:

That the Service Level Agreement attached at Appendix 2 for the year 2025/26 be approved.

8 Fees and Charges 2025/26

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 set out details of the proposed fees and charges for the Central Durham Crematorium for 2025/26 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Finance Manager, Neighbourhoods and Climate Change presented the report and highlighted the inflationary and cost pressures facing the crematorium, along with the views of the Bereavement Services Manager with regards to the local market, customer impact from any proposed increase and benchmarking data on the charges levied in other neighbouring facilities, plus the fact that the crematorium had recently undertaken major redevelopments were key factors in considering any increases for 2025/26.

The Finance Manager, Neighbourhoods and Climate Change proposed to increase the fees and charges for 2025/26 by £50 (5.71%) per cremation from £875 to £925 (inclusive of £30 medical referee fee) which was £49 below the average charges currently levied across the region. Once other crematoria apply their fee increases for next year, the proposed 2025/26 cremation fee of £925 would remain the lowest of other neighbouring facilities in the region. It was also suggested that a mid-year increase in fees and charges be considered, due to the widening gap between fees at Durham Crematorium and the average cremation fee across the region.

The Chair advised that the two principles would be maintained; to keep Central Durham Crematorium and Mountsett Crematorium fees and charges harmonised, and to have the lowest fees in the region. He added that the proposal for a mid-year increase would be for the new Joint Committee to consider later in the year. With regards to direct cremations, he commented that the perception was that direct cremations were a cheaper option,

however in reality there was very little difference and suggested it may be worthwhile to publish the actual cost difference.

Resolved:

- i) That the proposed fees and charges at Appendix 2 effective from 1 April 2025, which sought to increase cremation charges by £50 (5.71%) per cremation from £875 to £925 (inclusive of £30 medical referee fee) be approved and be incorporated into the 2025/26 budget;
- ii) That a mid-year increase in fees and charges be considered, due to the widening gap between fees at Durham Crematorium and the average cremation fee across the region.

9 2025/26 Revenue and Capital Budgets

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 set out proposals with regards to the 2025/26 revenue and capital budgets for the Central Durham Crematorium (for copy see file of minutes).

The Finance Manager, Neighbourhoods and Climate Change presented the proposed 2025/26 revenue budget, together with the forecast outturn position with regards to the reserves as at 31 March 2026 and highlighted the main changes from the 2024/25 budget which included an increase in the income budget by £228,844 due to the cremation fee increase and an increase in the projected number of cremations. There were other minor changes that effected other expenditure budgets such as pay awards, software licenses and the premises budget had decreased by £91,362 due to reduction of planned works associated with the Service Asset Management Plan. He further highlighted that the surplus redistribution to the constituent authorities remained the same as previous years and the estimated total reserves for Central Durham Crematorium at 31 March 2026 would be £2,962,828.

Councillor Brown referred to the 2024/25 and 2025/26 pay awards and queried whether the increase in National Insurance had been taken into account. The Finance Manager, Neighbourhoods and Climate Change confirmed that the increase in National Insurance had been incorporated into the budget.

Responding to a query from Town Councillor Maddison regarding advanced payments to undertakers for funeral services, the Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar clarified that there was no provision for undertakers to pay for cremation services in advance and they would be charged the current fee on the day.

Resolved:

- i) That the revenue and capital budget proposals contained within the report (as set out at Appendix 2) be approved;
- ii) That the forecast level of reserves at 31 March 2026 (set out at Appendix 2) be noted.

10 Any Other Business

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

Informal Briefing Session – Resomation

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar advised that Mountsett Joint Crematorium Committee suggested an informal remote briefing session on Resomation; water-based cremations. Further information would be provided when arrangements had been confirmed.