

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Mountsett Crematorium Joint Committee** held in Chapel - Mountsett Crematorium, Dipton on **Tuesday 28 January 2025 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor J Charlton (Chair)

Durham County Council

Councillors V Andrews, C Hampson, P Heaviside and K Rooney

Gateshead Council:

Councillors F Geddes and M Ord

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors G Binney (Durham County Council), D Oliver (Durham County Council), M Walton (Durham County Council), K Dodds (Gateshead Council), A Geddes (Gateshead Council), S Green (Gateshead Council) and M Hall (Gateshead Council).

2 Substitute Members

There were no substitutes.

3 Minutes of the Meeting held on 27 September 2024

The minutes of the meeting held on 27 September 2024 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Performance and Operational Report - Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar

The Joint Committee received a report of the Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar that provided Members of the Mountsett Crematorium Joint Committee with an update relating to performance and other operational matters (for copy see file of Minutes)

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar advised that from 1 September 2024 to 31 December 2024 there had been 405 cremations undertaken compared to 422 in the comparable period last year with a decrease of 37 cremations during this period. In addition, there were 35 memorials sold compared to 44 in the same period with a decrease of 9 with a value of £398. He noted that one Casual Relief Crematorium attendant had now left the role, and 2 Casual Relief Crematorium Attendant's had been appointed to cover both crematoriums. He confirmed that an application for the Green Flag 2024 award had been successful, and an application would be submitted for the 2025 award. He stated that the recycling metals scheme had raised £5,800 for 2 charities – Daft as A Brush and You Care Share Foundation. A second round of charity nominations 2025 was due to close on 31 January 2025 with Northeast Air Ambulance and Willowburn Hospice nominated.

The Chair noted that a Casual Relief Crematorium attendant had left the role and another appointed, how was this justified, particularly in light of falling cremation numbers which were a concern? The Bereavement Services Manager clarified that the vacancy was for a permanent casual attendant that would work across both sites. The falling number of cremations could be related to more resident using private companies for direct cremation services. The Chair highlighted that the crematorium was a local service that offered direct cremations which resident may not be aware of this service being available. Communication of direct crematorium could be shared through Members and also via social media in a sensitive manner. The Bereavement Services Manager added that the service did not have a Facebook page however it was being looked into as Bereavement Services in other Authorities did utilise social media.

Resolved:

- i) Note the current performance of the crematorium.
- ii) Note the current staffing issues.
- iii) Note the continued success with regards to the Green Flag Award.
- iiii) Note the updated position with regards to the recycling of metals scheme

6 Financial Monitoring Report - Position at 31/12/24, with Projected 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 Members of the Mountsett Crematorium Joint Committee with details of with details of the projected outturn position for 2024/25 and the projected level of reserves and balances at 31 March 2025 (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Finance Manager Neighbourhoods and Climate Change gave highlights of the financial report. He noted that the projected revenue outturn was a surplus of £369,574 against a budgeted surplus of £388,983 which was £19,409 less than the budgeted position. There was an overspend for employees due to levels of overtime being higher than expected and the national pay settlement for 2024/25. There was also an underspend on SAMP works relating to energy improvement works that had been delayed from last year.

Resolved:

That the April to December 2024 financial monitoring report and associated provisional outturn position as 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 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 outlined the proposed Service Level Agreement (SLA) for Support Service provision by Durham County Council to the Mountsett Crematorium Joint Committee for the period April 2025 to March 2026 (for copy see file of Minutes)

The Finance Manager Neighbourhoods and Climate Change detailed the proposed SLA for the next financial year that outlined the support services from Durham County Council. These included Management Services, Financial Services, Administration Services (including Committee support), Payroll Services and Human Resources Services. The proposed charge was £28,500 which was a 8% increase for the charge on this time last year that had considered the impact of the pay and inflation increases.

Resolved:

That the Service Level Agreement attached at Appendix 2 (including the relevant schedule) for the year 2025/26 be approved.

8 Fees and Charges 2025/26

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 set out details of the proposed fees and charges for the Mountsett Crematorium for 2025/26 (for copy see file of Minutes)

The Finance Manager Neighbourhoods and Climate Change highlighted the proposal to increase the fees and charges for the cremations for 2025/26 by £50

which was a 5.71% rise. The price would increase from £875 to £925 which was still the lowest price in comparison to other Local Authorities except Durham which was the same.

Councillor Andrews noted that the increase brought crematorium fees closer to the average cremation fees across the region and ensured it did not fall too far behind. The Finance Manager Neighbourhoods and Climate Change responded that the cost of a direct cremation would remain unchanged.

Councillor F Geddes added that the costs had increase twice in 2024/25 with a midyear increase. The Finance Manager Neighbourhoods and Climate Change replied that it would be a matter for the Committee to decide if a further midyear increase would be considered in 2025/26.

Resolved:

- i) It is recommended that members of the Joint Committee note and approve the proposed fees and charges at Appendix 2 effective from 1 April 2025, which seeks to increase cremation charges by £50 (5.71%) per cremation from £875 to £925 (inclusive of £30 medical referee fee).
- ii) It is recommended that members of the Joint Committee give consideration to a mid-year increase in fees and charges, due to the widening gap between fees at Mountsett Crematorium and the average cremation fee across the region.
- iii) It is recommended that the proposed fees and charges are incorporated into the 2025/26 budget.

9 Revenue Budget 2025/26

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 set out for Members' consideration proposals with regards to the 2025/26 revenue budgets for the Mountsett Crematorium (for copy see file of Minutes)

The Finance Manager Neighbourhoods and Climate Change highlighted the proposed revenue budgets along with the forecast outturn position as at 31 March 2026. There had been minor changes that included the pay awards and planned maintenance costs. The income had increased by £21,820 due to the estimated increase in the number of cremations and the increased amount of income from plaques, webcasting and visual tributes. It was estimated that the total reserves would be £1,014,959 as at 31 March 2026.

The Chair referred to future planned maintenance costs related to the cremator and the expected costs. The Bereavement Service Manager added that the current

cremator was installed 3 years ago and had a life span of 20 years subject to on-going maintenance and repairs.

Resolved:

That the budget proposals contained within the report (as set out at Appendix 2) and that the forecast level of reserves and balances at 31 March 2026 (also set out at Appendix 2) be noted and approved.