

Minutes



Greater Gwent Cremation Joint Committee

Date: 31 January 2024

Time: 12.00 pm

Present: Councillors Y Forsey (Chair), (Newport CC), L Lacey (Newport CC), Lane (Monmouthshire CBC), Tudor (Monmouthshire CBC), S Evans (Torfaen CBC), J Taylor (Caerphilly CBC) and Cross (Blaenau Gwent CBC)

1 Apologies for Absence

Councillors Simmonds (Caerphilly CBC) and Leadbeater Blaenau Gwent (CBC).

2 Declarations of Interest

None received.

3 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting of 18 October 2023 were accepted as a true record.

4 Review of Fees and Budget Proposals 2024

The Finance Business Partner - Systems with Finance IT Project responsibilities presented the item to the Committee.

Members were being asked to agree a distribution of £250,000 for the 2023/2024 financial year, to use of reserves to repay the outstanding loan on the mercury abatement equipment loan in this financial year, agree a 10% fee increase and to approve the budget for 2024/2025 period. Any fee increased decided by the Committee would be implemented following the 1 April.

Planned surplus £431,585 with no fee increase, £486,461 with a 4% increase and £568,775 with a 10% increase.

The financial summary detailed in the report showed a £270,000 outturn forecast less than budgeted.

The report noted there had been reduced usage of the cremation service due to works due to be completed by the end of the financial year.

Agency support had been required due to vacancies within the team, It was noted that there was a projected overspend of 65k however recruitment is underway.

The budget was increase due to increased energy costs however this was altered as the information had been fully realised.

A one-off payment for the mercury abatement equipment loan was being requested.

The officer Recommendation was to approve a 250k distribution cost.

The £845 fee is lower than surrounding comparable services.

Service time was reduced however this was expected to increase once works had been completed.

A fee of 10% on adult cremations would see an increase of £85 which would bring the service in line with competitors.

Costs increased due to inflation however energy costs have reduced by around 20%.

£100,000 would be contributed to the reserves.

If the Committee approved the cremator repair, energy and maintenance costs should see a reduction.

The officer's recommendation was that the Committee pay for the mercury loan in the 2024/2025 financial year.

Whilst the officer highlighted that a 4% fee increase would still be lower than competitors, the officer's recommendation was a fee increase of 10% which would match the average of competitors. It was noted however that a 30% increase would bring them in line with the private crematorium costs.

Questions raised by Committee Members:

- The Committee noted the £56,000 savings in the budget in relation to the Mercury abatement loan and queried why the officer felt it was better to pay it off in one sum. The Finance Business Partner - Systems with Finance IT Project responsibilities highlighted that this would reduce a key expenditure in the budget meaning if there was any capital financing the financial position would be in a more advantages position.
- The Committee questioned the change in the cremation numbers. The Finance Business Partner - Systems with Finance IT Project responsibilities noted there were less services due to the increase in time per service and also highlighted some early time slots aren't often taken up.
- The Committee questioned why income is listed as negative in the report on page 18 Appendix 3. The Finance Business Partner - Systems with Finance IT Project responsibilities noted that the report is laid out this way even though it is surplus.
- The Committee questioned the changes in transportation costs. The Finance Business Partner - Systems with Finance IT Project responsibilities noted there was a decrease in transport cost, so this reduction was reflected in the budget.
- M. Ryan (Funeral Director) sought clarification on the increase in fees from £845 to £930 recommended by the officer. The Finance Business Partner - Systems with Finance IT Project responsibilities confirmed that was correct.

Resolution:

The Committee agreed with the officer's recommendation and approved the budget for the following financial year.

The Service Manager Environment and Leisure highlighted that the questions asked at Committee on 18 October 2023 had been answered and requested confirmation that the Committee was satisfied going forward with the reports proposal regarding the installing solar panels.

Questions raised by Committee Members:

The Committee asked if the roofs were strong enough for solar panels. The Service Manager Environment and Leisure noted this was covered in the previous meeting. The Service Manager Environment and Leisure highlighted they would double check this information.

6 **Facilities Management**

Due to technical issues, the Newport Norse representative was unable to reconnect to the meeting and therefore answered the Committees questions via email.

The Head of Law and Standards read out the response from Norse, highlighting General issues such as lighting and fitting replacements as well as the impact of the numerous named storms as well as the time constraints as work was only completed on the weekends.

Norse would be dealing with the issues pertaining to the roofing contractors.

The cost to the damaged waiting area would be dealt with, without the crematorium incurring costs.

The roof was expected to be completed on the next two dry weekends.

Questions raised by Committee Members:

The Committee asked when the current works was expected to be finished.

K. Donovan (Newport Norse) explained the solar panel company has to do a structural integrity report before any works are able to be completed.

7 **Funeral Director's Report**

This was a verbal report provided by M Ryan (Funeral Director), who noted the requirement for the charge of £92.00 for the removal and return of cremated remains be revised. The Service Manager Environment and Leisure noted this was being looked into as it was also raised by another funeral director.

M Ryan (Funeral Director) queried whether there had been any update on the new staffing roles. The Finance Business Partner - Systems with Finance IT Project responsibilities noted there hasn't been any staffing changes, any information in relation to this question could be brought to the next Committee. The Service Manager Environment and Leisure detailed that the Team Leader role for Bereavement Services and Cremation Team Leader had been merged however this position had yet to be filled, The Service Manager Environment and Leisure further explained that there was a manager role and deputy role within the Bereavement Team and Cremator Team. The Service Manager Environment and Leisure explained the team leader role was currently being advertised.

M Ryan (Funeral Director) questioned whether the issue of turning the cremators into electric/hybrid machines was being considered. The Service Manager Environment and

Leisure stated this was not currently being considered however the Committee would be informed should this happen in the future.

8 **Manager's Report**

The item was presented by The Service Manager Environment and Leisure on behalf of the Interim Manager James Webster.

Memorial sales increased in the last quarter while crematorium services had been lower than last 10 years with services having been reduced due to ongoing works.

There were several staff changes such as a new cremator operator and another new staff support member.

Managerial services were being provided by an external company.

A flood over the winter occurred which led to the crematorium being closed this was escalated with Norse and would be rectified.

In January services were carried out on the cremators and further work had been booked.

Questions Raised by Committee Members

- The Committee questioned whether a site visit to the Crematorium would be useful. M. Ryan (Funeral Director) noted this would be good idea.
- The Service Manager Environment & Leisure noted that in the morning between 9-10am would be the best time to accommodate the site visit.

Resolution:

The Committee noted their desire to take part in a site visit of the Crematorium in order to better understand the workings.

9 **Part 2 Exempt or Confidential Items**

Part 2: Not for publication as consideration of the report involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in schedule 12 A of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended) and the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosure.

10 **Cremator Replacement Proposal**

The Committee agreed with the Officers recommendation in principle, subject to further details being confirmed.