

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE COYCHURCH CREMATORIUM JOINT COMMITTEE HELD REMOTELY VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON FRIDAY, 5 MARCH 2021 AT 14:00

Present

Councillor RE Young – Chairperson

G Cox
AA Pucella

S Edwards
JC Spanswick

G Hopkins
R Turner

G John
JE Williams

Apologies for Absence

E Venables

Officers:

Joanna Hamilton	Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar
Jessica Mclellan	Democratic Services Assistant
Michael Pitman	Democratic Services Officer - Committees
Zak Shell	Head of Neighbourhood Services
Eilish Thomas	Finance Manager - Financial Control & Closing

81. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

82. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of a meeting of the Coychurch Crematorium Joint Committee dated 4 September 2020 be approved as a true and accurate record.

83. EXTERNAL LIGHTING

The Head of Neighbourhood Services expressed his gratitude to the crematoria team who have been going through an unprecedentedly difficult time recently due to the Covid-19 pandemic. He also advised that as a priority working group all crematoria staff have received their first vaccination against Covid-19.

The Head of Neighbourhood services then presented a report on the proposed installation of new external lighting to the grounds at Coychurch Crematorium which was approved by the Joint Committee in March 2019 and to seek approval to award the tender in the sum of £182,646.70 to South Wales Contractors Ltd and for the Joint Committee to delegate to the Clerk and Technical Officer, the power to approve the final detailed terms of the contract in consultation with the relevant Chief Officers, Legal, HR, Regulatory Services, etc. and to finalise any necessary detail.

He advised that the lighting would improve the welcoming aspect to the Crematorium, assisting with safety and security within the site and potentially allow for additional service times during shorter daylight hours in winter.

The scheme had been budgeted at a cost of £300,000 and included all design works, planning applications, etc. with an actual construction budget of £250,000. The Head of Neighbourhood Services confirmed that the project was delayed last year due to the pandemic.

By way of update, the Head of Neighbourhood Services confirmed that the project went out to tender in November 2020. The Table at section 4 of the report showed the returned tender sums and technical quality points that each of the tenders were assessed against. There was a bid by South Wales Contractors Ltd which came in with both the highest quality score and best value tender sum of £182,646.70 which is below and within the budgeted construction amount of £250,000.

The Head of Neighbourhood Services confirmed that efforts had also been made to ensure that the new lighting would complement the existing surroundings and be in-keeping with the aesthetics and architecture at the Crematorium.

A Member asked if South Wales Contractors Ltd had been used before and whether the Officer was satisfied that works would be to a high standard.

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar advised that South Wales Contractors Ltd were quite a large firm, well-known in Bridgend and who had done a lot of the works at Coychurch Crematorium previously including the construction of the new extension road, new car parks into the new land, the waiting room extension refurbishments and the toilet refurbishments. She advised that the contractors are used to working on site, understood the delicacies of working on such a site, had always worked outside of service times without causing any issues to the running of the service. It was confirmed that the quality of their work was always of an exceptionally high standard.

A Member asked how often tender bids obtain a perfect score and whether the proposed external lighting would impact on light pollution.

In relation to the quality scoring, the Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar confirmed that three independent Officers scored and each had come up with the same score for South Wales Contractors Ltd independently of each other. She advised that the submission was of an exceptionally high standard and they made their understanding of the site clear. She advised that for the financial aspect, the lowest economic tender receives the highest score.

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar advised that the lighting was only to be used for the very end of the day in the winter months and would be on a timer system; going off just after 5pm when the site closes in the winter. She confirmed that it would not be on during the night and would

only be on during the winter months as required during the working day for lighting and safety purposes. After that period, it would be turned off automatically and would not, therefore, cause any light pollution in the evenings or overnight.

- RESOLVED:** That the Joint Committee:
- a) Approved tender Number 1 from South Wales Contractors Ltd in the sum of £182,646.70 and the award of the Contract to this contractor.
 - b) Delegated to the Clerk and Technical Officer the power to approve the final terms of the Contract in consultation with Bridgend County Borough Council's Chief Officer, Legal, HR and Regulatory Services, and thereafter arrange for the execution of the Contract on behalf of the Joint Committee.

84. CREMATORIUM BUSINESS PLAN AND FEES

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar presented a report, seeking the Joint Committees approval of the Business Plan and expenditure programme for 2021-22, which included a proposed increase in cremation fees.

She advised that the Business Plan is presented annually to the Joint Committee for approval and includes service objectives and proposed maintenance and improvement projects to enhance and maintain the Crematorium grounds and buildings for the forthcoming financial year.

She highlighted that the Service Level Business Plan showed the awards and achievements noted and of particular note, the achievement of the Green Flag Award again in 2020 and that the service remains self-sufficient.

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar advised that there were two temporary Crematorium Technicians employed in May 2020 to assist with resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic.

She highlighted that the report then detailed the business hours, the types of memorialisation provided, the different ways that the Crematorium markets itself and communicates with its service users and the different ways that the Crematorium remained environmentally sustainable.

The Business plan detailed the key achievements of the last 10 years. In 2020, there was the installation of air conditioning in the crematory operational areas and the office and the renewal of the main electrical distribution boards for the site.

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar stated that the report showed the performance indicators for the previous 5 years relating to user satisfaction; the results of which were taken from the service questionnaires which are sent out to the cremation applicants. The target was to achieve 100% overall satisfaction levels rated at 'Good' or 'Excellent' and these remained constant at 100% with the target set for same result in 2021-22.

She confirmed the total cremations in the calendar year 2020 was 1,933; made up of 1,251 from Bridgend, 141 from Vale of Glamorgan and 467 from Rhondda Cynon Taff with 74 non-residents. The agreement with the Princess of Wales Hospital Cremation for the cremation of non-viable foetal remains resulted in an additional 6 communal cremations and 12 individual foetal cremations were arranged directly with families.

The statistical record table for 2019 was included for comparison purposes and showed the total number of cremations for 2019 was 1,625; an increase of 308 cremations in 2020 which demonstrated the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on figures. Analysed statistics from the start of pandemic, from the start of March 2020 until the end of February 2021 when compared to the same period for the previous year 2019-20 showed 1,646 cremations in the previous year compared to 2,056 in the current. This demonstrated that the last 12 months of the pandemic have increased cremation numbers by 410 which is approximately a quarter more deaths than would have been expected.

The Business Plan outlined the service developments and objectives for the period 2021-22 and recapped the replacement of the electrical distribution boards which had been delayed due to staffing changes in the Council's electrical engineering department but was completed in September 2020.

With regard to mercury abatement charges, the Joint Committee was reminded that those crematoria that have abated more than 50% of their cremations can sell the excess mercury abated cremations to those which have abated less than this target and that this is done via CAMEO. Those that have excessively abated, derive an income and those who have not, share the financial burden. By way of background, in 2015/2016, the Crematorium paid £41,000 as a result of burden sharing costs for non-abated cremations and in 2016-17 when the installation of the mercury abatement plant was completed, more than 50% of cremations were abated and an income of £5,950.10 was generated. Similar incomes have been generated for subsequent years and for 2019-20 an income of £5,830 was generated. Confirmation of amount of expected generated income for 2020-21 is awaited. However, the Bereavement and Services Manager noted that she would expect to see a decrease in this income in the future as more crematoria install mercury abatement plants.

She confirmed that the main focus of service objectives in 2021-22 would be:

1. Installation of the Chapel's computerised music and media systems upgrade which was approved at the meeting on 6 March 2020. The pandemic has delayed this project but installation is hoped for 2021-22 financial year and the installation costs are included in the 2021-22 revenue budget.
2. Flower court extension works progressing. All statutory approvals, planning and listed building consent and sustainable drainage and building regulations were received by the end of 2020. The finalising of the design stage has been delayed by the pandemic but the architect has managed to overcome this; he is making a prototype and testing the structural elements of the roof. Procurement is actively progressing and a

further report is to be presented to the Joint Committee to seek final approval for the construction phase of the project at a later meeting. The estimated budget amount is included in the 2021-22 budget.

3. Installation of the external lighting; the report on which the Joint Committee approved earlier in the meeting. Works are due to commence at the start of this new financial year.

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar confirmed that a property contingency is also included in the Crematorium's revenue budget to cover unplanned works, general repair and maintenance. The Joint Committee was reminded that the surplus fund is designed to build up reserves for the future replacement of the cremators and ancillary plant in approximately 12 years' time as well as fund all future service improvements. The Bereavement and Services Manager advised that maintaining the reserve will ensure that the Crematorium has sufficient long-term funds for both plus any unplanned eventualities that could occur.

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar then highlighted the Table which summarised the projected costs for planned works, the Table which provided details for the overall proposed budget for 2021-22 and the Table which summarised the timescales and Officer responsibilities for the projects over the past and current financial year and for the reported new objectives for 2021-22.

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar advised that the Crematorium's cremation charge for the current financial year placed the Crematorium at 272 out of 308 cremation authorities and it was recommended that the cremation charges are increased by inflation from £696.40 to £707.50 based on a general increase of fees of 1% plus the current inflation figure of 0.6% in line with Bridgend Council's protocol. The table in paragraph 4.3 of the report, indicated a comparison on current (2020-21) cremation fees for adjoining crematoria.

A Member noted with concern that the cremation fees charged by the Vale of Glamorgan were £248.60 more than Bridgend on current figures and expressed that funeral directors were not giving families the option about whether to hold cremations in the Vale of Glamorgan or Bridgend and are directed only to the Vale of Glamorgan at a much higher cost. The Member also took the opportunity to express support for the Crematorium team's work during a very difficult period.

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar advised that funeral directors are running private businesses and work in the best interests of families but will also work to how their businesses can run most efficiently. She noted that this will be to turn their fleets around as quickly as possible and may choose to go to a crematorium which is a shorter journey time.

She further advised that prior to the pandemic (before numbers attending funerals was restricted) that it was very noticeable that if there were to be an expected large attendance for a funeral from the Vale of Glamorgan, invariably, Coychurch was selected as the site is able to provide the level of service that is required for a large number of people attending. The premises and grounds are able to accommodate that in Coychurch compared to the crematorium in Vale of

Glamorgan' chapel and ability to accommodate vehicles. She acknowledged that certain funeral directors were not giving families the choice of crematoria causing them to pay more but advised that that is difficult to alter as it was the funeral directors guiding the family and there is only so much that can be done to advise of Bridgend's fees.

A Member praised the Officer and her team for the efficient running of the Crematorium, particularly during the last year. The Member noted that the Officer analysed the figures for the past year and questioned the impact of the figures on the operating of the Crematorium in the next 12-24 months in light of deaths that might have been significantly earlier than they would have been expected without the pandemic.

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar indicated that there would be an impact but that it was noticeable that the number of cremations had been increasing at Coychurch year on year, prior to pandemic. She advised, therefore, that there was not a large reduction in number expected on the other side of the pandemic and the deaths ceased as a result of it. The Officer acknowledged there was likely to be some small impact because some of the very elderly lost lives early through the pandemic. She advised that there are currently no studies in this area but advised that although there is likely to be an impact, the population in Bridgend is increasing and the number of deaths that Coychurch had been receiving year on year had increased that that will perhaps outweigh changes in demographics.

The Head of Neighbourhood Services acknowledged that there have been a number of people who have died early and that this would likely cause a reduction although the detail is not known as no studies completed. He advised that of those that died, they died very suddenly and whenever they would naturally have come to the end of their lives, it would have been at different points over a spread out period. He continued that what happened in a very short period of time in the last year, those individuals would have been people coming to the Crematorium at some point in the future at an unknown time. In summary, it would have been spread out, the impact was therefore likely to be gentle and no significant dips are expected.

A member took the opportunity to thank the Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar and her team for their work acknowledging, in particular, the 10 years of Green Flag awards they have received.

RESOLVED: The Joint Committee:

- a) Approved the Service Level Business Plan 2021- 22.
- b) Approved the cremation fee for 2021-22 at £707.50 and a general increase in all fees of 1.6%.

85. PROGRAMME OF MEETINGS 2021-22

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar presented a report that sought approval from Members for the proposed programme of meetings of the Joint Committee for year 2021-22. She confirmed that the Joint Committee was

expected to hold at least two meetings in each municipal year and the first meeting after the annual meetings of Councils would be the Annual General Meeting where the Chairperson and Vice Chairperson for the ensuing year will be selected.

These proposed meetings were as follows:-

Friday 11 June 2021 – Annual General Meeting;
Friday 3 September 2021;
Friday 4 March 2022.

A Member questioned whether future meetings would be in person again or whether Members would prefer to avoid travel and continue meetings virtually.

The Head of Neighbourhood Services confirmed that the possibilities were being considered but that generally speaking the Welsh Government was likely to aim for a 30% model; 30% of the time people work from home and that this was likely to be replicated across authorities. He acknowledged that it was a new way of working that people have gotten used to but that it was likely to be blended models going forward. He advised that discussions were being held around video conferencing equipment being installed in conference rooms to enable partial attendance with some in person and some to dial in to a meeting.

The Head of Neighbourhood Services also acknowledged the impact of additional travel on the carbon agenda and whether it could be avoided to benefit environmentally.

A Member noted that one of the meetings usually involved an in-person visit to the Crematorium each year and acknowledged that this was a very useful meeting but accepted that virtual meetings would also be useful on occasions.

The Chairperson advised that it was a useful addition to have blended meetings but also acknowledged the usefulness of the in-person visit to the Crematorium to see what goes on behind the scenes.

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar advised that she will be led by Cabinet and Democratic Services as to what is likely to be a blended system and to those that are nearby who wish to attend will be able to and those further away can attend by video conferencing.

However, she noted that the AGM which normally takes place in June would normally have the site visit ahead of it which was very beneficial. She indicated that it allowed Members to see what has happened on site in the preceding 12 month period and for them to receive more explanation about the papers they are about to decide on. She also confirmed that most of the visit took place outside and hoped it could continue in the future.

RESOLVED: That the Joint Committee approved the Programme of Meetings for 2021- 22, as outlined in the Officer's Report.

86. FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE 2020-21 AND PROPOSED REVENUE BUDGET 2021-22

The Finance Manager, Financial Control and Closing submitted a report, the purpose of which, was to inform the Joint Committee of the projected financial performance for the Crematorium for 2020-21, and to obtain approval from the Joint Committee for the Proposed Budget and Fees and Charges for 2021-22.

The 2020-21 revenue budget was approved by the Joint Committee on 6 March 2020. Table 1 at paragraph 4.1 showed the comparison of budget against projected spend as at 31 January 2021. She advised that when the budget was set there was an anticipated budget deficit of £395,000, the projected outturn as at the end of January was a surplus of £517,000.

Paragraph 4.2 of the report provided some detail on the main variances noted at £36,000 overspend on employees due to two additional crematorium technicians being employed from June 2020 which was offset by an underspend of £8,000 on other employee costs. £11,000 underspend on premises made up of underspends on maintenance and business rates which was offset by a small overspend on electricity. £51,000 overspend on supplies, services and transport, the majority of which was due to increased spend on items for resale.

She advised that there was £832,000 underspend on planned capital maintenance and that Table 2 at paragraph 4.2 of the report showed a breakdown of the planned maintenance budget along with projected outturn and variances for the year. The Officer advised that the underspends were due to the projects being delayed as a result of the pandemic. All three of the delayed projects were now included in the capital budget for 2021-22.

The Finance Manager, Financial Control and Closing noted that income is higher than budgeted by £160,000 as a result of an increased number of cremations and receipt of the Welsh Government Covid-19 hardship fund.

The 2021-22 proposed budget was shown in Table 3 at paragraph 4.3 of the report. The proposed budget was a deficit of £451,000. All 2020-21 non-employee budgets had been reviewed and any necessary adjustments had been made to meet expected expenditure for 2021-22.

The Finance Manager, Financial Control and Closing confirmed that employee budgets had been adjusted to reflect salary increments where applicable although no allowance had been made for a pay award.

Table 4 at paragraph 4.6 of the report detailed the planned capital maintenance spending requirements. The three schemes detailed in the Table were budgeted at £845,000 and would be met from the capital financing costs budget identified in Table 3.

The income budgets had been prepared assuming a general increase in fees of 1.6% and were based on the usual levels of activity. The 2021-22 proposed Fees Table was attached at Appendix 1 of the report.

The effect on the accumulated balance of the proposed budget for 2021-22 was shown in Table 5 of the report. It was projected that as at 31 March 2022 there would be an accumulated balance of £2,120,000. The balance of Reserves as at 31 March 2021 was considered to be a sufficient level to maintain and protect the service, in light of any unknown demands or emergencies.

The Finance Manager, Financial Control and Closing confirmed that the Capital expenditure for 2021-22 would not require any loan charge or contribution from constituent authorities in 2021-22. Items of a capital nature in Table 4 at paragraph 4.6 of the report would be directly funded from revenue contributions and the accumulated surplus from previous years.

A Member noted that the report was very positive and was a reflection on how well the Crematorium was being run in terms of service to the public, its fiscal responsibilities and the prudence in which it operated. The Member further noted that no further investment from the constituent local authorities was required and that any Capital works required would not require any drawing on the resources of the three constituent local authorities.

A Member noted that no allowance was made for a pay award at paragraph 4.5 of the report and questioned where the money would come for that when a pay award was made.

The Finance Manager, Financial Control and Closing confirmed that when decisions were made on a pay award, the budget would be re-profiled to take that into account and would be demonstrated by an increase in the employees budget.

A Member noted that the planned capital maintenance spend and requirements shown on Table 4 of the report had site lighting at £250,000 but questioned whether that would need to be adjusted to take into account the accepted quote for the lighting at £182,646.70.

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar confirmed that the £250,000 allowed for all engineering costs, planning, applications etc. She acknowledged that the figure was likely to be prudent and confirmed that any not spent will be returned to the budget reserves. She clarified that the money was not only what was required to be paid to the contractors but all the additional costs that the management and planning of the project entailed.

The Head of Neighbourhood Services confirmed that best practice would be to keep the full budget allocated to any construction project until the work is complete. He acknowledged the works were a relatively straightforward engineering project but that additional costs could be incurred along the way. He confirmed that the money would not go anywhere else and would return to the financial bubble.

The Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar advised that the budget was adjusted slightly from £300,000 to £250,000 to take account of the amount the contractor put forward for the job and the additional costs for engineering planning, etc. and ensured enough budgeted in case.

The Chairperson advised that they wanted to thank and congratulated the Bereavement Services Manager and Registrar and her team for the continued support given to the people of Bridgend, Rhondda Cynon Taff and the Vale of Glamorgan in the height of the pandemic. He confirmed that there had been a massive spike at the start and from December to present. He expressed that the Joint Committee was fully understanding of the problems experienced by the workforce and gave his gratitude for the way they had conducted themselves and the Crematorium.

RESOLVED: That the Joint Committee:

- a) Noted the projected financial performance for 2020-21.
- b) Confirmed and approved the revenue budget to be adopted for 2021-22.
- c) Approved the increase in fees and charges with effect from 1 April 2021 as outlined in Appendix 1 to the report.

87. URGENT ITEMS

None.

The meeting closed at 15:09