

NORTH DEVON COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the NORTH DEVON CREMATORIUM JOINT COMMITTEE held at the Crematorium, Barnstaple on Friday 22nd June 2018 at 2.30 p.m.

Present: Representing North Devon District Council

Councillors Edgell, Jones, Lane and Yabsley (Chairman)

Representing Torridge District Council

Councillors Dezart, S.Inch, Langmead (Vice Chairman) and Pennington.

Officers

Head of Operational Services, Crematorium Manager, Secretary and Accountant

(a) APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN 2018/19

RESOLVED, that Councillor Yabsley be appointed Chairman of the Joint Committee until re-appointments are made in the next municipal year.

The Chairman welcomed Ricky McCormack, Head of Operational Services to his first meeting of the Joint Committee.

The Joint Committee recorded its thanks to Martin Williams, who had recently retired, for his support to the Joint Committee over a number of years and wished him well for the future.

It was agreed that a letter of thanks be sent to Mr Williams

(b) APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors T. Inch and Moores and S.Hearse (Treasurer)

(c) APPOINTMENT OF VICE CHAIRMAN 2018/19

RESOLVED, that Councillor Langmead be appointed Vice Chairman of the Joint Committee until re-appointments are made in the next municipal year.

(d) MINUTES

(i) RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 9th February 2018 (previously circulated) be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

(ii) Matters Arising

(A) Aspen Chapel

Councillor Edgell asked why there had been an increase in the costs for the refurbishment of the Aspen Chapel.

The Accountant stated that the majority of the increase was for VAT together with building control fees that had not been included in the costings and an increase in the contingencies.

(e) DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest announced.

(f) CREMATORIUM MATTERS

The Joint Committee considered a report by the Crematorium Manager (previously circulated).

i) Achievements

It was noted:

- A) That the covered walkway at the rear of the crematory was very industrial and dark and that new lighting and roof treatment/wall panelling had been installed to improve its appearance.
- B) Flower room – that new floral tribute stands (galvanized steel) had been installed replacing the original stands which were over 40 years old.
- C) That Phase 1 of a new bench/sanctum area in Authors & Royals had been installed, it was currently unused but was visually more appealing.
- D) That Signs had been ordered to improve the garden access as requested at the previous joint committee meeting. The areas & beds would be colour coded and linked to new, larger and an increased number of signs.
- E) That following requests from Funeral Director to improve the visibility of approaching hearses and maintenance issues, the hedge between the two car-parks was being replaced with a slatted fence.
- F) That the snagging from the Rowan Chapel works had been completed, including the damaged car-park ramp area.

ii) Crematorium Figures

The Cremation figures were noted.

iii) Metals Charity Recycling Award

It was noted:

That the Chairman had presented a cheque for £5,000 to Families in Grief and that North Devon Children's Holiday Foundation had been nominated for the next award.

iv) Grounds Improvement Update

It was noted:

A) That the Summerhouse had been installed (part of 2017/2018 garden improvement works).

B) That the Poets (circle) paths had been laid (part of 2017/2018 garden improvement works) and a clear disabled access route through to the summerhouse had been created. Early indications were that even extremely heavy rainfall does not flood the new paths.

The Joint Committee were impressed with the excellent look of the gardens and recorded its thanks to the staff.

v) Larkbear

It was noted that the developer had been asked to liaise with the crematorium manager regarding the bus gate implementation/options. A change in staff at the developer had delayed the commencement of discussions.

The Crematorium Manager was requested to report feedback from the meeting to NDC Planners and DCC Highways

vi) Medical Examiner Scheme

It was noted that the authorities planning for the new scheme had been advised to cease any expenditure as the scope and implementation date of the project were now in doubt.

vii) Refurbishment of Aspen Chapel

It was noted that the specification was being finalised prior to the procurement process. Early indications suggested a start date early in September with an 8-10 week programme.

In response to a question regarding demand at that time of the year the Crematorium Manager stated that he would have a contingency plan in place if required.

viii) Over-Run Penalty

It was noted that the over-run penalty charge had attracted some press attention recently following a recent service where the charge was applied.

The penalty was introduced in May 2013 with the agreement of the Committee, to address the frequent over-runs/delayed service.

The charge was a Funeral Director fee, not a charge to a family. Most Funeral Directors absorbed the fee, recognising their responsibility for the conduct of the service, whilst some passed it on.

When the charge was implemented a time buffer was also introduced of 10-minutes between services, so services were 40-minutes apart rather than 30-minutes as previously. The 10- minutes allowed for staff to clear flowers, remove and check the coffin, clean the chapel, re-arrange chairs, remove/place service sheets, prepare specific requests, discuss updates and possibly move to a different chapel. Even where there was no following service many of these tasks needed completing and staff may have had other duties/appointments or refreshment breaks.

The service in question had nearly 250 mourners, a lengthy video tribute and other material. A double service time was available and could have been taken, even at the last minute. Staff accommodated a 4-minute early start but the service still ran over by 7 minutes (11 minutes additional time in total). The decision not to book a double-service seemed at odds with the availability and content/mourner numbers. Hundreds of services run over the thirty minutes every year without consideration of any penalty. Staff work very hard to 'turn-round' the chapels and these incidents do not affect the following service. Hundreds of services are also facilitated to start early.

The penalty had been extremely successful in addressing the number of significant over-runs. In the last year only 16 services over-ran by more than 5-minutes (the trigger for consideration of the penalty charge). In these cases personal contact is always made with the funeral director seeking any representations to waive the fee. As a result, 9 resulted in the charge being waived.

The Joint Committee agreed the action taken by the Crematorium Manager

ix) Competition & Markets Authority Investigation – Cost of Cremation

It was noted that the Government had recently launched an investigation into the cost of funerals and in particular the cost of a cremation in view of wide national and local variances. A recent Cremation Society of Great Britain publication (using Jan 2018 data) showed that of the 291 crematoria listed nationally 254 had higher fees than North Devon. A comparison of all Devon Crematoria revealed that our fees were between £235 - £359 lower. It was also noted that the Rowan Chapel was the largest in England by a significant margin, demonstrating the quality of facilities and value of our service.

x) Additional Cremation Service Options

The Crematorium Manager reported that North Devon Crematorium currently offers two levels of cremation service:

- A 'Full-Service' at £660. This provides a half-hour service (or 70mins if double-service option booked at an additional £160) with no limits on mourner attendance or content.
- An 8.30am 'Walk-through Service' at £560 (a £100 reduction). This provides a 10-minute service where small number of mourners can attend and a piece of music can be played or short eulogies delivered.

He stated that a number of local Funeral Directors had very recently started to offer very low-cost cremations based services (£1200-£1400). Typically these did not allow for any mourner attendance, no service content or burial of ashes at the crematorium. Costs were kept low by use of emailing of documents (allowed since 6th April 2018) and using a single vehicle/driver to transport the deceased. Indications were that there was a need to keep costs low would result in services being taken to adjacent crematoria who offered a 'No Mourner' service at £499. This would result in local families having to travel to visit the burial location of their loved one's ashes and a loss of services from North Devon. He further stated that this raised the issue of whether North Devon Crematorium should offer a 'third option' where there was no mourner input. It was envisaged that such a service would be conducted at 8.15am at a cost of £499. The coffin would always be accepted only through the Chapel regardless of the option chosen.

It was agreed that consideration of the matter be deferred to the next Joint Committee meeting and that the Crematorium Manager in the interim seek further information regarding demand and intended migration to Exeter.

(g) OUTTURN 2017/18

The Joint Committee considered a report by the Treasurer (previously circulated) regarding the outturn 2017/18.

RESOLVED:

- (A) That that the Outturn Report 2017/18 be noted.
- (B) That the reserves and balances outlined in paragraph 3.4 be approved

Chairman

The meeting ended at 3.30 p.m.