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MERTON AND SUTTON JOINT CEMETERY BOARD

23 JUNE 2020

(2.00 pm - 3.05 pm)

PRESENT: Councillor Agatha Mary Akyigyina, Councillor Steve Cook, Councillor Nick Draper, Councillor Drew Heffernan, Councillor Simon McGrath, Councillor David Williams and Councillor Annie Moral

ALSO PRESENT: Zoe Church (Treasurer to the Board)
Stella Akintan (Democratic Services Officer - virtual meeting host)
Louise Fleming (Acting Clerk to the Board)

1 ELECTION OF CHAIR AND VICE-CHAIR FOR 2020/21 (Agenda Item 1)

RESOLVED that

1. Councillor Drew Heffernan be elected Chair of the Merton and Sutton Joint Cemetery Board for the 2020/21 municipal year; and
2. Councillor David Williams be elected Vice Chair of the Merton and Sutton Joint Cemetery Board for the municipal year.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Stan Anderson.

3 DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY INTEREST (Agenda Item 3)

There were no declarations.

4 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Agenda Item 4)

It was noted that the minutes of the previous meeting were not available and would be reported to the next meeting of the Board.

5 ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT 2019/20 (Agenda Item 5)

The Treasurer to the Board presented the Annual Governance Statement 2019/20 and drew Members' attention to section 10 of the report which set out the actions undertaken in 2019/20 and the actions to be undertaken in 2020/21, particularly on the recovery from Covid-19.

Members expressed concern that the Client Side Manager was not present at the meeting as it was felt that there may be particular questions or points of clarification needed. The Chair asked Members to forward any questions they had to the Clerk for the Client Side Manager and a separate briefing with him could be arranged if required.

RESOLVED that the Annual Governance Statement 2019/20 be noted and agreed.

6 ABSTRACT OF ACCOUNTS 2019/20 (Agenda Item 6)

The Treasurer presented the Abstract of Accounts 2019/20, drawing Members attention to significant negotiations with idverde during the year relating to income and confirmation had been received that income would be received in accordance with the original agreement, therefore there had been a large adjustment for income due in 2018/19 and 2019/20. In addition there were a number of projects due to be undertaken during the year, specifically around bearer beams and the safety of memorials. There were delays to start the programme due to testing of memorials to be undertaken and an update was included in the Contractor report in the following item. The programme of works was due to go ahead when the Pandemic hit and therefore the work due to be undertaken during March had to be delayed and this also resulted in a substantial underspend.

The Treasurer advised that a number of funds and balances had been cleared down and with the additional income, the common fund was just over £1m and therefore it was proposed that approximately £600k of that be invested to generate some more income for the Board going forward. The pension fund was now in a positive position and there would be no secondary charge, so the revenue estimate had been adjusted accordingly.

The Accounts had already been signed off by the Council's internal auditors and once approved would be sent to the external auditors for review and sign off. The Treasurer drew Members attention to the impact of Covid-19 on the income levels and internment levels.

In response to Members' questions, the Treasurer advised:

- Officers were monitoring the impact of reduced internments on income closely and these were detailed in the Contractor report at the following item. Internments were significantly higher in April but had started to come down again in May and it was anticipated that these would be below normal levels for some time. Financial information would be requested from idverde after the summer and analysis would be carried out to identify any trends and this information would be circulated to Members.
- Officers were not anticipating a big difference in internments over the course of the whole financial year and the risk register reflected that they would return to normal levels. Officers had been very prudent in their forecasts, however there were healthy reserves to cushion fluctuations and the situation would be monitored closely.
- The recommendation could be amended to progress early repayment of the original loan to Merton and Sutton, rather than invest £600k.
- As bearer beams deteriorated with age, they were being replaced with better quality beams.
- The triannual actuarial evaluation of the pension fund confirmed a positive position for the fund requiring no secondary contribution.

- There was a specialist investment officer in the Council whose advice would be sought in the event that the Board was minded to approve in investment of funds.
- The next meeting was due to take place in February 2021, at which point officers would have a clearer view of the impact of the Pandemic on the finances.

The following question was asked, which would be forwarded to the Client Side Manager for a response:

- The budget had been increased to account for what was not spent last year on the replacement of the bearer beams. Would this money replace all the bearer beams, or are there others left to replace in subsequent years?

Members asked if there was a way of expressing pandemic deaths in the risk register in a more sensitive way. It was acknowledged that there was a need to assess and report risk in a factual way, some felt that it should also be mindful of the language used in a public document. The Chair asked that the comments be reflected in the minutes as it was not possible to amend the wording of the risk register in a satisfactory way.

RESOLVED

1. To receive and approve the Draft Abstract of Accounts for 2019-20
2. To approve the Annual Audit Return for 2019-20 (Appendix E)
3. To approve the revised revenue estimates for 2020/21 in Appendix H
4. Review and Agree the Risk Register as at June 2020 in Appendix I
5. That officers progress the early loan repayment of up to £600k to Merton and Sutton Councils

7 CONTRACTOR REPORT (Agenda Item 7)

The Treasurer presented the Contractor report and drew Members attention to the section on the replacement bearer beams and Covid-19 response, which included an extra burial slot each day to deal with the increased numbers. It was noted that users of the service had been complimentary and the complaints received had been relating to the impact of central Government guidance.

The Board wished to express their thanks to the cemetery staff for the additional work undertaken and the Chair asked that a letter of thanks be sent to the Cemetery Manager on behalf of the Board.

The following question was asked and comments made, which would be forwarded to the Client Side Manager for a response:

- The report stated that one of the bearer beams was not fit for purpose and it is unclear whether it was the replacement beam that was not fit for purpose. If this is the case, why did that happen?
- Is there a longer term scheme to replace all failed beams across the cemetery and how much extra money would that require and when?

- It was important that going forward, any report of the Contractor being presented to the Board should include a response to the issues raised from Merton.
- Had any letters been sent out to grave owners regarding headstones which had been failed a safety.

RESOLVED that the contractor report be noted.

8 EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC (Agenda Item 8)

RESOLVED that the public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following report on the grounds that it is exempt from disclosure by virtue of paragraph(s) 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972: Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information)

9 CLIENT SIDE UPDATE - VERBAL REPORT (Agenda Item 9)

RESOLVED that

1. The verbal update from the Client Side Manager, who could not be present at the meeting, be noted.
2. The Board requests that, in the event that the Client Side Manager could not be present at any future meetings, a substitute attend in their place.
3. That any questions of clarification be forwarded to the Client Side Manager for a response after the meeting.