

Planning Context



What are the proposals?

A planning application is in the course of preparation for submission to the Test Valley Borough Council by Westerleigh Group Ltd for a crematorium at Ridge Lane, Romsey, Hampshire SO1 6AB.

Westerleigh Group Ltd is experienced in providing crematorium services with an existing twenty one crematoria established across the UK having built some thirteen since 1993 and caring for over 27,000 funerals a year. All of these facilities were built on green field sites and two were developed within the Green Belt.

The intention is to develop a fully operational independent crematorium to serve the local community essentially focused on Test Valley based on Romsey. The scheme comprises the construction of a crematorium together with associated gardens of remembrance, an access road (utilising the current site entrance/access point on the Ridge Lane) with car parking (up to 77 spaces comprising 40 main and 37 overflow spaces), staff parking, service yard, floral tribute area, landscaping and associated works. The crematorium building actually comprises a number of different functioning elements including:

- Porte Cochere
- Vestry and Book of Remembrance room
- Chapel
- Cremator room
- Storage rooms, administrative and staff accommodation
- Reception and general office
- Service yard, and
- Gas compound.

The architectural style of building considered most appropriate to this location is that of essentially a single storey form familiar within a predominantly rural area. The building is subdivided into two parts (the public larger and smaller operational) thus enabling an effective and functional reduction of the overall massing and inclusion of two traditionally proportioned pitched roofs. The overall contemporary architectural treatment presents a building of clean-lines and an uncluttered, simple but graceful appearance. The elevational plans reveal a very modest chimney which does not project above the ridge line of the principal (public) part of the building as it is associated with the smaller ancillary operational part of the structure. Accordingly the chimney will not appear as a local "landmark" as would have been the case with earlier generations of crematoria. The grounds will be extensively landscaped and include a garden of remembrance and area for floral tributes. The latter is provided as a part of the circulation route beside a water feature.

The access and parking arrangements are set within landscaped grounds, are designed to enable ease of circulation with minimum opportunity for funeral parties to intrusively coincide at a time of great emotional sensitivity. This circulation pattern has proved extremely effective and, having been now thoroughly tried and tested is welcomed by funeral directors who often encounter problems at older, often municipal crematoria.

Importantly the extensive grounds provide an opportunity to create an attractive landscape setting which can take advantage of the well enclosed (hedgerows and trees) site context and sense of relative seclusion. The local landscape and topography provide an extremely good framework for this form of development notwithstanding the site's proximity to the A3090 (Romsey Road - dual carriageway) to the west.

Why here?

The Test Valley Borough Council currently does not possess a crematorium and as a consequence Hampshire is widely acknowledged as one of the poorest served for crematoria provision based upon statistics provided by the Cremation Society of Great Britain and therefore local residents are forced to travel to Basingstoke, Southampton or Salisbury crematoria. For a significant number of people, these choices lie beyond at or beyond the thirty minute drive time for a funeral cortege, there being no other crematoria within a more acceptable travel time.

The relative remoteness of the current choices leads to large catchment areas for both crematoria and strong pressure on the service they provide to the bereaved within the various communities seeking to use these facilities. Southampton crematorium is for instance one of the busiest crematoria in the Country (25th out of 270) and is especially challenged holding some 2,542 funerals per annum. Basingstoke is less busy, holding some 1,824 funerals per annum, however this is still some 13% busier than the average crematorium within the UK. Salisbury is quieter but is regarded as too remote (over 45 minutes drive time) for the majority of the Borough's residents which therefore does not represent a viable option.

The other possible choice is at Hedge End (Wessex Vale) some 40 minutes drive time. A large number of people on the eastern boundary of New Forest District are also poorly served by existing crematoria. Families in Totton, Marchwood, Hythe and Fawley all face a journey in excess of 30 minutes when accessing Southampton which is their nearest crematorium. Whilst Bournemouth, the only other realistic choice, is the 4th busiest crematorium in the country.

In terms of demographic change, the projected rise in population of the catchment area contains a particularly pronounced rise in people over 70. This will lead to a sustained and long-term increase in the death rate and accordingly demand for cremation. A new crematorium on the southern edge of Romsey would therefore be ideally placed to meet this area of need.

As a result locational options have been carefully considered for a new crematorium to serve the Borough. The site at Ridge Lane comprising 5.8 ha (14.35 acres) of restored former gravel workings was accordingly identified as the optimum location taking into account geographical catchment, the quality of access, landscape and other environmental benefits and relatively discreet site characteristics.

Planning Policy

For the purposes of section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 and 70(2) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, the Development Plan comprises the Hampshire, Portsmouth and Southampton, New Forest and South Downs Minerals and Waste Plan 2013 and the "saved" policies of the Test Valley Borough Local Plan 2006. There is no policy directly relevant to the provision of crematoria within the adopted Local Plan.

The site identified by this Company followed careful analysis of the quantitative and qualitative need for a new crematorium to serve the Borough and other parts of the surrounding area. This is also influenced by the overall demographic trend (ageing population) which is quite pronounced within the Borough.

The site selection process is also influenced by the experience of the Company as an experienced operator and developer of new facilities together with the published guidance provided within (former) Department of Environment LG1/232/36 (1978), the Cremation Acts 1902 and 1952 together with industry advice provided by The Federation of Burial and Cremation Authorities (FBCA) and ICCM. The supporting text within SET 03: Development in the Countryside. This includes the provision of facilities and services which cannot be met within settlements with examples such as places of worship. As with most countryside policies there are no references to crematoria and therefore as a facility and service akin to a place of worship, an exception to policy would seem capable of acceptance by the Authority provided that it is fully justified.

The site was part of an extensive excavated minerals extraction area, since land filled and recently restored to open farm land.

Ecology

The site has been surveyed in the form of a preliminary (Phase 1 habitat) survey undertaken in February 2015. The site supports a range of habitats including grassland, deciduous woodland, hedgerows, veteran trees and watercourses. As the grassland is a recently seeded area it has limited diversity value however it should be noted that the hedgerows, ponds and lowland mixed deciduous woodland are all listed as priority habitats within the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. It is not considered that the proposal would give rise to unacceptable and material loss of biodiversity contrary to Policy ENV 01. Indeed the landscaping enhancement measures associated with the proposal coupled with a more active management regime will result if anything in biodiversity enhancement.

Heritage

A Preliminary Heritage Assessment has been undertaken. There are three Listed Buildings within the local vicinity of the site. These comprise the Grade II* Listed Ranvilles Farmhouse to the north west, The Grade II Listed milestone on the eastern side of the A3090 and the Grade II Listed Ridge Farmhouse to the south east of the site on Ridge Lane.

The assessment found that, at most, there would be a minor negative impact arising out of the development being within the setting of the Grade II* Listed Ranvilles Farmhouse. This is assessed as equating to *less than substantial harm to the significance of the heritage asset*. In this case the considerable public benefit associated with the provision of a crematorium in this location is considered to far outweigh the limited extent of harm.

Highways

The recorded accident data reveals that there are no accident trends or clusters which would suggest that there is a problem with the design of the surrounding road network which is compromising highway safety, nor that this would be worsened as a consequence of traffic associated with the proposal. The preliminary Assessment concludes that there are no highways or transportation reasons for withholding permission.

Landscape

A preliminary Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) has been undertaken as part of the site evaluation and pre application processes. The survey work was undertaken within the winter season thereby enabling assessment at the most "exposed" period within the year whilst the extent of foliage is at its minimum.

Visual effects of the proposals are limited to short range views from residential properties (Ranville's Park Cottages) immediately adjoining the western site boundary and from a nearby public footpath, all of which would be substantially screened following maturation of mitigation planting in the long term. Planting proposals would create an attractive and reflective environment within the site that accommodates species of value to local wildlife.

The study demonstrates that the proposed development would have no adverse landscape or visual effect upon any heritage assets or landscape features and is in compliance with local planning policies that place value on enhancing landscape character and structure.

Preliminary Studies:

A number of preliminary reports and initial sketch architectural designs have been undertaken and form part of this submission. These comprise:

- A Transport Assessment undertaken by SCP (March 2015)
- A Preliminary Heritage Assessment by Elaine Milton Heritage & Planning (April 2015)
- Ecology - Phase 1 Survey by DLA Ltd (Feb 2015)
- Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment by DLA Ltd (March 2015)
- Architectural sketch Layouts and elevations / floor plans by the Applicant's Group Architect (June 2014)