

Planning Context

What are the proposals?

We are in the process of preparing a planning application for submission to Uttlesford District Council, on behalf of Westerleigh Group Ltd, for the erection of a new crematorium to serve the District on land to the east of Field Farm Drive to the north of Great Chesterford.

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 a population catchment that is within a 30-minute drive time of the site. The scheme comprises the construction of a crematorium together with associated gardens of remembrance, an internal access road with sufficient levels of car parking and staff parking, a 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 waiting room
- Chapel
- Cremator room
- Storage rooms, administrative and staff accommodation
- Reception and general office
- Service yard, and
- Gas compound

The architectural style of building will be sympathetic to, and appropriate within this rural location. It will essentially have a single storey form in order that it does not intrude into the landscape. The building will be subdivided into two parts, being the larger 'public' area and smaller 'operational' area, thus enabling an effective and functional reduction of the overall massing of the structure. The overall architectural treatment presents a building of clean-lines and an uncluttered, simple but graceful appearance. The elevational plans will show a very modest chimney, associated with the smaller ancillary operational part of the structure, which will not appear as a local 'landmark' as would have been the case with earlier generations of out-dated crematoria.

The grounds will be extensively landscaped and include a garden of remembrance and area for floral tributes. The latter is normally provided as a part of the circulation route beside a water feature.

The access and parking arrangements will be set within landscaped grounds, 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 thoroughly tried and tested on other developments, is welcomed by funeral directors who often encounter problems at older or municipal crematoria.

Importantly the extensive grounds provide an opportunity to create an attractive landscape setting which can take advantage of the well enclosed site and offer a 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 A11 and the M11 to the west.

Why here?

This part of the District is not currently served by a crematorium and at present, local residents are forced to travel to Bury St Edmunds, Harlow or the north west of Cambridge. For a significant number of people, these choices lie beyond the thirty minute drive time for a funeral cortege as there are no other crematoria within a more acceptable travel time. The relative remoteness of the current choices leads to pressure on the service that the existing crematoria currently provide to the bereaved.

Recent appeal decisions have established precedents against which the 'need' for crematorium development can be evaluated. These include a 30-minute drive time, a population catchment of approximately 150,000 people within that 30-minute drive time and a practical capacity to avoid delays in establishing a date for a cremation service.

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 in the proposed location would therefore be ideally placed to meet this area of need.

The Cremation Act of 1902 stipulates that a new crematorium needs to be located at least 200 yards (183m) away from any dwelling, which immediately forces the proposal to be located away from urban areas and within the open countryside, but still close to population centres. In addition to this the Federation of Burial and Cremation Authorities guidance of 2013 and the Siting and Planning of Crematoriums guidance of 1978 both impose further restrictions on the location and siting of new crematoriums.

As a result of this, geographic options have been carefully considered for a new crematorium to serve the District. The proposed site at Field Farm Drive was accordingly identified as the optimum location for a new crematorium development taking into account geographical catchment, the quality of access, landscape and other environmental benefits and site characteristics.

Planning Policy

We have undertaken pre-application discussions with the District Council which have established that, in land use terms, the principle of the development is acceptable for the chosen site, subject to an evaluation of the proposal in terms of planning policy and in relation to its impact on the character and appearance of the open countryside.

Through previous applications we have established that the national planning guidance contained in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) is generally supportive of crematorium proposals in open countryside locations. In terms of local planning policy the 'Development Plan' for the District is made up of the Adopted Local Plan of 2005. Our pre-application submission to the Council established that the following Policies would be relevant in the determination of the application which, in principle, support the proposed development:

- S7 – The Countryside
- GEN1 – Access
- GEN2 – Design
- GEN3 – Flood Protection
- GEN7 – Nature Conservation
- GEN8 – Vehicle Parking Standards
- E4 – Alternative Use of Farmland
- ENV5 – Protection of Agricultural Land, and
- ENV8 – Other Landscape Elements of Importance for nature Conservation

In addition to this we are satisfied that the proposed development will conserve the existing landscape character within the area and enhance it with supplementary landscaping. A full Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment will support the future planning application in this respect.

Ecology

The site has been surveyed in the form of a preliminary (Phase 1 habitat) survey in order to establish whether there are any protected species within the site, or in close proximity to it, that may be affected by the proposed development. Our Ecologist has established that there is no obvious evidence of badgers, Great Crested Newts, rare reptiles or any other form of protected species within the site and that the boundary hedgerows are highly unlikely to support any protected species of birds or bats. The formal Ecology Report for the site is currently being produced and, as certain data is still awaited (October), will not be available in time for the Public Consultation Event. It will, however, be completed in order to support the future planning application.

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 will be finalised in order to support the future planning application. The LVIA will show that the proposed development will have no detrimental visual impact on the landscape character of the area as the limited views of the site from the immediate surrounding area and potential distant views are obscured/obstructed by intervening topography, vegetated boundaries and development. We are satisfied that the proposed development will meet the 'landscape strategy objectives' of the Council, as set out in their 2006 Landscape Character Assessment.

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
- Ecology - Phase 1 Survey by DLA Ltd and further detailed surveys over the summer
- Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment by DLA Ltd
- Architectural sketch Layouts and elevations / floor plans by the Applicant's Group Architect