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A Design and Access Statement for the East Cambridgeshire Crematorium

Address: Former Mepal Outdoor Centre, Chatteris Road, Mepal, Ely, Cambridgeshire CB6 2AZ

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Note: Architectural D&A Statement provided by Benchmark submitted separately

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1. INTRODUCTION

This Design and Access Statement is being submitted as part of a planning application by The CDS Group for the construction of a crematorium and associated service and administration building, function building, memorial garden, natural burial areas, pet cemetery, car parking, new vehicular access from the A142 and landscaping, on the site of the previous Mepal Outdoor Centre. A pre-application response letter dated 12th November 2020 concluded that, subject to detailed criteria, it was considered to be an acceptable proposal in principle.

Well-designed cemeteries play an important role in habitat creation, protection and enhancement, and ecological commitment is an integral part of this proposal. In addition to ecological protection, mitigation and compensation measures, the very fact that burials are protected from disturbance by The Burial Act 1857 means that there is an assurance of longevity to the cemetery and its resources. This by association provides reassurance for long-term ecological security.

In addition to the crematorium and associated infrastructure and landscape, the proposal also aims to provide vehicular access to the Northern part of the site in order to provide opportunities for recreational activities. This access point will use an existing access gate on the North East of the site, and additionally this area will receive a small parking area as well as new exit point merging back into the A142.

1.i Location

The aerial view on Page 4 (Fig 1) details two lakes, one each side of the A142 Ireton way. The proposal relates to the western lake and surrounding land.

The site is situated within an area characterised by low density built form and is surrounded by agricultural land, with the A142 running along its east boundary.

The proposal site is approximately 13 hectares in size, with the red line boundary following the entire perimeter of the water and adjacent vegetation, extending further into land at the south east corner.

The main project focuses on land at the east of this lake, between the water and A142, within the zone of the large yellow circle shown on page 4 (Fig 1). This area was previously developed by the Mepal Outdoor Centre.

Current vehicle access from the A142 would be retained.

The blue outline (Fig. 1) details the area that would be accessible to the public for recreational activities such as bird watching, walking and fishing, accessed at an entry at the North East part of the site.

Approximately 3.5km to the north of the proposal site is the settlement Chatteris and c. 3km to the south, Mepal village.

The site is surrounded by farmland, light industrial units and the Pretoria Energy plant immediately to the north. There are road tracks to the north, south and west side of the lake with the northern and western routes classified as 'byway open to all traffic' – shown in a green patterned line on Fig 2, Page 5.

Pretoria Energy's site functions as an anaerobic treatment facility. Other local commercial activities are in the form of gravel extraction to the west of the neighbouring lake.

Fig 1 – aerial view



Fig 2 – ‘byway open to all traffic’ indicated by Green hatched line highlighted green



1.ii Character of the Site

Existing vegetation of mixed quality and species encloses the east, north and west boundaries, with the southern boundary being more open and exposed, summarised as:

- East shore The water edge is formed of reedy growth and sandy areas near the development area. To the north of the earlier development, the water is closer to the boundary and the ground banks up toward the A142. It is covered with dense overgrown vegetation and trees
- North shore The vegetation here is less dense against the boundaries and the water edge meets an open, sandy area
- West Shore A narrow, steep bank covered in vegetation makes access to the western shore difficult.
- South shore This is an important ecological area where the water edge meets an open beach graduating to winter bird feeding habitats. These characteristics together with open mosaic habitat makes this the area with highest ecological value, especially to the south-east

This predominantly man-made landscape was created by commercial gravel extraction from the 1920s to the 1950s. Once redundant, the gravel pit was filled with water to form the lake that still exists today.

Transition from a commercial site, through a period of recreational use and latterly some four years of abandonment has allowed a specific beauty and ecologically interesting landscape to develop, characterised by sandy bunds, beached open areas and aggregate dominated surfaces.

Existing building are now in poor repair having been the focus of arson attacks and general vandalism on numerous occasions since the Mepal Outdoor Centre closed in 2017. The new development, designed to extend across previously developed areas will have significantly less building mass than has previously existed.

There are no domestic dwellings in the close vicinity of the site which is surrounded mainly by arable fields, active quarries to the East of the A142 and, to the North the anaerobic digestion plant. The Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) evidences that there will be no adverse landscape impact, especially when compared to the existing structures which are higher and more intrusive in design. These will be demolished under the proposed plans.

2. THE PROPOSAL

2.i Provisions

The proposed development has been designed to sit generally within the previously developed area and provide state-of-the-art sustainable crematorium buildings surrounded by a landscape that will complement and enhance the character, aesthetics and ecology of the wider site.

2.i.a – Burial and Internment

- 294 natural burials;
- 290 in-ground ash internment;
- 120 pet burial;
- provision for ash scattering.

Note: The natural burial figure equates to approximately 15 years estimated usage (based on c.20 per annum)

2.i.b – Parking

Standard bays – Total 104:

- 68 main car park;
- 30 overflow / natural burial area;
- 6 staff parking.

Disabled Parking – Total 20:

- 10 main car park;
- 4 natural burial/overflow;
- 3 multi-function building;
- 2 staff parking.

Hearse / Limousine:

- 3 main cemetery car park;
- 2 natural burial area.

Mini bus parking:

- 3 mini-bus parking area.

Electric charging points have been incorporated into areas:

- 16 in the main parking area;
- 4 in the disabled parking area;
- 2 in the staff parking area.

2.i.c Internal Roadways - Detailed on Fig 3 overleaf

(A knee-high rail fence shown in thick orange line on Fig 3 will act as a visual deterrent to prevent visitor access into the ecologically sensitive areas from the main cemetery site)

Fig 3 – internal roadways (main development area)

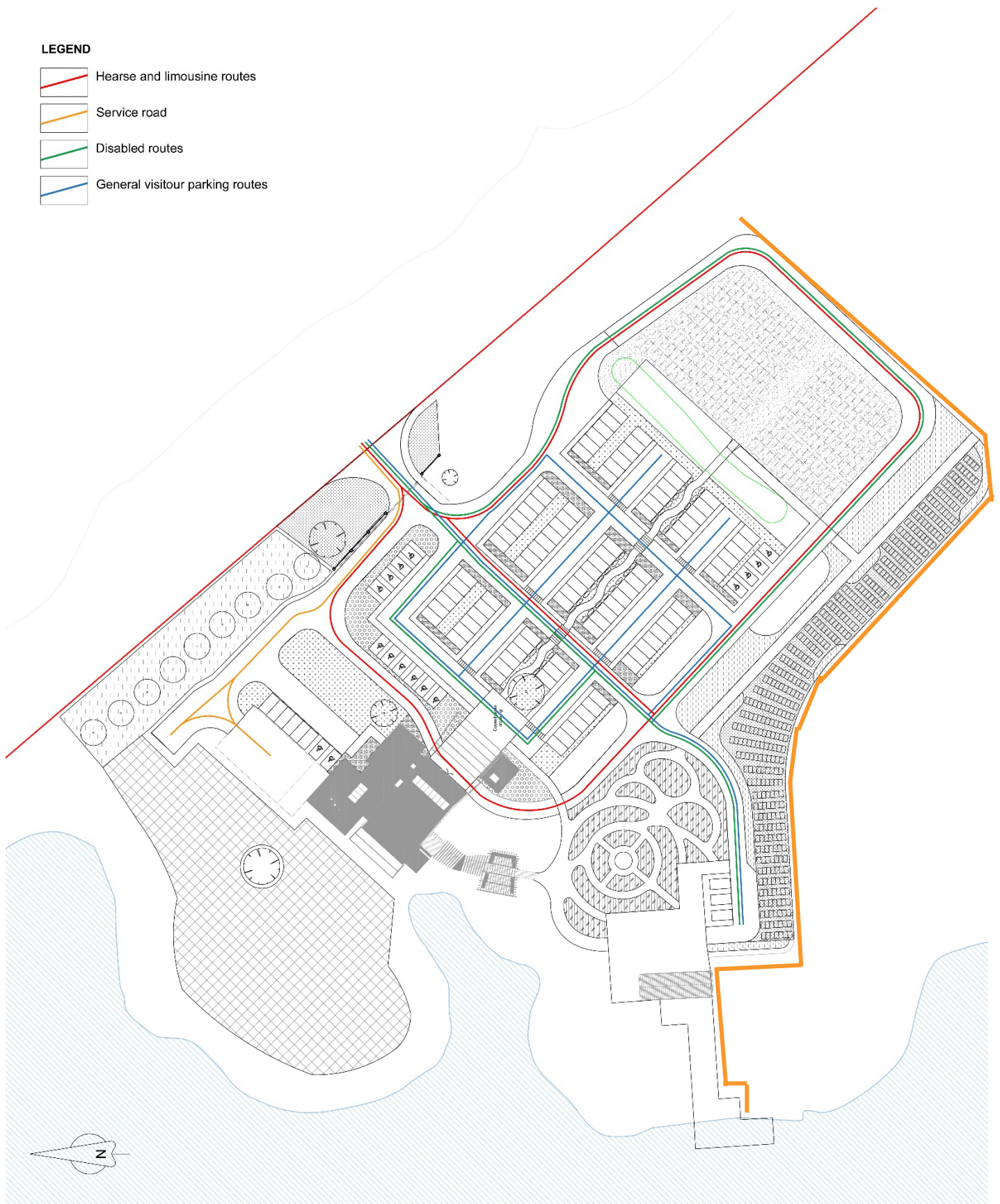


Fig 4 – internal roadways (North recreational area)



2.ii Boundaries

In general, existing vegetation will be maintained to enclose the overall site, protect ecology and preserve amenity views from the surrounding road and tracks.

Where protection is needed from unauthorised access a 2.5m high black steel mesh fence will be erected to secure the cemetery development and the ecologically sensitive areas - detailed in the yellow line below (Fig 5).

In addition, the red line indicates where a second fence will sit, restricting access to and from the North of the site.

Fig 5



2.iii Site Ecology

Essential to the project's development has been a commitment to protecting and enhancing the site's ecology which has driven the overall design process, including the position of the cemetery building.

Overall, the proposal seeks to create natural burial and memorialisation provision within a unique and beautiful setting whilst at the same time preserving and enhancing the specific character of the site, its wildlife and habitat value.

To ensure maximum habitat protection, most of the proposed car park stands over the previous footprint, with an extension to the south west to accommodate the number of spaces required for the new facility, and to ensure hearses and limousines have a suitable route and parking positions.

The only formal ecological category applied to the site is one of County Wildlife Site which relates specifically to species of pondweed found in the lake margins, the entire extent of which is protected within the proposed development.

The open mosaic habitat which is one of the most highly valued on the site relies on free draining, aggregate dominated soil and a bright open aspect. The ground conditions on site are due to commercial aggregate extraction which created suitable man-made conditions, together with the gravel dressing applied to the previous car parks. The absence of trees in the surrounding areas allow the region's naturally 'big skies' to wash the areas in bright light.

In addition to mitigating and managing future activity in these areas, a new open mosaic habitat will be created to the north of the building by scraping away enriched topsoil to expose the aggregate base, thus allowing a new area of open mosaic habitat to develop.

In general, all vegetation beyond the immediate development zone will be left untouched other than to implement a Landscape and Ecology Management Plan to be detailed by The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire. Impact on the areas at the north and east of the water will be minimal, with informal walkways created through open areas of planting.

The important 'beach' areas to the south with adjacent bird foraging zones will also be protected and managed, with the entire water edge also falling under similar regimes. Knee high rail fence will be installed around the crematorium site to demarcate public and private areas. There is no pedestrian route along the lake's western edge which is steeply banked.

More detail is provided in the landscape drawings, LVIA and Ecological Impact Assessment (EclA), but critical mitigation and compensation elements are:

- Protection of the southern area of the site;
- Mitigation and compensation with regard to the open mosaic habitats (later referred to as OMH);
- Retention, protection and infill of existing boundary planting;
- Retention of existing trees identified on the landscape plan;
- No public access to the south beyond the main crematorium areas;
- Commitment to long term management of the site's natural areas beyond the development;
- Ecological supervision of initial clearance works;
- No access from the eastern walks way into the crematorium zone.

2.iv Movement and Connections

It is evidenced that mourners generally arrive at crematoria by car or organised private transport such as mini-bus, but it is less common for people to travel by bus, cycle or walking.

On this basis the layout has been designed to provide ample car parking with safe and clearly defined pedestrian routes leading to the building. The principle throughout the car park is to create pedestrian priority and clarity. Pedestrian routes will be laid with different coloured material to the roadway, and will lead from each set of parking bays to a central sinuous spine path. This will deliver visitors to an extended Copenhagen crossing at the main building arrival point to ensure safe pedestrian gathering in this important meeting area.

Visitors leaving the chapel via the flower court will have opportunity to linger and walk through the memorial garden, down to the jetty at the water's edge, as detailed in Appendix 1. These two areas will provide uniquely peaceful settings where mourners can pay last private respects or simply dwell on memories. There will also be opportunity to wander through dedicated ash scattering areas

Similar experiences will be available to visitors who return to the site to visit the natural burial, ash internment or ash scattering areas. Some management will be necessary to ensure those leaving the service hall are not intruded upon but this will be managed using barrier ropes or similar devices when necessary.

2.v Landscaping

Areas detailed on the proposed drawings include:

- 1234m2 Soft Landscaped areas in the car park
- 1400m2 Soft landscaping in the memorial garden and ash internment areas
- 81No. New trees
- 1020m2 Wildflower sowing
- 3020m2 Area of new mosaic habitat
- 4152m2 Area of permeable roadways within the car park
- 730m2 Area of crushed stone roadway
- 622m2 Area of permeable pedestrian routes
- 425m2 Area of permeable paths in memorial garden
- 960m2 Area of boardwalk

2.v.a Soft Landscaping

With priority given to ecological protection and enhancement the planting is designed to:

- ensure formal, ornamental planting is restricted to the building surrounds and car park
- ensure no aggressive alien species are introduced that could spread into valuable habitats
- specify recommendations made by ecologists regarding grass and wildflower seed mixes
- detail new tree planting within the developed zone only
- create 'transition' planting in the memorial garden between the formal and natural areas
- ensure the landscape management plan for the developed zone details techniques to avoid species encroachment into the natural areas (e.g. dead heading flowering plants)
- commission a Landscape and Ecology Management Plan by The Wildlife Trust for long-term care of natural areas

2.v.b Hard Landscaping

Hard landscaping materials will all be permeable to ensure minimal drainage interventions within this sensitive location. There is also opportunity for water run-off to be directed into planting areas.

Material colours and textures will be selected to compliment the character of the site and its history, using permeable, aggregate scattered macadam, resin bound aggregate, clay block pavers and crushed compacted stone or self-binding aggregate. The parking bays will be laid with a cellular compacted gravel system. The aim for the landscape is that it should nestle comfortably into the site and avoid the appearance of standard public car park such as those seen at retail parks or superstores.

The design of the cemetery is by nature a compromise between maintaining a quality green, open space and maintaining ecological principles, with a need to ensure unhindered access to the point of burial by hearse and pedestrians, including the less able-bodied.

Routes comply with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) and Health & Safety legislation with respect to the manual handling of a coffin from the funeral car to the grave side by ensuring all burial plots are within twenty-five metres from a cemetery roadway or major footpath, or five metres from minor footpaths.

2.v.c Northern Access Area

There will be no new soft landscaping in this area. The Hard landscape elements, specifically the surfacing of roads and parking, similarly to the main development area, will also be permeable.

2.vi Constraints

Constraints require creative design solutions together with visionary commitment to ensure a successful project can be delivered whilst working within any restrictive parameters. For this project, ecology has been a driver rather than a constraint, and the design development process has enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to deliver an outstanding project whilst protecting and enhancing the site's habitat, long into the future.

More information is included in the Environmental Impact Assessment and LVIA

3.PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

The following local and national planning policies were referred to as being relevant in the pre-application response letter and are addressed in detail within the LVIA and Planning Statement.

East Cambridgeshire Local Plan 2015

The Development Plan for East Cambridgeshire is the starting point for decision making and currently comprises the 'East Cambridgeshire Local Plan 2015' (ECLP) which sets out the vision, objectives, spatial strategy and policies to deliver planned growth for the District to 2031.

- EMP3: New employment development in the Countryside;
- EMP4: Re-use and replacement of existing buildings in the countryside;
- ENV1: Landscape and settlement character;
- ENV2: Design;
- ENV4: Energy efficiency and renewable energy in construction;
- ENV7: Biodiversity and geology;
- ENV8: Flood risk;
- ENV9: Pollution;
- COM3: Retaining community facilities;
- COM4: New community facilities;
- COM7: Transport Impact;
- COM8: Parking Provision.

Other material planning considerations in that context are considered to comprise:

Relevant Supplementary Planning Documents:

- Design Guide SPD (2012);
- Developer Contributions SPD (2013);
- Renewable Energy (Commercial Scale) SPD (2014);
- Contaminated Land SPD (2015);
- Cambridgeshire Flood and Water SPD (2016); and
- Draft Natural Environment SPD (2020).

National Policy

- The National Planning Policy Framework 2019
- Planning Practice Guidance
- National Design Guide

As a general summary:

- Our design team has ensured that all polices relating to design quality have been satisfied, evidence with application drawings and documents.
- The proposal, being a cemetery facility, classified as a community resource and as such satisfies related policies.

- Sustainable and permeable materials have been specified for the building and exterior surfaces with the more environmentally-friendly option of an electric cremator being selected thus addressing sustainability policies.
- Renewable energy systems have been incorporated into the scheme, including installation of solar panels on the roof of the crematorium building coupled with on-site battery storage so that the development meets at least 70% of its energy needs through renewable sources.
- Close working relationships with ecologists and The Wildlife Trust ensures that all ecological factors have been addressed.
- Our inhouse engineers and geologists have responded to all factors relating to drainage, flood risk, geological factors etc.
- Transport, Air Quality, and Ecology consultants have been commissioned to address policies relating to specialist areas.
- It is worth noting that if the site was reopened within already authorised use, not requiring planning permission, the existing car park could be reinstated and the OMH, its botany and invertebrate population could be under threat.
- The northern access will provide a public resource for walking, bird watching and fishing.

4. General Design Statement

The proposed conversion of the site to a cemetery with supporting facilities would deliver an important community resource.

In its current state the site is derelict with buildings now in unsafe condition following several years of vandalism and arson attacks. Anti-social behaviour is evidenced in its broadest interpretation and, in Autumn 2020, the travelling community accessed the site and established themselves until they were officially removed.

Since the Outdoor Centre closed in 2017, the site has developed a degree of valuable habitat establishment, due mainly to lack of human activity. However, anti-social behaviour detailed in the paragraph above has potential to cause significant habitat damage. In addition, it is likely that invasive, aggressive plant species such as bramble and teasle will start to encroach into open and exposed areas threatening the recognised valuable and delicate habitats.

With regard to burial and ash internment provision detailed in Section 2.i.a above, it should be noted that the requirement for these various plots will not be immediate. A staged delivery process (Fig.6) would respond to this need ensuring that specific areas would remain unaffected by burials and ash internment for many years ahead, whilst new areas of open mosaic habitat (OMH) north of the building establish.

This point is particularly salient in the context of the OMH areas detailed on the following page in red, green and blue hatching:

Red - This is the compensation area where a new OMH habitat will be created by scraping away existing rich grass and topsoil to reveal the aggregate substrate beneath onto which a new OMH will be encouraged to develop.

As evidenced by the existing mosaic habitat (see 'Blue' below) it is expected that the new OMH would develop over a period of approximately four years. This has been the process of the established area which has developed since 2017 when the outdoor centre closed.

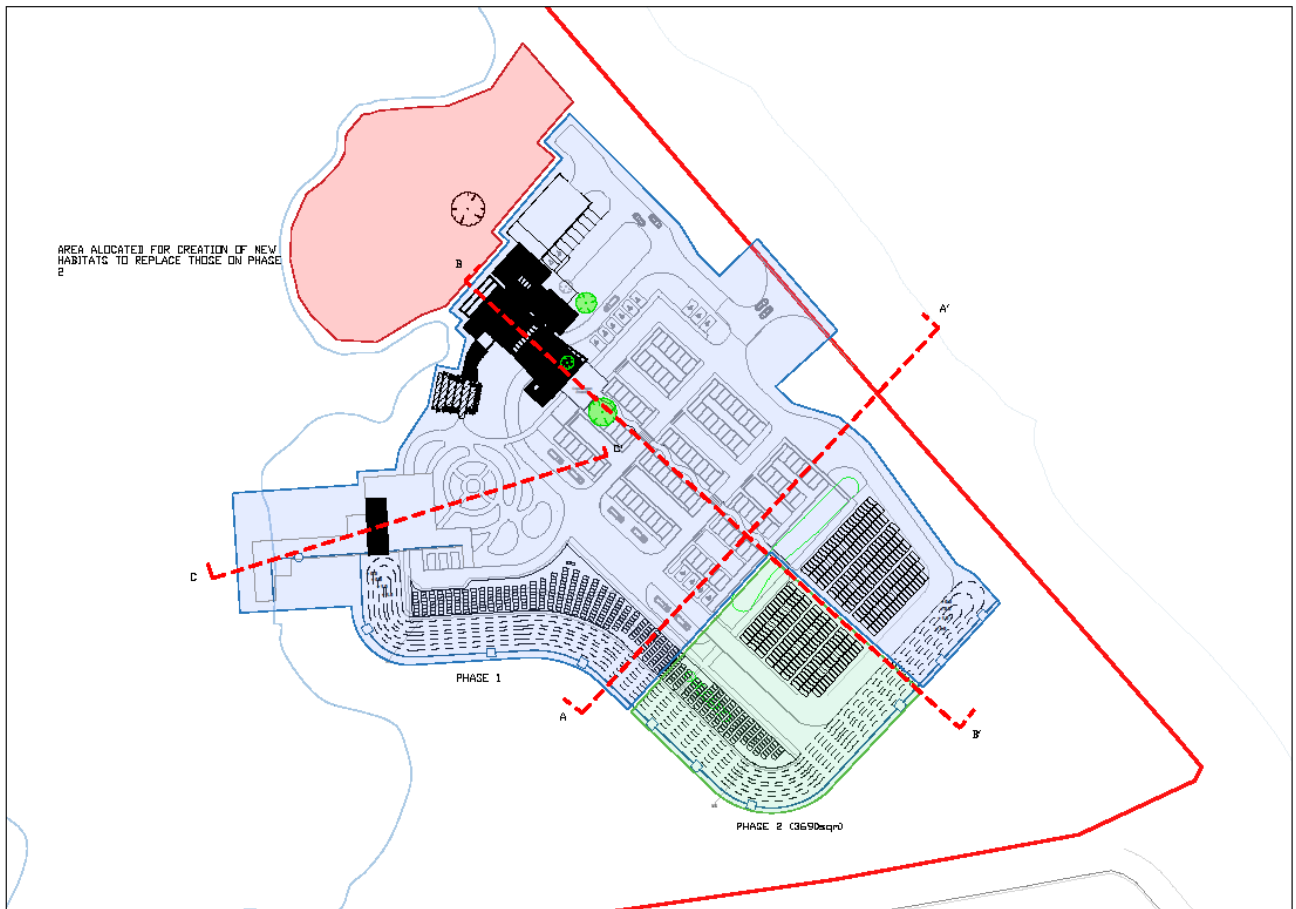
Consequently, in decades ahead, by the time the Green zone is released for burials, the compensation area will have been long-established and equally if not more valuable.

Blue - This relates to the eastern section of the existing OMH which has developed naturally over the previous gravel car park. The eastern section has less valuable habitat development than the western section and has therefore been identified as the first area to be released for natural burials, estimated to be between 20-30 per annum.

It is important to emphasise that when burial plots have been used, the top surface of ground will be the heavily aggregated soil reserved from the grave excavation. The aim is to recreate the OMH habitat which would then be left untouched for decades or more to come.

Green - The western area of OMH has become more established and is therefore more ecologically valuable. As detailed in 'Red' above, when this area is finally needed for natural burials in the future, the compensation area will have established, as will the early burial areas with reinstated OMH.

Fig 6 – staged development



The resultant natural burial area will provide visitors with a unique bereavement experience where the character of the landscape, the *genus loci*, will offer a sense of peace and tranquillity at a time of great sadness. There will be opportunity for mourners to linger or re-visit, to walk around contemplative accessible areas and have an unparalleled experienced of standing on a boardwalk at the water's edge looking out across the water, taking time to mourn, remembering and celebrating a lost family member or friend.

Planting will be designed to focus decorative, formalised planting around the building and car park, with the memorial garden having a more naturalistic character as it forms a transition between the developed and the natural areas.

Maintenance of the landscaping within the development area, including the memorial garden will be in accordance with a site-specific management plan and will be carried out discreetly, ideally during hours when services are not taking place. Wider landscape management will be under the directive of The Wildlife Trust's Landscape and Ecology Management Plan and a condition within the document will be a requirement for similar discretion.

The main objective of the development will be:

- To create a modern crematorium with high-end design and facilities within a unique landscape that also includes renewable energy generation.
- To mitigate and compensate for any impact resulting from the development.
- To ensure long-term management of wider landscape areas by working with The Wildlife Trust.
- To provide opportunity for peaceful outdoor exercise in the northern and eastern areas of the site

The design rationale is to create a sustainable and aesthetically significant crematorium that sits comfortably within and responds to the existing landscape, at the same time providing natural burial and ash internment facilities in a unique setting to provide peace and solace to mourners.

5 Conclusion

The proposed development seeks to optimise natural burial and ash internment opportunities whilst preserving and enhancing the specific wildlife and habitat value of the site. The partnership that has developed with ecologists and The Wildlife Trust throughout the design development process has empowered that vision and inspired creative solutions.

Access to the site is via the existing entrance, allowing existing boundary vegetation to remain.

Vehicle numbers and frequency generated by the crematorium could be comfortably accommodated, without significant impact on the safety or capacity of the surrounding transport network and infrastructure. (as evidenced in the Transport Statement within the submission documents).

By maintaining as far as possible a similar footprint to the previous car park, suitable access and parking provision has been balanced with habitat protection.

The solutions for maintaining, recreating and replacing areas of OMH provide confidence in longevity that might not be the case if the site is left in its current state when vandalism, trespass and vigorous plant species could all threaten such fragile habitats. There is ecological protection within the development of a crematorium project such as this, given that the site will be managed and maintained in accordance with agreed processes long into the future.

Similarly, the lake and water's edge will remain untouched in the southern section and protected with fragile, important pondweed being allowed to thrive. Birds will continue winter foraging; bat habitats will be protected and there is a hope that the evidence of otter existence will develop into a stable mammal community.

Whilst the public will be allowed access along the northern and eastern shores, access will not continue beyond the water's edge.

This proposal offers a uniquely sensitive and future-proofed solution to ensuring the site's special character and important habitats can continue long into the future, balanced by a commercially viable crematorium facility for community use.