

Myths and Meadows

Fact and fiction concerning the Council's proposals for routes in Castle Meadows



**A briefing note by Abergavenny Cycle Group
March 2022**

Myth #1: Upgrading existing paths with a bound surface such tarmac will be an eyesore.

Some facts: Tarmac has been used in equally beautiful settings without problems. Tarmac needn't be black. Black tarmac is used on roads where black blends in with the marks left by car tyres, but it can be made in any shade of grey, or even blue, green or beige. All shades of tarmac fade and lighten with time. Among possible alternatives to tarmac, are a wide choice of 'bound' surfaces that have been used in similar settings elsewhere. For more on the pros and cons of various path materials, see the excellent [Surface Guide for Path Projects](#) by Paths for All in Scotland.



Bound surfaces don't
have to be black

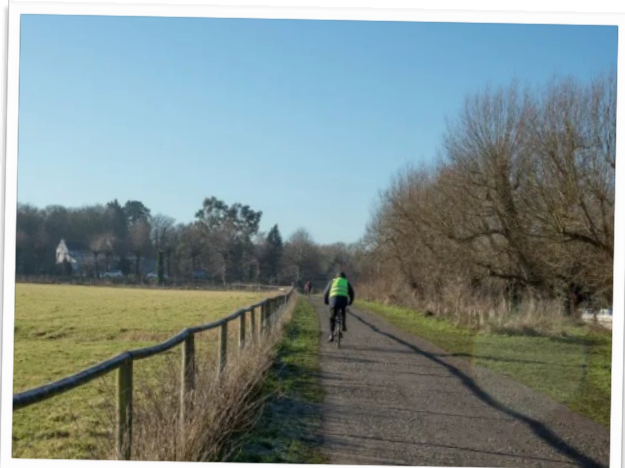
Myth #2: A tarmac path would be washed away by the floods and leach pollution into the river.

Some facts: Any durable path needs to be well laid with a good base. While the current proposals do not specify a material, tarmac is often used for shared use paths because it offers a smooth surface for wheeling, and is both durable and cost-effective. An example of a good riverside path made from tarmac is the path beside the River Dovey near Machynlleth (if you've ever cycled from the town to the nearby Centre for Alternative Technology you've likely used this path). The river floods just as fiercely as the Usk yet the path has been going strong for over twenty years and has not been washed away into the river. It even has grazing cows, just like Castle Meadows.



Riverside path (tarmac), near Machynlleth

Another example of a good riverside shared use path using a self-binding gravel surface is beside the River Avon at Bathampton Meadows just outside Bath, an area of green space managed by the National Trust. Though not as smooth as tarmac, and less weather-resistant, it is still useable all year round. As long as the path is well-made, and a suitable material is used, wheel-friendly surfaces can withstand flooding. Unbound, gravel-based surfaces are more susceptible to flood waters and the weather and need more regular maintenance. The recently relaid pinkish-red coloured unbound paths on Castle Meadows are already showing signs of flood and rain damage.



Riverside path (compacted gravel), Bathampton Meadows

Myth #3: Three metres is too wide for paths across the Meadows.

Some facts: The council proposes that the main routes across the Meadows meet the 3m wide standard set out in the Welsh Government's Active Travel Design Guidance. The present concrete block path is 2.25m wide. So the increase is just 75cm. The existing gravel paths are around 2m wide. Why increase to 3m? Well, studies have shown that where cycles and pedestrians mix, this is the width that reduces the chances of conflict. On a 2m wide path, two people walking side by side will tend to fill up the path. Any cyclist wishing to pass will have to either go off the path, or ring a bell to ask the pedestrians to step to one side. When traffic levels are less than 500 walkers and cyclists per hour, a 3m wide path provides enough room for everyone. In some of the minor paths, a 2.5m width may be sufficient. The narrower the path, the greater are the risks of conflict and collision.

Myth #4: Cattle grids will harm dogs, encourage fast cycling and allow motorbikes into the Meadows.

Some facts: The proposals include changing the gates to the Meadows from the current cattle-proof wooden kissing gates to a combination of a swing-gate for pedestrians and a miniature cattle grid for wheeled users (cycles, wheelchairs, mobility scooters). These are used widely in other settings where dogs are also walked off the leash, without problems. Cattle grids can be wide enough to be accessible to wheeled users, but sufficiently narrow to require them to slow down to walking pace. The photos below show this arrangement working elsewhere. Motorbikes are not a problem in Bailey Park nor on the Llanfoist to Clydach walking and cycling route. There's no reason to assume they'll be a problem in the Meadows.



Cattle-proof gates and cattle grids in various settings

Myth #5: Everyone is happy with how things are.

Some facts: Castle Meadows is a unique and popular outdoor space in the heart of Abergavenny and Llanfoist. But not everybody is currently able to enjoy it. Try getting through them unaided in a mobility scooter, or a wheelchair, or with a non-standard cycle or towing a bicycle trailer. The concrete block path is bumpy for small wheels of buggies, push-chairs and mobility scooters. In the winter the paths can become waterlogged and muddy, especially the route to Ysbytty Fields. Upgrading accessibility and creating truly all-weather all-year-round paths for walking and wheeling will only increase the range of people who are able to enjoy the Meadows, whether as a destination or as part of relaxed and pleasant journeys around town.

Myth #6: There's no need for a new route from the Meadows to the railway station.

Some facts: The proposals include upgrading the existing narrow and muddy track through the Meadows to Ysbytty Fields, and also creating a new route that would link to the A40 / Monmouth Road at the foot of Station Road. This would create a new, flat, direct and traffic free walking and cycling route from Llanfoist to the railway station (a 10 minute bike ride or a 20-25 minute walk) and reduce demand on car parking at the station and the surrounding residential streets. This new route would require a new ramp / steps structure to climb to the level of the Monmouth Road. It is worth considering this proposal further and seeing if the ramp could be landscaped into the slope. The present route from the Meadows to the Station via Mill Street and along the A40 or up via Holywell Road, is less direct and not ideal from a road safety point of view - the A40 is a hostile road for cycling. However, the new 20mph speed limit coming into force this may improve things. One or other of these routes across the Meadows to the railway station can and should be made to work.

Myth #7: The council wants to install floodlighting.

Some facts: The council's proposal does include the possibility of low level solar-powered lighting to aid way-finding in the dark. This is an idea for consideration and further investigation, rather than an essential part of the proposals. The original planning permission for the new walking and cycling bridge across the Usk specifically ruled out lighting the bridge, for ecological reasons relating to birds and bats that live in and around the Meadows. Night-time users would still expect to use bike lights or a hand-held torch to navigate the Meadows. The idea of lighting may well be dropped from the final proposal that is submitted to Welsh Government for funding.

Myth #8: A new Usk bridge and improved paths will turn the Meadows into a park

Some facts: Though Castle Meadows lies within the built-up area of Abergavenny and Llanfoist, it retains a rural atmosphere, and a character that is different and distinctive. It's not a garden like Linda Vista Gardens nor a park like Bailey Park. It's not typical farmland nor open country like the uplands of Brecon Beacons National Park. While the riverbank is an SSSI, the 22-acres of grazing meadow are not. Making the paths and entrances more accessible to a wider range of users won't diminish the Meadows - quite the opposite. The river will continue to flood, cattle will continue to graze. Its essential character will be maintained, while improved access will enable a wider range of local people to enjoy a unique and precious green space.

Myth #10: The money could be spent on something else, like repairing the roads.

Some facts: The only likely source of funding for the proposed new bridge etc is the Welsh Government's Active Travel Fund. This an annual pot of money, currently £75m, that is allocated following a competitive bidding process. Each council submits its bids and these are evaluated in terms of their design, the likely benefits to local people and value-for-money. Active travel funding is for walking and cycling projects and cannot be reallocated to schools, hospitals, or fixing pot holes.

Myth #9: This is being driven by outsiders - let locals decide!

Some facts: The current road bridge across the Usk is unpleasant and dangerous for walking and cycling, and a major barrier for local people who want to walk or cycle between Abergavenny and Llanfoist. For at least a decade, the idea of a new bridge has received overwhelming local support in several official consultations. The simple fact is that if a new bridge is built, it will - by design - attract more local people to the Meadows, both as a destination and as a walking and cycling route. The current paths and entry points fall below the accessibility standards required by this increased usage (the relevant standards are set out in the Welsh Government's Active Travel Design Guidance).

More and more people in Abergavenny and Llanfoist are using bikes to get around instead of cars, but without safe, pleasant and direct routes, this increase will be limited to those who are prepared to take their chances on the roads. Good, traffic-free routes across the Meadows could lead to a step-change in the way local people get around and provide youngsters with the 'freedom to roam' that has been lost to ever-increasing levels of motor traffic and road danger.



Peterborough Green Wheel



Riverside path, Western France



Exe Estuary Trail, Devon



Great Stour Way, Kent

Read the councils proposals and respond to the consultation - deadline 25 March 2022.

Abergavenny Cycle Group is a group of local volunteers who have been working for safe cycling in and around Abergavenny area since 1995. Registered Charity, No. 1070816.