

DM/2022/01831 | Improvements to the existing pedestrian and cycle connectivity across Castle Meadows by providing Active Travel compliant routes. Including the upgrade of existing routes, access points and the replacement of the existing footbridge over the River Gavenny.

Response from Abergavenny Cycle Group, 15 February 2023

Summary

Overall, our group strongly supports the proposals. We have a reservation about whether replacing the Gavenny Bridge is justified (see below).

While the existing paths across the meadows have been part of the National Cycle Network for years, they are underused as active travel routes. The overwhelming reason for this is road danger on the old bridge across the Usk.

With planning permission already granted for a new walking and cycling bridge across the Usk, it makes sense to ensure that the onward routes into Abergavenny are made suitable for the widest range of potential users. The new bridge and good onward routes into the town centre will provide people with a convenient and attractive alternative to making short local journeys by car. Increasing the share of local trips made by walking and cycling reduces traffic congestion, lowers pollution including carbon emissions, and contributes to healthier and happier lifestyles.

The proposed scheme provides for much-needed improvements to the infrastructure of existing active travel routes in Castle Meadows:

- Replacing the awkward wooden kissing gates with swing gates plus mini cattle-grids.
- Upgrading the existing uneven and often muddy paths to smooth, hard-wearing, all-weather, bound surfaces that are suitable for cycles and other wheeled users (e.g. wheelchair and mobility scooter users and parents with buggies).

- Widening paths to 2.5-3m to reduce potential conflict between active travel users as recommended by the Active Travel (Wales) Act.

With regard to the replacement of the fairly new Gavenny Bridge structure, ACG is not convinced that the high cost of a new bridge is justified. Given the expected volume of users on the eastern route, the fact that the current bridge is not 3m wide does not constitute a significant barrier to the overall success of this route.

As well as the paths within Castle Meadows, ACG very much welcomes the proposal to upgrade the path around the back of Abergavenny Castle between Castle Street and Mill Street. This is a key connectivity route within the town, providing a 'contraflow' for Cross Street, which is one-way in its top section. We also recognise the potential of upgraded routes into the eastern side of the town (Ysbytty Fields) and a new, direct, traffic-free route to the railway station.

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.

The case for the proposals

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.

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.

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.

Addressing concerns and objections

The following section presents our groups responses to some of the objections that have been raised by members of the public.

Upgrading existing paths with a bound surface such as tarmac

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.

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.



River Dovey path, near Machynlleth

Likewise, there are good, hard-wearing tarmac paths in Alney Island in Gloucester, which are regularly submerged when the River Severn bursts its banks.



Alney Island Nature Reserve, Gloucester

Mini-cattle grids for wheeled users

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. Motorbikes are not a problem on the Llanfoist to Clydach walking and cycling route.



Cattle-proof gates and cattle grids in various settings

Widening paths to 3 metres

The council proposes that the main routes across the Meadows aspire to 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 to 3m is just 75cm. The existing gravel paths are around 2m wide.

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 the width of the path. 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.

A new route from Llanfoist to the railway station.

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. 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.

Case studies of similar schemes elsewhere



Peterborough Green Wheel



Riverside path, Western France



Exe Estuary Trail, Devon



Great Stour Way, Kent