ABERGAVENNY TOWN COUNCIL

ACTIVE TRAVEL STAKEHOLDER MEETING

MONDAY 17TH JULY 2023

COMMUNITY ROOM, TOWN HALL, 7PM – 9PM

PRESENT: Paul Sullivan, Nick Tulp, Duncan Thompson, Ian Saunders, Mark Langley, Ruth Rourke – MonLife; Cllr Sara Burch – MCC Cabinet Member Active Travel; Cllr Laura Wright, Cllr David Simcock, Cllr Kyle Eldridge, Cllr Maurice Barnes, Cllr Maureen Powell, Sandra Rosser – Abergavenny Town Council; Mark Hand, Paul Keeble, Jan Whitham – Monmouthshire County Council; James Morgan, Stephen Heaney – WSP; Gwyn Smith – TfW; Anthea Fairey , Jay Shipley – Friends of Castle Meadows; Benita Kelly – Promobility Group; Jenny Cockitt – Local Access Forum; Patrick Hannay – Transition Towns; Sam Charrington – Abergavenny Cycle Group; David Haswell; Liz Procter; Jo Waters; Sam Meyrick; Andrew Erskine.

Cllr Laura Wright chaired the meeting on behalf of Abergavenny Town Council.

After introductions, Cllr Sara Burch reiterated the time that has gone into Active Travel plans, that it has been in development for nearly 15 years, and that there is now funding and planning permission in place for the bridge from Llanfoist to the meadows. The wider scheme is being developed. Grass Crete is expensive to maintain, the kissing gates are difficult for cyclists who must get off and lift their bikes over. Consultations and changes have been made to plans. Surface was changed to permeable resin bound surface, lighting was removed. Gate design was altered. Appalled at the incident that occurred – Cllr Burch expressed her condolences to Jo Waters over the death of her dog. Barriers were put up immediately after the incident and a full review implemented to re-assess the grids. Talked to many different locations around the UK to see the different options. The challenge is getting people on and off the meadows without the need to lift items over gates. The scheme is a balancing act. It’s important for the cattle to remain as part of the biodiversity and ecology of the area. It’s a quiet space. A National Cycle Route. It floods. It has important habitats. Road access points will have grids. Bridge over the Gavenny will be reinforced so no grids or gates are needed. The scheme will go to planning in August.

Paul Sullivan took the stakeholders through a power point presentation detailing work so far and plan details. He also apologised to Jo Waters for the loss of her dog. He stressed the level of detail that went into the decision for the trial grid wasn’t agreed lightly, and lots of work went into it. The main aim for access points is for any wheeled vehicle to have easy access. Monmouthshire County Council had strict guidance to adhere to in producing these plans and proposals.

Cllr Wright opened to questions from the floor. Liz Procter said she is anti-cattle grids. They are dangerous to dogs. Can’t find a cycle group who agree to cycle over cattle grids. Cross Country events cover cattle grids to enable cyclists to safely travel over them. Mobility scooters – again not recommended to go over grids. Cyclists want a gate; they are happy to get off and open agate. Need new gates for mobility scooters too. Want something easy for everyone. Blind person nearly knocked over who didn’t see the need to slow down or brake for a gate. A gate makes people stop and approach slowly. Cattle can’t push open gates from the other side.

Anthea Fairey said lighting being removed was as a result of recommendation from the Biodiversity Officer. Asphalt was rejected as it wasn’t SUDs compliant. Only 5% of flood meadows left in the UK. Friends of Castle Meadows have had no consultation, no dialogue, only monologue – being told by Monmouthshire County Council what’s happening. Could have met a more equitable solution if proper dialogue with the group and Welsh Government.

Jenny Cockitt said there was lots of talk about cyclists and mobility scooters, but what about parents with young children, negotiating prams and pushchairs – these need to be considered as well.

Gwyn Smith from Transport for Wales said the funding is for access for all. Previously worked with Sustrans on Clydach Gorge to Brynmawr route. 12 cattle grids, never any reported accidents. These are fitted at numerous sites across Wales. Monmouthshire County Council have consulted at length and considered many aspects. We want to see access for all legitimate users. Appreciate the issues being raised. Continue to work with the team on recommendations to get a satisfactory resolution.

Paul Sullivan stated the consultation is ongoing and that all opinions have been valued from day one. The session during Covid which was held with Friends of Castle Meadows prior to the consultation going live lead to a press enquiry containing details only shared at that meeting, which was disappointing. We’ve continued with the consultation, and want to keep the dialogue going, so people can see the delivery that works for everyone. Wouldn’t expect cyclists to travel over grids at speed. These are there to ensure they travel onto the meadows responsibly, as well as other users.

Benita Kelly said most people had smaller mobility scooter which are easier to get in and out of cars. They have small wheels at the back which would get stuck, so she won’t use the grids. Hired scooters tend to have larger wheels. Happy to try get through the gate. Concerned people won’t see signs regarding new entry points. Have Guide Dogs for the Blind been consulted and what provision is being made to enable blind people to know they are approaching somewhere with gates and grids?

Cllr Powell said she had farmed for years and if gates, grids and posts are properly installed there should be no issue. Just need to take care putting gates in place.

Andrew Erskine agreed we need to get out of our cars and walk/cycle more. Bridge across the Usk – why is it just for cycling? Create a cycle route up Merthyr Road and Tudor Street. There is no address of the slope up from the copse to the Castle. Due to the width and the slope here its unlikely to be used by cyclists to access the meadows. Has a health and safety appraisal been done on the entrances? A gate that requires pushing to open will be difficult for buggies. King Henry VIII School currently has 12 pupils cycling to school. Priority projects to link into this across the whole town. Develop these rather than the Castle Meadow scheme. Studies of cyclist behaviour have shown an increase in use of electric bikes, they are heavier, and go faster. Electric scooters although not yet road legal are likely to become more common place. A share use space at Kings Cross in London is now under review due to issues over the shared space – looking to segregate the pedestrian and cyclists. Shouldn’t mix these groups unless absolutely necessary.

Cllr Burch responded that the layout had looked at all options including any infill required. Existing paths are no longer safe or easy to maintain. Can’t put in a cycle lane further up. Even a cycle route will encourage faster traversing.

Mark Hand said tactile paving will be installed as part of the scheme. The surface chosen was one of 4 considered. Permeable resin bound option arrived at after consultation.

Paul Sullivan said wheel size is important, and gates and grids have ben looked at together. Compromise is a hybrid model – close off grids when cattle aren’t grazing.

Jenny Cockitt said there are types of wheelchairs which enable users to drive a car but then cause issue when travelling in the chair over certain surfaces or slopes – are all types of chair being considered?

Cllr Burch said there is no flat access and we have to live with the slopes. Dealing with what we’ve got. Multiple entry points will enable choice.

Patrick Hannay said the climate emergency is very important so hoping the scheme contributes to important changes in habits. No cycle association will recommend cattle grids. Interested to hear from cyclists what they think?

Jo Waters would rather open a gate than cycle over a grid, so why do we need them?

Cllr Eldridge said that high maintenance costs have ben talked about for the current surface. What are the projected maintenance costs for the new resin bound surface?

 Gwyn Smith said cattle grids have always been used they are set out in the greenway design guide, and allow easy access. Gates you can lean over to get through. Would love a design which automatically opens to save pushing/pulling gate. Cllr Burch said solar powered had been looked at but nothing on the market is flood or cattle proof!

Paul Sullivan said current state of path is decreasing so this gives us a chance to future proof it for all users. Enables improvements, and happy to provide ongoing revenue costs.

Gwyn Smith said it is best practice to look for ongoing low-cost maintenance options.

Sam Meyrick said this seems an impossible situation. There are set guidelines the scheme needs to fit. Need to address the gate issue. Personal experience as an active travel family – usually have a 2yr old on the back of the bike, so can’t open the gate and hold the bike. The grid will allow so many of us to use the space. Hope a solution can be found for us all.

Cllr David Simcock commented that as a cyclist himself he has found that grid can differ – if the bars are close enough together you can cycle over them easily. Appreciate people are nervous of them. Gates are difficult – you have to get off the bike, prop it up somewhere, open the gate, grab your bike and take it through, prop it up again, hen close the gate. It’s a difficult problem. Sensible design of cattle grids seems a good option, and to be in use only when cattle are on the meadows.

David Haswell said the context is difficult and challenging. Will Welsh Government fund active travel without cattle grids? People – the new bridge lands on the riverbank and then redirects you onto a new path system. There are right angle points to complete the journey. People will follow the desire lines. Routes should be short and direct, the bridge lands and there is no direct travel plan, but it was in the original plan in 2018. Lose existing grass crete blocks – these have value, instead of using for hardcore can they be reused at the northern edge for a secondary path system on the meadows. Recycle to enhance a popular accepted route.

Cllr Burch said gates will be open across the meadow when cattle are not on site.

Paul Keeble commented that paths will follow existing routes so as to not create additional paths.

Steve Heaney said there is a 2m difference in levels where the bridge comes across so additional flood works would be required, can’t increase the levels any further. Original plan was pre-flood modelling.

Paul Sullivan agreed about the desire line but informal desire lines will still be there, we want to make as few changes as possible.

David Haswell asked about a compromise of a northern route on the meadow, taking from meadows to car park area.

Ruth Rourke said we try to recycle where we can, we don’t want to create any more surfaced routes, as few as possible was the feedback from the consultation. Its important for the farer to have grass for the cattle.

Mark Langley said the grass crete blocks are very difficult to remove without damaging them. Most users will stick to the paths. Its not level across the meadows as there is a big pond in the middle.

Sam Charrington said the Abergavenny Cycle Group have looked at cycle safety, and the desire line issue he takes on board. Want to have as little impact as possible. At one point there were no paths, but now we have paths, benches, signs, gates. Interesting comments from Sam Meyrick. No issue going over grids. Choice is there. The steep hill from the Castle, are there long term plans to improve this access route? Are there pictures of the push gates and details or specs? The figure of 6000 journeys – what’s the projected change to this? People against the plans, saying its money wasted on a dystopian future where we all cycle! We are a town of 12,500 people, it’s not the Taff Trail - it is not a fair comparison. Appreciates the work that’s gone into this.

Jay Shipley said about this being requested to be a respectful process. It feels more like an attempt to discredit the Friends of Castle Meadows. The suggestion that someone leaked information to the press has been challenged by email to Paul Sullivan asking who shared the information but they have had no response to date. It is an attempt to discredit the Friends of Castle Meadows. Need acknowledgement of attempt to keep the area a SSSI and the work of the volunteers.

Cllr Burch reiterated the value of the work the volunteers from Friends fo Castle Meadows put in and the many hours they spend doing so. Not heard any disrespect – we’ve consulted and worked with groups and this is an area we are working to improve upon.

Anthea Fairey said she didn’t post any information on Facebook as she didn’t have access to it at that time.

Paul Sullivan said volunteers are the lifeblood of active travel and sport development. A conversation has happened and reiterated the point made that the South Wales Argus contacted him for comment, that no reference was made it came from Friends of Castle Meadows, but someone present at that meeting did take the information shared in confidence to the press after the meeting. Active Travel tam have faced mis-information being put up and shared on a regular basis. This has lead to a FAQs section on the website which has all the correct information. Apologised for any offence caused to the Friends of Castle Meadows but please appreciate someone at that meeting did go to the press. Please check the FAQs and update us if there is any point that’s not correct. Jay Shipley acknowledged this and said they want to work with Monmouthshire County Council going forward.

Cllr Burch said the grids will be located at the new bridge, Merthyr Road entrance and Byefield Lane car park, with no grids now being placed at the castle entry point or either side of the Gavenny bridge. New route via Mill Lane will have a grid. New scheme details to follow for Station Access and Llanfoist. The access to the station has significant slopes to overcome. Llanfoist is at the design stage )Paul Keeble said WelTag 3 design workshops are underway to create the detailed design for consultation).

Andrew Erskine said its hard to believe its safe for a 1 ½ meter opening at points 4 and 5 as people come from different direction and there are slopes. Why does national cycle network have to go over the meadows? Redirect it to Merthyr Road, local traffic may se meadows but National Cycle Network tourists are happy to go over the current bridge. Mill Lane – is Monmouthshire County Council adopting this highway and improving the road surface?

David Haswell asked again if Welsh Government funding would still be available without the cattle grids included in the scheme. Points 4 and 5 the car park gates were included in the survey but are not in the current proposal. Speed of cyclists – will you consider traffic calming measures?

Jo Waters said a super smooth surface will encourage faster cyclists and that is the main worry of the general public. It’s a peaceful and quiet place. How will you slow them down? Majority of users will be walkers.

Cllr Burch said the space will be shared use with families, children, cyclists and other wheeled users. The grids are compliant with active travel.

Mark Hand confirmed Mill Street is not adopted.

Anthea Fairey understands the need for a cattle grid for the bridge over the Usk. None for the Gavenny bridge – this will mean you have cattle, cyclists, cow pats – how will that works?

Cllr Burch responded that there were two options. A grid either side of the bridge with gates, or no grids or gates, which does mean cattle may well use the bridge, but it is preferred to the grid option. Its an area where lots allow their dogs to run free. Girds are to be at points approaching roads/car parks as a compromise.

Benita Kelly said the Mill Street access onto the path is very difficult for mobility scooters, particularly up and down to the Castle. The scheme shows the bollards have been removed – these stop vehicles parking there. Can you confirm if bollards will stay to stop the parking of vehicles? Cllr Burch confirmed they will be in place.

Liz Procter asked about the Merthyr Road cattle grid – gypsies try to access the meadows and have been trying to break the gate for years. Motorbikes and horse and traps too. Cllr Burch confirmed the grid will be 1 ½ meters wide. Possible CCTV extension from town if motorbikes are an issue.

Sam said as a cyclist can they reassure there is a difference between commuter cyclists and sport cyclists. Adaptive behaviours from all people will share the space respectfully. Maybe look at ‘Share with Care’ signs.

Cllr Wright brought the meeting to a close and reminded everyone of the drop-in session 10am – 1pm on Tuesday 18th July in the Mayors Parlour. Paul Sullivan said a public meeting will be held in the future to share further plans and developments.