River Dee Park Masterplan
& Site Action Plans

for

Chester City and Chester West & Chester Councils
The Forum
Chester
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River Dee Park Masterplan and Sites Action Plans
For Chester City Council

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 The River Dee Park is the network of green spaces, community assets and natural elements that intersperse and connect to the River Dee Corridor within Chester City Centre. The Park is part of a holistic approach to the sustainable development of Chester, and acknowledges the many benefits that the Park can provide for the economy, wildlife, local people and communities alike.

1.2 The Park needs to compliment and add value to plans for new built development while at the same time meeting community and environmental needs. There is also a need to protect and improve the green and open spaces that make up the Park in such a way that they can still provide recreational opportunities for existing and importantly future communities, and also for the many visitors Chester attracts each year.

1.3 TEP was therefore commissioned by Chester City Council to produce a Masterplan for the River Dee Park that would help in understanding and planning for the protection, enhancement and extension of its green and open spaces at a strategic level. Alongside this, a series of recommendations for the development and maintenance of individual sites are presented within a series of Sites Action Plans.

1.4 This report presents the evidence behind these recommendations, considering the City’s green and open spaces, resources and assets within the Park, and including environmental, ecological, historical and cultural elements. Current and future demands and opportunities for the Park and its sites are identified alongside the potential benefits the Park can deliver.

Chester & the River Dee

1.5 The historic city of Chester lies in the south western part of the North West Region, bordering Wales and close to the major cities of Liverpool and Manchester. This proximity to Wales and the City’s strategic and tactical location on the River Dee has ensured the City has retained its role as one of the North West’s major settlements for over 2000 years.

1.6 The River Dee has traditionally played an important part in the economic development of Chester, with shipbuilding on the River a valuable local industry until the 1930s and the docks until the 1960s.

1.7 The River continues to contribute to the local economy as a major element of Chester’s tourism draw, and provides recreational opportunities for local communities and visitors alike. It contributes to Chester’s unique ‘sense of place’ and high quality living and working environment, attracting new people to live, work and invest in the city.

1.8 The River is also a major regional environmental asset. Reputed to be one of the most regulated rivers in Europe, the Dee is designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Several important indicator species can be found in the Dee system, including Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*), European otter (*Lutra lutra*) (which is now showing signs of recovery following its decline in the 1970s) and the endangered water vole (*Arvicola terrestris*).
Why a River Dee Park?

1.9 Many of the world’s great cities are enhanced by their open spaces; Paris, Berlin and New York are all destinations that see their open spaces as an integral part of their image as well as an asset for their populations. With a growing community and a need to consolidate and improve its recreational, tourism and environmental assets, Chester must make the most of its existing assets and manage them in such as way as to maximise the benefit that they provide.

1.10 The River Dee Park provides a framework for integrating physical resources and natural systems with ecological, geological and historical assets within a common goal. The creation of the River Dee Park is consistent with the objectives of Chester’s Draft Green Space Strategy¹, Chester Greenways² and the North West of England Spatial Strategy³ - particularly in its contribution to green infrastructure: the parks and gardens, natural areas, canal and river corridors, farmland, street trees, outdoor sports facilities and open spaces of Chester. Green infrastructure (GI) planning is a concept that has much support in local, regional and national planning policies. The North West Green Infrastructure Guide⁴ describes green infrastructure as:

“the Region’s life support system – The network of natural environmental components and green and blue spaces that lies within and between the North West’s cities, towns and villages which provides multiple social, economic and environmental benefits.”

1.11 By linking the City’s green infrastructure assets both to each other and to the communities they serve, the Park will not only become a major green infrastructure asset for the City but for the West Cheshire Sub-Region as a whole, with sites becoming more sustainable as part of a wider network than as...
isolated individual sites. The Masterplan will inform the development of Cheshire West & Cheshire’s local plans and strategies such as Local Development Framework documents and Area Action Plans as well as green infrastructure plans for the West Cheshire Growth Point and River Dee corridor, and assist the implementation of those plans by providing baseline evidence and information for policy formulation and project development and delivery.

**Developing the River Dee Park Masterplan**

**Key Aims**

1.13 The River Dee Park clearly provides the opportunity for planning and managing the multifunctionality of the city centre’s open and green space assets at the landscape scale. This can clearly deliver a number of important benefits that set the context for the City’s sustainable prosperity:

- Providing an inspiring setting for economic progress and investment;
- Creating a focus for social inclusion, education, training, health and well being;
- Reinforcing and enhancing landscape character;
- Reversing habitat fragmentation and increasing biodiversity;
- Developing a multi-functional landscape and greenspace resource that meets local needs;
- Providing attractive and sustainable options for flood control and management;
- Safeguarding and enhancing natural and historic assets, between, in and around major communities; and
- Inspiring cohesive partnership working across a range of disciplines and sectors including voluntary and public.

1.14 This study will produce a River Dee Park Masterplan and Site Action Plans for the River Dee Park that will contribute to the conservation, enhancement and extension of the City’s green infrastructure and provide a baseline for developing management plans for the Park’s green and open spaces.

1.15 The Masterplan has been developed according to five key principles:

- It must be a strategic level plan for the whole river corridor;
- It must consider the linkages between the river corridor, the City and the City’s communities;
- It will link existing initiatives and programmes such as Cycle Chester and Chester Greenways;
- It will be the pilot project that can guide future green infrastructure planning and support any future River Dee Regional Park; and
- It will be a model of sustainability, guide sustainable development and recognise the multifunctional nature of land use.

1.16 Assessment of individual sites and subsequent development of the Sites Action Plans have also been guided by several principles:
• The assessments will follow the methodology of ‘Raising the Standard’, the Green Flag Guidance;
• The sites will be assessed in terms of their spatial relationship to the communities, historic, cultural and natural assets and each other, and
• Each site assessment and action plan will consider both routine maintenance and future site development;
• Action plans will consider both the role and functionality of the sites in terms of the River Dee Park and the wider community.

Methodology

1.17 Clearly the River Dee Park can deliver benefits beyond those of environmental protection and enhancement; there are also substantial returns for communities and society as a whole and the local and wider economies. The implementation of the Park Masterplan in the City of Chester and beyond will almost certainly make a significant contribution to the ability of Chester to live and prosper within environmental limits.

1.18 In view of the scale and strategic nature of this work, our approach is based on the steps for mapping and assessing green infrastructure outlined in the North West Green Infrastructure Guide across several stages of work:
• Analysis of policies, strategies, audits and plans within Chester, and specifically those that impact on the River Dee Park area;
• Identification of actual and potential assets using maps, spatial plans and open space audits, surveys and GIS datasets;
• Field assessment of the 27 key sites within the Park as highlighted by Chester City Council (see figure 1.2)
• Analysis of significant gaps and barriers, issues, needs and opportunities for delivering the River Dee Park, considering environmental features and socio-economic characteristics.

1.19 The evidence gathered from these stages of work was formed into a draft set of spatial and thematic recommendations that were presented to delegates in a stakeholders workshop. Feedback from stakeholders was added to the evidence base and recommendations revised as appropriate to form the final River Dee Park Masterplan and Sites Action Plans.

Outcomes

1.20 This River Dee Park Masterplan will have two main outcomes.

1.21 First, existing networks of green and blue (water) spaces and corridors within and between the urban area and other settlements and the surrounding countryside will be identified to form the basis for developing a strategic and aspirational Masterplan for the conservation, protection and enhancement of those green spaces, corridors, access routes and environmental resources that will form the River Dee Park.
Development on both brownfield and green field sites will exert pressures on both the quality and quantity of existing green infrastructure assets in the Chester area. This Masterplan will take the growth projections into consideration and will articulate a clear vision for meeting the City’s needs and opportunities for development, supporting the economy, improving the recreational offer and enhancing biodiversity.

Although the existence of a Masterplan will be important to guide development, its successful implementation is paramount in securing and enhancing the quality of life and sustainability of the City. In support of the Masterplan will be the identification of policy and deliverability issues, including possible funding, delivery mechanisms and main actors for implementing green infrastructure in the River Dee/Chester Area (i.e. the Masterplan will be grounded in deliverability).

Although the River Dee Park will be the main focus of the Masterplan it is important to recognise that the Park cannot be considered in isolation. Parts of the City that are a considerable distance from the main Park ‘corridor’ must also be considered as part of the green infrastructure context for the Park, particularly in terms of improving or extending the benefits of the Park and its sites to wider communities, whilst the aspiration for a River Dee Regional Park also requires a wider spatial approach.

The second main outcome of this commission will be a series of Action Plans for 10 of the Park’s key sites. These will be identified through an analysis of their potential contribution to the wider River Dee Park initiative and in consultation with the various stakeholders. Alongside these 10 key sites/assets, the remaining sites under local authority influence will be assessed and recommendations for their improvement made.

This document provides the detailed background and evidence used to form the River Dee Park Masterplan. Chapters 2 and 3 draw on a variety of information and data to build a detailed evidence base for the River Dee Park Masterplan, which is presented in Chapter 4. Our approach to the individual sites assessments is described in Chapter 5 and Appendix 2, with Site Action Plans included in Appendix 3. Finally, Chapter 6 begins to look at implementation issues, and how the recommendations laid out in the Masterplan could be delivered.

An executive summary has also been produced which presents the key findings and recommendations in a more accessible format. This is available at www.chester.gov.uk.
Chapter 2: Assets, Issues, Opportunities and Threats

2.1 The River Dee Park will deliver many benefits across several thematic ‘functions’. These functions are the roles that land can play if it is managed in an appropriate way. Numerous environmental or socio-economic functions are possible (e.g. biodiversity, local distinctiveness, public health, sport and recreation, heritage and culture, flood management, climate change adaptation and many others), and sites or areas can be ‘multifunctional’ where different functions or activities occur on the same piece of land.

2.2 To better understand these functions, a variety of existing datasets and sources of information have been used to identify and map the River Dee Park, and the issues, opportunities and threats it experiences across its range of assets: areas which, by virtue of their location, their use or their management, serve one or more functions of social, economic or environmental public benefit. Assets can be defined sites, or equally can be landscapes or other broader environmental features, and can include:

- Green space assets with wildlife value; (ANCVs, SNCVs, SAC, National & Local BAP Habitats)
- Water courses and water bodies; (including small ponds & ditches)
- Land under Countryside / Environmental Stewardship or other management regimes;
- Parks, gardens and heritage features;
- Recreation facilities;
- Access network, including footpaths, cycle ways and promoted paths

2.3 Analysis of these assets has led to the identification of several key functions that the River Dee Park can provide:

- Biodiversity
- Access
- Green & Open Spaces
- Heritage & Cultural Assets

2.4 This chapter examines each of these functions, presenting the issues for the River Dee Park, identifying any threats to the functions or assets providing the functions, and considering opportunities for enhancing or expanding the function to deliver additional benefits.

2.5 The analysis takes the approach that generally multi-functionality is desirable as integration and interaction suggests an efficient and sustainable use of land, especially where pressures on land are acute. However, it also recognises that some assets have single functions of over-riding importance which might be compromised by multi-functional use, and the River Dee Park Plan has to respond to the need or desire to manage these key assets for their single purpose or intrinsic value which can often be a result of unintended or inappropriate multi functional use.
Biodiversity

2.6 The River Dee itself is designated a Special Area of Conservation (SAC), with important species such as the Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*), water vole (*Arvicola terrestris*, UKBAP Species), European kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) and the European otter (*Lutra lutra*, UKBAP Species) all present within the river system. The entire Dee system is recognised as an important area for breeding birds, from the Welsh mountains to the estuary where the floodplains support protected species such as the lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*, UKBAP Species). The River is also an important corridor for many species including those not normally associated with the aquatic environment such as fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), badger (*Meles meles*) and many species of birds and bats.

2.7 As a designated site of European importance, management of and development around the River Dee is subject to particular requirements and restrictions in order to protect its biodiversity value. Of particular relevance to Chester is the need for Habitats Regulations Assessments to be carried out on any policies or projects which would be likely to have a significant effect on the River Dee SAC.

2.8 Figure 2.1 shows the distribution of open natural and semi natural spaces within the River Dee Park area, most importantly the River Dee SAC but also including green space of a natural character and other green spaces such as parks, sports fields and allotments. Figure 2.2 shows those areas that are designated or managed for their ecological value.

2.9 Several habitat types of local and national importance can be found within Chester district, including:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Habitat Typology⁶</th>
<th>UKBAP</th>
<th>LBAP</th>
<th>CROW Sec.74</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ancient Woodlands</td>
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<td>Coastal Floodplain/Grazing Marsh</td>
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<td>Eutrophic Standing Waters (inc Ponds)</td>
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<td>Fens</td>
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<td>Lowland Heath</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wet Woodlands</td>
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UKBAP: UK Biodiversity Action Plan  
LBAP: Local Biodiversity Action Plan  
CROW Sec.74: Countryside & Rights of Way Act Section 74 (Conservation of biological diversity)
2.10 Chester has several other key strategic connecting features that are important for wildlife, including the Shropshire Union Canal, designated as an Area of Nature Conservation Value in Chester’s Local Plan\(^2\), and the stretch south from the banks of the Dee at the Dingle all the way to the Eaton Estate. To the south of the estate much of the landscape is designated as having wildlife value and large areas are also managed under the Environmental Stewardship scheme.

2.11 Many of Chester’s more natural/semi-natural spaces are located to the south and west of the City centre:

- The Meadows is by far the largest of the natural assets within the Chester urban area, with a large amount of the nationally important habitat, floodplain and grazing marsh.
- Both Sealand Meadows and the land bordering the Curzon Park Golf Course to the north and west contain large areas of floodplain and grazing marsh.
- An area of Huntington adjacent to Saighton Camp has been classified in the National Habitat Inventory as “purple moor grass & rush pasture.” Part of this area designated as a Site of Biological Interest (SBI), while the site is also close to Caldy Nature Park with its own considerable wildlife and recreational value.

**Issues**

2.12 Provision of natural and semi natural open spaces is an important issue: whilst the River Dee is a connecting natural feature for wildlife, access to sites to the south of the River such as The Meadows is restricted for those communities in the north east of Chester. This part of the City has almost no accessible green space of a natural essence, particularly when compared to the areas in the south of the River Dee Park area which contains a variety of important biodiversity features.

**Threats**

2.13 Some stretches of the riverbank along the Dee have been heavily eroded, with the activity of river users (including walkers and anglers) and access by cattle reducing the bank side vegetation, impacting on wildlife areas for otter and water vole and decreasing the integrity of the bank. Increased erosion can also reduce the water quality through the release of sediments into the river.

2.14 New development may adversely affect the nationally important habitats that currently exist on and adjacent to the River Dee, and Chester’s inclusion in the West Cheshire Growth Point is particularly relevant. New Growth Point is not however a statutory designation, and Growth Point proposals will be subject to consultation, testing and examination through the statutory planning process, in particular the relevant Regional Spatial Strategy and Local Development Frameworks. This includes Sustainability Appraisal, Appropriate Assessments (under the Habitats Directive) and any examination in public that these entail.

2.15 For example, Saighton Camp is included as a potential development site in the Growth Point proposals\(^8\). Any development here could affect the drainage into Caldy Brook, possibly increasing flooding further downstream in Caldy Nature Park and potentially having a negative effect on its wildlife and biodiversity value.
Therefore, any plans for development would need to consider such implications and actively account for any potential loss or damage to habitats.

**Opportunities**

2.16 The Draft Chester Biodiversity Audit recognised that ‘there is a clear necessity for the provision of further sites with importance for biodiversity’. Recommendations made in the audit include expanding some sites, changes/improvement in management and designation of new sites using strategic objectives and access provision as a guide to the location of new sites. Further sites could be included within either the River Dee Park and/or any future River Dee Regional Park.

2.17 The Audit also recommends that improving the biodiversity value of certain sites and therefore the possible designation could afford ‘stronger protection’ from development. Those areas currently designated as ANCV such as Sealand Meadows could be ‘elevated’ to SNCV status through better management for wildlife.

2.18 Natural England (NE) recommends that at least 1ha of Local Nature Reserve (LNR) per 1000 people should be provided and also sets standards for natural space provision and access (see discussion on Green & Open Space later in this chapter). Although Chester currently does not have any Local Nature Reserves, the Draft Biodiversity Audit recommended that given the number of high value sites within the area some could be designated as LNRs, whilst the Draft Open Space Audit identifies natural green space as the top priority for an increase in provision by respondents. Given that LNRs should have an educational and/or community aspect as well as wildlife protection, the designation of a site/sites as an LNR could help Chester to meet NE standards and to provide important community assets.

2.19 Sealand Meadows is one such site that would be a suitable candidate for designation as a Local Nature Reserve: it is located close to the West Chester Regeneration Area, is already providing (informal) access and has a large amount of nationally important BAP habitat.

2.20 Other opportunities include:

- The landscape to the south of the City and leading to the A55 corridor, including parts of the Eaton Estate, has a biodiversity value which can be enhanced through the development of a multifunctional connective route(s) that can also serve recreational and community access needs.
- Deficits in the east of Chester may be addressed by adopting a multifunctional approach to the management of neighbourhood spaces to increase their wildlife value.
- The disused railway line that runs to Mickle Trafford provides the opportunity to create a multifunctional corridor, connecting both people and wildlife to the City and wider countryside, particularly those wildlife rich areas to the south east of Mickle Trafford.
- Potential new development should include careful designs that integrate wildlife areas within the development site and connecting these to existing habitats. Design details such as Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) can increase the space available to wildlife within the site whilst complimenting and supporting the wildlife value of the surrounding area.
• Caldy Brook itself could be improved through buffering and increases in the bank side vegetation, so reducing flood risk and improving the biodiversity holding capacity of the watercourse.

• The wildlife value of The Meadows could be further increased by creating several ponds, taking advantage of the proximity to the River and the large amount of space available to encourage amphibians and birds to the site.

• Curzon Park Golf Course contains a substantial amount of the River Dee’s riverbank within its boundaries. The buffer between the golf course fairways and the river is an important part of the river corridor, and it is possible that changes to the management of this strip of land could have a positive effect on the natural corridor function of the river bank.

Access

2.21 The River Dee Park already has a relatively strong strategic access network and connectivity: several national and regional National Cycle Network routes converge on and pass through the city linear routes such as the Shropshire Union Canal, the River Dee and the disused railway line that pass through the City allow access east to west and north to south (Figure 3.3), and there is an extensive Public Rights of Way network (Figure 3.4).

2.22 Traffic free routes for pedestrians and cyclists are continuing to be developed, with the Cycle Chester Strategy\(^1\) identifying an ambitious programme of cycle infrastructure improvements including new improvements to existing routes, whilst the proposed New Dee Bridge will offer a pedestrianised route for the communities of Great Boughton to access the City Centre, Chester Business Park and the Meadows as well as the riverside footpath network and other sites along its route.

2.23 The River Dee has already a comprehensive coverage of footpath networks including a riverside path runs adjacent to the river as far south as Farndon. It is possible to walk from Farndon all the way to the estuary alongside the river, a distance of approximately 20 miles.

2.24 In addition to the New Dee Bridge there are other key routes that will be created and/or improved including the extension of the Greenway route along the disused railway to Mickle Trafford, the Deva Road Link, and The Curzon Park Railway Bridge. Other issues such as the permeability of the City Centre and better more consistent signage will also run alongside the major infrastructure improvements.

2.25 Several of the strategic routes for access already have a level of multifunctionality in that they have a wildlife value; routes such as the canal, River Dee and the disused railway line are good examples of multifunctional corridors.

Issues

2.26 Chester City Council’s Open Space RSvP survey\(^2\) showed that 80% of the population use their green spaces to go for a walk in, and that green corridors are especially valued by the residents. Over 80% of respondents used Chester’s open spaces for walking although only 48.8% actually walk to the space, with
only 8.4% choosing to cycle. Although the Survey does not explore why respondents choose to drive to spaces, one possible reason could be that 65.8% of respondents felt that the route to the space(s) was unsafe. Similarly, although one of the most popular spaces revealed by the Survey was the Shropshire Union Canal corridor, it was also the site that people were the least satisfied with, citing poor lighting and personal safety as important issues.

2.27 Access quality is a concern in other areas, with the poor condition of some pathways discouraging potential users. For example, Curzon Park Golf Course occupies a long stretch of the River Dee’s bank. Currently the condition of this path is poor and can only be accessed on foot. This site could provide the community of Saltney (which currently has limited public access to the south bank of the Dee) with a circular recreational route and make available a wider range of fishing sites for anglers. A further example is the path that follows the River between Edgar’s Field and Overleigh Cemetery which is poorly maintained and so is difficult to use.

2.28 Chester’s public rights of way allow access to most of the surrounding countryside, however there are some areas that are less accessible than others and in some areas there is a strategic need/deficit in access provision: access from settlements in Upton and Hoole into the countryside to the east is poor, although the Chester Greenway extension through to Mickle Trafford will go some way to addressing this. Sealand Meadows has a lack of public footpaths although clear desire lines show that there is significant local use (inset).

2.29 Similarly, existing communities to the east of the River Dee in Great Boughton and the potential new communities proposed in Growth Point plans for this area do not have access to the riverside, with no pathways running alongside the river on the eastern bank. To access the river residents currently have to cross at the Queen’s Park Suspension Bridge in the centre of the City. Access between sites is also important: for example linking the lower part of Finchett’s Gutter with The Cop and Saughall Allotments and the upper part to Sealand Meadows would have clear recreational and wildlife benefits.

2.30 The improvement of Chester’s access networks and green spaces should run in parallel with the regeneration projects and development programmes already taking place. Such activities should consider the wider access opportunities available for communities other than simply providing open space within new development areas.
Figure 2.3
Chester's Cycle Networks

- National Cycle Network
- Chester's Future Cycle Network
- Greenway Extension
- Chester Greenway
- Regional Cycle Routes
- Shropshire Union Canal
- River Dee
- River Dee Park Sites
- Urban Area
- Infrastructure Improvements

1. New Dee Bridge
2. Caonol Park Railway Bridge
3. Devil's Bridge

Data Sources:
- Sustrans
- Chester City Council
Threats

2.31 There is a real possibility that the number of people using the paths and green corridors will decline if they continue to feel unsafe. This in turn could discourage people from using sites at all, or cause them to either drive to sites or look further afield for places to visit, leaving unused and undervalued spaces which are likely to decline further through lack of use.

2.32 Community perceptions concerning anti-social use of routes and spaces also need to be considered. This is particularly true of the New Dee Bridge where there are concerns that there may be disturbance at night, and that motorcyclists may use the bridge to gain access to The Meadows. The Bridge is a key part of the Cycle Chester Strategy and is needed to compliment the rest of the network; those fears that the bridge will increase the disturbance on the Meadows must be addressed and solutions found.

Opportunities

2.33 The creation of a River Dee Park could address the issue of inadequate access provision, recognising and enhancing existing routes and enabling the creation of new routes that link sites and communities. Equally, with so many of Chester’s residents already using parts of this network spaces to go walking and enjoying the health benefits that this brings, it is likely that any new routes or those improved with walking or cycling in mind will prove very popular.

2.34 There are several specific areas where access could be improved, both for pedestrians and cyclists; one such is the stream corridor between the Cop, Saughall Allotments and Sealand Meadows. This would increase the accessibility of both the River Dee and the City centre to the residents of the Blacon area as well as connecting both the allotments and the meadows to the wider River Dee Park network.

2.35 The installation of the New Dee Bridge between Handbridge/The Meadows and Great Boughton could open up the River Dee corridor to a much wider audience. Connecting the new bridge and the Caldy Nature Park will further improve the network, whilst the footpath that circumnavigates around the Curzon Park Golf Course could be improved to allow cycle access, opening up a new route along side the River Dee.

Green and Open Spaces

2.36 The River Dee Park encompasses a variety of open spaces which provide an equally large range of functions (Figure 2.5). Maintaining and raising the quality of these sites to a high standard will enhance community well being and add to a local ‘sense of place’, as well as contributing to Chester’s tourism ‘offer’ and so the visitor economy.

Issues

2.37 When compared to Natural England’s ANGSt standards, Chester does have a deficiency in the accessibility, size and quantity of some green and open spaces typologies\(^1\). In response, Chester City Council has laid out specific guidance for new development for the installation or improvement of nearby spaces. If the needs and advantages of connecting new spaces to the River Dee Park are considered, then additional value may be added to a particular space by way of access to other spaces within the Park.

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\(^{1}\) Amenity greenspace, natural greenspace, outdoor sports areas, provision for young people
2.38 The distribution of open space within Chester is uneven with some communities having more spaces than others. Because of the already built-up nature of much of Chester the provision of new spaces is difficult. However the opportunity exists to use the existing spaces, cycle-paths and footpaths to connect areas considered deprived in terms of green space to the wider River Dee Park, allowing access to a much wider range of activities and to the City Centre.

2.39 The RSvP Open Space Survey revealed that the Shropshire Union Canal was the space used most on a daily basis, most likely because it connects many parts of the City and offers a traffic free route, to work, school or simply for going walking. However there is some conflict between the user groups on the canal. Litter and dog fouling and perceived safety issues were the main reasons that prevented people from using particular spaces, alongside anti-social behaviour and poor maintenance.

2.40 The variable quality of the individual spaces will also have an impact on their attractiveness to visitors: on some key tourism sites the infrastructure is beginning to look tired and a little worn out with pathways, railings and seating on some sites requiring renewal or refurbishment.

Threats

2.41 One of the real threats to Chester’s green and open spaces is the fact that some do look tired, and, whilst litter and the general cleanliness of sites is very good, infrastructure such as railings and seating often needs renovating. Sites that people consider to be badly kept will more often than not suffer reduced user numbers. As sites become less popular they often become victims of anti-social behaviour, further preventing or discouraging potential users. Chester’s image and value as a tourism destination could be also affected by poorly maintained open spaces.

2.42 Even when a site has improved, such as a reduction in litter and dog fouling, it could be difficult to persuade people that a site is worth revisiting. Local spaces in poor condition mean that people are likely to travel further to visit better sites. This is an undesirable outcome and puts further pressure on the bigger more popular sites.

Opportunities

2.43 There are aspirations for the development of Sealand Meadows as a community open space: it is allocated in Chester’s Local Plan as a potential country park, and is already used by communities in Blacon for pedestrian access to the City. The site also has an important role in the reduction of flooding. Managing the site to increase accessibility, biodiversity value and flood control will enable the whole of Blacon and part of northern Chester to have access to a natural green space of over 20ha, in line with Natural England’s ANGST standards (Figure 2.6).

2.44 The land directly to the west of the Countess of Chester Hospital adjacent to the canal corridor also has the potential to become an important natural green space, providing access for the communities of Bache and Upton. This land also has an important function for flooding and the wildlife connectivity of Finchett’s Gutter. Further improvements to access in this area could also enhance access to the Chester Zoo.
2.45 Lapa Field in the Lache area is an important site for the local community. Despite being a former landfill site it is highlighted as a natural green space in the Open Space Audit and is included in the Lache Masterplan (Neighbourhood Initiative Foundation, 2007), and as such is the only accessible natural green space in the south east of the City. Improvements to both access infrastructure and habitat management could raise its profile and value locally and as part of the wider River Dee Park, although possible constraints relating to the site’s previous use would need to be considered.

2.46 The former landfill site to the south west of Sealand Industrial Estate has limited function due to its previous role as a landfill. Housing or other development would require extensive remediation of the land, in creating a ‘wild area’ with some access points the site could become an asset for users of the Riverside Walk and the employees in the estate.

2.47 Built development in and around Chester can make a direct contribution to the quality and provision of green spaces, perhaps focusing on the River Dee Park as the primary environmental initiative that links community needs and tourism aspirations. These opportunities are discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Heritage and Cultural Assets

2.48 Chester is world renowned for its heritage which supports the City’s tourism appeal. The city’s history spans millennia and its key tourist sites reflect this long history, and within Chester there are clusters of historic assets: St John’s, the Amphitheatre and the Roman Gardens are all close together, and in conjunction with the City’s tourist information centre they form a major destination within Chester. Their location adjacent to the River Dee means that they make a significant contribution to the wider River Dee Park.

2.49 Chester’s most obvious historical asset - the City Wall - provides views over the whole city and is well connected to many of the historic assets and the River Dee.

Issues

2.50 The Amphitheatre Park Zone\textsuperscript{13} is part of the central core of sites that include Grosvenor Park, the Roman Gardens, St John’s and the Amphitheatre. Despite being a main tourism site, currently the Amphitheatre is not as welcoming as it could be: there is sufficient interpretation for the archaeological remains that are currently visible, but the view from the roadside is poor and whilst the south side of the Amphitheatre provides a much more explanatory view of the site this is presently inaccessible. There are plans within the Culture Park Strategy to improve the situation with a new building and improved facilities.
A number of sites within the River Dee Park lie outside of the main tourism honeypot area. Several have a historical interest or other ‘cultural’ draw, including sites such as The Meadows and Queen’s Promenade which offer a different view of the City in a relaxed traffic free environment. Others such as the Cemetery and Edgar’s Field with its Roman Shrine have the feel of being off the beaten path and somewhat disconnected from the main sites within the City centre, with few visitors currently visiting these sites.

**Threats**

The concentration of people using the more centrally located heritage sites such as St John’s, the Amphitheatre and the Roman Gardens could in time lead to increased management costs for repairs and maintenance, although as part of the Culture Park Strategy and the Chester Renaissance Programme this area will be subject to a great deal of investment, justified by the considerable public benefits that this will bring. Whilst the Amphitheatre is in serious need of investment and change, concentration on the key City centre sites could distract attention and possibly funding away from other important sites south of the river that may have a more localised but equally viable value.

**Opportunities**

Chester Renaissance plans and the Culture Park Strategy present opportunities to make a positive contribution to the City’s historic spaces, including specific sites of high heritage value (such as the Amphitheatre) alongside those of a lesser value that nevertheless add to Chester’s wider sense of place and so contribute greatly to the City as a whole. The Culture Strategy’s ‘Routes of Discovery’ theme in particular recognises the value of the south bank and its wider connections to The Meadows and Overleigh Cemetery, whilst the value of the Roman Gardens in providing an attractive pedestrian gateway between the city centre, The Groves and riverfront (and so the wider River Dee network of open spaces) is included in proposals for the Amphitheatre Park Zone.

Chester Renaissance includes key projects under its ‘historic assets’ and ‘green spaces’ themes that will impact on the River Dee Park sites including Grosvenor Park, the Amphitheatre, and The Roodee (Chester Racecourse). Its Heritage Interpretation Masterplan will also provide the template for a system of coherent and consistent signage and interpretation, designed to appeal to a wide audience from local communities and international visitors and helping to address sense of disconnection some sites experience.
CHAPTER 3: Drivers for Change

3.1 This chapter examines the issues affecting the River Dee Park and its constituent sites and routes, and determines the drivers for change in West Cheshire, in particular the Chester area.

Policy Context for the River Dee Park

3.2 The purpose and principles of the River Dee Park are essentially in line with the North West Regional Spatial Strategy’s role for green infrastructure, in that it will:

- Protect the integrity of sites of national and international importance (including the historic environment)
- Integrate proposals to improve green infrastructure in the delivery of new developments, particularly through area based regeneration initiatives and major proposals and schemes
- Maximise opportunities for mitigating against climate change.

3.3 This close alignment of the River Dee Park with the principles of green infrastructure (GI) is essential because national, regional county and local policies all promote green infrastructure, both in terms of its functions and also as an organising concept for delivering smart growth. In numerous national level strategy and policy documents it is implicitly recognised that there are many policy priorities that may be delivered through green infrastructure (see Appendix 1):

![Diagram of green infrastructure and policy context](image)

March 2009
The Spatial Strategy’s emphasis on GI demonstrates its continued high profile in the region. The Plan particularly recognises the role of GI in relation to climate change and across several Regional Core Objectives including transport and promoting environmental quality, whilst Policy EM3 specifically relates to Green Infrastructure:

“Plans, strategies, proposals and schemes should aim to deliver wider spatial outcomes that incorporate environmental and socio-economic benefits by:

- conserving and managing existing green infrastructure;
- creating new green infrastructure and;
- enhancing its functionality, quality, connectivity and accessibility.”

Green infrastructure can contribute to a high quality natural and built environment and can enhance that quality of life for present and future residents and visitors and delivers “liveability” for sustainable communities”.

The concept of green infrastructure (whilst not specifically referenced) is also promoted within the Mersey Dee Alliance’s West Cheshire / North East Wales Sub Regional Spatial Strategy, with one of its key principles being to “Protect and enhance the environmental assets of the sub-region, including the natural, built and coastal environments”. The Strategy has suggested that a River Dee Regional Park could be a vehicle for green infrastructure planning and delivery in the Dee corridor; this is being currently being investigated within a River Dee Green Infrastructure Feasibility Study (due for completion in summer 2009).

Growth proposals put forward in the West Chester Growth Point Programme of Development (2008) proposes that 4,502 dwellings will built in the Chester area alone between 2008 and 2016/7. Implementing such proposals are likely to increase demands on existing open and green spaces and have other implications on wildlife, landscapes and other elements of the natural environment, potentially adversely affecting the quality of life of existing and new communities. As such, the Growth Point proposals also have (as a key objective) the creation of:

“A network of open spaces across West Cheshire to bring social, economic and environmental benefits to local people and communities and to deliver high quality open spaces, strategic environmental enhancements and contribute to high quality development”

The North West Regional Development Agency’s support for GI is embodied in the development and support of ‘Natural Economy Northwest’, a partnership programme with a remit to maximise the economic benefit from existing and new investment in the region’s natural environment. GI is explicitly recognised as an under-exploited economic resource for the region and part of our quality of life. The Regional Economic Strategy\textsuperscript{14} transformational action 113 specifically recognises the importance of developing a strategy for green infrastructure to:

“Develop the economic benefit of the region’s natural environment through better alignment of environmental activities and economic gain”
3.8 The North West also benefits from the expertise provided by the Green Infrastructure Think Tank (GrITT), a partnership of public and private organisations that seeks to develop best practice in green infrastructure planning and implementation across the region. The GrITT produced the North West Green Infrastructure Guide, which sets out the key principles for GI in the North West and seeks to guide practitioners in the delivery of GI planning in the region in support of RSS policy EM3. This provided the basis for the approach used in this study (see Chapter 1).

3.9 Within this context of national, regional, sub-regional and local policy, we have specifically considered the findings of several critical pieces of research and proposed and existing initiatives, including:

- Chester’s Draft Open Space Audit
- Open Space RSVP Survey
- West Cheshire’s Growth Point Programme of Development
- Chester’s Draft Green Space Strategy
- Chester’s Local Distinctiveness Strategy
- West Cheshire Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (WCSFRA)
- Chester’s Draft Biodiversity Audit
- Chester’s Draft Culture Park Strategy
- Cycle Chester Strategy

3.10 From this assessment of several key pieces of research and initiatives in the City, we have identified several key issues which may affect the provision, protection or delivery of green and open space and the recreational offer in West Cheshire and Chester – and so the delivery of the River Dee Park:

- Growth, Development and Regeneration
- Climate Change
- Socio-Economics and Demographics

**Growth, Development & Regeneration**

3.11 Chester is recognised as one of the sub-regional centres in the North West of England Plan, and West Cheshire Growth Point Programme of Development expects that 4,502 dwellings will built in the Chester area between 2008 and 2016/7; however this number may be revised in light of the current economic climate.

3.12 Three key areas have been identified as being suitable to deliver the new housing; they include Saighton Camp, City Centre and the North East Action Area and a number of sites collectively known as the West Cheshire Regeneration Sites (Figure 3.1).

3.13 As Chester’s housing stock is expected to rise by 4,502 dwellings, measures must be taken to ensure that the quality of life and place available to existing and future residents is of a high order.
3.14 Infill development in the urban area will increase demands on existing open and green spaces and with other implications on wildlife, landscapes and other elements of the natural environment that can have an important role in providing a good quality of life. Growth Point proposals indicate that Saighton Camp alone could potentially deliver around 1,000 family homes and affordable housing, and as such will require substantial green infrastructure to accommodate the needs of both the new communities and the environment in line with planning and legislative requirements.

3.15 Other built infrastructure requirements are associated with growth and house building proposals, particularly in relation to transport such as the proposed Chester Western Relief Road. Provision must be included to allow more sustainable transport options for day to day journeys to the city centre and to local facilities and services such as schools.

3.16 The River Dee Park can provide a framework for delivering such sustainable transport options, particularly should existing access routes and site linkages be improved and including the possibility of new access such as the proposed New Dee Bridge.
3.17 The loss of natural elements such as a simple hedge line, field margin or ditch will have implications for the movement of wildlife across landscapes, affecting the ability of species to maintain viable populations and so reducing the ability of the landscape to sustain wildlife. The provision and retention of habitats and corridors is therefore vital in maintaining and improving the District’s biodiversity and for meeting Chester’s obligations under PPS9.17.

3.18 Developments adjacent to watercourses can have an impact on their natural corridor functions and have implications for localised flooding. Figure 3.2 highlights the particular impacts such development may have at Finchett’s Gutter which already has a significant role in localised flooding issues, and illustrates the close relationship between Saltney (Flintshire) and Chester where flooding issues in Saltney are directly related to land management upstream.

3.19 Development control is only one part of the approach that is needed for truly sustainable development: building design and landscaping within developments must also be factored into the planning process to address the negative effects of development on hydrologically sensitive sites and provide for new and enhanced urban environments.

3.20 To balance development needs with the needs of communities in the River Dee Park, Sealand Meadows could be highlighted: managing this site to increase access to the City and provide a large public open space for communities in Blacon make this site a potentially significant asset and an important factor in the regeneration of the Blacon area.

**Climate Change**

3.21 The challenge of climate change will affect our lives over the coming decades, whether through the increased risk and magnitude of flooding, prolonged periods of drought, more intense and more regular storms or the predicted increase in summer temperatures. In Chester over the long-term, sea level rise will also be an important factor for flooding in Chester. To address this challenge we will undoubtedly be required to modify our behaviour: in our private lives, in our communities and our regions, small changes and perhaps much larger changes will make all the difference for the present and future generations.

**Flooding**

3.22 The position of Chester on the River Dee and its proximity to the coast mean that parts of Chester are susceptible to flooding, as the climate changes this risk will increase, resulting in possible further economic loss and damage to communities.

3.23 Development in Chester must be mindful of its potential to increase flooding risk and intensity. This is particularly relevant to those sites adjacent to water courses: with heavier and more intense rainfall predicted due to changes in the world’s climate, any further insensitive or poorly planned development within the catchment area will heighten Chester’s already significant flood risk.
Figure 3.3
Population Density
Flood Risk

- Floodzone 3
- River Dee

Population Density
Decile
- Low
- Medium
- High

Data Sources:
ONS 2001
Chester City Council

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3.24 The West Cheshire Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (WCSFRA) states that there are several areas that are at risk to flooding in the Chester City area. These include Sealand Meadows, Gladstone Road, Vernon Road, Catherine Street, Jesmond Street and the Greyhound Industrial Park. Finchett’s Gutter is the source of much of this flooding, land either side of this watercourse must therefore be retained in as natural state as possible to minimise flood risk.

3.25 The WCSFRA recognised groundwater flooding and surface water/sewer flooding as a problem in the Chester area. This is most likely a combination of poor drainage and too little natural surface absorption as a result of a high proportion of sealed surfaces.

3.26 The developmental pressures within the urban area can further hinder the capability of the land to absorb flood events caused by intense rainfall and the inability of the receiving environment to deal with it. Replacing a natural vegetated surface with a built or road surface will adversely affect the rate of groundwater recharge, can affect the rate of flow into the nearby watercourses and negatively impact on the amenity value of the watercourse. The wider impact of such effects combined with periods of high tide and rainfall and future sea level rises could have a negative effect on Chester’s ability to withstand flooding.

3.27 To reduce the likelihood of local and downstream flooding, development along these stream and river corridors must be kept at a minimum and associated with measures including the introduction of flood storage ponds along watercourses within the urban area to help reduce the potential for damage. Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) within developments can also help mitigate against the effects of development near a watercourse whilst helping to maintain habitats for wildlife. SuDS can be in-built within new developments and in some cases retrofitted into existing built environments.

3.28 There are also opportunities to incorporate flood management measures alongside other functions, particularly biodiversity enhancement. Sealand Meadows in particular offers the potential for delivering a range of functions that can be associated with flood storage as well as biodiversity and recreation.

“Heat Island” Effect

3.29 The urban ‘heat island’ effect is the result of heat absorbent and reflective surfaces found in urban areas (such as asphalt and concrete) increasing the ambient temperature up to several degrees higher than the surrounding countryside. The annual average summer temperature is also predicted to increase, creating what could be an uncomfortable environment for communities living in those urban areas. The combination of higher urban temperatures and high pollution levels arising from transport, industrial and domestic airborne pollution could mean that over the next few decades living in urban areas will become less appealing.

3.30 Discomfort from increased temperatures may make the City’s urban areas less attractive to residents, can contribute to reducing quality of life and have a negative impact on health. Migration from the urban areas to the more comfortable rural areas could be a result, with the added consequences of stretching rural service provision, and increasing demand for more housing in potentially unsuitable areas for development whilst decreasing affordability.
3.31 Communities with high proportions of elderly or young people are particularly at risk from the effects of the urban heat island due to reduced mobility; equally those areas with high population density and those where residents have a high level of health deprivation are vulnerable to increases in temperature in the urban realm.

3.32 Naturally much of Chester’s city centre is of a built up nature. In addition the City Walls reduce airflow through the centre, further increasing the intensity of the ‘heat island’ and holding airborne pollutants within the area.

3.33 The provision of green and open space can help reduce the ‘heat island’ effect through shading and evapotranspiration. As part of a wider strategy street tree planting around the city centre can also provide shading. Improving the conditions in the city centre during the summer months can help improve the conditions for those living and visiting the City. The green and open spaces located alongside the river also provide cooling and respite from the high temperatures for those working in, living in and visiting Chester.

Sustainable Transport

3.34 The need to reduce our carbon emissions to combat climate change effects is well documented, however air quality and health and the physical safety of Chester’s residents and visitors are also important factors in the need for a reduction in fossil fuel based emissions.

3.35 The alternatives to motor vehicle transport should be an accessible, suitable and sustainable option, whether this is public transport, cycling or walking. Chester has already made steps forward with its plans to improve the cycle network through the Cycle Chester Strategy, yet the location of the City astride the River Dee means that during peak times it can be heavily congested, particularly over Grosvenor Bridge.

3.36 The network of access routes and sites present in the River Dee Park offer an opportunity for providing an attractive transport alternative, both for recreation and leisure and for everyday journeys. The proposed river crossing at Great Boughton, opening up the footpath around Curzon Park Golf Course, introducing footpaths across Sealand Meadows and improving the condition of footpaths and access routes between sites such as Edgars Field and Overleigh Cemetery can provide a network of linked paths that can be used to sustainably access the city centre, key employment and recreation areas from local communities.

Socio-economics

3.37 The Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD 2007) ranks Chester District as 184th out of 354 English local authorities, where 1st is the most deprived. This is the Government’s official measure of multiple deprivation at small area level; it brings together 37 different indicators which cover specific aspects or dimensions of deprivation across seven thematic “domains”:

- Income
- Employment
- Health and Disability
- Education, Skills and Training
3.38 Figure 3.4 shows the relative levels of deprivation across Chester District. Several areas display significantly higher levels of deprivation when compared to the rest of the District, with the main concentrations of deprivation around Blacon in the north west of Chester, Saltney in the south-west and in the city centre. Figure 3.5 Shows those areas whose IMD score improved or decreased between 2004 and 2007.

3.39 Chester has areas with a high proportion of relatively elderly residents at 18.1% of the population when compared to the regional (16.2%) and national (16%) figures, conversely there are less people 14 years old and under (16.1%) than either the regional (17.7%) or national (17.6%) figures. Green infrastructure needs may well be different in demographically different areas: older and therefore potentially less mobile people will need doorstep greens and street greening (e.g. through street trees) whereas young people may demand more multifunctional open spaces that meet increasingly varied leisure and educational needs.

3.40 With a higher than average number of older people living in Chester, access and health are key issues. Providing spaces and networks in which people can participate in active recreation has considerable health benefits. Improvement to the health of the general population helps reduce the expenditure of the local health authorities. Safe traffic free routes are also important for older people and families with young children, in terms of health and safety.

3.41 Chester District has a population of 119,900, with an average (mean) rise over the last five years of 0.23% (Office for National Statistics figures). The density of the population is varied with several areas displaying a significantly higher density, including Blacon, north west Lache, Saltney, Flookersbrook, Handbridge South, City Centre north east, Newton West and north east Upton (Figure 3.6).

3.42 The natural concentration of the population in the city itself means that the location and functionality of accessible open spaces within the urban areas will be critical to serve the needs of the population. Equally such spaces will need to be protected from possible damage through overuse, particularly in the face of growth. This is particularly important when considering the characteristics of the population, and its ability to benefit from green infrastructure.