

# Cheshire West & Chester Council

## Curzon Park Cycle and Pedestrian Bridge Focus Group Findings



A big thank you to all the residents and cyclists who took part in the discussion groups!

Produced by the Research, Intelligence & Consultation Team  
June 2010

Research Manager: Beverley Wilson

[Beverley.Wilson@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk](mailto:Beverley.Wilson@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk), tel:01244 972176

Research Officer: Lois Hughes

[lois.hughes@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk](mailto:lois.hughes@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk), tel: 01244 975988

Research Officer: Lee Huxley

[lee.huxley@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk](mailto:lee.huxley@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk), tel: 01244 972064

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>METHOD</b>	<b>4</b>
<i>Recruitment</i>	5
<i>Sample</i>	5
<b>INITIAL THOUGHTS ON THE CURZON PARK CYCLE AND PEDESTRIAN BRIDGE</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>BENEFITS OF A NEW CURZON PARK CYCLE AND PEDESTRIAN BRIDGE</b>	<b>8</b>
<i>Aspects of the bridge proposal favoured by residents</i>	9
<b>SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENTS TO THE CURZON PARK BRIDGE DESIGN PROPOSAL</b>	<b>11</b>
<i>Specific design aspects residents felt could be improved</i>	12
<b>USE AND PROMOTION OF A NEW CURZON PARK CYCLE AND PEDESTRIAN BRIDGE</b>	<b>15</b>
<i>Who might use the bridge?</i>	15
<i>Promoting the new bridge</i>	15
<b>FINAL THOUGHTS AND COMMENTS...</b>	<b>17</b>

## **Introduction**

The area of Curzon Park is situated close to Chester City Centre and adjacent to Chester Racecourse and the River Dee. It is close to the residential areas of Lache, Handbridge and Saltney to the South of the City. Currently there is a footbridge attached to the side of the Network Railway Bridge that runs across the River Dee and is used by cyclists and pedestrians to access the City Centre. Proposals for a pedestrian and cycle bridge in the Curzon Park area are intended to replace the existing footbridge, which is currently reached via steps, with ramped access from Curzon Park to the Roodee area of Chester City.

The project is being funded by Cycling England and Sustrans. Cycling England awarded Chester "Cycle Demonstration Town" status in 2008 and the proposed Curzon Park bridge is one of four schemes across Chester that aim to help the City become an area where cycling is the preferred option of travel by improving low traffic routes around Chester and encouraging more people to cycle.

'Cycle Chester' is the project team promoting cycling in Chester and working to implement the four cycle schemes in the area. The Cycle Chester team have been seeking the views of local residents and potential users on proposals for the new Curzon Park Bridge to ensure the design is fit for purpose and will be well used in the future. A range of consultations have taken place to find out the views of local residents, local cycling groups and others. This included a road show, where people were invited to examine proposals and given opportunities to comment on them online, in writing and via focus groups.

The aim of the focus groups was to try to gain an in-depth understanding of these views and explore how the plans could be adapted or improved to meet the needs of the local community. This report sets out the results from the focus groups with residents and members of local cycling groups.

## **Method**

Focus groups are a collection of around 5-15 individuals who have come together to discuss a specific topic in order to gain an insight into, and an understanding of, their views. Focus groups require a skilled facilitator who can steer the conversation without introducing bias and make sure everyone is able to have their say and contribute to the discussion.

Two focus groups were held between 11 and 13 May 2010 and conducted by Lois Hughes and co-facilitated by Lee Huxley, both Research Officers for Cheshire West and Chester Council.

## **Recruitment**

As part of a programme of consultation, local residents were invited to attend a road show organised to present plans for the Curzon Park Bridge. Those who attended were given the opportunity to take part in a focus group to explore their views on the benefits and drawbacks of the Curzon Park Bridge proposals. Additional recruitment of local residents living in the immediate Curzon Park area was also carried out to ensure a good cross section of people (both cyclists and non-cyclists) were able to share their views.

The research aimed to be as inclusive as possible and so transport was offered to anyone who may have had difficulty getting to the venue, which had convenient car parking, access to public transport and disabled facilities.

## **Sample**

Two focus groups were held in Chester City Centre as the research was aimed at those living in Curzon Park and the surrounding areas.

Ad hoc comments received by the Cycle Chester team suggested that cyclists and non-cyclists may have different views, user experiences and expectations of the Curzon Park Bridge and it was therefore decided that, where possible, groups would be split depending on how frequently participants cycled.

**Group one** consisted of four females and six males who were mainly regular cyclists, or those who cycled occasionally but wanted to do so more often and lived in the immediate area, Hoole and Handbridge. Six of the participants were frequent cyclists. All had used the existing footbridge, some frequently.

**Group two** consisted of nine females and eight males who lived in the immediate Curzon Park area and tended to cycle infrequently, or not at all, with the exception of one or two individuals. Most had used the bridge before.

## Initial thoughts on the Curzon Park Cycle and Pedestrian Bridge

Before the discussion began, residents were taken through a short presentation highlighting key background information about the Curzon Park Bridge proposal, covering the sources of funding, why the bridge was being proposed and some key design features.

Afterwards, participants were asked if they had any initial comments on information highlighted in the presentation. A number of issues were raised by both groups, which are captured below.

### Alternative proposals and options

Both the resident and cyclist groups acknowledged that the current footbridge requires a lot of investment and improvement but there was a feeling that the footbridge should be maintained. In both groups, a number of participants felt that the funding should be used to improve the existing footbridge. The cyclist group suggested the footbridge should be maintained *in addition* to the proposed bridge.

‘Why not consider the existing facilities, why not improve them or modernise them?’

Questions relating to alternative proposals and ways of investing the funding were also raised in both groups. There was a strength of feeling at both the cyclist and residents’ groups that participants wanted to know if any alternative proposals had been considered, what these alternatives were and the reasons why the proposed option had been selected. Participants in both groups also questioned whether the funding could be invested elsewhere or in other activities that would have more benefits than the proposed scheme, for example by improving other cycle routes and educating drivers.

A bridge running alongside the Grosvenor Bridge was an option discussed by the residents group, who suggested that such a bridge would be a more direct route into the centre of Chester and more gently sloped for cyclists, although this option was clearly favoured by a few individuals in particular and not the entire group.

‘This bridge is taking people away from the centre and it would be better if it was put across the Grosvenor Bridge’

‘Why not use the other bridge further along, which has a more gentle slope down?’

Using the disused railway track, which could be extended towards Chester railway station and up into Saltney, was a suggestion raised by some in the cyclist group, although it was acknowledged that Network Rail may not allow a cycle path on the track itself. Using another bridge over the track (further along towards Saltney) was another alternative suggested by this group, who felt the descending slope would be much gentler.

### **Grosvenor Bridge and access into the City Centre**

Safety concerns about Grosvenor Bridge were mentioned by both groups, particularly in relation to cyclists using the pavement across the bridge to avoid cycling on the road. It was noted that this posed a danger to pedestrians and made the busy bridge even more unsafe. The cyclist group felt that the proposed pedestrian and cyclist bridge did nothing for those living in Westminster Park or Handbridge in terms of access to the city centre and wondered if placing a cycle lane on Grosvenor Bridge had been considered, although it was acknowledged that the bridge may be too narrow.

Some participants from the residents group said that they felt the proposed bridge took people away from the city centre. Comments were made with a view that the majority of people travelling into the centre would want to take the most direct route into town and that the new bridge would not achieve this. Further suggestions were made for improving the existing cycle track through The Dingle into Handbridge, which would allow access to the existing riverside path.

### **Road safety**

There was an overwhelming strength of feeling at the cyclist focus group that more education on road safety was required, and some felt the only way to do this was to increase the number of cyclists, automatically forcing drivers to become more aware and drive more cautiously. Holland was also mentioned as a very positive example for cycling policies.

## **Benefits of a new Curzon Park cycle and pedestrian bridge**

Participants were asked what they felt the potential benefits were of developing a new cycle and pedestrian bridge between Curzon Park and Chester City Centre. The main points raised are outlined below.

### **Personal safety and wellbeing**

The cyclist group felt that a bridge similar to the one proposed would be a safer route into the City Centre, particularly as some participants mentioned they disliked cycling on roads because of noise and fumes. Many agreed that the route would be a much quicker and less stressful way of accessing City Centre facilities, such as the library and City Baths. In addition to this, participants felt the pleasant route would have a positive impact on the wellbeing of those who used it, which they referred to as the 'feel good factor'.

### **Alternative access**

The importance of giving people an alternative route was stressed by the cyclist group, who felt that it would provide a strategic, as well as a key commuter connection between the south and north sides of the City. This point was also raised by participants in the residents group, who felt that the bridge would provide good alternative access from the Saltney and Curzon Park areas. Encouraging cycling in and around the City was seen as a key benefit of a cycling and pedestrian bridge. There was general agreement that young families would use the proposed facility more than the existing footbridge, particularly in terms of improved access for prams and buggies as well as allowing parents to cycle across the bridge with young children.

### **Links to existing cycle paths**

Both the cyclist and resident groups agreed that the bridge would help to open up the existing cycle network that runs throughout the City Centre and beyond, providing a useable link to the Riverside Promenade. Access to leisure facilities and shops in the Sealand Road area was also highlighted as a benefit by both groups.

'I think it's a much more useable link to the riverside path that I use frequently and value'

'It opens the cycle path right around the Dee which is a feature for the City'

### **Accessibility**

The additional disabled access a cycling and pedestrian bridge would provide into the City Centre was mentioned by the residents group. This was thought to be particularly important as some feel access into the City Centre for those with mobility issues is currently poor. In particular, access over the Grosvenor Bridge was considered a dangerous and busy route, and the current Curzon Park footbridge, has steps that can be difficult to navigate.

### **Poor condition of existing footbridge**

Comments were made about the condition of the current footbridge. There was general agreement that the condition of the existing bridge, and access to it, is very poor, particularly in relation to the lack of lighting and sense of isolation when using the footbridge. Questions were asked about the possibility of improving the current facility.

‘When you walk down the steps at Curzon Park you can’t see anything. I feel like I am going down a subway when I walk down the steps’

### ***Aspects of the bridge proposal favoured by residents***

In groups, participants were provided with large, detailed plans of the Curzon Park Bridge and asked to illustrate aspects of the proposed bridge design they liked, which are summarised below.

- **The slope or gradient** of bridge was thought to be good for cyclists, pushchairs and wheelchair users alike and a feature that would open up access to a wide range of groups.
- **Links to the City Centre, Sealand Road and Groves area**, as well as links with existing cycle routes, was favoured by all participants in the cycling group and some in the residents group as an alternative to using roads. The Riverside Promenade was considered by some to be a very positive development and improved links to this facility were thought to be a beneficial.
- **Steps for pedestrians** as an alternative to walking down the slope on the Curzon Park side of the bridge was a popular feature. A similar set of steps on the other side of the bridge was an additional element both groups would like to see included in the design.
- **Additional lighting** was seen to be a very positive feature and participants felt the design made **good use of the existing pillars**, which some felt was a cost saving feature.
- **Good visibility of oncoming pedestrian and cycle traffic** was picked as a positive feature by some in the cyclist group, as well as the **enclosed design of the bridge** itself and **high rails** visible on the plans.
- **The improved width, compared with the existing footbridge** was noted. However, some participants in the residents group felt the current design was still not wide enough.

- The '**cycle friendliness**' of the new bridge was acknowledged, and some of the cyclist group liked the fact that the gentle slopes meant there was no need to dismount when using the bridge.

## **Suggested improvements to the Curzon Park Bridge design proposal**

Participants were asked to discuss the drawbacks they anticipated if a cycle and pedestrian bridge was developed in Curzon Park. The key issues are captured below.

### **Access on race days**

During this part of the discussion, both groups raised the issue of access to the Riverside Promenade on race days and during events at the Racecourse. According to some participants, gates along the Promenade near the Racecourse are closed on race days which they felt would restrict access to the path and the proposed cycle and pedestrian bridge and was seen as a major drawback to the proposals. However, not all participants were aware or had encountered this problem, nor were they informed of which gates would restrict access to particular sections of the Promenade or when they were shut.

### **Personal safety and the golf club access bridge**

Another issue raised by both groups was the access bridge close to the golf club in Curzon Park. The resident group in particular felt that accessing the proposed cycling and pedestrian bridge via this route would be dangerous. The width of the access bridge was thought to be too narrow, particularly when cars, pedestrians and cyclists would be using it, potentially at the same time. There was a strength of feeling that a bike or pushchair would be unable to cross the bridge with a car. The speed that cars cross the bridge, coupled with the blind bend on the residential side of the access bridge meant that it was very unsafe. It was also noted that coaches and delivery lorries also use the bridge to access the golf club, adding to the hazards cyclists and pedestrians must avoid when using the bridge.

‘Yes it’s very narrow and cars come very fast’

‘Have you tried walking across that bridge with a car coming let alone a pram or bicycle?’

### **Upkeep and maintenance**

Upkeep of the access bridge, particularly with the increased traffic the proposed bridge would bring, was mentioned. The cyclist group emphasised the importance of maintaining the bridge, particularly in terms of litter collection and general cleanliness.

### **Community safety and anti-social behaviour**

Increased use of the proposed bridge and the associated increase in pedestrian and cyclist traffic, ultimately leading to higher instances of anti-social behaviour and crime was a potential problem mentioned both groups. Specific reference was made to concerns about motorbikes using the bridge,

young people speeding along the smooth sloped surface of the new structure and burglaries and theft from residential houses. This view was countered by some, who felt increased cyclist and pedestrian traffic would multiply the number of people in and around the neighbourhood thus making the area feel safer. It was also felt that better lighting would help make people feel safe and reduce the level of undesirable behaviour.

‘Not great for residents as it’s a magnet for anti-social behaviour’

‘If there were more people using it and better lighting it would reduce that’

The cyclist group mentioned the potential danger of cyclists speeding along the proposed bridge and causing problems for pedestrians. Consideration and caution by all users was seen as the way forward if problems of this nature were to be avoided. Some suggested that marked lanes would help to achieve this.

### **Parking**

A small minority of participants in the residents group had strong views on parking issues in Curzon Park, who felt people would park in the area and use the proposed facility to access the City Centre, either on foot or bike.

### **Cycling in Chester**

There was a strength of feeling in both groups, but particularly those attending the cyclist discussion, that more needed to be done to improve cycling in the City Centre and wider Chester area. This included providing better facilities for cyclists, such as safe storage in more locations, as well as making cycling on roads safer and easier. The cyclist group felt that building pedestrian and cycle bridges did not make Chester a Cycling Demonstration Town - the real underlying issues such as road safety must be tackled first.

This was echoed by the residents group who made comments at the end of the discussion group relating to the hazard associated with cycling in Chester, especially when trying to navigate roundabouts.

‘It is a half-hearted effort of trying to introduce it where they could improve it elsewhere’

‘It’s a small pathetic attempt to improve cycling – there are certain places in Chester where cycle routes just disappear’

### ***Specific design aspects residents felt could be improved***

In groups, participants were asked to illustrate aspects of the proposed bridge design they thought may be problematic. Where issues were identified,

participants were invited to make suggestions about how these problems could be overcome.

- The potential for **traffic conflict on the access bridge** was acknowledged as an issue by both groups, but was a particular concern for the resident group. The bridge was considered to be too narrow, posing a danger to cyclists and pedestrians and the blind bend onto the bridge from the Curzon Park area was felt to be a serious hazard. Suggestions of **traffic calming measures** were made by a number of participants, including:
  - a maximum speed limit
  - traffic lights
  - speed bumps (participants in the residents group were unsure whether Network Rail would allow these to be placed on the bridge)
  - allowing cyclists and pedestrians priority access over the bridge
  - a rail or barrier to separate pedestrians/cyclists and cars
  - a different road surface, which makes it unpleasant for drivers to use and would indicate the pedestrian section of the bridge
  - instructing cyclists to dismount and walk over the access bridge
  - signs (although this option was not popular with participants in the residents group)
  - bollards that sink into the ground (again, this suggestion was not popular with the residents group)
  - a separate bridge for cyclists and pedestrians attached to the current access bridge.
  
- The recognition of **shared use issues on the Curzon Park Bridge** was highlighted by a number of participants, particularly **in relation to cyclists and pedestrians**. **Traffic calming measures for cyclists**, such as staggered barriers or humps, to prevent them from speeding along the bridge, were suggested to try to alleviate the potential problem. However, participants felt this might cause issues for cyclists, those with pushchairs and wheelchair users trying to access the bridge. Some participants in the residents group were particularly **concerned about motorbikes using the bridge**, and felt the bridge wasn't very pedestrian friendly. The cyclist group also raised concerns about the **potential hazards caused by dogs that are not kept on a lead** by their owners. To overcome these issues, the cyclist group suggested that people may need to be reminded to use the bridge sensibly and with consideration.
  
- **Participants wanted to be able to use the bridge on race days and were concerned the route would be closed to the public on race days** or during other events held at the Racecourse. Some participants were aware of gates along the Riverside Promenade being closed near to the stable area of the Racecourse during events but many participants seemed to be unsure of where gates are located currently so were uncertain of how this issue could be overcome.

- Concerns were raised about the **increased risk of dog fouling and litter on the bridge and the immediate areas surrounding the new development**. It was suggested that litter and dog bins, together with regular litter collection and bin emptying, would help to overcome this issue. Participants from the cyclist group were particularly concerned about cleanliness and safety in terms of broken glass bottles, and felt that **cycle routes are often overlooked in terms of road and street sweeping**. They emphasised the importance of regular maintenance and servicing, but also questioned the Council's ability to collect litter from Network Rail land.
- There was general agreement from both groups that the **proposed bridge is too narrow**. Suggestions included increasing the width from 2 to 3 metres and using the existing disused railway track as an alternative, opening it up to the City Centre and allowing easy access to the train station.
- **Being able to view the landscape from the new bridge was important to participants**. Some questioned if users would be able to see the surrounding area and enjoy the pleasant view through the bridge construction, as is the case with the current footbridge. Some participants asked whether a viewing area could be added to the plans to allow users to view the Chester townscape from the Curzon Park side of the bridge. In addition to this, the cyclist group felt the **colour of the bridge should be in keeping with the surrounding natural environment** and suggested a more natural colour, such as green.
- Many participants emphasised that they **wished to keep the existing footbridge**, although it was referred to by some participants from the residents group as 'an eyesore'.
- Some in the residents group **questioned whether disabled users, particularly those who are old or frail, would be able to manage the slope** of the bridge.
- The **surface of the bridge was felt to be particularly important**. As no mention of this was made in the plans, participants felt that it **should be tactile and good enough to use in poor weather**. All participants seemed to like the Riverside Promenade surface as it is non-slip, and felt it should be similar. Surface maintenance was also considered to be important.
- All participants felt **including a handrail on the bridge** would be beneficial, although the cyclist group felt these should be far enough apart to allow people to move freely and enjoy their journey across the bridge.

## Use and promotion of a new Curzon Park Cycle and Pedestrian Bridge

In order to understand the type of people who might use the proposed bridge and ways in which it could be advertised and promoted to potential users, participants were asked if they could identify groups of people they felt would use the facility and ways in which use could be increased and promoted effectively in the future.

### ***Who might use the bridge?***

Participants mentioned a number of groups who they thought might use the proposed bridge. This included:

- children and young families
- individuals who find it difficult to navigate stairs, such as disabled and older people
- local people who reside in the area, using it to come in and out of the City
- commuters, including those who work at the Sealand Retail Park and Countess of Chester Hospital
- pupils and parents, as a means of accessing a number of schools in the area
- those who wish to access leisure facilities
- those wishing to use the bridge as a leisure walk or cycle route.

### ***Promoting the new bridge***

- **Good signage** was thought to be vital, both in the immediate vicinity of the proposed bridge and directions to the bridge from further afield, such as at the end of Mount Pleasant, in Saltney and on the Overleigh Roundabout. Directions from the bridge to the railway station were also suggested by the cyclist group.
- Some participants from the cyclist group felt that calling the new bridge the 'Curzon Park cycling and pedestrian bridge' may sound exclusive and alienate many potential users. As an alternative, the **cyclist group suggested renaming it the 'Roodee Bridge'**.
- A number of **suggestions about how to promote** the bridge were made by the cyclist group. These included:
  - having an opening event when the bridge is complete
  - including a leaflet in the Council newspaper, which goes to every household in the Borough
  - borough Councillors using and promoting the bridge
  - using additional promotion ideas from the Council's Communications team
- **Interpretation boards** to include information about the history of the site, as used elsewhere in Chester City Centre, were also suggested

by the cyclist group as a positive way to provide information, as opposed to telling people what not to do when using the facility.

- Some participants in the residents group felt that, as the **current footbridge is a public right of way, there was no need to advertise** or promote a new bridge further.
- A participant in the resident group felt that the **Sustrans website is not clear in terms of where people can cycle** in Chester and how the current cycle routes link up with others in surrounding areas, such as North Wales and Ellesmere Port.

## Final thoughts and comments

Towards the end of both the cyclist and resident focus groups, respondents began to question and discuss the practical aspects of developing the proposed Curzon Park Bridge, including timescales for the development and conditions of funding.

In particular, both groups were **interested in knowing exact dates of the process**, such as when planning permission would be applied for, when the results from public consultation would be considered and when work to build the bridge might begin. There was also a strength of feeling from both groups that they **wanted to more information about the proposals and future plans for the bridge**. This was particularly evident in the resident group, where comments were made regarding late delivery of a letter outlining information about the road show (where plans and proposals for the new bridge were displayed), which some participants did not receive until after the event had taken place.

'I would be interested to know how it goes through planning permission, whether it's going to be railroaded or what'

Although a wide range of concerns and issues relating to the Curzon Park Bridge were raised by the cyclist and resident groups, there was a genuine feeling that **most people were in favour of a bridge or cycling and pedestrian facility in the area but had reservations about of the current proposal** – only a handful were against in principle. Participants in the resident groups voiced concerns that if this particular proposal was not approved they will be left without any facility.

'It's not a good scheme but if it's the only one available we will put up with it'

'I want some improvements to the existing thing. Is it possible the bridge will be taken away and nothing happening?'

'The worry is if you oppose this is that you leave yourself with no access'

The cyclist group also had **concerns about the impact of government cuts** on funding for the project and felt it was important the Council push to keep the process moving forward for fear that the new bridge may not be developed at all.