

Chester Northgate

General

As with our representation in 2002 regarding the planning application submitted by London and Amsterdam, Chester Cycling Campaign welcomes the proposal as an opportunity to redevelop a key part of Chester. As a cycling campaign we look to encourage an increase in cycling in and around Chester, and a corresponding reduction in cars entering the city. We do, however, acknowledge that for a development of this type there has to be a balance with the need to provide parking for the visitor arriving by car, in addition to the desired pedestrian, cycle and public transport.

Although we welcome the project we consider it ambitious, with a high concentration of retail units, which, with current shopping trends runs the risk of not being viable. In addition there is no noticeable green space, a feature that has declined in most cities over the years. We would make the point that a reduction in retail units with some accompanying green space is preferable to no green space and empty units. There is nothing more dispiriting for a visitor, than to walk along a street with numbers of empty retail units, it speaks of a centre in decline, contrary to what Chester is trying to achieve.

Layout

Without commenting in too much detail we are happy with how the sloping site is dealt with and the proposed open streets and squares. We would make one comment, the web site under the section on Leisure - view 3 – ‘Looking into Chester Northgate from the St. Martin’s Way access’; the steps are accompanied by a lift. Would this arrangement exclude cyclists, or would there be provision of a ramp? Out door public lifts have never been a success wherever they are located. There are obviously some difficulties associated with the public lift at the canal bridge, beside Waitrose, where the contractor installed a lift, and over a year later the lift is still not in operation.

Movement

We would like to see the flow of users around the streets and squares to be accessible for cyclists as well as pedestrians. Dedicated cycle paths would be ideal, differentiated with a change in colour or surface texture, but if this is not possible then shared usage. Shared usage is becoming more common as local authorities retrofit cycling provision, using existing foot paths, to avoid dangerous or unsafe sections of highway. It is a solution that can initially cause conflict between the two parties, until each becomes comfortable with the other and happy to coexist.

The preferred solution for cycle visitors is to have cycle stands provided little and often throughout the streets and squares. The most economical and effective stand is the inverted ‘U’ shaped ‘Sheffield’ stand, each one accommodating two cycles. With imaginative hard landscaping the stands can blend in well with the street scene.

Staff

A further issue is the provision for cycle parking for staff working within the development, of which there will be a significant number.

These staff will likely be at the lower end of pay scales and either not possess a car or find parking difficult and the cost prohibitive. This would leave walking, cycling and public transport as the likely options for travelling to and from work. Most staff using cycles would prefer secure storage out of site of the public streets. One option is to allocate communal space within the underground car park. However, local authorities are often not prepared to give up revenue earning parking spaces. At the other end of the scale is some type of provision for individual stores, and with lots of permutations between.

A point which maybe of interest, Chester Cycling Campaign carried out a survey in 2014, of the large supermarkets in and around Chester. The basic task was to look at the cycle provision for both shoppers and for supermarket staff. The results were quite varied - ranging from poor provision for shoppers, but within the same store, good secure parking for staff, including cycle to work schemes. We then had stores with nothing for staff but good convenient undercover parking for shoppers. Shoppers wanted stands in reasonably close proximity to the shops they were visiting and staff wanted secure storage hidden from view. The best stores also provided changing facilities for their staff.

We acknowledge that it is often difficult to complete even preliminary design when occupants of the premises and their requirements are not yet known, but Chester Cycling Campaign would request that the above is given consideration, and hopefully designed in to all new premises as a standard facility.

Link With Other Chester Projects

Access to the proposed development from beyond its perimeter is to a certain extent dictated by Chester City's current road and street layout.

At the moment there are a number of major projects in Chester either under construction or at the planning stage. In addition to the proposed Chester Northgate there is the new bus interchange, the new theatre, significant developments for housing at the old Saighton Camp and Upton Grange under construction and proposals for a large housing development along Wrexham Rd, along with others. These will all feed into Chester Northgate through either employees or visitors. Chester Cycling Campaign acknowledges that the consultants developing the project have a limited brief, but would hope that the Northgate development is not being looked at in isolation, but looking at where it fits into a strategic plan for Chester, a role where the Cheshire West and Chester Council need to collaborate with the development team. The cycling campaign accepts that money is very tight and when it is available only a proportion would be allocated to cycling or pedestrian improvement. However, we would like to think there is a plan of what the Council would eventually want to achieve and the pieces of the 'jigsaw' could be put in place, as a new development creates an opportunity. The Campaign group feel currently that when money does become available there is a scramble to come up with ideas for where it could be spent, rather than a strategic objective where minor improvements are known about and the money can be suitably allocated.

An example of the link between the various developments is the 'New Cultural Centre, now nearing completion. Chester Cycling Campaign commented on the application with regard to the lack of cycle stand provision, the only provision being made was for a limited number of stands for employees located to the rear of the theatre - a good facility. This did not comply with Cheshire West and Chester document 'Supplementary Planning Guidance: Parking Provision within Developments in Chester'. However, in the planning officers 'conditions of the permission' it stated:

14. Details of Cycle Parking provision shall be submitted to and agreed in writing with the local planning authority. The provision shall be made available prior to the occupation of the development hereby approved.

Reason: To accord with local and national sustainable transport objectives and to comply with policy TR13 of the Chester District Local Plan.

With the Chester Northgate seeking planning approval early in 2016, provision could be made for additional cycle stands within the Development if space within the theatre plot is limited. However this has not been confirmed. Chester Cycling Campaign have written to the planners to ascertain if any progress has been made to arrive at a solution, considering the Cultural Centre is due for completion later this year.

Access Route Map

We are still hoping to let you have a map of the site, highlighting the various access points to and from the development. More people will arrive at the site on foot or by bicycle if the routes in are both direct and obvious. So often, safer routes follow back streets or are out of sight for people less familiar with an area. Good clear signage is something we find lacking in many areas and cycle routes are not always used to their full potential as a result.

There is a lot happening in Chester at the moment, and it would be good to think, from a Chester resident's point of view, that the council and the developers are getting it right.

Trevor Jenkins

For Chester Cycling Campaign

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