

Community Active Travel project

Walkability assessment findings – Ballymacarrett (2)

Introduction

The Community Active Travel initiative is a three-year project aimed at encouraging communities to travel more actively, both for transport and leisure purposes. The project is funded by the Public Health Agency and led by Sustrans. Belfast Healthy Cities has contributed to the project through walkability assessments designed to provide a baseline insight into the community's perceptions regarding walking and walkability in the local neighbourhood. The aim of the assessments is to provide evidence on priorities for action that can be addressed with stakeholders throughout the life of the project. The approach is also intended to give local residents an opportunity to share their views and ideas on their neighbourhood environment.

The walkability assessment approach

The assessment tool used within the project has been developed by Belfast Healthy Cities through adaptation of existing walkability assessment tools.¹ The tool was originally developed as part of the Age Friendly Belfast action plan and reflects the key criteria for outdoor space outlined in the World Health Organization (WHO) Age Friendly Cities framework.² It has been piloted with over 200 older people, including people in supported housing with early stage dementia, community based walking groups and seniors fora.³

Methodology

The assessment tool is designed to particularly highlight issues in the built environment, but also encourages and allows for feedback on other issues important to participants in relation to walking in the local neighbourhood. The walks follow a route that is identified by participants as important to them and the community and are preceded by a short briefing session on the purpose of the walk, the questionnaire topics and logistical information about duration of the walk and point of assembly etc. Walks typically last for 10-20 minutes, to enable people of all abilities to participate. A questionnaire is completed following the walk in the neighbourhood, and a further discussion of the results is facilitated in order to extract a more in-depth understanding of the issues raised and to allow additional information not covered by the questionnaire to be shared and recorded.

The questionnaire included a list of 25 topics that are grouped under different themes including 'general impression of the area'; 'pavements'; 'outdoor safety'; 'pedestrian crossings'; 'safety'; and 'connectivity'. These topics are rated by participants from 'excellent' to 'very poor'. An additional section at the end of the questionnaire allows participants to register more detailed comments about the positive aspects and challenges of the area and suggestions to make the area safer.

¹ Belfast Healthy Cities (2014) *Walkability Assessment for Healthy Ageing: A report.*
www.belfasthealthycities.com/publications

² WHO (2007) *Global Age Friendly Cities: A Guide.*

http://www.who.int/ageing/age_friendly_cities_guide/en/http://www.who.int/ageing/age_friendly_cities_guide/en/

³ Belfast Healthy Cities (2016) *Walking Belfast: Older People's Views.*
www.belfasthealthycities.com/publications

Questionnaires do not ask for information that can be used to identify the person filling in the questionnaire and all information gathered through them will remain anonymous. Participants are encouraged to fill out the questionnaire but are not obliged to.

In order to allow for the registration of opinions and knowledge of all participants, a discussion is initiated after questionnaires have been filled out. Also, the discussion allows for additional topics and in-depth information that are not covered by the questionnaire to come to the fore, either through elaboration by participants or through prompting by the facilitator. The overall findings reflect the outcomes of both the questionnaires and the additional discussion.

Ballymacarrett walkability assessment

The walkability assessment in Ballymacarrett was undertaken in September 2018. In total 13 persons with ages ranging from 40 to 60 participated in the walk. 8 out of 13 participants were female. Most participants were regular walkers. As a result none of the participant had mobility issues. Thirteen questionnaires were completed.

The route of the walk is shown in Figure 1 below. Figure 2 in Appendix 2 shows the route in relation to the wider Belfast area. This route was selected by the group leader in consultation with BHC staff and follows one of the main arteries in East Belfast. Most participants would have used this road on a frequent basis for accessing shops and other facilities in the past, but some of the participants indicated that they moved away and don't visit this area as often.



Figure 1. Map of route used for walkability assessment with numbers indicating location of photos. Source: Google Maps

Feedback from participants

The key challenges of the area that were highlighted during the assessment are:

- The design quality of the public realm is generally very high, particularly along the Connswater Greenway and main roads. The pavements generally appeared to be well maintained, clean and wide enough;
- Dropped kerbs and tactile pavements for the visually impaired are generally provided at pedestrian crossings on Newtownards Road. However, in the side streets dropped kerbs can be lacking and in poor condition;
- Pedestrian crossings are generally available and are equipped with pedestrian lights. The main exception to this is the crossing near Bryson Street. Pedestrian lights around the Connswater junction generally lack sound signals, however, due to the density of crossings this might be done in order to avoid confusion for visually impaired people about which crossing is safe to use. Also, the different crossings are not timed according to each other and often don't provide sufficient time for people to cross. Also, the placement of the light indicators seems to cause confusion for some people when it comes to noticing when it's safe to cross;
- There is a general **lack of benches**. This might present a problem for people with mobility issues;

The full results of the questionnaires can be found in Appendix 1. The images below illustrate some of the issues raised that relate to the various questionnaire topics.

Pavement

Key issues:

- The quality of pavements is generally high with appropriate widths assigned along Connswater Greenway and Newtownards Road. Poor quality pavements due to uneven surfaces, cracks and lumps appear in side streets leading off from Newtownards Road;
- Tactile pavements occur at most road crossings;
- Dropped kerbs occur at most road crossings and along walking routes. However, in the side streets leading off Newtownards Road some dropped kerbs are uneven or poorly executed.



Connswater Greenway (location 1)



Newtownards Road (location 3)



Templemore Avenue (location 7)



Major Street (location 6)

Street environment

- The Newtownards and Albertbridge Roads are busy with car traffic, but wide pavement are provided for pedestrians. The junction of Newtownards and Albertbridge Roads is particularly dominated by car traffic;
- Streets are generally clean and well-maintained, with high-quality paving materials being used along Connswater Greenway and Newtownards Road. However, side streets are generally much less maintained and of poorer quality and no trees;
- There is a lack of benches along the main walking routes, however, the Skainos Centre provides a good quality public space including sheltered seats and planting;
- The residential areas away from the main roads can be very disorientating for people that don't live there, especially when compared to the original terraced streets that used to be in the area before redevelopment.



Newtownards Road (location 3)



Skainos Square (location 4)



McMaster Street (location 5)

Accessibility

- Most pedestrian crossings are fitted with pedestrian lights. However, it can be difficult to notice when the light turns green due to the odd location of lights. Different types of pedestrian crossings add to the confusion;
- Pedestrian crossings near the Connswater junction lack sound signals. However, this might be to avoid confusion due to the density of crossings?;
- Three separate pedestrian crossings need to be used when walking from Connswater Retail Park to Newtownards Road. The poor timing of pedestrian lights means that pedestrians need quite some time to cross;
- Limited space for larger groups / cyclists on traffic islands;
- Limited number of pedestrian crossings between Templemore Avenue and Short Strand;
- Some minor issues with cars blocking the pavements.



Albertbridge Road / Connswater Link (location 2)



Newtownards Road (location 3)



Major Street (location 6)



Templemore Avenue (location 7)

Recommendations

The walkability assessment provides a preliminary foundation to devise solutions with local residents and stakeholders. The key recommendations arising from this assessment are:

- A coherent design of pedestrian crossings in the area should be pursued in order to avoid confusion among pedestrians about the use of crossings. The instalment of **audio signals** at pedestrian crossings will make crossings more user-friendly for visually impaired people, while the **timing of pedestrian lights** would allow more crossing time at pedestrian crossings and would add to a sense of safety;
- The addition / redesign of dropped kerbs and tactile pavements in the side streets leading to Newtownards Road would make the area more user friendly for people in wheelchairs and people with buggies;
- The inclusion of **more bins and benches** along the main routes will contribute to a cleaner and more walkable environment;
- Harsh punishment regime should be followed when it comes to people that drop **litter** / don't remove **dog fouling** in order to avoid unclean streets.

Appendix 1: Walkability assessment questionnaire responses

Date: 12 September 2018

Route: from EastSide visitor Centre to Ballymac Centre via Newtownards Rd

Number of completed questionnaires: 13

| General impression of the area: | Excellent | Good | Average | Poor | Very Poor |
|---|------------------|---------------|----------------|-------------|------------------|
| Cleanliness | II | IIIIIIII | IIIII | | |
| Overall appeal | II | IIIIIIII | IIII | | |
| Pavements: | Excellent | Good | Average | Poor | Very Poor |
| Well maintained with few cracks | II | IIII | IIIIIIII | | |
| Free of obstruction –cars, bins etc | II | IIII | IIIIIIII | | |
| Non-slip | II | IIIIIIII | IIII | | |
| Wide enough for wheelchairs or for safely passing other pedestrians | II | IIIIIIII | IIII | | |
| Dropped kerbs to road level at crossings | II | IIIII | IIIII | | |
| Outdoor safety: | Excellent | Good | Average | Poor | Very Poor |
| Drivers give way at crossings | II | IIIIIIII | III | | |
| Separate cycle paths | II | I | II | IIII II | I |
| Good street lighting | II | IIIIIIII | II | | |
| Good visibility with no high hedges, dark corners | II | IIIIIIII | III | | |
| Street is used by others, feels busy | III | IIIII | IIII | | |
| Pedestrian crossings: | Excellent | Good | Average | Poor | Very Poor |
| Available at busy locations and at local shops and services | I | IIIIIIII I | II | | |
| Safe for people with different levels of ability | | IIIIIIII | IIII | | |
| Appropriate tactile surfacing at crossings | II | IIIIII | IIII | | |
| Traffic lights are clearly visible | III | IIIIIIII | III | | |
| Sound signal clear | I | III | IIII | I | II |

| | | | | | |
|--|------------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|------------------|
| Adequate crossing time | I | IIIIII | IIIII | | |
| Seating: | Excellent | Good | Average | Poor | Very Poor |
| Available at suitable intervals | | | IIIIII | IIII I | |
| Well maintained | | I | IIIIII | IIII | |
| Comfortable | | I | IIIII | IIII | |
| Walking environment & shops: | Excellent | Good | Average | Poor | Very Poor |
| Streets are situated together and are accessible | | IIIII | IIII | II | |
| Streets link me to places I want to go | | IIIII | IIII | III | |
| Shops are within walking distance | | IIII | IIII | IIII | |

Additional comments raised during the discussion:

Positive elements

- Mostly clear pavements and good quality surfaces;
- Wide pavements;
- Dropped kerbs are generally available.

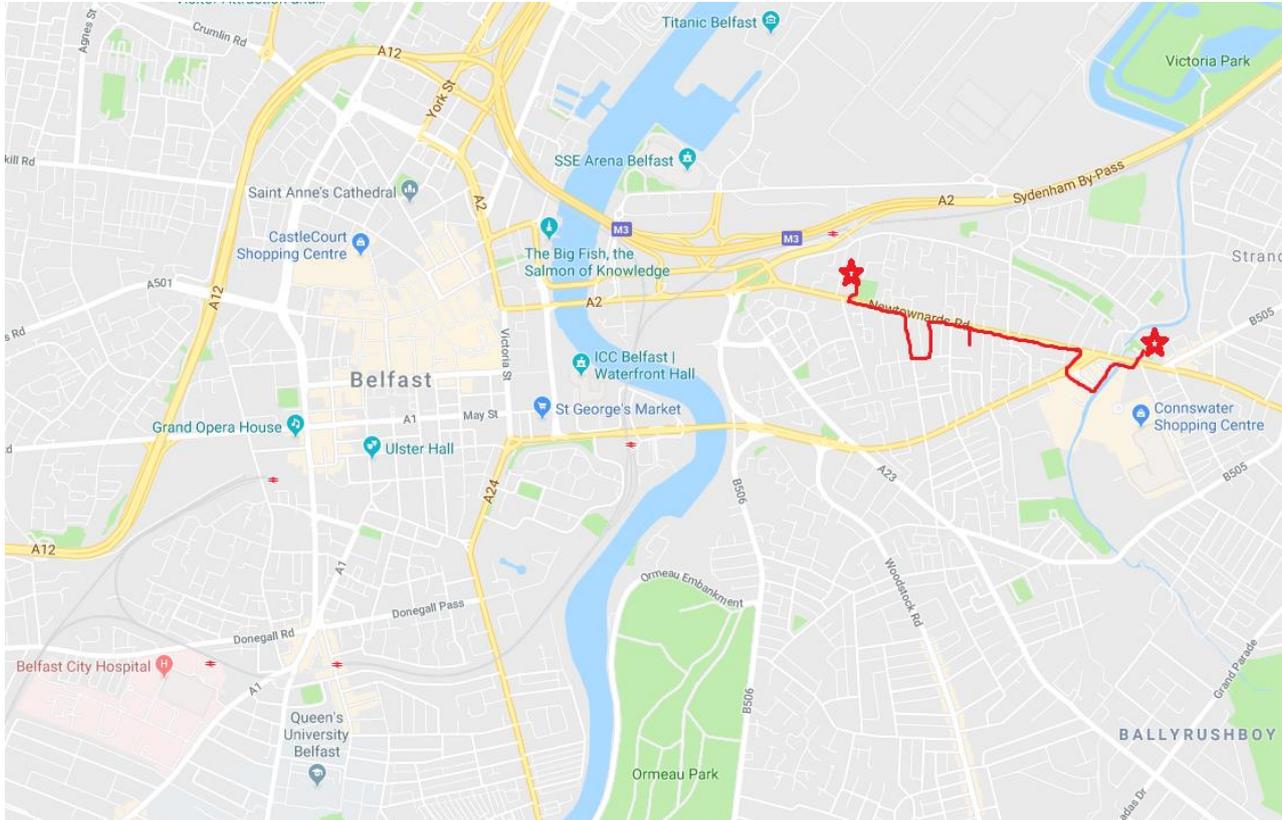
Challenges

- Traffic and busy roads;
- Keeping streets clean; dog mess; litter;
- Lots of side streets to cross;
- Shops use pavement as display area, thereby reducing space for walking;
- Lack of dropped kerbs in side streets;
- Poor quality shops;
- Pedestrian crossings are not all of same type; limited crossing time;
- Not many local shops;
- Lack of seats.

Changes suggested

- More bins.

Appendix 2



Map of route used for walkability assessment in relation to the wider neighbourhood. Source: Google Maps