

Community Active Travel project

Walkability assessment findings – Ballymurphy

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.

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.

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

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.

Ballymurphy walkability assessment

The walkability assessment in Ballymurphy was undertaken in April 2019. In total 7 women from different age ranges participated in the walk. One participant had a mobility issue, but none of the participants were visually or hearing impaired. Six 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 in consultation with the participants and follows a route that takes in streets and facilities that people living in the area would generally use. All participants use the route on a frequent basis and felt that the route showcases issues with the local walking environment.

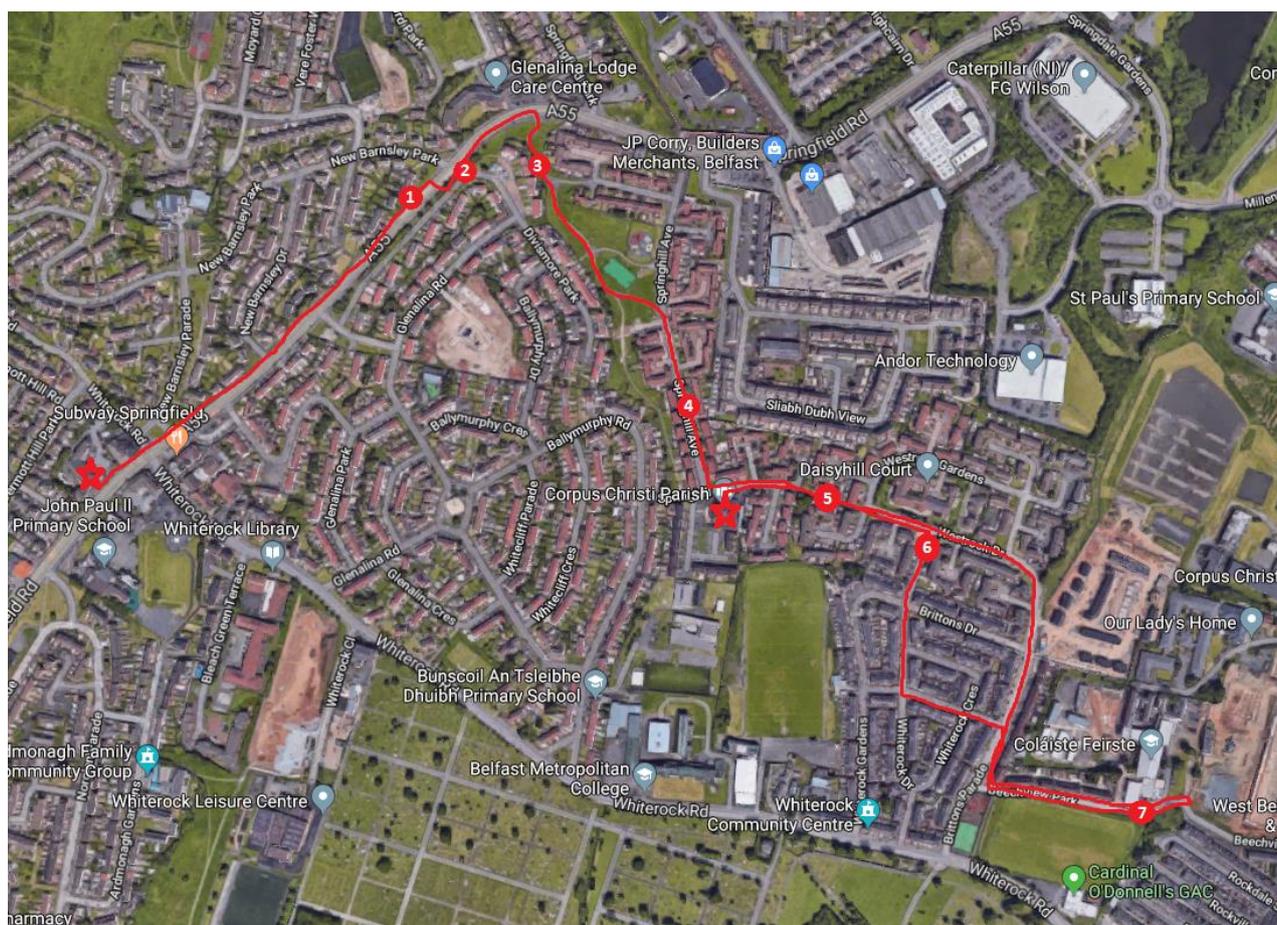


Figure 1. Map of route used for walkability assessment with numbers indicating location of photos. Source: Google Maps

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 quite low. A lack of trees in the streets make the area feel like a 'concrete jungle'. Also, the pedestrian link between Springhill Drive and Westrock Gardens is generally poorly maintained and unappealing to walk through, especially during night time when drug abuse might occur.
- The **lack of street lighting** in the play park and around Divismore Park make these areas intimidating to walk through at night. Youth gathering in the area during the evenings adds to this feeling of intimidation;
- Litter and dog fouling appear regularly in the area. A **lack of bins** means that litter is likely to accumulate over time. There are specific hotspots where littering takes place, for example in the pedestrian link between Springhill Drive and Westrock Gardens and the pedestrian shortcut through Beechview Park;
- Pavement in the residential street often **lack dropped kerbs** and tactile paving for the visually impaired. Major cracks and burn marks from burned wheelie bins add to a general impression of underinvestment and poor maintenance;
- There are **pedestrian crossings** available that are equipped with pedestrian lights and dropped kerbs as well as tactile pavements for the visually impaired on the main crossroads. Sound signals are lacking though. Additional traffic islands where residents can cross occur occasionally, for example near the entrance to the city cemetery / Falls Park. However, these crossings can be dangerous especially with no traffic calming measures in place. Generally speaking, the long distances between pedestrian crossings encourages residents to jaywalk in order to avoid length detours;
- **Cars parked haphazardly** in the area present residents with a major obstacle. Cars parked on the pavement often do not leave adequate room on the footpaths for people to pass, particularly with a pram or in a wheelchair;
- The commonly used pedestrian route through Beechview Park that leads to local schools and the Falls Road is dominated by litter and graffiti and is therefore unattractive to use. Also, the steepness of this route makes it very unsuitable for people with mobility issues;
- A **poor bus service** leads to difficulties reaching facilities situated in the city centre and along Falls Road and in the Park Centre on Donegal Road. People without access to private transport or with mobility issues often rely on taxis;
- The nearest **accessible green space** is the green strip next to the play park on Springfield Avenue. However, this area is generally poorly maintained and is dominated by litter and dog fouling. Youth tend to gather in these spaces in the evenings, which makes these areas unattractive to use. The play park is fenced off in order to avoid vandalism of play equipment taking place. Also, metal gates at the entrances to the green strip combined with a lack of dropped kerbs makes this green space difficult to access for people in wheelchairs or people with a pram or rollator. The nearest large park would be Falls Park across Whiterock Road. Residents generally feel this park is good quality and accessible. However, the lack of a proper pedestrian crossing can make access difficult at times;
- There is a general **lack of benches** in the area for elderly people to sit on and rest.

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:

- Pavements generally have appropriate widths assigned to them throughout along the Springfield Road and Whiterock Road;
- Pavements often have cracks and uneven patches, particularly in the residential streets;
- The concrete steps leading down from Springfield Road onto Divismore Park are crumbling;
- Burn marks from the burning of wheelie bins occur regularly throughout the area;
- The surface in front of the shops on Brittons Parade are uneven and slippery when wet, which makes it more probably that people will fall.



Steps leading down from Springfield Road (location 2)



Steps leading down from Springfield Road (location 2)



Westrock Parade (location 6)



Springfield Avenue (location 4)

Street environment

- Vandalism of public property such as lamp posts, bins, and play facilities has led to a general underinvestment in the area;
- Street lighting is missing or malfunctioning in several places, particularly around the play park and around the Divismore Park area. This makes these areas intimidating during night time, when groups of youngsters might gather to hang out in public;
- The pedestrian link between Springhill Drive and Westrock Gardens is very unattractive to walk in due to blind walls, fences etc. Drug abuse occurs here at night time;
- Dog fouling and litter are a major concern, particularly in Beechview Park and the pedestrian link between Springhill Drive and Westrock Gardens. A general lack of bins in the area contributes to this problem;
- There is a general lack of benches for elderly people to sit and rest;
- The green strip next to the play park is poorly maintained. Trees are generally lacking in residential streets, which contributes to the impression of a 'concrete jungle'. The outdoor play facilities for children located in the green strip is fenced off to avoid vandalism.



Beechview Park (location 7)



Entrance to play park (location 3)



Pedestrian link between Springhill Drive and Westrock Gardens (location 5)



Beechview Park (location 7)



Beechview Park (location 7)

Accessibility

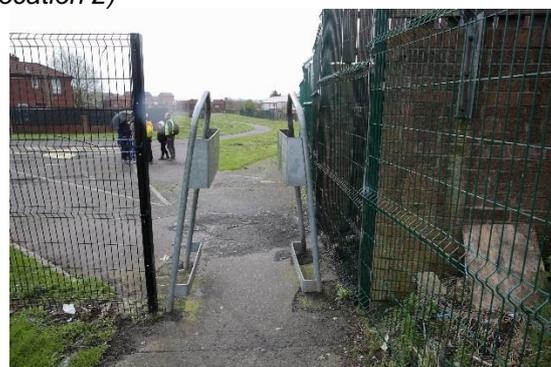
- There is generally quite a large volume of car traffic in Springfield Road and Whiterock Road. Pedestrian crossings with lights installed only occur at the major crossroads. Although additional traffic islands occur, residents are often forced to jaywalk in order to avoid walking large detours. Residents rely on a small traffic island when trying to reach the entrance gates to the city cemetery / Falls Park. Sound signals are lacking at all crossings;
- Parked cars are often parked haphazardly and block access to side streets and pavements which makes it difficult for people in wheelchairs or with buggies to move around;
- Dropped kerbs and tactile pavements occur along Springfield Road and Whiterock Road are mostly lacking in inner residential streets and near the entrances to the play park. This makes it difficult for people in wheelchairs are with buggies/rollators to traverse the area. Concrete poles situated in the middle of pavements, steep staircases and the metal gates situated to the entrances to the play park contribute to this problem;
- The pedestrian shortcut through Beechview Park is very steep and therefore very difficult to use for people with mobility issues;
- The area is served by insufficient public transport services. There is only one bus an hour with no services on the Sundays. Residents without access to a car rely on black taxis.



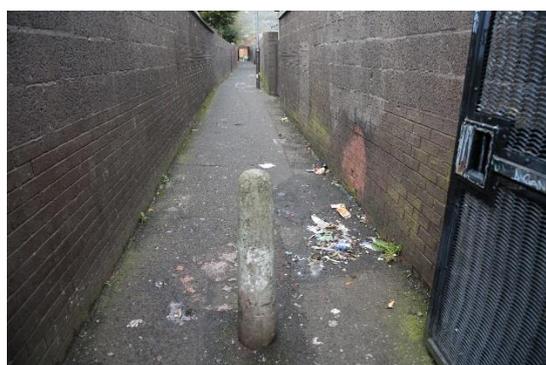
Springfield Road (location 1)



Steps leading down from Springfield Road (location 2)



Entrance to play park (location 3)



Pedestrian link between Springhill Drive and Westrock Gardens (location 5)



Westrock Parade (location 6)

Recommendations

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

- Improvement of the **pedestrian route** through Beechview Park would create a more pleasant walking link to Falls Road. The inclusion of a set of steps to make it easier for people to climb up the steep section of the route would be a priority;
- **Regular maintenance** of road surfaces and **regular cleaning** will create more user-friendly pavements and will make the area look more appealing. The inclusion of more bins along the main routes will contribute to a less litter on the streets;
- **More investment** in a redesigned green strip along Springfield Avenue could create a high-quality open space that local residents feel ownership of;
- The maintenance of **street lighting** would make the green strip and the area around Divismore Park more safe and less intimidating to use during night time;
- **Better policing** mechanisms or the employment of community officers could help to tackle the high rate of vandalism in the area;
- The **removal of gates and high walls** along the pedestrian link between Springhill Drive and Westrock Gardens would make this route much more pleasant to use. The removal of the concrete post would allow better access for people in a wheelchair or people with prams or rollators;
- The planting of **more street trees** would make the area feel less like a concrete jungle;
- The introduction of **stricter parking regulation** will help to prevent cars being parked on pavements and will provide local residents with better access to the public realm;
- The instalment of **more pedestrian crossings** would cut the distance between them and would make it easier for people to cross the Springfield Road and Whiterock Road. The instalment of a pedestrian light near the entrance to the city cemetery / Falls Park would create a safer way for residents to access these important facilities;
- A **more frequent bus** service would increase mobility opportunities for people without access to a car.

Appendix 1: Walkability assessment questionnaire responses

Date: 3 April 2019

Route: from the Upper Springfield Development Trust offices on Springfield Road to the Top of the Rocks Healthy Living Centre on Springhill Drive via Springfield Road, Springfield Avenue and an additional loop through the Westrock estate.

Number of completed questionnaires: 6

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

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

Additional comments raised during the discussion:

Positive elements

- Walking distances to main chapel and main road are small;
- The area is close to Falls Park, which allows for a safe walking environment away from traffic.

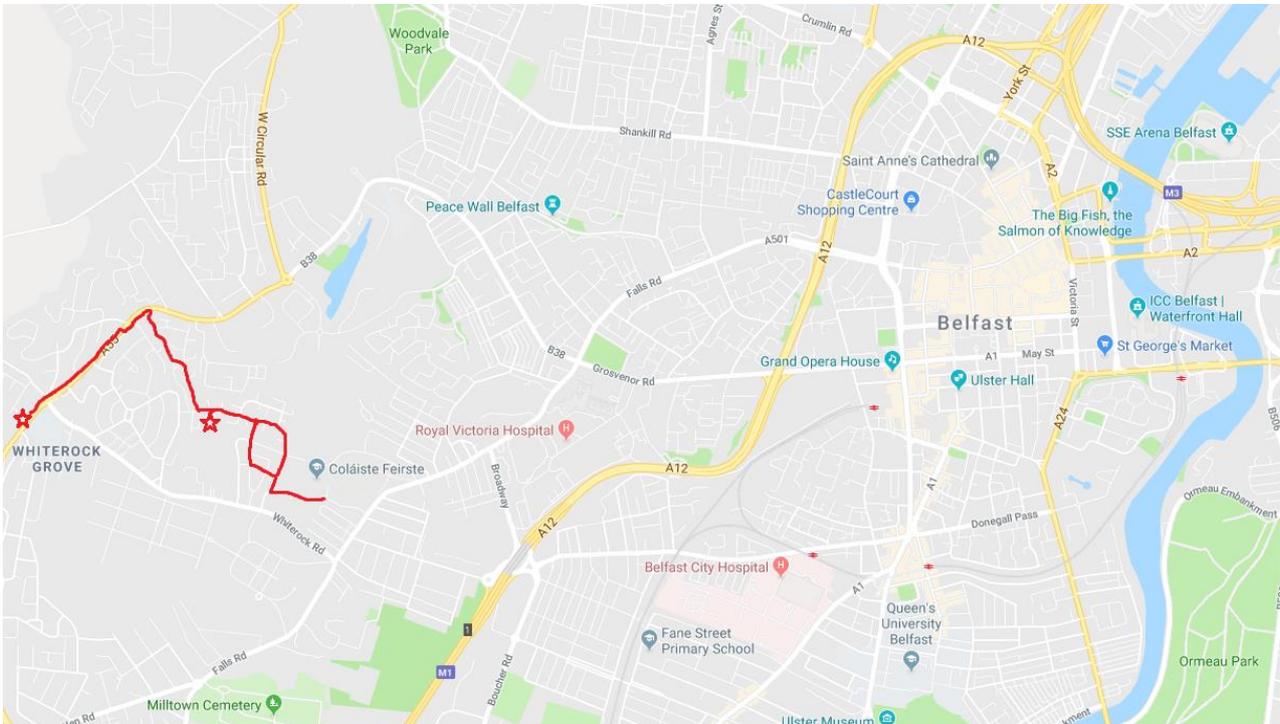
Challenges

- Dog fouling;
- Litter;
- Graffiti;
- Poor maintenance of alleyways;
- Footpaths are slanted and cracked;
- Surfaces outside local shops are uneven and slippery when wet;
- Cars parked on pavements, forcing prams and wheelchair users on the road;
- Concrete posts on pathways restrict access for prams and wheelchair users;
- Metal gates at entrances to local play park keep scramblers and motorbikes out but also restrict access for prams and wheelchair users;
- Poor street lighting, which encourages anti-social behaviour;
- Vandalism of facilities / playgrounds.

Changes suggested

- Better street lighting;
- Resurfacing of roads and pathways;
- Regular cleansing of streets including removal of dog fouling;
- Walking in groups rather than alone;
- Better policing of areas to deter vandals and anti-social behaviour;
- Levelling of pathways;
- More security e.g. through employment of community worker.

Appendix 2



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