

## **Community Active Travel project**

### **Walkability assessment findings – Connswater (1)**

#### **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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

#### **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.

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<sup>1</sup> Belfast Healthy Cities (2014) *Walkability Assessment for Healthy Ageing: A report.*  
[www.belfasthealthycities.com/publications](http://www.belfasthealthycities.com/publications)

<sup>2</sup> 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/](http://www.who.int/ageing/age_friendly_cities_guide/en/http://www.who.int/ageing/age_friendly_cities_guide/en/)

<sup>3</sup> Belfast Healthy Cities (2016) *Walking Belfast: Older People's Views.*  
[www.belfasthealthycities.com/publications](http://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.

### Connswater walkability assessment

The walkability assessment in Connswater was undertaken in June 2018. In total 8 adults with ages ranging from 50 to 85 participated in the walk. Seven out of the eight participants were male. All participants were elderly, therefore most participant had mobility issues to varying extents. Some of the participants were visually or hearing impaired, although not severely. Only two questionnaires were completed. The group leader identified that some participants had problems with reading and writing and preferred to opt out.

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. Because of the fact that some of the participants did not live locally, not all participants would use the route on a frequent basis. However, all participants felt that the route would showcase 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 area is quite crowded with **busy roads** and **surface car parking**. This means that many roads need to be crossed in order to traverse the area. Pedestrian crossings are generally available and are equipped with pedestrian lights and dropped kerbs as well as tactile pavements for the visually impaired. The main exception to this is the central roundabout in the Connswater Retail Park. Due to the large volume of cars using this roundabout it can be difficult to cross. Other pedestrian lights lack sound signals and often don't provide sufficient time for elderly people or people with buggies or in wheelchairs to cross. This is particularly true for the pedestrian crossing on Newtownards Road leading to and from CS Lewis Square. Also, the placement of the light indicators seems to cause confusion for some people when it comes to seeing when it's okay to cross;
- The pedestrian link between Skipton Street and the Connswater Retail Park is very poorly designed. Its limited width, steep incline and plant overgrowth means that it's difficult to have several people using the link at the same time. People with buggies or in wheelchairs might have particular difficulties accessing this link since dropped kerbs are lacking.
- A **lack of bins means** along the main routes means that litter is likely to accumulate over time, however, pavements generally appeared to be very clean. There is a **lack of benches**, particularly along the Connswater Greenway. Benches are only readily available around CS Lewis Square but are not always comfortable due to the lack of back support. There are **no public toilet facilities** available which means people have to ask for access to toilets in coffee shops etc. This might present a problem, especially for elderly men;
- Some issues with waste disposal bins blocking the pathway were highlighted. Also, at one point abandoned street furniture blocked part of the pavement, which made it more likely for passers-by to trip and fall. Generally speaking, no issues with cars blocking the pavements were highlighted;
- The design quality of the public realm is generally very high, particularly along the Connswater Greenway and CS Lewis Square. However, some issues were raised in relation to design decisions. The 'sunken' part of CS Lewis square is accessible through a wide set of steps that can present a danger to visibly impaired people. Tactile surfacing is available though. The lack of railings for support during descending and ascending these steps might present difficulties for elderly people. Along the Connswater river safety railings are available along the pathway, however, the end point of these railings stick out quite a bit so that passers-by might be hit. This is a particular concern for children and people in wheelchairs;

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:

- Quality of pavements is generally high with appropriate widths assigned, particularly on the Connswater Greenway. East Bread Street is the only road that is equipped with poor quality pavements with a lack of dropped kerbs and posts blocking the walking route;
- Dropped kerbs and tactile pavements occur at most road crossings.
- The connection between Skipton Street and Connswater Retail park is poorly designed, with insufficient width assigned and lack of dropped kerbs for wheelchair users.



*East Bread Street (location 2)*



*Albertbridge Road / Newtownards Road (location 4)*



*Connswater Link (location 5)*



*Skipton Street connection to Connswater Retail Park (location 6)*

## Street environment

- Streets are generally clean and well-maintained, with high-quality paving along the main routes and Connswater Greenway;
- There is a general lack of bins in the area, especially along the main routes which means that litter is thrown on street;
- Limited number of benches for elderly people to sit. Most benches are located around CS Lewis Square but are not always comfortable;
- 'Sunken' design of CS Lewis square is dangerous for people with visibility impairment;
- The Newtownards and Albertbridge Roads are very busy with car traffic. The Retail Park is dominated by car parks with limited designated pedestrian routes;
- The design of railings along the Connswater Greenway might lead to passers-by getting injured, particularly kids and wheelchair users.



*C.S. Lewis Square (location 3)*



*Albertbridge Road / Newtownards Road (location 4)*



*Connswater Greenway (location 7)*

## Accessibility

- Pedestrian crossings are missing on the central roundabout within the Connswater Retail Park, which can make crossing the road quite perilous;
- The large numbers of busy roads converging in the area means that several pedestrian crossings need to be used when traversing the area. Different pedestrian crossings are not timed according to each other which adds extra waiting time;
- Most crossings are fitted with pedestrian lights, however, due to the placement of these lights it can be difficult to notice when it's safe to cross the road. Also pedestrian crossings lack sound signals, which makes it difficult for visibly impaired people to determine when to cross;
- Some pedestrian crossings don't allow sufficient time for elderly people to cross the road, particularly the crossing leading to/from CS Lewis square;
- Some issues with bins blocking the pathways. However, no issues with cars blocking the pavements.



*Ashdale Street (location 1)*



*Albertbridge Road / Connswater link (location 5)*



*Albertbridge Road / Newtownards Road (location 4)*



*C.S. Lewis Square (location 2)*

## Recommendations

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

- Allowing **more crossing time** at pedestrian crossings would add to a sense of safety, particularly for elderly people and people with buggies or in wheelchairs. The instalment of audio signals at pedestrian crossings will make crossings more user-friendly for visually impaired people. The pedestrian crossing on Newtownards Road leading to and from CS Lewis Square would be a priority;
- **Regular cleaning** and **clearing** of objects that block pavements will reduce the risk of pedestrians tripping. This is particularly important for elderly people. The inclusion of more bins along the main routes will contribute to a cleaner environment. The addition of public toilet facilities would improve the appeal of the area even further;
- Reconsideration of some of the public realm features in CS Lewis Square and Connswater Greenway to make these features safer for visually impaired people in particular. The CS Lewis Square could be improved by installing a covered bandstand or stage so that the square can also be used in bad weather;
- The instalment of **street lighting** along the Comber Greenway would make the route more safe and attractive to use after sunset;

## Appendix 1: Walkability assessment questionnaire responses

**Date:** 20 June 2018

**Route:** Connswater Shopping Centre to CS Lewis Square via East Bread Street and back via Newtownards Road, Albertbridge Road and Connswater Retail Park.

**Number of completed questionnaires:** 2

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

| <b>Seating:</b>                                  | <b>Excellent</b> | <b>Good</b> | <b>Average</b> | <b>Poor</b> | <b>Very Poor</b> |
|--|------------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|------------------|
| Available at suitable intervals                  |                  |             |                | I           | I                |
| Well maintained                                  |                  |             | I              |             |                  |
| Comfortable                                      |                  |             | I              |             |                  |
| <b>Walking environment &amp; shops:</b>          | <b>Excellent</b> | <b>Good</b> | <b>Average</b> | <b>Poor</b> | <b>Very Poor</b> |
| Streets are situated together and are accessible |                  | II          |                |             |                  |
| Separate queues in shops for older people        |                  |             |                |             |                  |
| Streets link me to places I want to go           |                  | I           |                |             |                  |

#### **Additional comments raised during the discussion:**

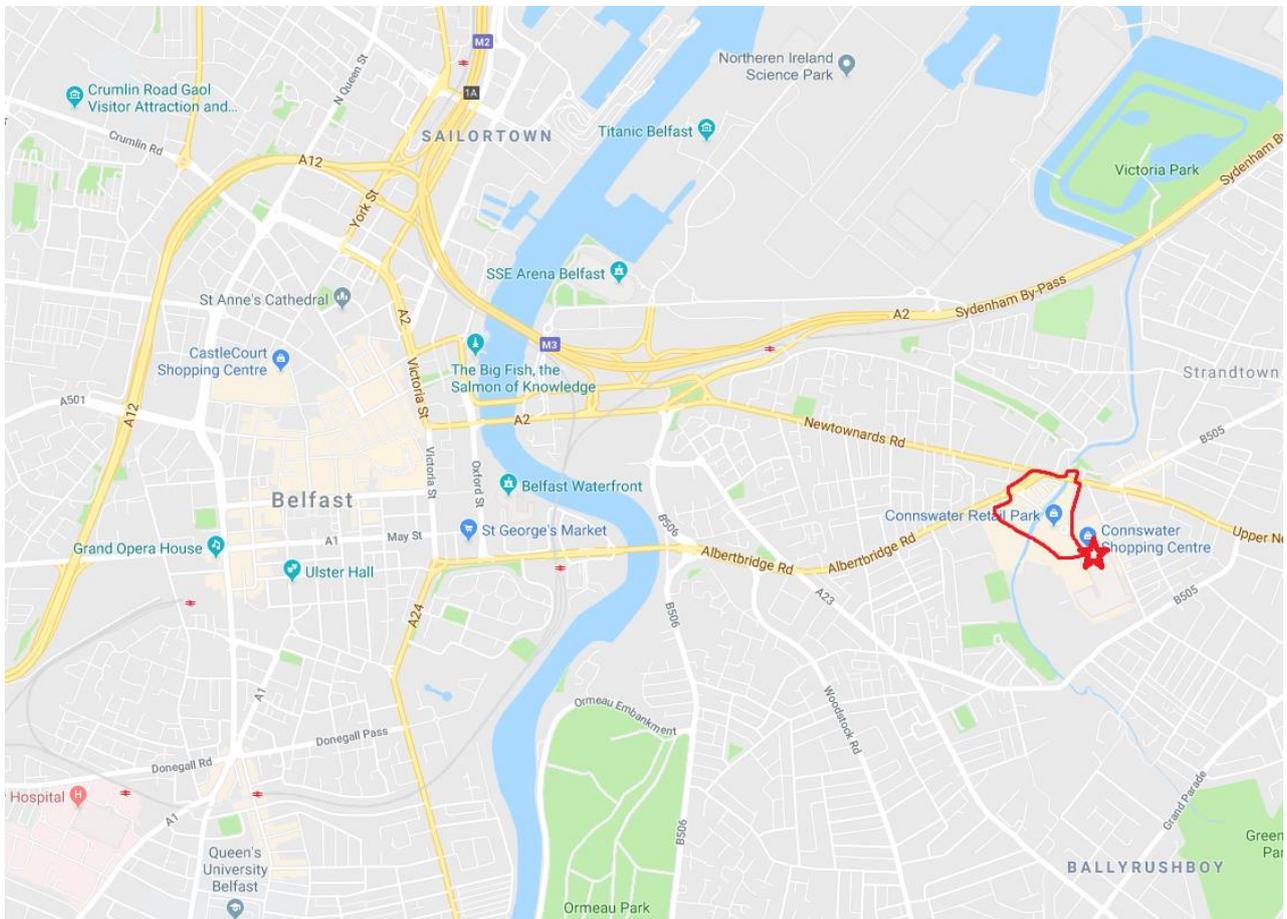
| <b>Positive elements</b>   |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plenty of space to walk;</li> <li>• Proximity to Connswater and Comber Greenways;</li> <li>• High quality of environment;</li> <li>• Good connectivity;</li> <li>• Plenty of facilities;</li> <li>• Events going on.</li> </ul> |

| <b>Challenges</b>  |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some pedestrian crossings do not allow sufficient time to cross safely, particularly for people with wheelchairs, rollators etc.</li> <li>• Lack of sound signals at pedestrian crossings, which is particularly detrimental for visually impaired people;</li> <li>• Lack of bins;</li> <li>• Lack of seating;</li> <li>• Discarded street furniture was left in the bushes and may cause people to trip over;</li> <li>• Cars dominate the area; abundant car parking;</li> <li>• People should allow time for plants/trees to grow along Greenways;</li> <li>• No places for public access to drinking water;</li> <li>• Difficult to get access to toilet facilities; people have to ask at pubs and shops;</li> <li>• Some of the railings on ramps of the Connswater Greenway stick out and might lead cyclists / children / wheelchairs users to harm their body.</li> </ul> |

| <b>Changes suggested</b>   |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Roundabout at Connswater Retail Park would need pedestrian crossings</li> <li>• More signposts needed;</li> </ul> |

- Make traffic lights more visible for pedestrian; current pelican crossings make it difficult to understand when it's okay to cross;
- Increase crossing time at pedestrian crossing next to CS Lewis Square;
- Install street lighting along Comber Greenway;
- Music stage / permanent shelter on CS Lewis Square;
- More bins and benches;
- Rethink design details of railings along Greenway;
- Make sure that cars parked on bus lanes are removed promptly as to avoid delays for busses.

## Appendix 2



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