

Community Active Travel project

Walkability assessment findings – Greater Village

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.

Greater Village walkability assessment

The walkability assessment in Greater Village was undertaken in March 2019. In total 8 elderly people participated in the walk with a good mix between males and females. Three participants had major mobility issues, with one participant using a rollator and two participants relying on walking sticks. None of the participants were visually or hearing impaired. Seven 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.

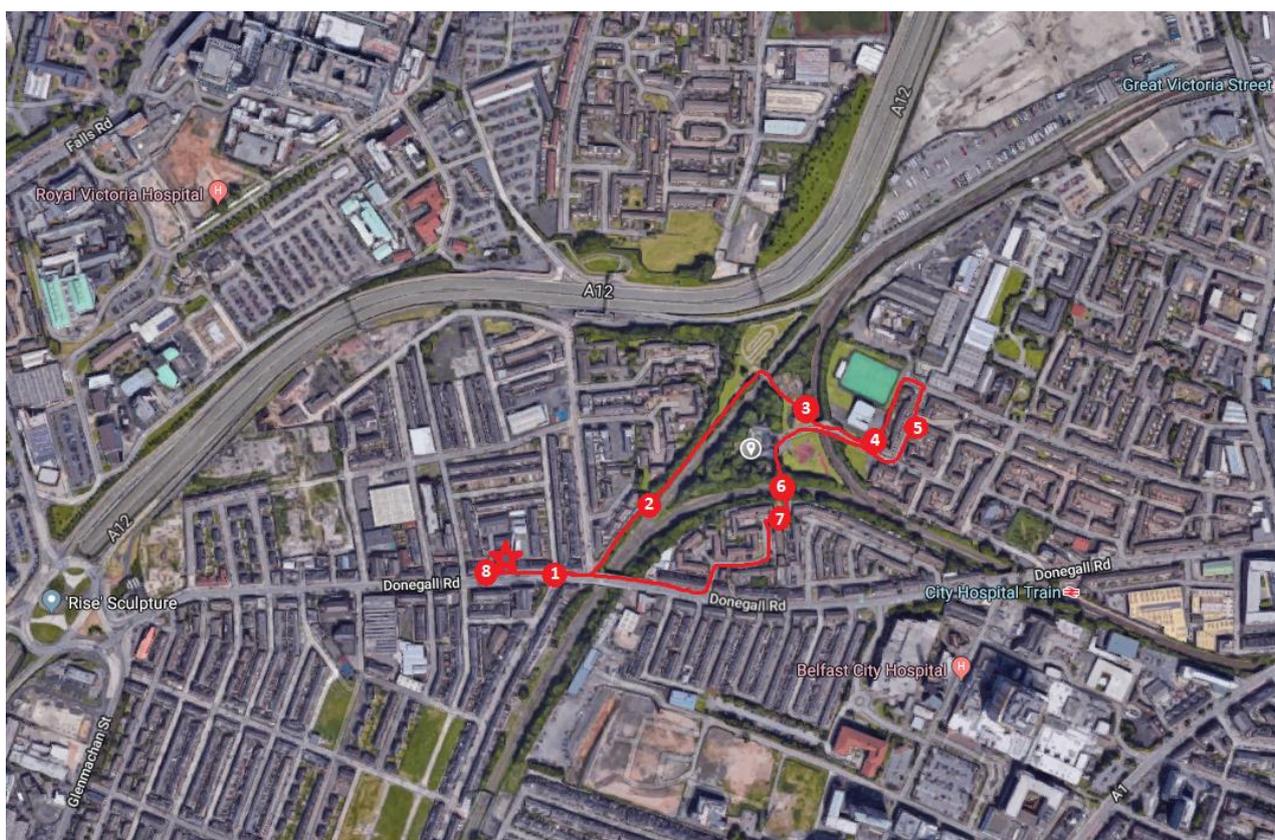


Figure 1. Map of route used for walkability assessment with numbers indicating location of photos. Source: Google Maps

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, alleyways at the back of houses are generally poorly maintained and unappealing to walk through, especially during night time. The lack of street lighting in the area in front of the Arellian Nursery makes this area particularly 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 along the footpath along the railway line and on the green strip behind Oswald Park housing;
- Pavement along Donegal Road are generally appropriately designed but many cracks and **uneven surfaces** appear due to tree roots. This increases the risk of elderly people tripping over;
- Also, pavement in the residential street often **lack dropped kerbs** and tactile paving for the visually impaired;
- Traffic on Donegal Road can be very busy, especially during peak hours. Since most local shops and facilities are located along Donegal Road local residents rely on **pedestrian crossings** to access these facilities. There are regular pedestrian crossings available that are equipped with pedestrian lights and dropped kerbs as well as tactile pavements for the visually impaired. However, most crossings allow limited time to cross and lack sound signals for the visually impaired. The crossroad where Donegal Road, Donegal Avenue and Roden Street meet can be quite confusing for pedestrians to cross due to the different directions that cars can come from;
- **Cars parked haphazardly** in the area present residents with a major obstacle. The lack of parking regulation means that many of these cars are parked inappropriately and thereby block public pavements. As a result, parked cars often do not leave adequate room on the footpaths for people to pass, particularly with a pram or in a wheel chair. This problem is exacerbated by the large amount of city centre commuters and hospital staff and visitors that attempt to park in the area. Since parking is free in the residential streets large number of commuters prefer to park their cars here rather than in designated parking areas that demand a parking fee;
- **Cyclist** often ride on the pavements and can thereby make pedestrians feel unsafe using the pavements;
- Due to the location of the area between the Westlink and the City Hospital, there are **limited pedestrian links** into surrounding areas such as Lisburn Road and the Falls. The railway lines that traverse the area add to poor connectivity. For example it would take more than 15 min to reach shops and facilities on Lisburn Road on foot due to the limited amount of pedestrian bridges across the Lisburn bound railway line;
- A **poor bus service** leads to difficulties reaching other parts of the city including the city centre with people without access to private transport and mobility issues.
- The only **accessible green space** is the green strip along the railway line and the adjoining triangle between the railway lines. However, these areas are often dominated by litter and dog fouling. Also youth tend to gather in these spaces in the evenings, which makes these areas unattractive to use. The nearest parks would be Drumglass park on Lisburn Road or Botanic Gardens on Stranmillis Road but these would take a good 30 min to reach on foot;
- There is a general **lack of benches** in the area, especially along the footpath along the railway line and in the area between the Arellian Nursery and Charter Youth Club.

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 the area;
- Pavements often have cracks and uneven patches, particularly along Stewart Street and in alleyways, however, quality of pavements along Donegal Road is generally adequate with appropriate widths assigned. However, cracked and uneven patches occur frequently along Donegal Road due to tree roots, while gutters in the pavements increase the risk of elderly people tripping over.



Donegal Road (location 1)



Donegal Road (location 1)



Footpath along railway line (location 2)

Street environment

- Dog fouling and litter are a major concern, particularly along the footpaths next to the railway line and the Carter Youth Club. A general lack of bins in the area contributes to this problem;
- Street lighting is missing or malfunctioning in several areas, which makes these areas intimidating during night time, when groups of youngsters gather to hang out in public. This particularly applies to the pedestrian bridge across the railway line near Prince Andrew Park and the children play park in front of the Arellian Nursery;
- There are some alleyways that are unattractive to walk in due to blind walls, fences etc, particularly during night time;
- There is a general lack of benches for elderly people to sit and rest;
- There are no proper green spaces available for local residents. Trees have been planted along Donegal Road but are generally lacking in residential streets which contributes to the impression of a 'concrete jungle'. The only extensive outdoor play facilities for children is located near the Arellian Nursery, which is quite far away for children living in the upper Donegal Road area.



Footpath along railway line (location 2)



Alleyways (location 7)



Triangle between railways (location 3)



Pedestrian bridge across railway line (location 6)



Alleyways (location 7)

Accessibility

- There is generally quite a large volume of car traffic in Donegal Road. However, residents feel there are sufficient pedestrian crossings available. Sound signals are often lacking at these crossings though. In addition the crossroads with Donegal Road, Donegal Avenue and Roden Street can be confusing for crossing pedestrians. Pedestrians are not always given right of way;
- The amount of cars parked by commuters and visitors to the City Hospital leads to residential streets that are overcrowded with cars. It is often difficult for local residents to find a parking space near their home.
- Parked cars left by commuters are situated haphazardly and often 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 Donegal roads. However, inner residential streets often lack dropped kerbs and tactile pavements which make them difficult to traverse for people in wheelchairs or with buggies/rollators.
- The area is served by insufficient public transport services. There are only 2 busses an hour with no services at all in the evenings and on the Sundays;
- There is a lot of cyclists using the pavements instead of the roads, which causes pedestrians to feel liable to unexpected collisions.



Entrance to Richview Regeneration Centre (location 8)



Oswald Park (location 5)



Entrance to Charter Youth Club (location 4)

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** between Roden Street and Bentham Drive would allow residents to engage in more leisurely walking activities and would create a more appealing walking route into the city centre;
- **Regular cleaning**, particularly the green strip along the railway lines, will make the area look more appealing. The inclusion of more bins along the main routes will contribute to a cleaner environment;
- **Regular maintenance** of road surfaces will create more user-friendly pavements and reduces the risk of people tripping over;
- The instalment and maintenance of **street lighting** would make the area in front of the Allerian Nursery feel more safe and less intimidating to use during nighttime. Also, a lot of the alleyways would benefit from better street lighting;
- **Introduction of parking regulation** will help to control the number of commuters and hospital staff and visitors parking in the area and will allow local residents to access private driveways, public pavements and public realm better. A stricter policy for banning the use of pavements by cyclists or a public awareness campaign on this issue would help to prevent conflicts between pedestrians and cyclists;
- 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;
- A **more frequent bus** service would increase mobility opportunities for people without access to a car.

Appendix 1: Walkability assessment questionnaire responses

Date: 28 March 2019

Route: From the Richview Regeneration Centre on Donegal Road to Oswald park across railway footpath and back via Prince Andrew Park and Donegal Road.

Number of completed questionnaires: 7

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

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

Additional comments raised during the discussion:

Positive elements

Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uneven surfaces due to tree roots; • Dog fouling; • Cyclists on the pavement; • Lack of street lighting; • Horrible smell from drains.

Changes suggested

