

## **Community Active Travel project**

### **Walkability assessment findings – Connswater (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.<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.

---

<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)

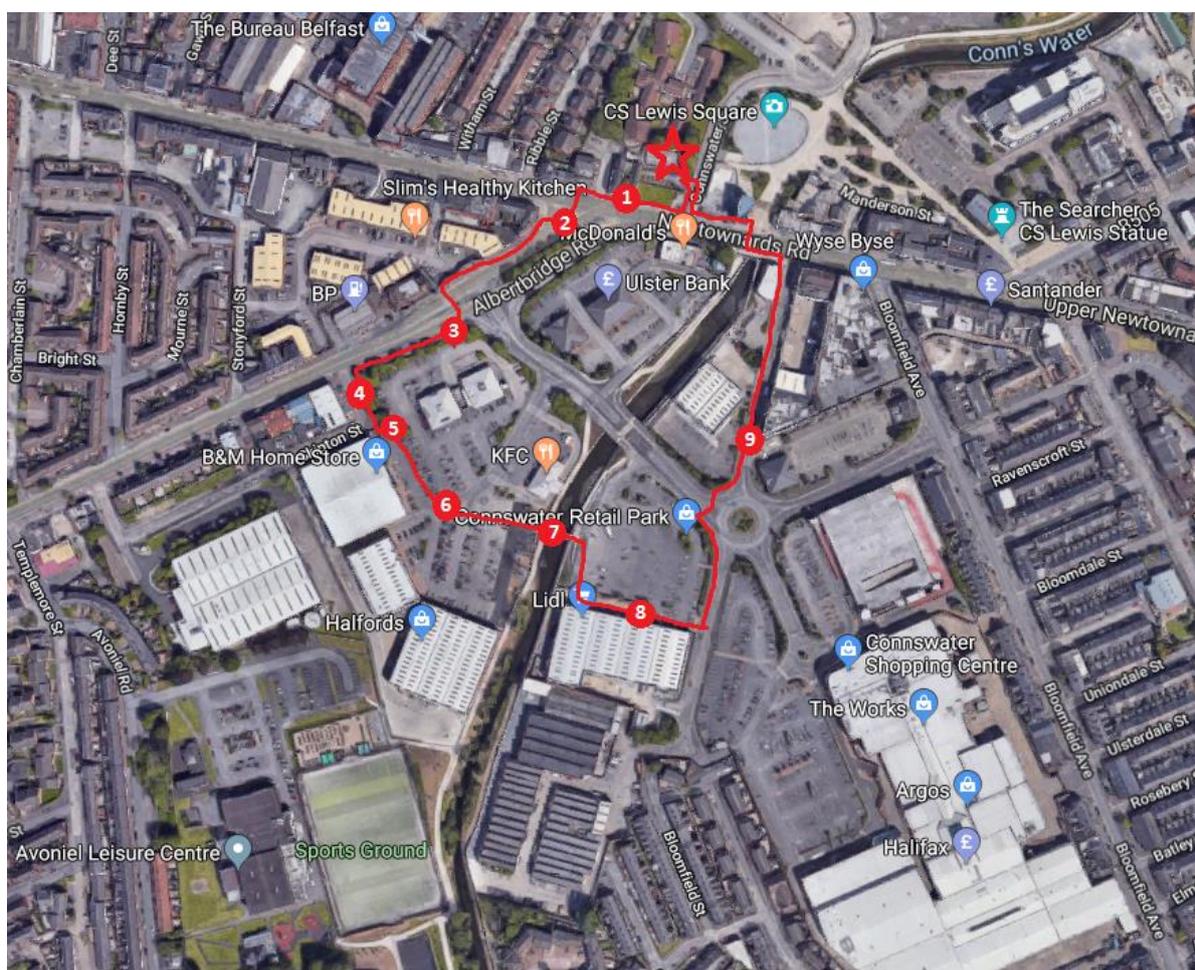
Questionnaires do not ask for information that can be used to identify the person filling in the questionnaire and all information gathered through them will remain anonymous. Participants are encouraged to fill out the questionnaire but are not obliged to.

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 August 2018. In total 4 persons with ages ranging from 6 to 50 participated in the walk. All participants were female. One participant had mobility issues and used a rollator. Four 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 and follows a route that takes in streets and spaces that participants would use on a frequent basis for accessing shops and other facilities.



**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. The pavements generally appeared to be very clean;
- Dropped kerbs and tactile pavements for the visually impaired are generally provided at pedestrian crossings. However, some of the dropped kerbs are poorly executed and don't allow for smooth use due to uneven surfaces or insufficient heights to bridge the difference in height levels between road and pavement. Also, the texture of the tactile pavement is very rough and might be uncomfortable to roll over for wheelchair users;
- The pedestrian link between Skipton Street and the Connswater Retail Park is very poorly designed. It's 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.
- The area is **dominated by cars**. This means that many roads and surface car parks need to be crossed in order to traverse the area. It is therefore not safe for young kids to traverse the area without supervision.
- Pedestrian crossings are generally available and are equipped with pedestrian lights. 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 people to cross. This is particularly evident for the pedestrian crossing adjacent to CS Lewis Square. 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 **lack of benches**, particularly along the Connswater Greenway. This might present a problem for people with mobility issues;
- There is insufficient provision of street lighting, which might contribute to people feeling unsafe when traversing the area during dark hours. The congregation of youngsters and the dominance of surface car parks can add to these feelings of unsafety.

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. Poor quality pavements due to uneven surfaces, cracks and lumps appears in East Bridge Street;
- Tactile pavements occur at most road crossings. However, the texture of the tactile paving is quite rough and might be painful for people in wheelchairs;
- Dropped kerbs occur at most road crossings and along walking routes. However, some dropped kerbs are uneven or poorly executed. The connection between Skipton Street and Connswater Retail Park lacks dropped kerbs, which means that it is difficult for wheelchair users and people with buggies to use this important pedestrian shortcut.



*Newtownards Road (location 1)*



*Albertbridge Road (location 3)*



*Connswater retail park (location 8)*



*East Bread Street (location 2)*

## Street environment

- The Newtownards and Albertbridge Roads are very busy with car traffic, but wide pavement are provided for pedestrians. The junction of Newtownards and Albertbridge Roads is particularly dominated by car traffic. It is unsafe for kids to walk in the area without supervision;
- Streets are generally clean and well-maintained, with high-quality materials being used;
- There are lots of car parks in the Retail Park and a limited number of routes designated for pedestrian. This can leave pedestrians confused about how to navigate the area on foot and conflicts between pedestrians and motorists;
- There is a lack of benches and bins along the walking routes. This issue is particularly evident for the Community Greenway route, since the construction of this greenway would have provided opportunities for addition of street furniture.



*Newtownards Road (location 1)*



*Connswater retail park (location 6)*



*Connswater Greenway (location 7)*



*East Bread Street (location 9)*

## 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;
- Pedestrian crossings lack sound signals, which makes it difficult for visibly impaired people to determine when to cross;
- Five separate pedestrian crossings need to be used when walking from Newtownards Road to the Retail Park. The poor timing of pedestrian lights means that pedestrians need quite some time to cross;
- Some pedestrian crossings don't allow sufficient time for people to cross the road, particularly the crossing leading to/from CS Lewis square;
- Some minor issues with cars blocking the pavements;
- The connection between Skipton Street and the Retail Park is very narrow and doesn't include dropped kerbs.
- Pedestrian crossings are missing on the central roundabout within the Connswater Retail Park.



*Albertbridge Road / Newtownards street (location 2)*



*Skipton Street (location 4)*



*Skipton Street connection to Connswater Retail Park (location 5)*



*Connswater Greenway (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:

- The addition / redesign of dropped kerbs and tactile pavements would make the area more user friendly for people in wheelchairs;
- 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 pedestrian crossing adjacent to CS Lewis Square would be a priority;
- The inclusion of **more bins and benches** along the main routes will contribute to a cleaner and more walkable environment;
- The instalment of **street lighting** in the area would make the routes more safe and attractive to use during dark hours.

## Appendix 1: Walkability assessment questionnaire responses

**Date:** 14 August 2018

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

**Number of completed questionnaires:** 4

<b>General impression of the area:</b>	<b>Excellent</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Poor</b>	<b>Very Poor</b>
Cleanliness		II	II		
Overall appeal		I	III		
<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	II	I	
Free of obstruction –cars, bins etc		I	III		
Non-slip		I	II	I	
Wide enough for wheelchairs or for safely passing other pedestrians			III	I	
Dropped kerbs to road level at crossings			II	I	I
<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	II		I
Separate cycle paths		I	I	II	
Good street lighting		I	III		
Good visibility with no high hedges, dark corners		I	III		
Street is used by others, feels busy			IIII		
<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	I	I	
Safe for people with different levels of ability		I	III		
Appropriate tactile surfacing at crossings		I	III		
Traffic lights are clearly visible		I	II	I	
Sound signal clear			II	I	I
Adequate crossing time				III	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	II	I
Well maintained			II	I	I
Comfortable			III		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	II		
Streets link me to places I want to go		I	III		
Shops are within walking distance	I	III			

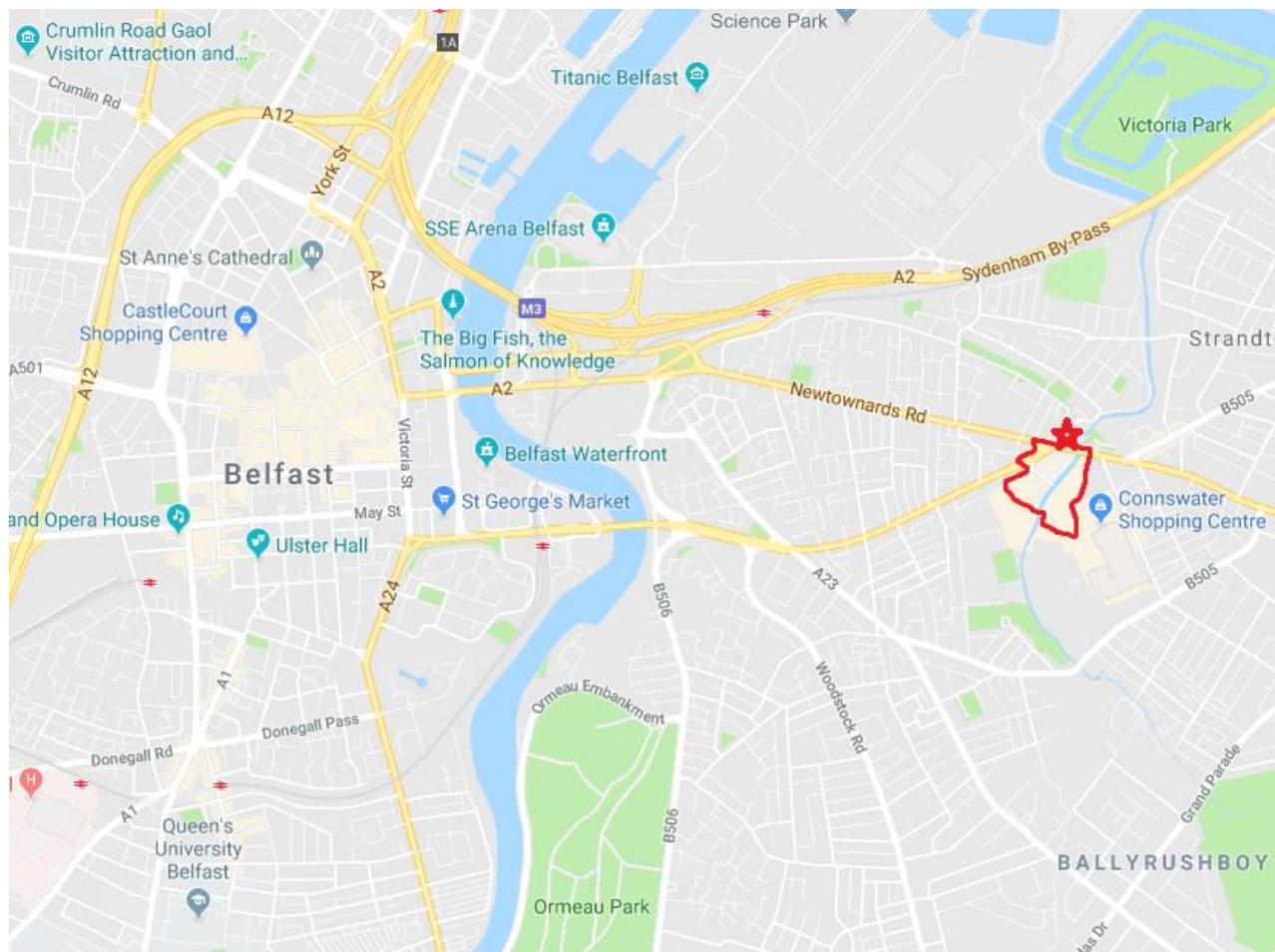
**Additional comments raised during the discussion:**

<b>Positive elements</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beautiful pavements with very high quality material in some parts of the route;</li> <li>• Generally clean and tidy walking environment;</li> <li>• Some of the walking environment is very easy to use for rollator and wheelchair users.</li> </ul>

<b>Challenges</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The quality of pavement is very poor in some area due to cracked and uneven tarmac surfacing;</li> <li>• Limited time for pedestrians to cross at pedestrian crossings;</li> <li>• Too many safety fences placed at pedestrian crossings;</li> <li>• Lumps and cracks in some pavement have led me to trip in the past;</li> <li>• Limited opportunities for walking for older people / kids / disabled in some areas due to uneven surfaces;</li> <li>• Gangs of kids are present late at night;</li> <li>• Unsafe for elderly people and kids.</li> </ul>

<b>Changes suggested</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less space allocated to cars;</li> <li>• Better street lighting at night;</li> <li>• Traffic calming measures.</li> </ul>

## Appendix 2



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