

## Community Active Travel project

### Walkability assessment findings – Lower Falls Road

#### 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.

### Lower Falls Rd walkability assessment

The walkability assessment in the Lower Falls Rd area was undertaken in November 2018. Participants were all members of a local walking group that meet every Thursday afternoon to walk together, usually in Falls Park. In total nine elderly people and a walk leader participated in the walk. Nine out of ten participants were females. A few participants had mobility issues, however, none of the participants were visually or hearing impaired.

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 walk leaders and follows a route that takes in local streets that participants would use on a regular basis and that 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 low appeal of the walking environment in the residential streets away from Falls Road due to **dog fouling and litter**. There is also a number of vicious dogs present in the area that are often kept off the lead. **A lack of bins means** that litter is likely to accumulate over time. Some places that are poorly supervised such as Ross St and Roumania Rise are being used to dump and burn stolen vehicles, which lead to burn marks on the footpaths and have left these streets with an impression of no-go areas, especially during night time. Public realm improvements along the Falls Road have led to clean appearance of the Falls Road
- The **lack of (functioning) street lighting** in the residential streets away from Falls road caused a lot of concern among elderly people about safety in the area during night time. One participant remarked that local young people break street lights as a pastime activity. The presence of **poorly designed alleyways** that are surrounded by blind walls and fences added to such concerns. The pedestrian footbridge across the Westlink is also poorly designed and seems to attract a lot of litter. Regular maintenance of street lighting along the Falls Road have led to safe atmosphere along the Falls Road
- The **poor quality pavements** along the Grosvenor Road and the residential streets away from Falls Road. Lots of cracks appear due to tree roots and pavements often are not level and patchy. This is a particular issue around the access to the pedestrian footbridge across the Westlink from Cullingtree Road, where variations in the level of the pavements make it more likely for people to trip over. The lack of a ramp there also makes it difficult for people with buggies or in a wheelchair and cyclists to access the footbridge
- The difficulty with crossing residential streets in the area due to the **lack of pedestrian crossings**. Due to the **lack of dropped kerbs** people that have buggies or are in a wheelchair would have difficulties navigating these streets, while the **lack of tactile paving** makes it difficult for visually impaired people to cross roads. Pedestrians are often not given right of way and there is a general feeling that pedestrian rights are not being respected by car drivers. The number and quality of pedestrian crossings along the Falls Road has improved, although sound signals seem to be lacking
- There is a general **lack of accessible green spaces** in the area. Residential streets lack trees and small scale play facilities for children. The nearest park is the Dunville Park. As part of public realm improvement works trees have been planted along Falls Road

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 very good along Falls Road, but pavements along Grosvenor Rd and inside residential areas are often poor quality and cracked due to tree roots. Pavements often are not level and have different levels which can lead to pedestrians tripping over quite easily, especially elderly people.
- Pavements generally have appropriate widths assigned to them throughout the area;
- Dropped kerbs and tactile pavements occur along the main roads. Road improvement works along Falls Road have led to more convenient pedestrian crossings. However, road crossings in inner residential areas often lack dropped kerbs and tactile pavements;
- Pavements in Ross Street and Roumania Rise are affected by burn markings that apparently originate from the burning of stolen vehicles by local teenagers and adolescents.



*Ross Street (location 1)*



*Falls Road (location 5)*



*Lower Clonard Street / Falls Road (location 4)*



*Grosvenor Road (location 6)*

## Street environment

- Dog fouling and litter are a major concern, however most streets seem to be quite clean. Regular cleaning up days by local residents have been organised in the past;
- There is a general lack of bins in the area, which means that litter is thrown on street;
- Street lighting is missing or malfunctioning in several areas, which makes these areas intimidating during night time. Local kids sometimes break street lights on purpose;
- There are some alleyways that are unattractive to walk in due to blind walls, fences etc makes these alleyways very unattractive to use, particularly during night time. The same issues are apparent for the pedestrian bridge over the Westlink that links Cullingtree Rd and Durham St;
- No pit stops for elderly people to sit;
- The only accessible green space is Dunville Park, however at the time of the walk this park has been fenced off due to issues with anti-social behaviour. Street trees are generally lacking except along the Falls Road. There is also a general lack of outdoor play facilities for children outside of school hours.



*Ross Street (location 1)*



*Ross Road (location 2)*



*Durham Street entrance to Westlink pedestrian bridge (location 7)*



*Pedestrian link between Millford Street and St Peters Close (location 9)*

## Accessibility

- Pedestrian crossings along Falls Road have been improved in recent years, however sound signals are missing. Proper road crossings are lacking in the inner residential areas which can make it difficult for people in wheelchairs or with buggies to get around;
- There is generally quite a large volume of car traffic, even in residential streets. Pedestrians are often not given right of way;
- Cars parked partially on the pavements make it difficult for people in wheelchairs or with buggies to get around;
- The installation of bollards contribute to car routes at several locations, however, these bollards may also present obstacles for people in wheelchairs or with buggies;
- The access to the Westlink pedestrian bridge from Cullingtree Rd is stepped and difficult to use for cyclists and for people in wheelchairs or with buggies.



*Ross Street (location 1)*



*Ross Road (location 2)*



*Leeson Street (location 3)*



*Cullingtree Road entrance to Westlink pedestrian bridge (location 8)*

## Recommendations

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

- **Regular cleaning** (i.e. litter, dog fouling) and **maintenance** (i.e. street lighting) of streets and particularly alleyways will improve the attractiveness of the walking environment in the area. This is particularly important for children, women and elderly people, who can feel especially vulnerable in the area during nighttime. More bins along the main routes could help to tackle the issue of litter, while an increased presence of dog wardens might help to address issues with dog fouling and vicious dogs roaming the area. More plants and flower plants could make streets appear more attractive
- **Redesign of alleyways** through removal of blind walls and fences would open them up and make them less dark, thereby significantly improving their attractiveness. More police presence could address the issues around joy riding and burning of stolen vehicles. The redesign of the pedestrian footbridge across the Westlink would make this a more attractive route for pedestrians to get to and from the city centre
- **Regular maintenance of pavement** that would address cracks and the non-level nature of pavements would reduce the risk of people tripping over. This is particularly urgent around the access to the pedestrian footbridge from Cullingtree Road. The instalment of ramps here would also improve accessibility for people with buggies and in wheelchairs
- **The implementation of dropped kerbs and tactile paving** at pedestrian crossing points in the residential street away from Falls Road. The **inclusion of sound signals** at pedestrian crossings along the Falls road would make it easier to cross for people that are visually impaired
- **'Green up' the area** by planting more trees in the residential streets. Installing small scale play facilities reduces the dependency of children on Dunville Park as the only safe area to play outside school hours
- The **provision of more benches for people to sit** down would contribute to the walkability of the area, particularly for elderly people

## Appendix 1: Walkability assessment questionnaire responses

**Date:** 22 November 2018

**Route:** Walk from Maureen Sheehan Centre, Albert St to Dunville Park via Ross Rd and Falls Rd and back via Grosvenor Rd, Durham St, Cullingtree Rd and Albert St; meeting in Maureen Sheehan Centre.

**Number of completed questionnaires:** 10

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

<b>Seating:</b>	<b>Excellent</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Poor</b>	<b>Very Poor</b>
Available at suitable intervals		III			IIIIII
Well maintained		II	I	I	II
Comfortable		II	I	I	II
<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	I		IIIIII	II	
Streets link me to places I want to go	I	I	IIII	I	I
Shops are within walking distance	I	II	IIIIII		

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

#### **Positive elements**

- The introduction of the Glider has improved frequency of public transport (2);
- Footpaths are usually safe / wide and allow people to pass (4);
- Most of footpaths are free of obstacles and comfortable to walk on;
- The area is busy and full of activity (2);
- Additional pedestrian crossings have been added recently.

#### **Challenges**

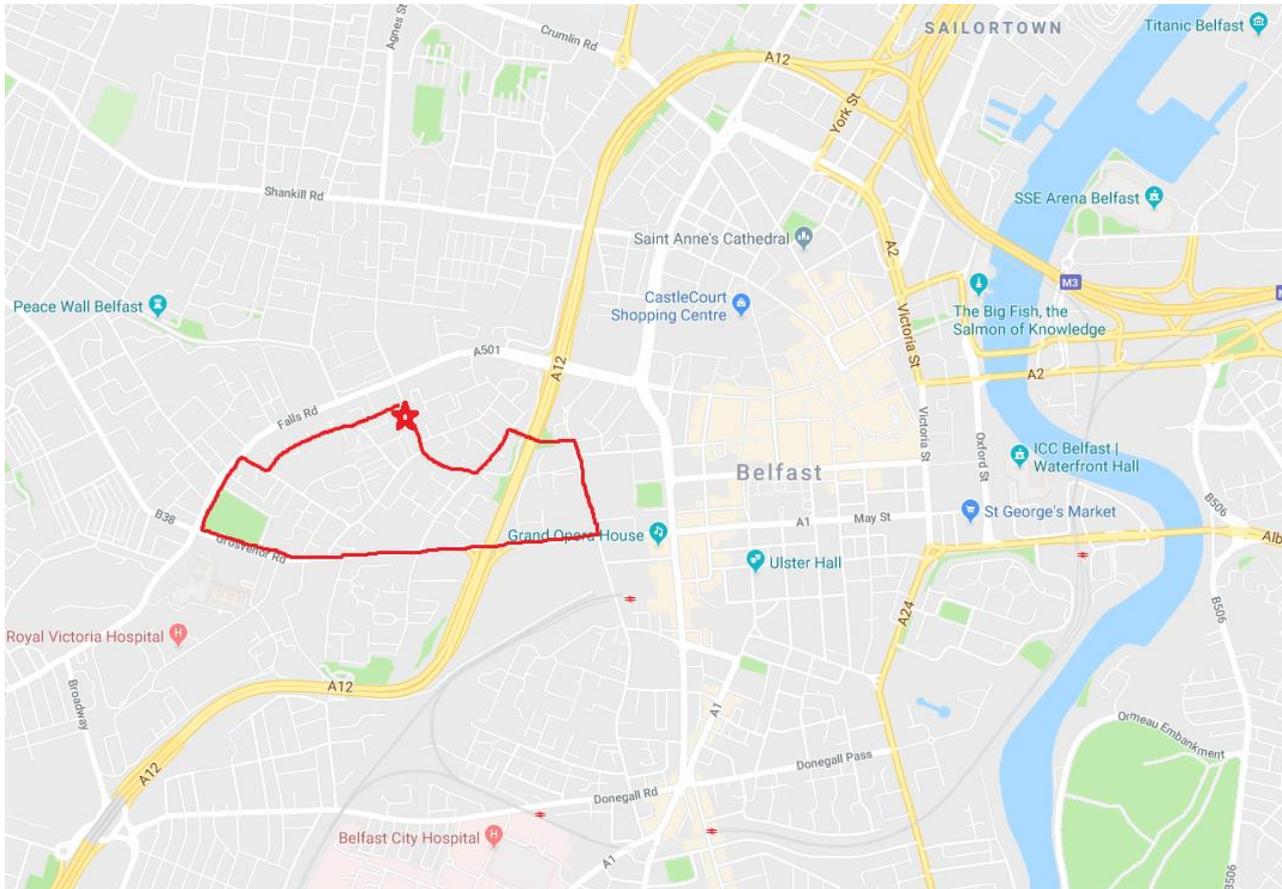
- Dog fouling (6);
- Litter (2);
- Lack of bins;
- Poor quality tarmac on footpaths (2);
- Cracks in footpaths due to tree roots;
- Footpaths are not level;
- People in wheelchairs and with prams are unable to use footpaths due to cars parked on the footpaths (2);
- Anti-social behaviour (joyriding / burning cars);
- Kerb heights are different in different locations;
- Local children breaking street lighting;
- Vicious dogs on the loose;
- Many roads to be crossed.

#### **Changes suggested**

- More street lighting (7);
- Street lighting needs to be replaced when broken;
- More wardens patrolling the area;
- A contact point where people could request help if needed;
- Plants and flower baskets to brighten up the area;

- Dogs should be kept on a lead;
- Improve safety on the streets by tackling joyriding.

## Appendix 2



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