

Community Active Travel project

Walkability assessment findings – Markets

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.

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

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.

Markets walkability assessment

The walkability assessment in Markets was undertaken in February 2019. In total 8 adults participated in the walk with a good mix between males and females. None of the participants had major mobility issues or were visually or hearing impaired. Eleven questionnaires were completed, of which 4 were completed on the day of the walk and a further seven during a subsequent community gathering on the 12th March.

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 Markets area is surrounded by **busy roads** and **surface car parking**. Both Cromac Street and East Bridge Street are amongst the busiest in Northern Ireland but haven't been designated as major thoroughfares. This means that major infrastructure needs to be crossed in order to enter and exit the area for daily purposes. Cromac Street is perceived as the biggest barrier, since it disconnects two parts of the community and needs to be crossed by parts of the community to access the local primary school and the nearest church. Pedestrian crossings are available on both Cromac Street and East Bridge Street and are equipped with pedestrian lights and dropped kerbs as well as tactile pavements for the visually impaired. However, the Cromac Street crossing only allows very limited time to cross and doesn't have any speed barriers in place which means that traffic often doesn't slow down or ignores the pedestrian lights. The pedestrian crossings on East Bridge Street lack sound signals and demand long waiting times for pedestrians;
- **Cars parked haphazardly** by commuters in the area present residents with a major obstacle. Since parking is free in the residential streets a large number of commuters prefer to park their cars here rather than in designated parking areas that demand a parking fee. The lack of parking regulation means that many of these cars are parked inappropriately and thereby block residents' driveways, public pavements or occupy green spaces that are not meant to be parked on. 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;
- Due to the railway line separating the Markets from the river Lagan and a number of fences around the Gasworks office park, there are very **limited pedestrian links** from the Markets into surrounding areas. This makes residents in the area feel like being hemmed in and makes it much more difficult for residents to access healthcare and sports facilities in Lower Ormeau or access the river Lagan for leisure. The high walls and fencing alongside the railway also makes the area unappealing;
- The surrounding areas including LaganSide appear to be overdeveloped. Surrounding office and residential developments are not in line with the scale of the terraced housing in the Markets area and they therefore seem to dominate the area in terms of height and volume;
- Pavement in the residential street often lacks dropped kerbs and tactile paving for the visually impaired. Also, pavements are generally full of cracks and appear uneven in many places;
- Litter and dog fouling appear regularly in the area, especially along Cromac Street and East Bridge Street. A **lack of bins** means that litter is likely to accumulate over time. There are specific hotspots where illegal dumping takes place, for example along McAuley/Stewart Street. There is a general **lack of benches** in the area;
- The design quality of the public realm is generally quite low. A lack of useful green spaces and 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 due to insufficient street lighting.

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.

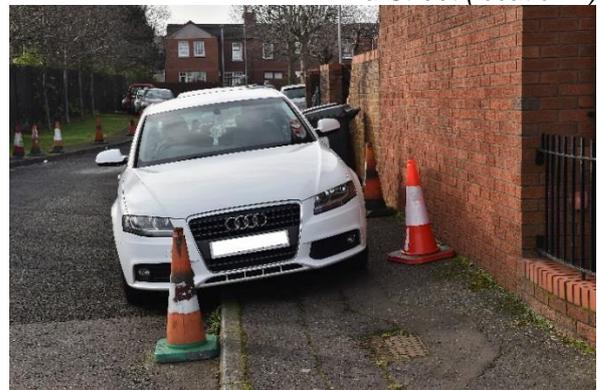
Pavement

Key issues:

- Pavements often have cracks and uneven patches, particularly along Stewart Street and in alleyways, however, quality of pavements along major routes is generally adequate with appropriate widths assigned;
- Parked cars block (parts of) pavement at numerous occasions, making stretches of pavement inaccessible for people in wheelchairs or with buggies. The raised pedestrian crossing at the entrance of the play park was totally blocked by a parked van, making access to the play park for parents with buggies difficult.
- Dropped kerbs and tactile pavements occur at road crossings at major routes but often lack in residential streets.



Eliza Street (location 1)



Eliza Street (location 1)



Friendly Place (location 6)



Pedestrian link between Lower Stanfield Street and Stanfield Place (location 12)



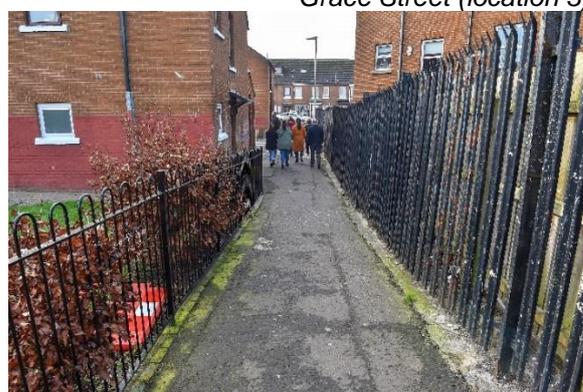
Stewart Street (location 9)

Street environment

- The area is dominated by parked cars that often block pathways;
- Cromac Street and East Bridge Street are very busy with car traffic;
- The presence of major infrastructure around the neighbourhood, including roads and a railway line, makes people in the area feel like being hemmed in;
- The alleyways in the area are poorly maintained and often lack adequate street lighting, which makes these areas unpleasant to visit at night;
- There is a general lack of high-quality green spaces for residents to use. Most streets don't have trees in them and feel like a 'concrete jungle';
- Litter and dog-fouling can be found regularly in the area, but particularly along East Bridge Street. A general lack of bins in the area means that litter is more likely to be thrown on street;
- One particular area on McAuley/Stewart Street is used for dumping and illegal fires and makes the area very unappealing;
- There is a general lack of seating in the area, which can present problems for elderly people.



Grace Street (location 3)



Pedestrian link between Stewart Street and Friendly Street (location 5)



Stewart Street (location 10)



Pedestrian link between McAuley Street and Welsh Street (location 11)

Accessibility

- The large numbers of busy roads surrounding the area means that major roads need to be crossed to access facilities such as the churches, schools and shops. Waiting times at pedestrian crossings are long and crossing times are short, particularly at the Cromac Street crossing. In addition, car drivers sometimes ignore the red lights;
- All crossings are fitted with pedestrian lights, however, the crossings along East Bridge Street lack sound signals, which makes it difficult for visibly impaired people to determine when to cross;
- A big wall/fence along the Lanyon Place station and railway line blocks off access to the Lagan towpath on the other side of the railway line;
- Access to the neighbourhood from Cromac Street is being dominated by a public car park;
- Connections to the Gasworks office park are missing;
- Parked cars left by commuters are situated haphazardly and often block access to side streets and pavements.



Cromac Street (location 2)



East Bridge Street / Cromac Street (location 4)



Stewart Street (location 8)



Friendly Street (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:

- **Introduction of parking regulation** will help to control the number of commuters parking in the area and will allow local residents to access private driveways, public pavements and public realm better;
- Allowing **more crossing time** at pedestrian crossings and introducing speed control measures in Cromac Street 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;
- **Stricter planning policy** that would reconsider of the size of new office and residential development in the surrounding area would lead to better integration between the Markets and surrounding areas such as LaganSide in terms of architectural scale;
- The provision of a **pedestrian link** from the Markets onto the Lagan towpath would allow residents to engage in more leisurely activities and would open up access to Lower Ormeau, where sports and healthcare facilities are located. Similarly, the provision of a pedestrian route into the Gasworks office park would allow residents to access other parts of South Belfast better;
- **Regular cleaning** will make the area look more appealing. The inclusion of more bins along the main routes will contribute to a cleaner environment. In addition, the enforcement of flytipping regulation would reduce the amount of rubbish dumped;
- **Re-design of the alleyways** and leftover spaces in between housing would provide more useable public realm for local residents. Suggested forms of redesign include green spaces, street trees, outdoor gyms and seating arrangements.
- The instalment of **street lighting** would make alleyways feel more safe and attractive to use during nighttime.

Appendix 1: Walkability assessment questionnaire responses

Date: 25 February / 12 March 2019

Route: From the Markets community centre across Cromac Street and back along East Bridge Street, Stewart Street and Welsh Street.

Number of completed questionnaires: 11

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

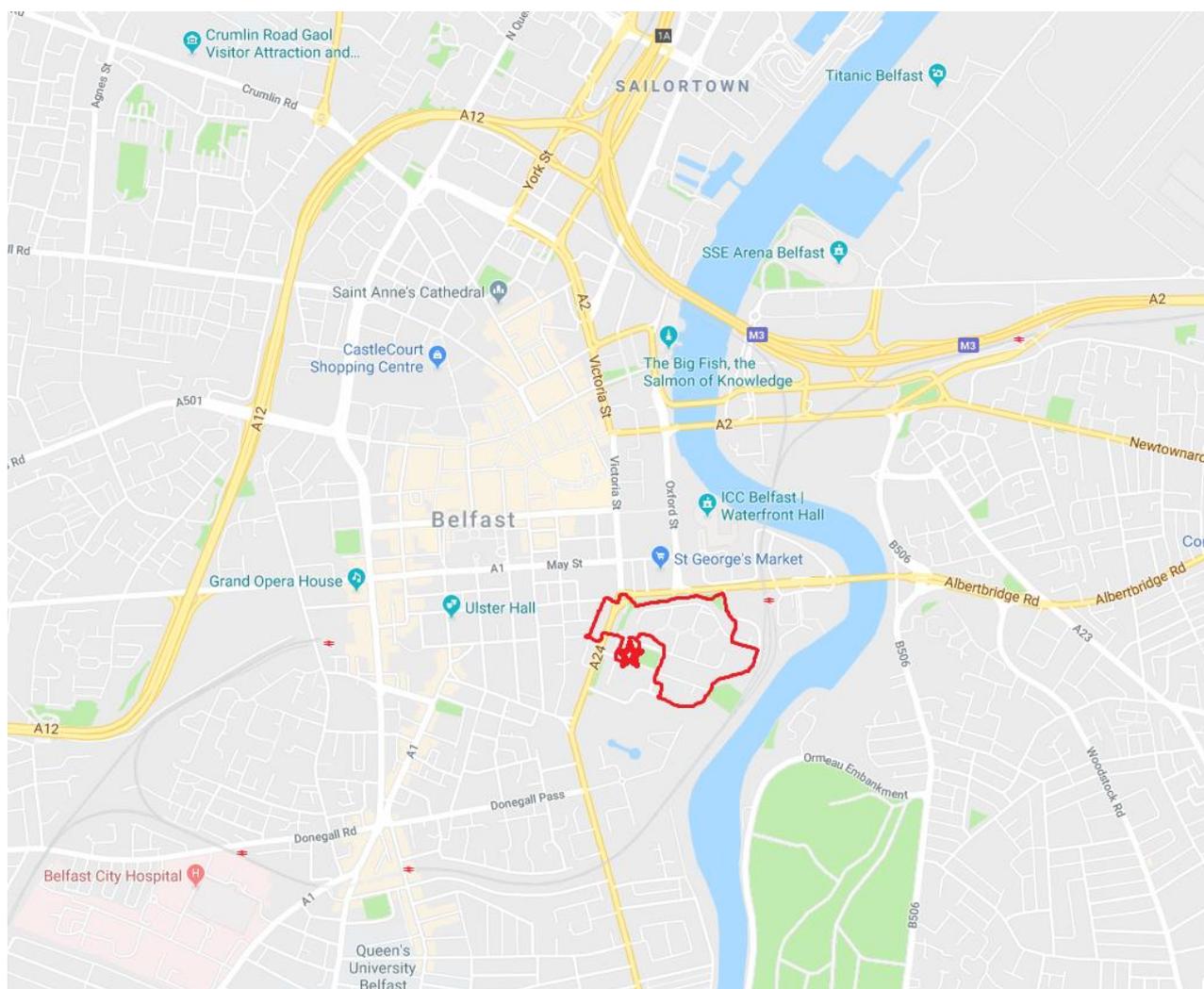
Additional comments raised during the discussion:

Positive elements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good location with lots of potential; • Social network.

Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The built environment adds to the physical containment of the local population; • The area looks very rough / concrete jungle; • Flytipping and dumping; • Lots of rubbish in the grassy areas; • There is dog fouling everywhere; • Lack of pedestrian crossings; • Lack of lighting in alleyways; • Parked cars block the pavements; • Cramped condition on the streets due to excessive parking of commuter cars; • Car traffic makes it extremely dangerous for children that walk to park and school to cross roads; • Car traffic contributes to a dangerous situation for people with disabilities; • Air pollution due to car traffic.

Changes suggested
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better connectivity (with Lagan towpath / Gasworks); • More mixed use, if evenly spread and proportionate in scale; • More street lighting in the alleyways; • Better use of small green spaces for community use; • Traffic calming measures on Cromac street; • Manage/police on street parking.

Appendix 2



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