

Community Active Travel project

Walkability assessment findings – Marrowbone

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.

Marrowbone walkability assessment

The walkability assessment in Marrowbone was undertaken in June 2019. In total 7 adults with ages ranging from 45 to 70 participated in the walk. All participants were male. None of the participant had mobility issues that limited their participation in the walk. Six 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. 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:

- Traffic volumes are often quite high on both Oldpark Road and Cliftonville Road, particularly during peak hours. Due to youth joyriding using cars, scooters and quad bikes traffic can be high speed and unpredictable at times. Oldpark Road has an insufficient number of **pedestrian crossings**, with only one designated pedestrian crossing available. Sound signals seem to be missing at the Oldpark Road pedestrian crossing. There are a number of pedestrian crossings on Cliftonville Road but they are far apart from each other. When accessing the Water Works park from the Oldpark Avenue area there is only a zebra crossing available. Not all car drivers stop to allow pedestrians to cross. Due to the length of these streets, pedestrians often chose to jaywalk instead of using the crossings, especially when trying to access the cluster of shops on Oldpark Road. Participants disclosed a number of occasions on which pedestrians have been involved in collisions when trying to cross the Oldpark Road;
- Most residential street lack **dropped kerbs**, which make them difficult to navigate for wheelchair users and people with rollators or buggies. Pavement kerbs are very high in some places which make tripping more likely;
- Pavements are generally wide enough along Oldpark Road and Cliftonville Road, but lack in maintenance. Pavements along residential streets often aren't sufficiently wide to allow two buggies to cross each other. Cars are often parked on top of pavements and thereby allow very limited space for pedestrians to pass, which increases the inconvenience experienced by wheelchairs users and people with / rollators / buggies;
- A **lack of bins means** along the main routes means that litter is likely to accumulate over time. A **lack of benches** in the main streets make it difficult for people with mobility issues to walk longer distances. Bus shelters are also missing, which means that people can't sit down while waiting for the bus. Benches are available in Water Works park but these are not always accessible due to park closing hours;
- Water Works park does not have any street lighting along the main paths and the entrance lane from Cliftonville Road. Also, the entrance lane from Cliftonville Road features many blind walls and high planting. This makes it very unappealing to enter the park after daylight hours (in winter). Regular congregation of large groups of youth and prostitution activity taking place in the park in the evenings make people feeling intimidated when entering the park in the evenings.

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:

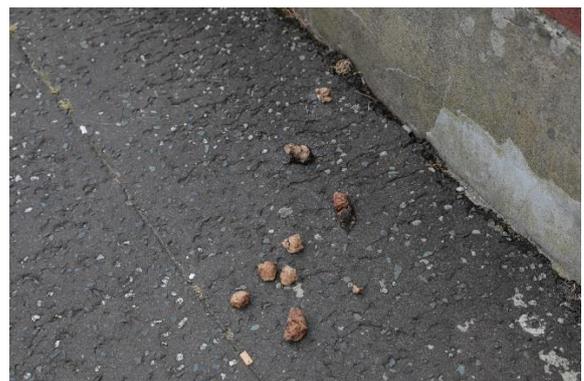
- Quality of pavements is generally poor and due to successive repairments appear to be a patchwork of surfaces. Cracks and uneven surfaces appear regularly;
- Widths of pavements are generally appropriate on Oldpark Road and Cliftonville Road. However, pavements in residential street are often too narrow;
- Dropped kerbs and tactile pavements only occurs at pedestrian crossings on Oldpark Road and Cliftonville Road. however, dropped kerbs are generally lacking in residential streets. Pavement kerbs are very high in some places which make tripping more likely.



Oldpark Avenue (location 3)



Ardilea Street (location 1)



Oldpark Avenue (location 3)

Street environment

- Dog fouling and litter are present in most streets. There is a general lack of bins in the area. This means that litter is thrown on street;
- There are no benches for people to sit on along main roads and residential streets. Bus shelters are also not present, which means that there's no place for people to sit while waiting for the bus. There are benches in Water Works park but these are not accessible when the park is closed;
- Water Works park does not have any street lighting along the main paths and the entrance lane from Cliftonville Road. This makes it very unappealing to enter the park after daylight hours (in winter). Regular congregation of large groups of youth and prostitution activity taking place in the park in the evenings make people feeling intimidated when entering the park in the evenings;
- The Oldpark Road and Cliftonville Road can be very busy with car traffic, and are often congested with cars during peak hours. This makes crossing the street difficult at times.



Ardilea Street (location 1)



Water Works park (location 6)



Oldpark Avenue (location 4)



Water Works park (location 7)

Accessibility

- There is only one pedestrian crossings on Oldpark Road. This makes it much more likely that people jaywalk, especially when trying to access the cluster of shops along Oldpark Road. Due to the large volume of traffic and high traffic speeds pedestrians occasionally get involved in traffic collisions;
- There are a number of pedestrian crossings on Cliftonville Road but they are far apart from each other. When accessing the Water Works park from the Oldpark Avenue area there is only a zebra crossing available. Not all car drivers stop to allow pedestrians to cross;
- Pedestrian crossings, when available, seem to lack sound signals which makes it difficult for visibly impaired people to determine when to cross;
- Cars often block parts of the pavements in residential streets, which makes it difficult for wheelchair users and people with rollators / buggies to use the pavement.



Oldpark Road (location 2)



Oldpark Avenue (location 3)



Entrance to Water Works park (location 5)

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 and maintenance** (i.e. cracks in pavement, plant overgrowth) of streets will improve the feeling of safety for pedestrians and thereby increase the potential for walking in the area. This is particularly important for children and women, who can feel especially vulnerable in the area during night time;
- Additional **pedestrian crossings** in Oldpark Road (particularly near the cluster of shops) and Cliftonville Road would allow safer crossing and dissuade pedestrians from jaywalking. The inclusion of traffic lights and sound signals will make pedestrian crossings more effective;
- The instalments of **dropped kerbs** along Oldpark Avenue would make it easier for wheelchair users and people with rollators / buggies to use the pavements;
- Stricter **parking policies** and clearing of objects that block pavements will reduce the chance that pedestrians are forced to walk on the road. This is particularly important for wheelchair users and people with rollators / buggies;
- Enforcement of **speed limits** and instalment of **speed barriers** will help to counteract the occurrence of speeding and joyriding activities;
- The inclusion of **more bins** along the main routes will contribute to a cleaner environment;
- The addition of **public seating** in the area would allow people with mobility issues, especially elderly people, to break up their journey and would encourage more people to walk;
- The addition of **street lighting** would improve the appeal of the Water Works park, while the presence of park wardens would help to deter anti social behaviour and prostitution activity;
- More regular and reliant **public transport** services will lower the reliance of residents on cars and taxis for accessing local services. The provision of bus shelters with seating will also contribute to better use of bus services.

Appendix 1: Walkability assessment questionnaire responses

Date: 25 June 2019

Route: Ardilea Street to Water Works park and back via Oldpark Avenue

Number of completed questionnaires: 6

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	IIII	
Well maintained		I	III	II	
Comfortable		I	III	II	
Walking environment & shops:	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor
Streets are situated together and are accessible		II	III	I	
Separate queues in shops for older people		I	IIII	I	
Streets link me to places I want to go		II	III	I	

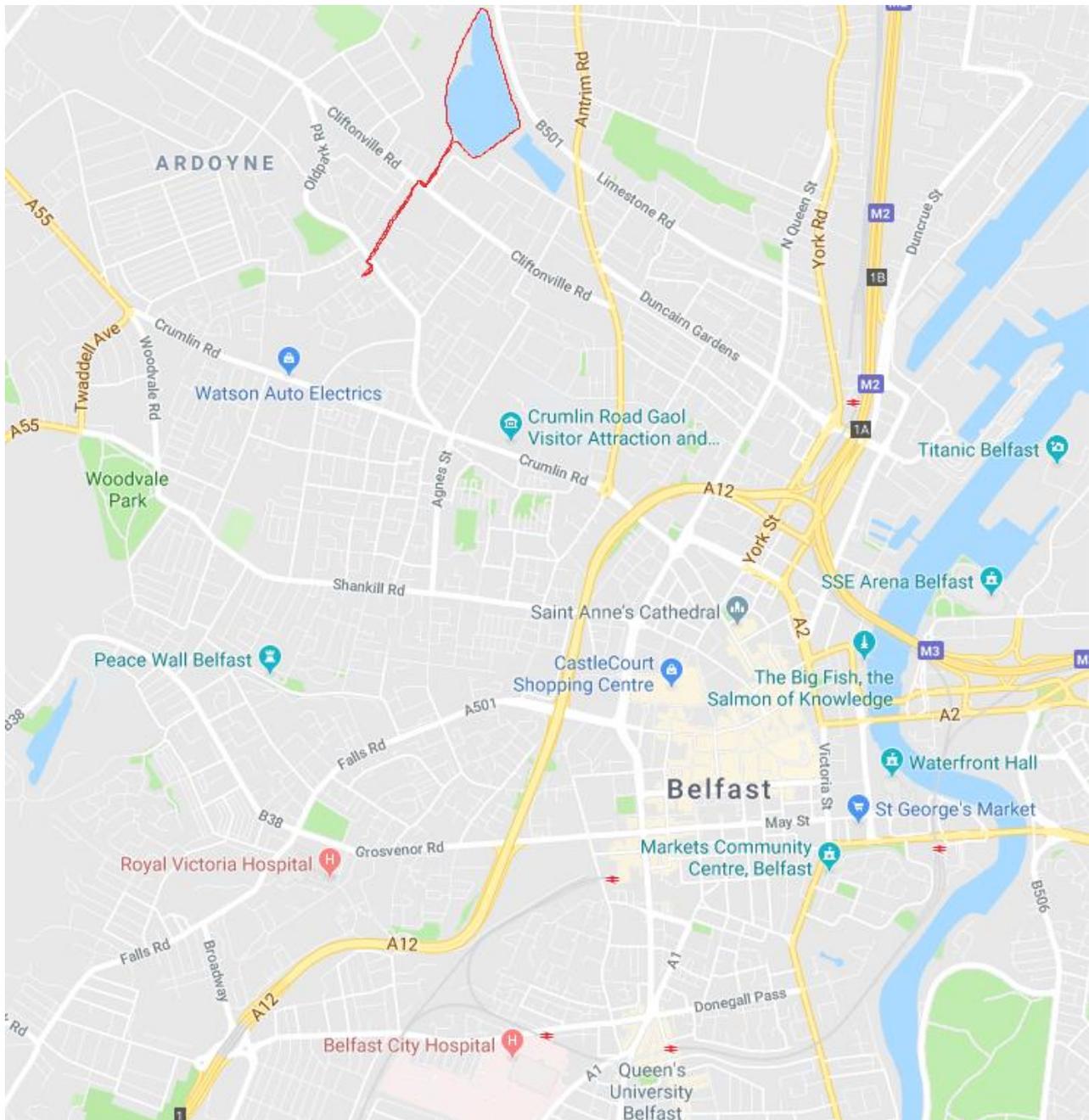
Additional comments raised during the discussion:

Positive elements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Park provides opportunities to get out in the fresh air.

Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dog fouling on the pavements.

Changes suggested
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More funding to improve local built environments.

Appendix 2



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