

Community Active Travel project

Walkability assessment findings – New Lodge

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.

New Lodge walkability assessment

The walkability assessment in New Lodge was undertaken in June 2018. In total 8 adults with ages ranging from 25 to 65 participated in the walk. The group of participants was equally split between males and females. One participant had mobility issues due to an injured leg, while none of the participants were visually or hearing impaired. Two participants did not finish the walk and returned early to the meeting point to fill out a questionnaire. Three additional persons that did not participate in the walk also filled out a questionnaire.

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 community representatives 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.

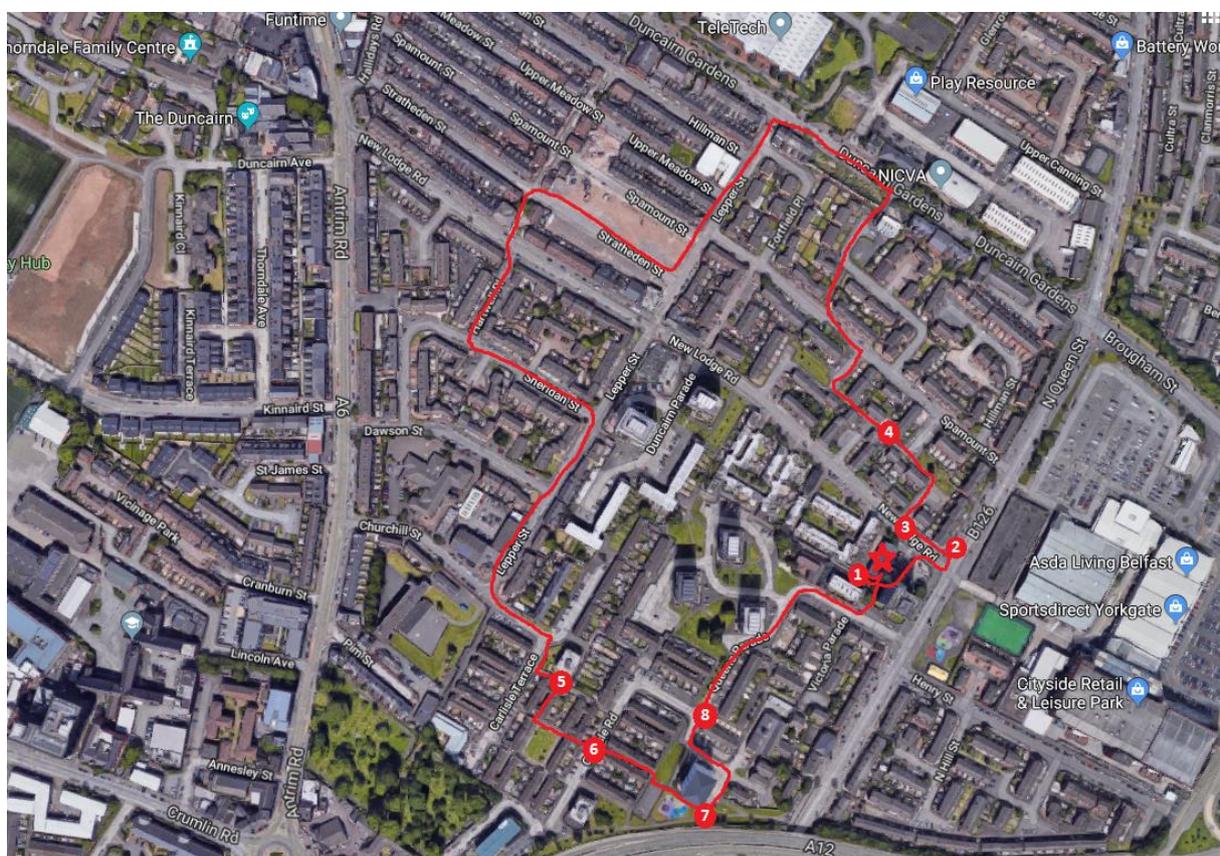


Figure 1. Map of route used for walkability assessment with numbers indicating location of photos. Source: Google Maps

Feedback from participants

The key challenges of the area that were highlighted during the assessment are:

- The low appeal of the walking route due to **abundance of litter**, particularly glass. **Fly tipping** occurs in places that are poorly supervised. A particular concern is the prevalence of drug tablets laying on the street, since these can be picked up and consumed by young kids. **A lack of bins means** that litter is likely to accumulate over time. The council takes a long time to respond to requests for removal of litter and only comes to collect litter after repeating complaints;
- The **poor design and layout of alleyways** caused a lot of concern among some participants, particularly among women and elderly people. **Poor levels of street lighting** in alleyways made these routes particularly unattractive during night time. The unsupervised alleyways are used by groups of young people for hanging around, which can be intimidating. Also, they are sometimes used for criminal activity such as setting alight of stolen vehicles;
- The difficulty with crossing major roads in the area due to the **lack of pedestrian crossings**. This means that many people would cross roads on random locations. However, due to the **lack of dropped kerbs**, this option is not available for those people that have buggies or are in a wheelchair. The limited number of pedestrian crossings available don't have traffic lights or sound signals present, which means that pedestrians rely on car drivers to stop on their own accord. However, this often doesn't happen. This issue has a particularly negative impact on the accessibility of the CitySide Shopping Centre where the main grocery store is located. The volume and speed of the traffic can make the crossing of roads particularly dangerous, with participants highlighting concern for pedestrian safety. These issues are much more severe for people with buggies or in wheelchairs, since they need more time to cross;
- The **lack of trees and accessible green spaces** in the area and the abundance of tarmac makes the area feel like a 'concrete jungle'. The nearest parks are Water Works and Alexandria Park, however, these are considerable distance away. There are some grass leftover spaces but these have all been fenced off so that they can't be used for any purpose despite their potential for accommodating play parks etc. Other potential spaces for green areas are used for car parks despite the fact that they are not used most of the time due to low levels of car ownership in the area;
- The **lack of investment** and the lack of effort put into the area by public bodies. Maintenance level of public realm is poor and open areas tend to be fenced off in fear of being vandalised. Due to the lack of activities in the area, vandalising of public property can become a pastime for youngsters, which prevents any investment coming in to the area.

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

- Quality of pavements is generally good with appropriate widths assigned;
- Dropped kerbs and tactile pavements occur at a limited number of road crossings. The distance between road crossings can be considerable, which can make it difficult for people in wheelchairs or with buggies to cross the main roads. Some provisional ramps for wheelchairs and buggies occur occasionally.



Carlisle Road (location 6)



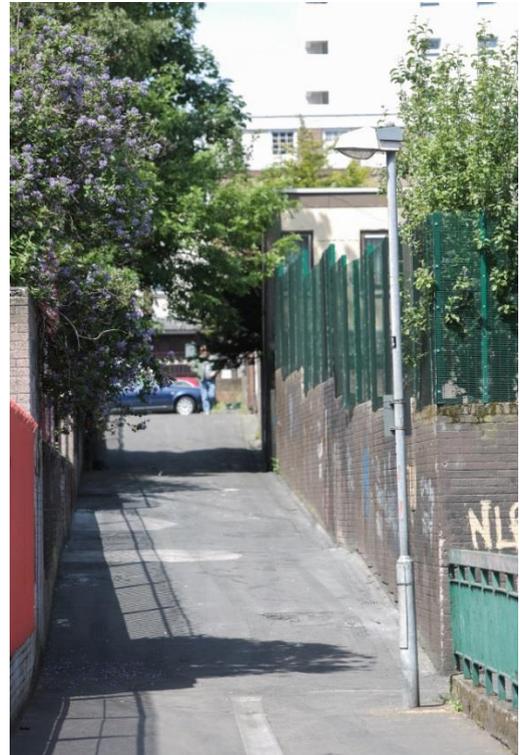
Carlisle Road (location 8)



New Lodge Road (location 2)

Street environment

- Litter and fly tipping is abundant, however, dog fouling seems to be a relatively limited problem;
- There is a general lack of bins in the area, which means that litter is thrown on street;
- There are a lot of alleyways that are very dark due to blind walls, fences etc. Poor street lighting during night time makes these alleyways very unattractive to use;
- No pit stops for elderly people to sit;
- There is a general lack of accessible green spaces and trees, which contribute to the feeling of walking in a 'concrete jungle';
- Groups of young people hang around alleyways and shops which can be intimidating, particularly for women and elderly people.



Walkway behind Victoria nursery school (location 1)



Walkway between Hardinge Place and Ludlow Square (location 4)



Car park behind Artillery youth club (location 1)



Carlisle Walk (location 5)



Walkway along Westlink (location 7)

Accessibility

- Very limited number of crossings on New Lodge Road, with only one zebra crossing allowing for smooth crossing. Traffic lights and sound signals are lacking;
- Only one crossing on N Queen Street that provides access to CitySide shopping centre. Traffic lights and sound signals are lacking. Car drivers often don't stop on own accord;
- Large numbers of fast moving cars on N Queen Street and New Lodge Road can make it dangerous to cross these roads without the use of pedestrian crossings serviced with traffic lights.



New Lodge Road (location 2)



New Lodge Road (location 2)



North Queen Street (location 3)

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, fly tipping) and **maintenance** (i.e. street lighting, plant overgrowth) of streets and particularly alleyways 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;
- **Redesign of alleyways** through removal of blind walls and fences would open them up and make them less dark, thereby significantly improving their attractiveness;
- **Increase the number of pedestrian crossings** along N Queen Street and New Lodge Road and improve existing ones. The **installation of pedestrian lights** would make it easier to cross busy roads, particularly during traffic peak hours and particularly for people with buggies or in wheelchairs. Sound signals are missing, which is particularly unhelpful for those with mobility aids or visibility issues;
- **'Green up' the area** by planting more trees and getting rid of unused car parks. Also, existing green spaces are not accessible but have the potential to be used by the local community, particularly young kids and elderly people. There would have to be more supervision and positive community outreach work implemented in order to make sure that any investment doesn't become vandalised. However, more police presence might not prove to be very popular among residents;
- The **provision of more play parks** for young kids and **places for elderly people to sit down** would contribute to the liveability of the area.

Appendix 1: Walkability assessment questionnaire responses

Date: 7 June 2018

Route: Artillery Youth Cluc to Hartwell Place via New Lodge Road, Meadow Place, Duncairn Gardens and Stratheden Street, and back via Sheridan Street, Lepper Street, Carlisle Walk and Queen's Parade.

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

Additional comments raised during the discussion:

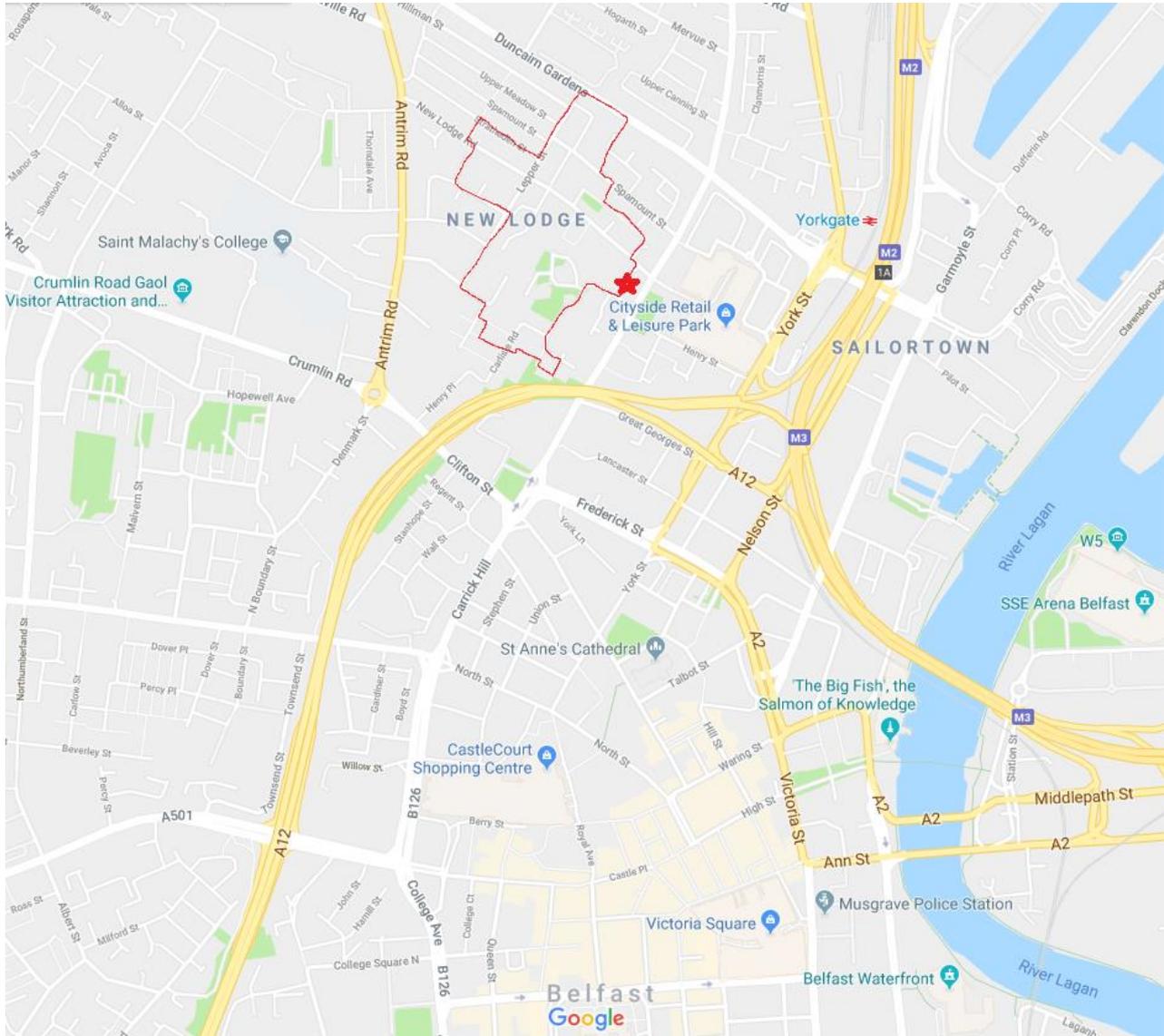
Positive elements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some nice views; • New housing; • Clean streets; • Some spare green areas that can be utilised; • Proximity to city centre; • Availability of shops; • Strong community ties; • Lots of youth clubs etc., although they do not all cater for community needs.

Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People need to learn more about environment; • Nowhere for kids/young people to play; • Nowhere to walk the dog; • Lack of bins; • Lack of pedestrian crossings; • Litter; • Dark alleyways / blind walls; • Abundant car parking; • Lack of accessible green spaces / trees in street; • Anti-social behaviour, anything gets vandalised; • Intimidation by youngsters; • Criminal activity; • Safety; • Parks are far away; • Lack of leisure centres in the immediate area; • Insufficient public transport.

Changes suggested

- More play areas;
- Walking together in a group instead of alone;
- More green areas for youngsters to play;
- More street lighting;
- Get the 'bad guys' out;
- Regular cleaning of public areas;
- Open up alleyways.

Appendix 2



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