

Community Active Travel project

Walkability assessment findings – Water Works

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.

Water Works walkability assessment

The walkability assessment in Water Works was undertaken in July 2019. In total 11 adults with ages ranging from 50 to 85 participated in the walk. Ten out of the eleven participants were male. Most participant had mobility issues to varying extents, including one participant who relies on a walking stick. Nine questionnaires were completed. The group leader identified that some participants had problems with reading and writing and preferred to opt out from filling in a questionnaire, however, their opinions were captured during the subsequent in-depth discussion.

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:

- The **green spaces** and natural scenery provided by Water Works and Alexandra parks are very positive for the area. Pathways within the parks are generally of good quality. Dogs not on a leash and bird droppings on the pathways present a nuisance to some people. Also, the presence of a peacewall in the Alexandra park gives the park an unwelcoming look;
- Participants highlight that there is a lot of anti-social behaviour going on in the parks during night time. A lack of effective security measures facilitates this unwanted use of the parks and makes most participants avoid entering the parks after night time;
- Antrim Road is a busy thoroughfare that crosses the area and therefore presents challenges to pedestrians. The crucially located **pedestrian crossing** on the junction of Antrim Road and Limestone/Cavehill Rd is equipped with pedestrian lights and dropped kerbs as well as tactile pavements for the visually impaired. However, sound signals seem to be missing. Also, due to the size of the junction and the limited crossing times, pedestrians are often forced to wait twice when aiming to cross 'diagonally';

- **Pavements** are generally wide enough and smooth, with occasional instances of cracks caused by tree roots or potholes due to lack of maintenance;
- **Dropped kerbs** are generally available at road crossings and provide wheelchair users and people with buggies to access pavements;
- 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. Benches are available in Water Works park but these are not always accessible due to park closing hours. Also, elderly men in highlight the need for **public toilet facilities**, however, a public toilet is situated at the lower end of the Water Works park;
- Some issues with cars blocking the pathway were highlighted. Sometimes there is very limited space available to pass, which increases the inconvenience experienced by wheelchair users and people with rollators / buggies.

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 high, particularly within the parks, although occasional cracks appear near street trees;
- Widths of pavements are generally appropriate, particularly along Antrim Road;
- Dropped kerbs and tactile pavements occur at road crossings on Antrim Road;
- Bird droppings on some pavements in Water Works park contribute to a unclean and potentially unhealthy environment.



Water Works park (location 2)



Antrim Road (location 3)



Alexandra park (location 6)

Street environment

Key issues:

- Streets are generally clean and well-maintained;
- There are bins available in the streets and parks, although their number is limited;
- The parks provide good quality green spaces and natural scenery. They therefore offer good opportunities for people to go out and enjoy a walk;
- Outside the parks, there are limited opportunities for people to sit;
- The Antrim Road can be quite busy with car traffic.



Antrim Road (location 8)



Antrim Road (location 3)



Water Works park (location 1)



Alexandra park (location 7)

Accessibility

Key issues:

- Pedestrian crossings are generally available on Antrim Road;
- The pedestrian crossing on the junction of Antrim Road and Limestone/Cavehill Road is fitted with pedestrian lights. However, they seem to lack sound signals, which makes it difficult for visibly impaired people to determine when to cross. Also, the short amount of time available makes it difficult for pedestrians to cross 'diagonally';
- There are issues with cars blocking parts of the pavements, particularly on the access routes towards Alexandra park, which make it difficult for wheelchair users and people with rollators / buggies to use the pavement.



Antrim Road (location 3)



Castleton Gardens (location 5)



Camberwell Terrace (location 4)

Recommendations

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

- Additional crossing time at the **pedestrian crossing** on the junction of Antrim Road and Limestone/Cavehill Road would allow more efficient crossing opportunities;
- The instalment of **security measures**, such as lighting and CCTV, in the park could dissuade younger people from engaging in anti-social behaviour in parks after night time and would make the park more attractive for wider community use;
- **Regular cleaning** and **clearing** of objects that block pavements will reduce the risk of pedestrians tripping or being forced to walk on the road. This is particularly important for wheelchair users and people with rollators / buggies. A stricter (enforcement of) parking policy would reduce the amount of cars blocking the pavement;
- The inclusion of **more bins** along the main routes will contribute to a cleaner environment;
- The addition of **public seating** along the main routes would allow people with mobility issues, especially elderly people, to break up their journey.

Appendix 1: Walkability assessment questionnaire responses

Date: 26 July 2019

Route: Walk from car park on Cavehill Rd around Water Works park and via Antrim Rd and Castleton Gardens to Alexandra park; back via Jubilee Avenue and Antrim Rd/Cavehill Rd

Number of completed questionnaires: 9

General impression of the area:	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor
Cleanliness					
Overall appeal	I		I		
Pavements:	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor
Well maintained with few cracks					
Free of obstruction –cars, bins etc			I		
Non-slip					
Wide enough for wheelchairs or for safely passing other pedestrians	I		I		
Dropped kerbs to road level at crossings					
Outdoor safety:	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor
Drivers give way at crossings					
Separate cycle paths	I				
Good street lighting	I		I		
Good visibility with no high hedges, dark corners	I			I	
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			I		
Traffic lights are clearly visible			I	I	
Sound signal clear			I		
Adequate crossing time					

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

Additional comments raised during the discussion:

Positive elements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presence of nature within this part of the city; • Nice scenery / beautiful views; • Parks provide a good traffic free walking environment.

Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cyclists sometime obstruct pedestrian movements; • Not enough seats available; • Presence of flags in the area; • Poor toilet facilities; • Dogs are often not kept on leash in park; • Poor quality of tarmac repairs on footpaths; • Bird droppings on the footpaths in the park; • Presence of litter.

Changes suggested
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lighting at night time / other security measures; • Toilet facilities.

