



Comments from Imtac about proposals to improve public realm in Ballycastle

(March 2024)

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About Imtac

The Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (Imtac) is a committee of disabled people and older people as well as others including carers and key transport professionals. Its role is to advise Government and others in Northern Ireland on issues that affect the mobility of Deaf people, disabled people and older people.

The aim of Imtac is to ensure that Deaf people, disabled people and older people have the same opportunities as everyone else to travel when and where they want.

Imtac receives support from the Department for Infrastructure (herein after referred to as the Department).

Background

Imtac was approached by Causeway Coast and Glen Borough Council to provide input into a proposal for an environmental improvement scheme to improve the public realm in Ballycastle. The Committee were provided with a briefing document from the Council setting the proposed improvements for The Diamond Area and surrounding streets. The main proposals centre on enhancements to the public realm and safety improvements for people walking and wheeling and vehicle movements around The Diamond.

How we developed this report

To inform this report a representative from Imtac met with Council Officials in Ballycastle on the 10th January 2024 and reviewed the streets covered by proposals. In reviewing the proposals an assessment was made of how the streets did or did not meet current standards for accessible and inclusive pedestrian infrastructure.

The assessment of the scheme also takes account of the four broad principles set out in Imtac's paper¹ "A New Approach to travel, our streets and our places". The four principles are:

- Putting Deaf people, disabled people and older people at the centre of every stage of decision making
- Ensuring a shift in our cultures

¹ <https://www.imtac.org.uk/new-approach-travel-our-streets-and-our-places>

- Ensuring public and private investment contributes to an accessible and inclusive society
- Ensuring end to end journeys are straightforward and accessible

Finally this report takes into account key recommendations made by Imtac in another report² developed by the Committee for the information of Government and Councils commenting on the impact of investment in other completed public realm schemes in Northern Ireland, published in 2023.

Summary of the scheme

The scheme outlined in an Options Paper proposes to make improvements to Castle Street, The Diamond and Ann Street in the town centre. As part of the improvements to The Diamond area there will also be an upgrade of footway surface on Fairhill Street.

The most significant changes involve upgrading the existing footways on Castle Street with new paving and surfaces as well as the reworking and realigning of the existing street configuration in the area around the Diamond to provide a much improved public space including the removal of cobbled surfaces which should never be used in public realm schemes. Ann Street will be upgraded re- using the existing paving surface. It is proposed to upgrade footways linking the car park on Fairhill Street to The Diamond using asphalt.

² <https://www.imtac.org.uk/assessing-impact-investment-public-realm-schemes-report-revisits-completed-schemes>

Findings

Topography

The topography of parts of the town centre create accessibility issues. Gradients and crossfalls, particularly on Castle Street and linkages to car parks off Ann Street, will be challenging for some older people and disabled people. The proposed use of natural stone particularly on Castle Street is likely to exacerbate these issues of problematic gradients and crossfalls.



Image shows the gradient of Castle Street. A bin narrows the footway.



Image shows a sharp crossfall on the footway on Castle Street created by a dropped kerb at a vehicle entrance. The gradient of the street exacerbates the fall.

Footway condition

Footway condition although generally adequate is poor in places. This is particularly acute along sections of Ann Street including junctions. There are indications that some of the damage to footways has been caused by heavy goods vehicles parking on the footway.



Image shows poor surfacing on the footway at a vehicle entrance at the junction of Ann Street and Station Road. No tactile paving has been provided on the northern footway for crossing of Station Road. Bins and railings narrow pedestrian accessibility on the junction crossing.



Image shows one of several locations on Ann Street where paving is broken and loose, probably due to pavement parking by heavy goods vehicles.

Footway widths

There are a number of locations where footway width is below minimum standards. This is particularly acute on Fairhill Street.



Image shows the narrow footway widths on Fairhill Street which provide a pedestrian route from the public car park. The footway also has a poor surface.

Street clutter

Street clutter is a frequently occurring obstruction on all the streets with A Boards in particular creating hazards in many locations. The location of bins and other street furniture including a telephone kiosk creates potential hazards at points.



Images shows a series of A Boards on Ann Street, narrowing footway width.

Vehicle, car park and building entrances

Many of the buildings along the streets covered by the scheme contain vehicle entrances. There are also entrances to off street car parks from the streets. Level changes and poor surfacing in some of these locations create hazards particularly for people with walking difficulties.



Image shows a significant reverse crossfall created on the footway at the entrance to the off street car park along Ann Street.



A vehicle entrance on Castle Street creates a sharp drop and crossfall. The surface condition on the footway is also poor in this location.

Stepped accesses to buildings create both an access barrier to premises and contribute to an irregular building line and resultant potential hazards. Some attempts have been made to provide step free access to some premises with solutions falling short of acceptable access requirements.



Image shows attempts to provide step free access to premises on Ann Street with a steep, short ramp (stepped access to adjacent buildings is just visible).

Provision of crossings

There are two controlled pedestrian crossings located on Ann Street and Castle Street. Both crossings conform to design standards. There are a number of uncontrolled crossings along Ann Street and around the town. Although broadly installed to design standards, the usefulness of these crossings is reduced by the high levels of traffic in the town. Contrasting between tactile paving and general paving at crossings is poor.



Image shows an uncontrolled crossing across Ann Street. Although meeting design guidance traffic levels make crossing difficult or impossible for some users with assistance.

The current configuration of the Diamond area

The current configuration of the Diamond area means it is a difficult area for people walking and wheeling. The area is heavily trafficked with a supermarket, parking and side roads meaning that pedestrians are not prioritised, particularly when crossing streets and side roads. The central area of the Diamond including the monument is not currently accessible with little or no kerb delineation between the currently inaccessible cobbled areas of the Diamond and the carriageway. There is some seating in this area but it very limited.



Images show views of The Diamond including the inaccessible central area, dominated by parking. Accessible parking is provided at the western side of The Diamond as well as footways and crossings in need of upgrading.

Impact of vehicles

The difficulties created by the priority given to vehicles in The Diamond area are reflected across the other streets covered by the proposed scheme. Both on-street parking and the movement of traffic are prioritised above pedestrians on the streets covered by the scheme. There is also no provision made for cycling or bus stops on any of the streets.



Image is an example of a street configuration near The Diamond exemplified by trafficked main streets, side roads and an absence of accessible crossing opportunities for people walking and wheeling.

Linkages to car parks

There are number of off-street car parks accessed from the streets covered by the scheme. Linkages for people walking and wheeling to and from these car parks are generally unattractive but also challenging for anyone with mobility difficulties due to steep gradients.





Images shows linkages to off street car parking from Ann Street and Castle Street. Significant gradients are a significant barrier for use of the car parks by people with mobility difficulties. Although handrails have been provided the positioning of one set of rails creates a potential access restrictions and hazard for people with visual impairment.

Recommendations

The proposed scheme will undoubtedly make improvements for people walking and wheeling in Ballycastle. The condition of footways will be improved and the area around the Diamond in particular will benefit from a significant improvement in pedestrian priority and provision including enhanced accessible space, seating and the removal of currently inaccessible and unacceptable cobbled surfaces.

Two specific issues need to be considered with regard to the proposed scheme. Firstly the use of contrasting materials, particularly with regard to contrasting between tactile paving and surrounding paving, needs to be significantly improved. Secondly, further thought needs to be given to the footway surfacing on Castle Street. The significant gradients on this street mean that the proposed use of large natural stone sets is likely to exacerbate existing issues with steep crossfalls on the footway. Depending on the surface used gradients could lead to increased slips and falls.

Despite these improvements many of the issues identified by this report will not be addressed by upgrading the existing footway surfacing and limited realignment of the street configuration in the Diamond area. There are, for example, no plans to increase footway widths along the streets covered by the scheme or to improve crossing priorities for pedestrians. More broadly the changes do little to address the priority given to traffic and vehicles in the town centre or to promote more sustainable and active travel.

Addressing these issues will require significant changes in current cultures and approaches including the reallocation of road space from traffic and vehicles to people walking, wheeling and cycling. As part of the overall process of improving Ballycastle as a place for people Imtac recommends that consideration be given to the following now.

1. Changes to traffic management in the town with a view to reducing and removing unnecessary traffic from the main streets and create more space for people. Options could include the introduction of a one-way system.
2. A review of parking in the town with a view to (1) improving linkages to off street parking to maximise usage and reduce reliance on on street parking, (2) developing proposals to reduce the levels of non accessible on-street parking and improve the provision of accessible parking in the town (including bays for drivers of larger wheelchair accessible vehicles (WAVs) and charging infrastructure for electric vehicles designed PAS

1899 standards³), (3) developing options to tackle problems created by pavement parking and (4) developing and implementing proposals to manage and reduce the impact of delivery vehicles on the main streets in the town centre.

3. As part of recommendation 1 above, the reallocation of current roads space to provide more available space for people including widened footways or parklets.
4. Introduce a ban on A Boards on footways in the town centre.
5. Improving the provision of bus infrastructure across the town centre.
6. Developing plans to provide accessible and inclusive cycling infrastructure accessible to users of standard and non-standard or accessible cycles.
7. Review public toilet and children's play provision in the town with a view to providing more inclusive and accessible facilities including the provision of a Changing Places Toilet and inclusive play equipment.

³ <https://www.bsigroup.com/en-GB/insights-and-media/insights/brochures/pas-1899-electric-vehicles-accessible-charging-specification/>