



Comments from Imtac about proposals to improve public realm in Rathfriland

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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).

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Background

Imtac was approached to provide input into proposals for environmental improvement schemes to improve public realm in three locations across Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council. Locations were Rathfriland, Gilford and Markethill. Due to limited resource Imtac agreed to carry out a site visit and provide comments on the proposals for Rathfriland only, as this is the most challenging location and that issues are likely to be common to all locations.

How we developed this report

To inform this report a representative from Imtac met with Council Officials in Rathfriland on the 30th November 2023 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.

A further assessment was made of the scheme proposals based on 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 into the impact of investment in other completed public realm schemes in Northern Ireland, published in 2023.

Summary of the scheme

The scheme proposes to make improvements to the streets linking to and in the immediate vicinity of Church Square in Rathfriland. It is proposed to make improvements to Church Square at a later date. The streets involved are listed below.

The entire length of:

- Caddells Lane
- Main Street

Parts of:

- John Street
- Newry Street
- Dromore Street
- Downpatrick Street
- Castle Street

Findings

One notable issue that is specific to Rathfriland is the topography of the town with significant gradients which make access issues in the town more pronounced as well as placing constraints on the potential options for improvement.

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

Many of the other findings of the assessment mirror findings in other places and are detailed below.

Issues with pavement widths

Pavement widths are an issue on a number of streets including Dromore Street, Castle Street and most acutely on Caddells Lane where widths fall below acceptable standards along long parts of the street.

Image shows the very narrow footway widths on Caddells Lane.

Pavement condition

Pavement condition is a consistent issues across all streets with poor and uneven surfaces common.

Image shows an example of poor pavement condition on John Street close to its junction with Church Square. Note the deep dish drainage channel.

Poor provision of crossings and tactile paving

There is a lack of accessible crossing opportunities across the streets covered by the scheme. Dropped kerbs have been provided in a number of key locations, while no tactile paving has been provided. There is one controlled crossing in the town on Main Street which does meet inclusive design standards.

One particular issue is the lack of accessible pedestrian infrastructure on John Street, meaning linkages including crossings on John Street make accessibility to the Health Centre and Library difficult or impossible for many.

Image shows a uncontrolled crossing across Newry Street. Although the kerbs have been dropped no tactile has been provided.

Image shows a uncontrolled crossing across Dromore Street. Although the kerbs have been dropped no tactile has been provided.

Image shows the inadequate sub standard pedestrian infrastructure around the Health Centre and Library on John Street.

Obstructions created by the building line and vehicle entrances

Rathfriland has particular problems created by the building line on many of the streets covered by the scheme. Steps into house and frontages extend into the footway, narrowing widths and creating multiple potential hazards.

Image shows steps into dwellings on Downpatrick Street.

Many of the frontages on the street also include vehicle entrances with kerbing which mean that step free access along footways in some locations is impossible. This is particularly acute on Downpatrick Street.

Image shows the building line impacting significantly on footway width on Dromore Street.

Image shows a vehicle entrance on Downpatrick Street. Kerbs parallel to the entrance obstruct step free footway access.

Drainage channels

Deep dish drainage channels are a frequent potential hazard on footways across streets in the town. Some of these channels are loose and in poor condition, creating potential trip hazards.

Image shows a deep and damaged dish drainage channel on Dromore Street.

Vehicle / traffic dominance

Vehicular traffic dominates the town centre and the streets covered by the scheme. There is significant provision of on street parking as well some off street car parks (which appear to be under utilised). Parking wholly or partially on footways is a persistent issue across most of the streets in the town. Some of this parking is clearly linked to residential properties with no off street parking provision.

Traffic levels, both legal and illegal parking and the poor pedestrian infrastructure including a lack of crossing opportunities mean the town is currently a hostile environment for anyone walking or wheeling. There is no cycle infrastructure in the town other than a limited number of bicycle parking hoops on Church Square. This cycle parking is not accessible to many users of non-standard and accessible cycles.

Limited seating has been provided at either end of Church Square but it is not an attractive environment for people to dwell given the surrounding traffic levels.

Images show pavement parking on Newry Street, John Street, Dromore Street and Downpatrick Street.

Image shows the current seating on Church Square at its busy junction with Main Street, Dromore Street and Newry Street.

Recommendations

The review of the streets in Rathfriland highlights issues common to many towns and cities. These include poor pavement conditions, the lack of accessible crossing opportunities, and the impact on footway accessibility of existing drainage solutions and vehicle entrances. The proposed public realm improvements offer the opportunity to remedy almost all these issues through the adoption of high inclusive design standards when implementing the scheme.

There are specific issues in Rathfriland created by the frequency of stepped entrances to buildings and historic building frontages. These create multiple potential hazards on the building line and in places narrows footway widths below acceptable standards. Where possible, action should be taken to reduce the impact of these potential hazards, although the Committee recognises that options for change will be limited.

The other issues in the town relate to a lack of footway width on some streets and the lack of pedestrian connectivity for key community infrastructure, such as the Library and Health Centre on John Street. Both issues are symptomatic of the wider dominance of vehicles and traffic in the town, which is exemplified by widespread pavement parking on many of the streets.

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. Of the streets covered by the current scheme a proposal to make Caddels Lane one way to traffic offers an opportunity to increase footway width in one location and is supported by Imtac.

The future redevelopment of Church Square offers further opportunity to reduce space given over to traffic in the town and increase space for people walking, wheeling and cycling. As part of the overall process of improving Rathfriland as a place for people Imtac recommends that consideration be given to the following now.

1. A review of parking in the town with a view to (1) improving linkages to off street parking to maximise usage, (2) develop options to tackle problems

created by pavement parking and (3) develop proposals to 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).

2. Prioritising improving inclusive and accessible walking and wheeling linkages from Church Square to the Health Centre and Library.
3. Improving the provision of bus infrastructure in the town including upgrading existing stop and shelter provision on Downpatrick Street to inclusive design standards.
4. Developing plans to provide more accessible and inclusive cycling infrastructure including secure cycle parking accessible to users of standard and non-standard or accessible cycles.
5. Review public toilet and children's play provision in the town with a review to providing more inclusive and accessible facilities including the provision of a Changing Places Toilet and inclusive play equipment.

Conclusion

Imtac thanks Council officials for the opportunity to comment on proposals for improvements to the public realm in Rathfriland. Our comments reflect the need to upgrade existing infrastructure to reflect inclusive design standards. Our comments also reflect the need to rethink and reprioritise our streets and places with a focus on people rather than vehicles and traffic. The Committee is happy to provide further comment as the proposals are progressed. We would also encourage the Council to further engage with local Deaf people, disabled people and older people.