



**Initial feedback from Imtac about Grand Central
Station**

(January 2025)

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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

This paper provides feedback from Imtac about the first phase of the opening of Grand Central Station in Belfast. The feedback reflects previous recommendations on the project and is informed by experience with several previous Translink projects and developments. This includes written comments provided by the Committee at different stages of the design of the project in 2017¹ and then 2020². It also includes specific engagement that has taken place between Translink and Imtac around signage, tactile surfaces, seating and visual information screens. The final consideration was a site visit to the new station involving Imtac members on the 25th October 2024 and other feedback / comments made by the general public.

The report focuses on phase one of the project. It does not include the planned wider public realm works including parking, assistance dog spending area, cycle provision, taxi ranks and pick up and drop off. This will form part of a future updated report once these works are complete.

The report does look at the interim arrangements put in place during the transfer from Great Victoria Street Railway Station / Europa Bus Centre to Grand Central Station and includes the current temporary access arrangements in place whilst phase two works are completed which have generated a lot of public comment.

Where making recommendations around improving provision the Committee uses best practice guidelines including BS 8300³ and Design Standards for Accessible Railway Stations⁴. The comments are also informed by the four principles of the Imtac New Approach paper⁵, with particular regard to principle three - Ensuring public and private investment contributes to an accessible and inclusive society.

How the report is structured

The report looks first at the immediate approaches to the new station, where public realm works have already been undertaken. It then addresses the entrances and interior of the building, commenting on specific elements of the bus, rail and other provision in the station. The

¹ <https://www.imtac.org.uk/detailed-comments-imtac-around-proposals-belfast-transport-hub>

² <https://www.imtac.org.uk/feedback-imtac-following-belfast-transport-hub-update-3rd-june-2020>

³ Design of an accessible and inclusive built environment (BS 8300-1: 2008)

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/accessible-railway-stations-design-standards>

⁵ <https://www.imtac.org.uk/new-approach-travel-our-streets-and-our-places>

final section of the report looks at the interim measures put in place during the phased opening of the station.

Station approaches

Public realm works have been completed in the immediate surroundings of the station including part of the route towards Durham Street. Tactile guidance paving has been provided along this section, leading to several entrances to the station.

The public realm has used a very distinctive pattern with small, differently coloured and toned pavers. Although aesthetically striking, it would have been advisable to test the paving and get feedback from a variety of users including people with visual impairment, cognitive impairments such as people with dementia and neurodivergent people.

There is covered weather protection provided in the immediate vicinity of the station. Grey columns supporting the canopy would benefit from the addition of strong contrasting visibility strips at the appropriate height to reduce the potential of the columns becoming a hazard for people with a visual impairment.

There are steps at the Grosvenor Road entrance to the station. Appropriate handrails have been provided with contrasting corduroy tactile at the top and bottom of the steps in line with guidance. Alternative ramp provision is available at the Grosvenor Road. Both this ramp and the ramped access via Durham Street meet inclusive design standards in terms of gradient.

Station entrances / exits

There are several entrances and exits to the main station concourse. The frontage of the station is heavily glazed although the darker grey window and door frames do provide some contrast to the glazing. Contrasting markings have also been provided at the appropriate height on glazing on both windows and doors although these markings should provide stronger contrast.

There are “Entrance” signs above the automatic doors, but these are not particularly prominent or readable. The automatic doors themselves have visible white stickers, reading “Automatic doors”, providing the only distinguishable difference between the doors and surrounding glazing. Consideration should be given to providing more prominent signage to

make the entrances to the station more identifiable and stronger contrasting measures on the entrance / exit doors to the station.

Station interior / Staffing

The reality of the station interior is as vast as was promised in the design stage. It is an undoubtedly impressive building but for many disabled people and older people the size and scale of the building will be intimidating. At the design stage Imtac welcomed the inclusion of a staffed information point close to the entrance of the station but also stressed the importance of proactive staff on the concourse ready and willing to assist passengers.

It is good to report that since opening the initial feedback Imtac has received and what we have observed on the site visit has been significant numbers of proactive staff visible on the concourse, providing support where required including at the rail ticketing gates. This is hugely positive but also hugely necessary in a station this size. Some people have expressed concerns to us about staffing being scaled back as the station becomes established. For Imtac such a move would be a major retrograde step and have a major negative impact on the accessibility of the new station.

We have also received some feedback about occasions where assistance at the station has fallen below what is required at such a large site. In the main issues appear to arise from poor communication between staff and staff unaware of their responsibility to provide assistance. It is essential that procedures are in place to ensure that staff communicate effectively with each other and passengers and are reminded frequently of what is required of them in relation to assistance. Translink should proactively seek periodic feedback about assistance at the station, with a view to improving the passenger experience for Deaf, disabled and older customers.

One positive suggestion which we understand will be adopted by Translink, is to distinguish staff providing assistance by the introduction of distinctive high visibility jackets for these staff. We also understand that equipment, including manual wheelchairs, are available to staff and passengers to assist people to use the station. The availability of this provision must be communicated more clearly to the public than it currently is.

Ticketing arrangements

Ticket vending machines have been provided at several locations close the entrances of the station and adjacent to the rail ticketing barriers. Separate machines have been provided for bus and train tickets with staff on hand to provide support. We know from user testing that the ticket machines are inaccessible to some disabled people, so providing alternatives including retaining the ability to obtain and ticket from a member of staff was a key ask from the Committee in discussions about the design of the station.

A separate ticket or Customer Service desk has been provided but is a considerable distance from the entrance. This Customer Service desk meets inclusive design standards. The Committee has also been informed that tickets can also be purchased from staff at the information point and rail ticketing barriers, but this is not clear to users in the station. The information point has been designed to include as section of low-level counter in line with inclusive design standards. Bus tickets can also be purchased from drivers when boarding most bus services but a ticket is required for passengers prior to using the ticket barriers to access the rail platforms.

Imtac has received feedback from passengers confused about the ticketing arrangements, particularly from half-fare SmartPass users. The half fare SmartPass can only be used on the rail ticket machines and many passengers seem unaware that there are alternatives to using the customer service desk. We have also observed staff at ticket barriers directing disabled people to use ticket machines, inappropriately on occasions, rather than issue a ticket themselves using a handheld device.

Whilst the Committee is satisfied there are a variety of accessible ticketing options for passengers at the station including from members of station and other Translink staff, the communication of what is available needs to be improved. In the absence of an adequate explanation, half fare SmartPass users should also have the option of purchasing tickets from bus ticket vending machines.

On a broader point, Half-Fare SmartPass holders are increasingly disadvantaged and excluded from wider the wider ticketing improvements being introduced by Translink including mobile ticketing through M Link. The burdensome requirement to provide a payment either through cash or card makes the concession onerous for users and

is a strong justification for Imtac's continuing advice for free concessions to be made available to all eligible disabled people.

Seating

In a large station such as Grand Central Station, an adequate mix of seating is essential. There has been some criticism online about an apparent lack of seating, however we have not observed a shortage of seating during our visits apart from a lack of seating on the rail section in the area beyond the ticket barriers in front of the rail platforms. There appears to be space to accommodate additional seating in this location. Once the station is fully operational and additional seating should be provided on the rail concourse. Further additional seating is also likely to be required on the main concourse as the number of services accessing the station increases.

The design of the banks of seating is good, with armrests and a number of higher airport "PRM" style seats. Seating has been positioned in a logical manner to minimize potential obstructions and contrasts suitably with the surroundings. Recently, perch seating has been installed on the main concourse, in line with inclusive design standards, and will be available at several key points along the length of the large concourse space and on the mezzanine level. The use of chrome as a finish does limit the contrast between the perch seating and its surroundings, a better design could have been achieved if engagement had taken place with Imtac and others before final design decisions were taken.

A mix of perch and fixed seats with armrests have been provided on each of the rail platforms, again broadly in line with inclusive design standards although the previous comments about the design of perch seating is relevant.

Toilet provision

Broadly the toilet provision meets design standards. On the ground floor a Changing Places Toilet has been provided with two further unisex standard accessible toilets in addition to separate baby and toddler changing facilities. The standard male and female toilets provide the required provision of facilities including wider cubicles and the appropriate provision of grab rails. Despite meeting design standards, the overall opinion of the Committee is that provision could and should have been much better and improvements are needed where possible.

The Changing Places Toilet is currently permanently locked, and a key must be sought to use it. The toilet itself lacks a screen, and the sink is not height adjustable. These issues should have been addressed before the station was opened, including the fitting of a Radar Key lock. The Committee recommends that issues are addressed urgently as part of the accreditation process for the facility to be formally recognised and included on the register of Changing Places Toilets.

The standard unisex accessible toilets on the ground floor are disappointing in terms of size, the layout is compact with limited space internally. More concerning still is the automated door opening and locking mechanisms. Neither of these are intuitive and require thought by the users. For some users such as people with visual impairment the operation of doors and locking mechanisms will be very difficult to operate. Whilst the inclusion of automatic doors is welcome, the overly complex opening and locking mechanisms should never have been considered as appropriate. Urgent work is required to ensure both written and audio instructions are provided to make the toilets more usable and accessible. There were also some privacy concerns about the use of glass doors. Our understanding is that these have been made opaquer, however feedback we have received indicates that some people still feel self-conscious using the toilets. Under no circumstances should this design of toilet should not be used again in future station developments.

Further toilet provision has been provided, and recently opened, on the mezzanine level including male and female toilets and a standard accessible toilet which is combined with baby and toddler changing facilities. The design of the male and female toilets, although smaller in size, reflect the provision of those on the ground floor. The accessible toilet is more generous in terms of space than those on the ground floor. Signage to and around the toilets on this level is poor and needs to be improved. Because of a lack of signage most people will be unaware of this toilet provision on this level in the station unless visiting BrewDog.

Consideration should be given in future developments to providing both right hand and left-hand transfer options for accessible toilets in stations providing multiple accessible toilets.

Despite the additional provision on the mezzanine level there is a concern about the overall toilet provision in terms of adequacy for the volume of passengers using the station. Queues have been observed already at both male and female toilets at times even though the station

is not yet fully operational, which potentially will mean non-disabled people using accessible toilets. Better awareness and advertisement of alternative facilities may help reduce the risk of this happening.

Members also have expressed concerns about the distance for passengers arriving by rail to access toilet facilities. Overall, the provision is disappointing, comparing less favourably to recent developments such as the North West Transport Hub.

The Committee has previously recommended that Translink develop consistent toilet signage across its entire estate. Although the toilet signage at Grand Central is acceptable our broader recommendation for consistent signage stands. New signage should be designed in partnership with Imtac and others.

It is worth noting that neither Imtac nor the Translink Accessibility Manager were consulted about the specific detailed design of accessible toilets. This is the perfect illustration of why engagement is important and demonstrates that when it doesn't happen the provision fails to meet the highest possible standards and passenger expectations.

Signage and information

In broad terms the signage in the station is well designed and meets design standards in relation to contrast and usability.

In relation to visual information display screens the principle of the provision, with information becoming progressively more specific is excellent. The large central information screen is also excellent and a really striking feature, however the intermediate bus screens are mounted too high on columns making them difficult to read. Whilst the screens above the bus gates are better, there are some concerns about their readability as glare from the sun is likely to be an issue. Concerns were also raised about the readability and accessibility of the intermediate screens on the rail side again because of height.

One suggestion that was made by several participants was the provision of some low-level information screens. Examples of these screens can be found at Belfast City Airport and the North West Transport Hub.

There has been some negative publicity about the Grand Central being a “quiet station” with the policy to make no announcements other than when there is an unexpected event or change. Imtac understands that

this policy has been refined to now mean that announcements will be made on the rail side of the station but with none on the bus side other than emergency announcements and announcements about service alterations. The Committee recognises that there are practical considerations that limit the usefulness of announcing all bus services. We also recognise that frequent announcements can impact on some disabled and neurodivergent people. The Committee recommends that the no announcements policy for buses be kept under review with the option retained to start the limited announcement of bus services in the future.

Retail

The station has a range of retail options on both ground and mezzanine level. Premises generally provide good access into and around the facilities. Already, however, premises have started to spill out onto the main concourse in the form of A Boards and tables and chairs. The Committee sees absolutely no need for businesses to use A boards in the station as they have a captive audience. Whilst tables and chairs are not an issue where there is ample room, these should be appropriately screened so as to avoid creating a potential hazard. Screening should include a tap rail and access to the premises should be maintained while ensuring that desire lines between station's transport facilities are not impeded. Guidance is available from DfI⁶ around appropriate screening and minimising the potential hazards of tables and chairs outside of premises.

Bus stands and rail platforms

A mix of bus stands have been provided to facilitate the operation of both low-floor and high floor buses and coaches. The opportunity has not arisen to test the accessibility of these stands, but an early passenger experience has identified a potential issue for lift deployment for users of high floor coaches. To their credit Translink acted swiftly to remove the potential barrier. More testing is needed of the accessibility of bus stands. The kerb at stands does appear to be less than 125mm which can pose issues making the gradient of ramps steeper than is acceptable when deployed onto the surface from a low floor bus. The Committee recommends that Translink work with Imtac to user test the operation of ramps and passenger lifts at the Grand Central. Feedback

⁶ Pavement Café Guidance – Highway Considerations (DfI 2024)

from this testing will be incorporated into an updated lmtac report about the station.

It is welcome that there is space for people to wait away from the elements before boarding a service. It is noticeable that a queuing system is being used for busy services similar those commonly used at airport security. It is important that in operating any queuing system that unobstructed space is left for disabled people to make their way to the bus stand without having to weave around the queuing arrangements and that tactile surfaces are not obstructed by queues. This provision appears to have been made, but it must be accompanied by clear communication to inform disabled passengers that they do not have to queue to board services.

Access to the rail platforms is straightforward. For lmtac one of the key elements of future proofing the station is that platforms will be able to facilitate the operation of level boarding, low floor trains. We have been told that platforms at Grand Central have been designed to achieve this but confirmation of this would be welcome.

Lifts and stairs

Access to the mezzanine level from the ground floor is via two lifts, escalators and stairs. The main issue with these facilities is the poor use of contrasting materials. The predominant use of chrome and glass materials for the lifts makes identifying entrances and exits and lift controls difficult particularly on the ground floor. Using a colour on the surrounding glazing, as used at stations such as London Bridge, could make the doors and lift controls more identifiable. Appendix A has photographs that illustrate this issue.

Contrasting corduroy tactile surfaces have been provided at the top and bottom of the stairs which have fitted with appropriate handrails. Again, the use of chrome limits the contrast between the handrails and the surroundings.

There are two chrome bollards at the bottom of the two escalators on the ground floor. These do not have any contrasting visibility strip and represent a potential hazard for people with a visual impairment.

Evacuation from levels above ground floor is a concern for many disabled people, particularly given the events at Grenfell Tower. From information provided by Translink in the event of an emergency or

evacuation neither the lifts nor escalators to the mezzanine level will be operational. In these circumstances, for anyone unable to use the stairs there is a refuge area located at the back of house stairs with a phone linking to the station management suite. Security staff will sweep the building, and evacuation can be made using either an Evac Chair or via the lift operated by the fire service or the Translink Duty Lead. There is a Duty Lead on site 24 hours a day. The likely uncertainty and delay for some disabled people in evacuation in the event of an emergency will be a major deterrent for them using facilities on the mezzanine level. One way that this deterrent could be reduced could be better communication with station users about evacuation procedures including signage around the mezzanine level indicating the locations of refuge areas.

Lighting

Imtac is satisfied that the lighting levels inside the station meet inclusive design standards. The one caveat to this is how glare will impact on the station on sunny days given the amount of glazing used.

Contrasting

There are good examples at the station of contrasting materials being used effectively within the station. Contrast has been achieved cleverly in places such as using Translink branding to wrap around internal support columns. There are several locations that would benefit from additional contrasting measures. As previously indicated contrasting is poor around the lifts and some of the seating. The dominant use of chrome and glass finishes will make it difficult for some people to identify lifts and their entrances / exits. Support columns in the area around lifts on the ground floor also provide poor contrast with their surroundings as do the two chrome bollards at the escalators on the ground floor. Where necessary and possible the Committee recommends remedial measures to improve contrasting.

Wayfinding

Measures to support wayfinding was a key ask of the Committee during the design stage. The decision to include both comprehensive tactile guidance surfacing and the provision NaviLens means that the station has potentially innovative and unique wayfinding provision. Early testing with blind and partially sighted people has been very positive with the technology of NaviLens complementing the physical provision of tactile surfacing. More testing is needed to refine both. NaviLens has the

potential to have wider benefits to more people than just those with visual impairment.

Feedback from other users about the tactile surfacing is less positive. The surface is uncomfortable for some people to walk on and could potentially cause a trip for someone who have difficulty in lifting their legs. For some wheelchair users small castors on some wheelchairs can potentially catch on the surface if not anticipated. More testing is needed to ascertain the extent of these issues. For Imtac, potential issues for other users does not mean we should remove the tactile surfaces, rather we need to identify which type of finish on the tactile will reduce the impact on other users (currently the station uses three different finishes) and implement the best compromise option.

One issue that has become apparent with the new surfacing is maintenance issues. As the surface is stick down there have been frequent issues with pieces coming away. Vigilance and swift refitting is required if the surfaces are to remain useful and not become a potential trip hazard.

Sensory / Quiet space

Because of the sheer size of Grand Central, it was a key recommendation from the Committee that a quiet / sensory room should be provided. The new station includes a sensory nook, which is a mobile sensory space, currently located at the end of the main concourse. Sensory packs are also available at the station although communication about the availability of this resource must be better.

Although Imtac recognises that efforts have been made to address our recommendations, we believe current provision falls significantly short in several ways. Firstly, the space is not quiet, it is part of the general concourse and will be noisy at certain times of day, reducing / removing the benefits of the provision. Secondly, the space is open to the front, meaning it lacks the privacy many users will require. Finally, the space is not accessible with a step up required to access the nook. It is not acceptable that a supposedly inclusive space excludes some users, particularly as an accessible step free option was available. Translink has indicated a commitment a step free option will be purchased if current provision is deemed a success. Accessibility and inclusion should never be based on this metric.

Whilst the Committee acknowledges the effort that went into finding a potential solution for a quiet / sensory space, we do not believe that it will meet the requirements of potential users. We recommend that dedicated, accessible space be found at the station to provide a private quiet / sensory space away from the central concourse.

Interim measures

Intac recognises that a major infrastructure project such as Grand Central cannot be realised without any disruption and that it is unrealistic to expect that Deaf, disabled people and older people can be completely shielded from the impact of this disruption, particularly when the rail line between Belfast and Lisburn was closed for an extended period. The Committee acknowledges and commends Translink for engaging with our members at every stage to try and minimise the disruption and responding quickly whenever issues arise.

One issue that does need to be addressed following experience and problems with the line closure is the accessibility of bus substitution services. During this period a significant number of vehicles were used that did not comply with Public Service Vehicle Accessibility Regulations (PSVAR). The Office for Road and Rail (ORR) has previously ruled that these services fall under PSVAR requirements, and, unlike GB, there is currently no exemption scheme for operators from these requirements. Operating vehicles without an accessibility certificate was and remains unlawful. Regardless of the circumstances, it is unacceptable in the opinion of the Committee to simply ignore the legal protections disabled people have fought long and hard for.

There were also issues during the initial line closures with the provision of audio and visual next stop announcements on trains. The provision of these announcements is a legal requirement and although issues were resolved for the full line closure, any future disruption or closure must plan to ensure that announcements are maintained at all times.

Currently external access to and from the station is far from ideal with walking routes difficult to and from Grand Central into the city centre. It is particularly concerning that the route via Grosvenor Road has already been improved but still is a difficult route for some disabled people because of sharp crossfalls on the footway. Changes have been made to ensure that Glengall Street is usable, but access remains far from ideal. It is also disappointing that the proposed “super crossing” across Great Victoria Street is less wide than the crossing it replaced. This crossing is

currently frequently obstructed by vehicles backed up in Great Victoria Street. If pedestrian safety and comfort is to be prioritised it is essential that these issues are resolved before completion of the project.

The difficulties of routes to and from into the city centre emphasise one consistent concern Imtac has expressed since the start of the project. For many disabled people the walking routes and distances involved in connecting to the City Centre and the wider Belfast public transport network are too great and indeed longer than some of previous arrangements. We repeat our previous recommendations that a bus service be provided from the hub to connect people to key locations in the city centre and the wider Belfast Metro and Glider network.

On further recommendation made by the Committee in 2017 relating to access to the wider city centre was linking Grand Central to local Shopmobility services. This would involve people accessing mobility scooters and other mobility equipment at the station to make their way into the city. Similarly, people could also use Shopmobility to travel to the station, leave equipment and access buses and trains for onward travel. As no progress has been made to date, we repeat our previous recommendation to develop partnerships with Shopmobility services in Belfast to improve access to and from the city centre from Grand Central.

The absence of drop and pick up facilities has received significant public attention. Despite the public perception Imtac had agreed with Translink alternative access for drop off and pick up for disabled people on Glengall Street. However, it took some time for this to be communicated by Translink to the public. Improving communication between different parts of Translink and the wider public is another of the key lessons to be learned from the project. To be completely fair to Translink, when issues have been raised, solutions have largely been found and changes made at speed.

The interim pick up and drop off / taxi arrangements do raise a significant issue around assistance available to passengers using the station. We have been informed by Translink that assistance from Translink staff is confined to the footprint of the new station. It is unclear whether the footprint extends to the pick up and drop off / taxi area on Glengall Street. Once complete, pick up and drop off and taxi ranks will fall within the footprint of the station and therefore disabled people and older people will be able to avail of assistance to use these.

For Imtac it is not acceptable that interim arrangements may not be in place to provide similar assistance to the current, temporary pick up and drop off / taxi facilities, particularly given the disruption to passengers created by current circumstances. This interim arrangement is the very definition of a reasonable adjustment and the Committee recommends it be introduced and communicated to users of the station.

Other issues

The Committee needs to raise one further matter in relation to Grand Central. It relates to the use of the station by the Hannon express coach service to Glasgow. It has been observed that some of the vehicles used to deliver these services do not meet PSVAR despite it being a legal requirement for all vehicles delivering services to do so for several years. An explanation is required as to why Hannon's are allowed to flout the law and why they have been rewarded for blatant discrimination by being allowed access to a state of the art, publicly funded, accessible and inclusive transport hub.

Conclusion

Grand Central is an impressive space with many features that provide exemplars of inclusive design and innovation. There are some features of the station that require tweaks and small changes to meet best practice. There are also a small number of examples of provision that disappoint that will need significant changes or alternative provision. Finally, there have been important lessons to be learned about engagement on all aspects of the design of station as well as improving communication in respect to both temporary arrangements as well as station facilities to ensure they are clear, appropriate, accessible and inclusive to all.

The Committee has to date commended Translink for making changes quickly when issues arise throughout the project, and we hope a similar approach will be maintained both in the implementation of recommendations of this report and through the delivery of remainder of the project.

Appendix A – Lift provision at London Bridge Station & Grand Central



The image above shows lift provision at London Bridge Station. The potential barriers created by use of chrome and glass are mitigated by using white glass surrounding doors and controls, ensuring passengers can identify these more easily. Signage above the lift further assists passengers identify entrance to the lift.



This image above from Grand Central illustrates how the predominant use of glass and chrome makes identification of the lift doors and controls more difficult for some passengers. Visibility strips, using white dots have been provided but do little to help differentiate between doors and the surrounding areas. Signage above lift doors could help make these entrances more identifiable.