



Comments and advice from Imtac about potential public realm improvements for parts of the Linen Quarter

(December 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).

Introduction

Imtac has been approached by the Department for Communities (DfC) to examine current public provision in streets that form part of the Linen Quarter in Belfast City Centre, identify current barriers and provide advice and recommendations for improvements. The streets covered by this report are Amelia Street, Brunswick Street, Blackstaff Square, McClintock Street, Clarence Street West, and the parts of James Street South and Franklin Street west of Bedford Street.

These streets have strategic importance as they will provide the gateway to the Linen Quarter from the new Grand Central Station when it opens in late 2024. They currently have mixed uses including office space and a significant element of hospitality businesses. The area also contains a rare example in Belfast of a square offering a traffic free public space in the centre of the city. The area also contains the largest and most significant temporary street intervention trialled during COVID 19 in the form of Flax, a space reallocated from previous road and parking spaces now used for seating and events.

How this report was compiled

This report is based on a site visit to the streets mentioned above. The site visit has been used to audit current public realm provision, using current good practice in terms of public realm and inclusive design¹.

An assessment has been made taking account of current policy² around the provision of public realm in Belfast and across Northern Ireland generally.

¹ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-mobility-making-transport-accessible-for-passengers-and-pedestrians>

² See <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/planning-future-transport-time-change> and <https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/boldervision>

These policies promote prioritising space and streets for people rather than the movement of traffic.

The report concludes with an analysis of current issues and barriers with recommendations for appropriate improvements should a public realm scheme in the area be progressed.

Audit of current provision

Amelia Street

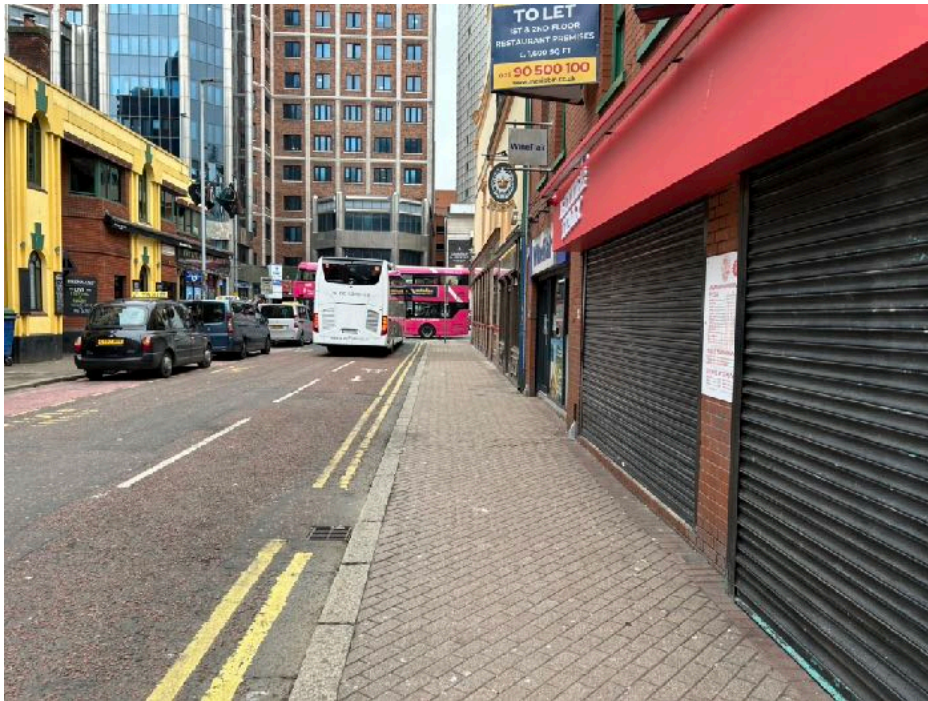
There is an uncontrolled crossing at the junction of Amelia Street with Great Victoria Street. Tactile paving is damaged and missing in places. The junction is exceptionally busy with evidence of heavy vehicles including coaches moving through Amelia Street.



There is a taxi rank on the southern side of Amelia Street. Tactile paving along each side of the street in this section appears to have no apparent purpose and could be confusing for people with a visual impairment.



The footway on both sides of the street is relatively narrow but largely uncluttered (but see below) on the day of the site visit.



There are controlled crossings at the junctions with Bains Place. The only purpose of this street appears to be the servicing of businesses and access to private parking.



The footway on the southern side of Amelia Street continues with some evidence of obstruction caused by A Boards. There is also a number of on street parking bays in this location with evidence of Blue Badge usage.



The Northern footway of Amelia Street merges with the infrastructure of Blackstaff Square.



Blackstaff Square

Blackstaff Square is a mainly hard surfaced public space softened slightly by street trees. The Square is littered with a series of unrelated interventions including a Belfast Bikes station, pavement cafés and street games. The presence of numerous bollards as well as the aforementioned clutter makes this an extremely challenging place for some disabled people to navigate.



The junction of Amelia Street, Brunswick Street and Franklin Street is a raised table contiguous with the east boundary of the Square. Although tactile paving has been provided to indicate uncontrolled crossings the flush surface with the carriageway throughout this space makes finding the crossing points extremely challenging for people with a visual impairment and the junction design is dangerous and confusing for these users.



Brunswick Street

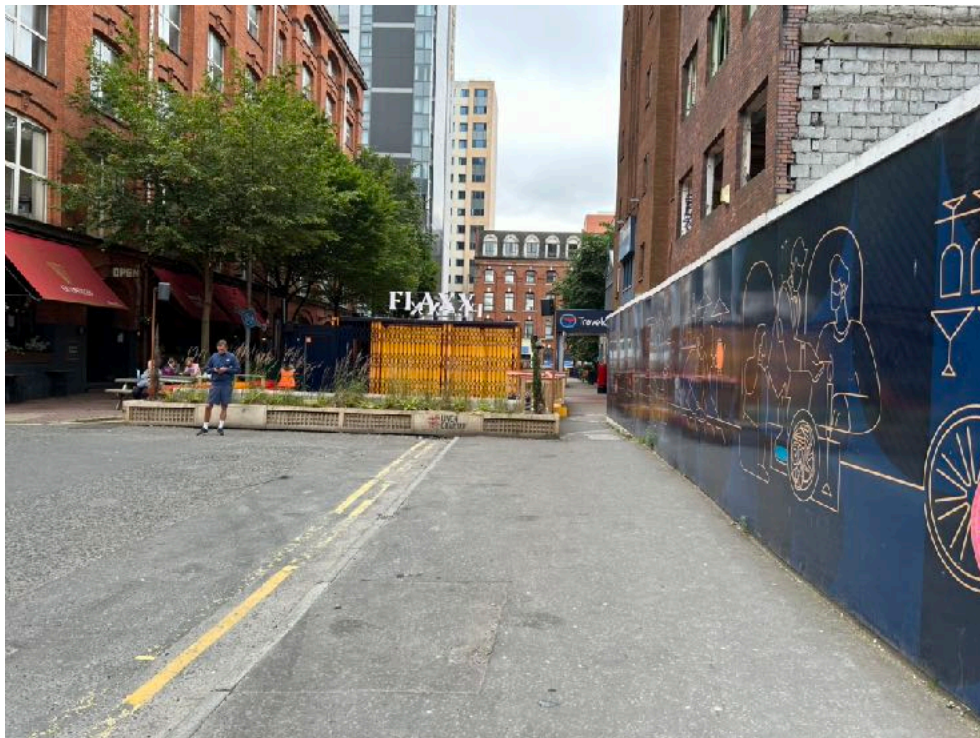
The section of Brunswick Street between Franklin Street and James Street South has been closed to traffic to accommodate the Flax installation with seating and events space designed to encourage people to dwell. Some efforts have been made to ensure step free access is provided to Flax.



Despite the availability of multiple seats as part of Flax, pavement café furniture restricts pavement widths along the eastern footway of Brunswick Street alongside Flax.



Flax has also narrowed the footway in locations along the western side of Brunswick Street.



The western and eastern footways on Brunswick St broaden out to the North of Flax. However, their condition is poor in places and dish drainage channels and vehicle entrances present potential hazards.



There is on street parking on this section of Brunswick Street with some evidence of Blue Badge usage.



Tactile paving at crossings at the junctions with Howard Street and James Street South is loose in places (see image above).

James Street South

Footways on either side of James Street South are narrow but relatively uncluttered.



On street parking is provided on both sides of the street with some evidence of Blue Badge usage.



Vehicle and servicing entrances cause potential hazards along the street.



Sections of the footway have been upgraded as part of the recent hotel development. Crossfalls on the footway along lengths of these sections are extremely challenging and uncomfortable for many people to use. It raises questions about how such provision can be approved.



There is an uncontrolled crossing at the junction of James Street South and Bedford Street. The tactile on the north side of the crossing installed as part of the recent hotel development does not contrast with the surrounding paving making it difficult for people with a visual impairment to identify the crossing.

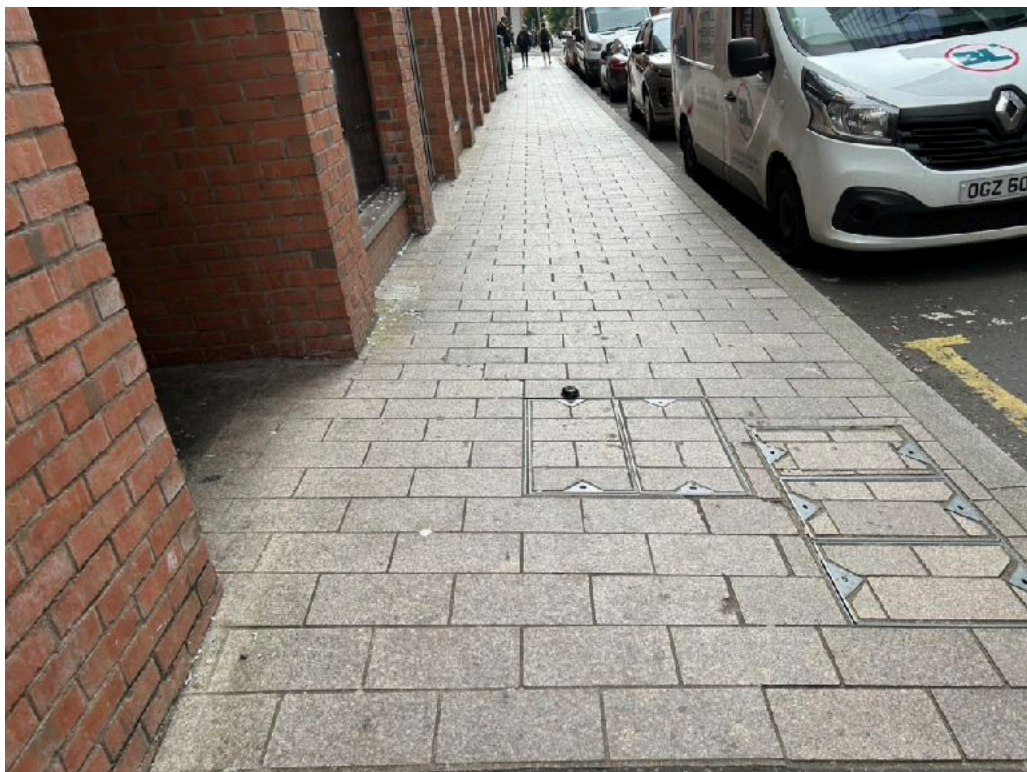


Franklin Street

There is a satisfactory uncontrolled crossing across the junction of Bedford Street and Franklin Street.



The northern footway of Franklin Street has been upgraded as part of the recent hotel development. As with James Street South the crossfall along sections of this upgrade are unacceptably pronounced.



There is an uncontrolled crossing across Franklin Street close to the junction of McClintock Street. This was obstructed on the day of the site visit and there was evidence of frequent parking by heavy vehicles on the tactile paving.



The rest of the northern footway towards Blackstaff Square is broad but bins cause obstructions in places.



The southern footway is relatively broad but obstructed in places by street furniture.



The uncontrolled crossing across the junction with McClintock Street fails to provide the required step free access. Damage to tactile paving indicates frequent mounting of the footway by heavy vehicles.



There is on street parking on both side of Franklin Street with some evidence of blue badge usage.



McClintock Street

Ongoing building work is restricting access to the eastern footway of McClintock Street.



The western footway is relatively wide and uncluttered. Vehicle / servicing entrances to university halls of residence present potential hazards.



There is a A board obstructing the footway.



The entrance to the BBC studio at the junction of McClintock Street and Clarence Street West is potentially confusing, prioritising vehicle over pedestrians.



There is on street parking on both sides of McClintock Street with some evidence of Blue Badge usage.



Clarence Street West

The northern footway of Clarence Street West is broad and uncluttered.



The southern footway is interrupted by car park entrances. There is no step free route along this section of footway.



Beer barrels create further obstructions on the southern footway.



There is an uncontrolled crossing at the junction of Clarence Street West and Bedford Street. The tactile paving is damaged and does not provide the required contrast with the surrounding footway.



Assessment of current issues

The key issue for the area is the dominance of traffic and cars. Vehicle movement, including heavy vehicles, is constant. There is a significant amount of on street parking which is clearly generating additional traffic as people search for spaces. Some of this traffic is generated by disabled people as evidenced by Blue Badge usage on all the streets with on-street car parking. The dominance of cars and other vehicles has a major detrimental impact on other users of streets including people walking, wheeling and cycling.

Common issues that impact on the public realm in other locations inspected by Imtac are also significant features observed in this section of the Linen Quarter. Footways on all streets are generally narrow and in poor condition in several locations. Crossings are in poor condition across the area with damage to tactile paving common emphasising the lack of priority given to pedestrians. Some crossings and vehicle entrances across footways are dangerous or do not provide basic step free routes. Clutter and obstructions are an issue on most streets with A Boards, pavement cafes, street furniture and on occasions vehicles providing potential hazards.

It is particularly disappointing that recent public realm works undertaken associated with a hotel development have left footways with unacceptable crossfalls. Public realm improvements should never leave footways less accessible than before works are undertaken.

The area has a rare example of a traffic free square in the city centre. However, Blackstaff Square has little or no identity and has been rendered an accessibility nightmare by a series of ad hoc initiatives and additions. In its current format the Square is inaccessible and unattractive with little or no incentive for people to dwell there.

The raised table at the junction of Amelia Street, Franklin Street and Brunswick Street is problematic as it creates a space that is confusing and potentially dangerous for people with a visual impairment. With no delineation between footway and carriageway and limited tactile paving provision, people who are blind or partially sighted are in danger of walking into traffic without being aware. Imtac is aware that people with a visual impairment avoid these streets because of the design of the junction and the extensive clutter on Blackstaff Square.

The Flax has provided an opportunity to reallocate roads space from traffic to people. In this regard it should be viewed as successful in that taking part of the carriageway from vehicles has been achieved without significant disruption. Whether the Flax has been successful in providing an inclusive space where people want to spend time is a moot point. It is disappointing

that despite the significant additional space provided for hospitality, footways adjacent to Flax remain littered with unscreened tables and chairs.

Amelia Street and surrounding streets represent the gateway to the Linen Quarter from the new Grand Central Station. The streets currently experience usage by large numbers of people walking and wheeling. These numbers are expected to increase in the years to come following the full opening of the new station later this year. Currently the streets give insufficient priority to people walking, wheeling and cycling and present specific and serious accessibility issues for disabled people and older people. A radical rethink of how road space is used and how road users are prioritised is required as part of any public realm scheme.

Recommendations for improvement

As currently configured the streets covered by this report prioritise vehicles at the expense of people walking, wheeling or cycling. A key outcome of any changes to these streets is to reverse current priorities, radically reducing the impact of vehicles whilst enhancing provision for pedestrians and cyclists.

For Imtac this could be achieved in several ways including:

- Reducing on-street car parking spaces and reallocating space to extended footways and cycle lanes (but note later recommendation re accessible parking)
- Reducing vehicle access to certain streets with access for servicing only
- Restricting access to some streets to one way only freeing up carriageway space for prioritising sustainable journeys
- Prioritising people walking and wheeling at junctions and crossings

Particular attention should be given to the reconfiguration of the area around Amelia Street and Blackstaff Square including the junction with Franklin Street. Given this will be a key pedestrian route from Belfast Grand Central Station, Imtac believes there may be a case for this area to be pedestrianised, with restricted access for service vehicles only. Significant work is required to reconfigure Blackstaff Square itself to make it an inclusive and accessible place where people want to dwell.

Reconfiguration of the Square should also prioritise creating inclusive space for hospitality, that enables everyone to enjoy café culture whilst not restricting people walking and wheeling through the area.

Footways and crossings across the streets covered by this report would all benefit from improved surfaces. Remediating the harsh crossfalls on Franklin Street and James Street South is a much-needed improvement essential for comfortable use by all pedestrians.

Whilst Imtac is advocating the removal of some on-street parking, current Blue Badge usage indicates a demand for accessible parking in the area. Designs for the scheme should include provision of accessible parking.

The reconfiguration of Amelia Street could also result in the removal of an existing taxi rank. Consideration should be given to relocation of the rank to another location as the entrance to the Transport Hub is no longer on Gt Victoria Street.

Designs should include wider improvements to enhance the accessibility of the area including enhanced lighting, a mix of inclusive and accessible seating and the provision of cycle parking including provision for people who use accessible and non-standard cycles. Where provided, cycle lanes should

be segregated from vehicles and pedestrians and meet inclusive design standards to ensure easy access for all cyclists.