



**Assessing impact of investment in public realm schemes –
Report on revisits to completed schemes**

March 2023

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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 has been a stakeholder in the development of several public realm schemes across Northern Ireland. This paper is an assessment by the Committee of the impact of investment in making places more inclusive and accessible.

How we have made the assessment

To inform our input into the development of any public realm scheme Imtac routinely undertakes a street audit of areas covered by proposed schemes to identify potential issues and required improvements. The first part of assessing the impact of investment in public realm schemes is to revisit a number of these street audits and identify which issues have been addressed and what improvements have been made.

A further assessment has been made of schemes based on the four broad principles set out in Imtac's paper "A New Approach to travel, our streets and our places¹". The four principles are:

1. Putting Deaf people, disabled people, and older people at the centre of every stage of decision making
2. Ensuring a shift in our cultures
3. Ensuring public and private investment contributes to an accessible and inclusive society
4. Ensuring end to end journeys are straightforward and accessible

Locations

Three locations have been chosen where Imtac has previously undertaken a street audit and produced a report with recommendations. In each of the locations works have for the most part been completed.

The locations are:

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

- Portrush² public realm scheme part of an Executive backed £17 million regeneration scheme for the town
- Enniskillen³ public realm scheme, a £5.25 million Department for Communities (DfC) and council backed scheme
- Dromore⁴ public realm scheme, a £1.4 million DfC and council backed scheme

A follow up site visit was undertaken to each location between September and November 2022 to audit and assess the improvements. As with the previous reports pictures have been used to illustrate what has improved in each location as well as issues that remain.

² <https://www.imtac.org.uk/portrush-walking-audit-report>

³ <https://www.imtac.org.uk/comments-imtac-about-public-realm-proposals-enniskillen-town-centre>

⁴ <https://www.imtac.org.uk/recommendations-imtac-public-realm-proposals-dromore-town-centre>

Review of street audits

What has improved

Improved footway / crossing conditions

The original street audits in all three locations identified examples of poor footway or crossing conditions including uneven / damaged surfaces and tactile paving. There is little question that the investment in public realm has largely addressed these issues in each of the three locations.



Images above show before and after photographs of the junction of Dunluce Avenue and Eglington Lane in Portrush town centre. The damaged footway surface and drainage channel have been replaced with tactile paving across the uncontrolled crossing.



Images on the previous page show before and after photographs of the southern footway of Townhall Street in Enniskillen town centre. Poor surfacing including dish drainage channels across the footway has been replaced. A build out has been added to improve sight lines and provide additional space at an uncontrolled crossing across the street.



Images above show before and after photographs of the northern side of Market Square in Dromore town centre. Poor surfaces including old vehicle entrances have been replaced with a smooth, continuous surface.

Improved the provision of crossings

The initial street audits identified many examples of inadequate crossings in the three locations. In some cases, this involved poorly designed crossings or in others the absence of basic crossing infrastructure including dropped kerbs and tactile paving. In each location the accessibility and usability of crossings has been significantly improved. In Enniskillen, for example, new controlled crossings have been installed in key locations, replacing inadequate uncontrolled crossings.



Images above show before and after photographs of crossings at the junctions of Eglinton Street and Causeway Street in Portrush town centre. Previous uncontrolled crossings via a traffic island have been replaced with a single controlled crossing.



Images above show before and after photographs of the two crossings at the busy junction around Queen Elizabeth Road and East Bridge Street in Enniskillen town centre. Fully controlled crossings have replaced a zebra crossing across Queen Elizabeth Road and an uncontrolled crossing across East Bridge Street.



Images above show before and after photographs across the southern section of Market Square in Dromore town centre at the junction with Lower Mount Street. An uncontrolled crossing has been created where previously there was none including the removal of some on street parking which obstructed access to the southern footway.



Images above show before and after photographs of uncontrolled crossing provision in Enniskillen town centre. Previously pedestrians had to cross between parked cars, now crossings have been built out to improve comfort and sight lines.

Improved parking and public transport access

Although accessible parking was available in each of locations before the schemes, there were issues with the number of bays provided and their design (including a lack of dropped kerb access to and from the footway). Accessible parking has been improved in each location as a direct result of the scheme, although access to dropped kerbs remains an issue.



Images above shows on street accessible parking close to the Diamond in Enniskillen and on Main Street in Portrush. A dedicated dropped kerb is provided in Enniskillen. In Portrush two accessible bays are provided either side of a dropped kerb associated with an uncontrolled crossing.

At the time of the original audit there were issues with access to bus stops in two locations. The issues were particularly acute in Dromore where there was no access to the kerb at the Newry bound bus stop on the Square. As a result of the public realm works a bus boarding build out has been provided, ensuring appropriate access for bus users. Minimal improvements have been made to the bus stop in Enniskillen.



Images on the previous page show before and after photographs of the southern side of Market Square in Dromore town centre. A footway build out has been provided instead of on street parking which allows buses and coaches access to a kerb and footway.

Improved access at difficult locations

Each of the three schemes included locations with significant access challenges, where constraints meant that standard solutions were not possible. At each location although not all the access issues have been addressed, the changes made have significantly improved the accessibility of the area compared with previous provision.



Images above show before and after photographs of the stepped and ramp access between Bath Terrace, Bath Street and Bath Road in Portrush town centre. Ramp gradients have been significantly reduced with enhanced provision of handrails. New steps include corduroy tactile paving.



Images above show before and after photographs of The Diamond area in Enniskillen town centre. The area is a shared surface with no level difference between footway and carriageway. Previously delineation was provided using bollards and a dish drainage channel. This has been upgraded to blister tactile paving along the length of the shared area and replacement bollards.



Images above show before and after photographs of Bridge Street in Dromore town centre. Previously this was a shared surface street with no footways. The street now has a kerbed (albeit narrow) footway on the eastern side which continues along the length of Bridge Street. A very narrow footway on the western side stops after a short distance.

Improved pedestrian amenity

Each of the three locations originally had issues with street clutter created by poor location of furniture and signage and a lack of seating. Each of the schemes have resulted in improvements such as rationalising / removing unnecessary street furniture and the provision of additional seating. The use of large planters on the narrow footways in Dromore is, however, an example of creating additional clutter on footways.



Images above show new seating in Portrush and Enniskillen town centres.



Image above shows the large planters and cycle stand used on the already narrow footways around Market Square, Dromore.

What has not improved

Footway width

The three original audits identified narrow footways as an issue in each location with opportunities identified to extend widths in places at the expense of a small number of on-street car parking spaces. In the majority of locations opportunities to extend footway widths have been rejected in favour of retaining on-street car parking.



Images above show examples of narrow footways in Dromore and Enniskillen town centres where on street parking is prioritised over space for pedestrians.

Street clutter

During the each of three original audits street clutter such as outdoor seating, A Boards and shop displays created unacceptable narrowing and potential hazards on the footways. Despite the wider improvements created in each of the locations and some attempts to minimise its impact, this type of clutter remains a persistent problem which must be addressed to gain full benefit from the schemes.



Images show pavement clutter in Portrush and Enniskillen town centres including large A Boards and shop displays on the upgraded footway.

New Approach Assessment

Imtac published its New Approach paper in summer 2022. The paper is a response to the challenges created by the pandemic, climate change and the current cost of living crisis. It sets out changes in approach in four key areas the Committee views as essential if investment is to maximise opportunities to make travel, streets, and places accessible and inclusive. We have assessed how the three public realm schemes have met the four key principles set out in New Approach.

Putting Deaf people, disabled people, and older people at the centre of every stage of decision making

Each of the schemes covered in this paper involved Deaf people, disabled people, and older people from an early stage. This included Imtac, other organisations and individuals from the local communities. From this perspective the schemes represent good practice being applied in respect of engagement and consultation and provide a model that should be adopted with all future public realm schemes.

Ensuring a shift in our cultures

Whilst there was a genuine attempt by designers to maximise the opportunities to make each location more accessible and inclusive in line with “New Approach”, there was failure in all schemes to address the priority given to private vehicles and to promote a sustainable transport hierarchy and active travel as set out in both New Approach and the Department’s Time for Change⁵.

As previously indicated this failure is illustrated by the prioritisation of existing on-street parking instead of extending footway widths to create space for people. A further consequence of prioritising parking is the restricting of space available for café culture in the towns, resulting in the current conflict between businesses and pedestrians.

The continued dominance of parking and traffic in each of locations means none of the schemes have provided any cycling infrastructure other than some limited cycle parking. Although limited changes have been made to

⁵ <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/planning-future-transport-time-change>

improve access to public transport, this access is still less of a priority than access for private vehicles.

The ubiquitous presence of A Boards in each of the locations demonstrates, in the opinion of Imtac, a culture where people are not a priority in places. The tolerance of A Boards also reduces the impact of the significant investment in public realm.

Ensuring public and private investment contributes to an accessible and inclusive society

Whilst work on the pedestrian environment has largely been completed to the best current standards, the priority given to private vehicles places limitations on the wider placemaking benefits the investment in public realm should bring to towns and cities. Some of the opportunities missed to maximise this investment include:

- Using existing on-street car parking to widen footways, creating additional space for people and appropriate café culture
- Reallocating road space to provide cycle infrastructure
- Prioritising high quality public transport facilities
- Prioritising enhanced accessible parking including larger WAV spaces
- Providing inclusive public toilets including Changing Places toilets
- Providing inclusive public spaces including play facilities accessible to disabled and non-disabled children

The Committee recognises that some of these suggested changes will require a change to the remit and specifications for future public realm schemes.

Ensuring end to end journeys are straightforward and accessible

The investment in public realm schemes has undoubtedly improved the experience for people walking and wheeling in each of the three locations. There appears, however, to have been limited consideration of how the schemes can reduce car / vehicle dominance and encourage connectivity by

other modes. Some of the measures which could have been considered include:

- A parking strategy which maximises the use of off-street parking and reduces reliance on on-street parking
- Measures such as the provision or enhancement of Shopmobility schemes to make the using pedestrian infrastructure easier for everyone
- A plan to promote inclusive cycling as a mode of travel including the provision of dedicated cycling infrastructure
- Measures that enhance connectivity from the public realm improvements to public transport and other shared passenger transport services including community transport and taxis

Conclusion and recommendations

Imtac's assessment in this paper of the impact of recent investment in public realm schemes as demonstrated by projects three locations across Northern Ireland shows it is possible to deliver significant improvements to towns and cities including improvements the pedestrian environment. However, as we have also identified these improvements are limited by the continued priority given to private vehicles in each of the locations without adequately addressing the priority for pedestrians, cyclists and other sustainable transport users. In order to maximise the benefits of investment in future schemes and to meet the likely requirements of a just transition to Net Zero, the Committee recommends the following as conditions of funding:

- Schemes must be required to develop a plan to reduce car / private vehicle dominance in towns and city centres, recognising the need to provide enhanced accessible parking and supporting active travel.
- Schemes must be required to develop or contribute to a plan to improve access to towns and cities by sustainable modes including inclusive cycle infrastructure and improved connectivity for public transport and other shared transport.
- Schemes must be required to adopt a wider placemaking remit focusing on providing places with facilities that are accessible and inclusive to everyone. This widened remit should include the provision of or access to inclusive and accessible public toilets and the provision of inclusive and accessible play for children.

Our final recommendation is an immediate ban on the use of A Boards in footways across Northern Ireland. Based on the experiences of places such as Edinburgh, DfC and Councils should explore how alternatives, such as hanging signs above premises, could replace A Boards, providing a solution that enhances rather than detracts from the investment in schemes as well as contributing to road safety by eliminating the visual obstruction caused by them at vehicular accesses and junctions.