



Comments from Imtac about proposals to improve public realm in Strabane

(March 2025)

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Michael Lorimer
Imtac
Titanic Suites
55-59 Adelaide Street
Belfast BT2 8FE

Telephone/Textphone: 028 9072 6020
Email: info@imtac.org.uk

Website: www.imtac.org.uk
Twitter: @ImtacNI

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 Derry City & Strabane District Council to provide input into a proposal for a scheme to improve the public realm in Strabane. The scheme is at an early stage with planning permission being sought with much of the design detail for the scheme still to be decided.

How we developed this report

To inform this report a representative from Imtac met with a Council Official to discuss the extent of the proposals. This meeting was followed up with a site visit to the town to review the existing public realm provision in the town. In reviewing the provision 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 into account 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
- Ensuring public and private investment contributes to an accessible and inclusive society

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

- 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 projected scheme will encompass a significant area, with proposed improvements to Railway Street, Abercorn Square, Market Street, Castle Street and parts of Main Street, Bridge Street, Dock Street, Canal Street, Derry Road and Patrick Street. The scheme follows on and builds on a previous public realm scheme completed in the town involving parts of Main Street, Bridge Street and Castle Place. In discussions with Council officials, our feedback on the previous scheme included issues with the slippiness of the natural stone paving used particularly when wet or icy.

Key issues and challenges

The proposed public realm scheme in Strabane is significant, and the street layout is complex in places and presents significant design challenges. This section of the report seeks to identify the challenges and issues in the town.

Topography

Although many of the streets within the scheme are relatively flat, there are streets where the topography of the street creates significant issues due to steep gradients. This applies particularly to Derry Road and Patrick Street. Derry Road currently has a set of steps leading to a steep western footway, meaning step free access is only available on the eastern footway. The gradient of the eastern footway is also steep with the provision of handrails, an illustration of the potential hazard this presents to pedestrians.

There are other areas of the town where similar problems exist with footway gradients, including Bridge Street at its junction with Main Street. This creates problems with using natural stone which becomes slippery when wet or icy. This is illustrated by changes made to the previously completed public realm scheme on Main Street at its junction with Bridge Street.

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

Footway condition and width

The condition of the footways on the streets covered by the scheme is poor in many places, with uneven surfaces common. Broken tactile paving is an issue in places, indicating issues with vehicles mounting the pavement.

Improving footway conditions must be a priority for the scheme.

Footway width, although ample in some locations, is an issue in other locations, particularly on side streets. Where it is an issue of main streets this is largely due to the impact of an irregular building line and the inappropriate placement of street furniture.

Street clutter

Street clutter is a frequently occurring obstruction on all the streets. Examples of clutter includes A Boards, pavement cafés and vehicles parked on the footway. There are particular issues with the placement of some street furniture including signage poles and bins and the random placement of large commercial bins in particular creating hazards in many locations. Obstructions on the footway create potential hazards for some disabled people.

Vehicle and building entrances

Many of the buildings along the streets covered by the scheme contain active vehicle entrances. The issues are particularly acute on Railway Street. At some points along the street the layout of the footway is confusing, with distinguishing the footway from the carriageway difficult for some users.

There are also issues with the building line in several locations with steps into buildings creating potential hazards in a number of locations. The design of the steps into the Theatre and Library on Railway Streets is particularly problematic as they extend into the footway with the lack of appropriate tactile warning paving representing a potential hazard for people with a visual impairment.

Impact of traffic / complexity of junctions

Vehicles dominate the town centre with both moving traffic and parked vehicles prioritized over other users. There is provision of both controlled and uncontrolled crossings across the town centre, generally meeting design standards but crossing streets, particularly where there are no controlled crossings is challenging for some pedestrians.

The complex design of some junctions in the town accentuates the issues with car dominance, making crossing streets more difficult. This includes the junction between Patrick Street and Derry Street, the junction between Market Street, Butcher Street and Church Street and part of the southern side of Main Street which includes a significant area of on street parking.

Accessibility of bus infrastructure

There are several bus stops located in the streets earmarked for improvements. The current configuration of these stops does not maximise accessibility to vehicles, particularly given the use of high floor coaches with passenger lifts to deliver services, there is insufficient space to enable the deployment of lifts.

Provision for cyclists

Provision for cyclists in the town centre streets covered by the scheme is limited to a small number of Sheffield type stands.

Linkages to car parks and on street parking

There are a significant number of off-street car parks accessed from the streets covered by the scheme including several close to key amenities which were underutilized on the day of the site visit. Linkages for people walking and wheeling to and from these car parks are generally unattractive but also challenging in places for anyone with mobility difficulties due to the current poor design of footways.

There is significant provision of on-street parking on the streets covered by the scheme. This includes several accessible parking bays. A lack of drop kerb provision at bays limits the accessibility of these bays.

Public toilet provision

There are public toilets provided close to the large car park on Market Street. These include an accessible toilet. Pedestrian routes to and from the toilets are challenging for some users.

Castle Street area

Castle Street and the surrounding area provides an opportunity to provide a genuine public traffic free public space. However, currently there is vehicle access through the street, as well as pavement cafés and other street clutter. This area is in effect a shared space street, unwelcoming and potentially hazardous for some disabled pedestrians.

There is a traffic-free part of this area. It is, however, tired and uninviting. Not somewhere, currently, where anyone would choose to dwell.

Recommendations

The proposed scheme must improve and upgrade the condition of footways and crossings across the streets. Where possible narrow footways should be widened. Strong contrasting materials should be used to differentiate between tactile paving and the surrounding pavement surfaces.

Significant thought needs to be given to the footway surfacing on the streets on the town centre where there are steep gradients and crossfalls. The use of large natural stone sets is likely to exacerbate existing issues caused by the gradients and could lead to increased slips and falls.

Footway clutter is a commonly recurrent issue on the streets covered by the scheme. The scheme's design must rationalize the existing street furniture ensuring that provision of bins, seating and signage does not restrict pavement widths below inclusive and accessible standards.

Seating is a key part of an accessible and inclusive public realm. The town already has good provision of seating, although the positioning and design of some of the seating could be improved. The final design of the scheme must include a mix of different types of seating.

The final design must also address the issues created by the poor design of steps at the Theatre / Library in the town centre. An appropriate corduroy tactile warning surface at the bottom of the steps must be part of the final design.

The biggest design challenge for the scheme will be the area around Castle Street. There is an opportunity to provide an attractive, inclusive and accessible public space in the town centre where people will want to spend time. The current provision is uninspiring and inaccessible. The current shared space on Castle Street is not a design that Imtac supports³ and we strongly recommend that the Council look at options where people walking and wheeling do not have to share space with vehicles.

Even with the improvements outlined above, many of the issues identified by this report will not be addressed by upgrading the existing footways and improving the Castle Street area. These changes will 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

³ <https://www.imtac.org.uk/revised-statement-shared-space>

vehicles to people walking, wheeling and cycling. As part of the overall process of improving Strabane as a place for people, Imtac recommends that consideration be given to the following actions as part of the development of final designs and the overall management of public realm in the town:

1. A review of parking in the town with a view to:
 - A. Improving linkages to off street parking to maximise usage and reduce reliance on on-street parking,
 - B. 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 larger wheelchair accessible vehicles (WAVs) and charging infrastructure for electric vehicles designed to PAS 1899 standards⁴),
 - C. Developing options to tackle problems created by pavement parking and
 - D. Developing and implementing proposals to manage and reduce the impact of delivery vehicles on the main streets in the town centre.
2. The reallocation of current roads space to provide more available space for people including widened footways or parklets and improved crossing opportunities.
3. Stricter licensing of pavement cafes in the town centre with effective enforcement..
4. A ban on A Boards on footways in the town centre.
5. Better management of commercial bin storage and collection in the town centre, ensuring the bins are neither permanent nor temporary obstructions to footways.
6. Improving the provision of bus infrastructure across the town centre.
7. The provision of inclusive cycling infrastructure accessible to users of standard and non-standard or accessible cycles.

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⁴ <https://www.bsigroup.com/en-GB/insights-and-media/insights/brochures/pas-1899-electric-vehicles-accessible-charging-specification/>

8. Improving public toilet provision including the provision of a Changing Places Toilet and providing improved pedestrian linkages to the public toilets.
9. Provide for children in the final designs for the town centre including accessible and inclusive play facilities.