

Accessibility of Belfast City Centre – Imtac Briefing Paper

(November 2026)

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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 has developed this briefing paper for public representatives and council and other officials involved in policy making around future access arrangements for Belfast City Centre. It has been developed in response to the recent hosting of the Fleadh in Belfast City Centre and the subsequent calls for extending current pedestrianised areas. The paper is designed to be a constructive contribution designed to inform and improve the hosting of future events including next year's Fleadh and wider policy proposals including the Eastern Transport Plan aimed at making the City Centre more people focused.

The Fleadh

The Committee believe the Fleadh was a major positive for Belfast. It attracted large crowds, including many Disabled people, and rightly created a desire to make the City Centre more people focused in the future. While the Fleadh was undoubtedly a tremendous cultural and economic success for Belfast, the experience was unfortunately very different for some members of the disabled community. Changes to public transport, access routes and the wider city centre environment created significant barriers, effectively excluding some Disabled people from areas and activities that should have been accessible to everyone.

Issues included:

- Removal of parking opportunities[1] in the City Centre with inaccessible alternatives offered too far from the core areas
- There was widespread disruption to bus and rail services during the Fleadh. Changes were made to where bus and trains departed / terminated often at short notice during the week of the Fleadh. For some Disabled people this disrupted established routines causing genuine distress. For others it meant being dropped in unfamiliar locations, often a considerable distance from where they wanted to be.
- Inadequate dedicated shuttle and Park and Ride bus services with inaccessible surfacing at sites and destination stops too far from the core areas of the City Centre
- Inadequate temporary arrangements for taxi and other drop off and pick up services with the provided dedicated locations too far from the core areas of the City Centre
- The expansion of business premises and other activities onto pavements, blocking dropped kerbs and crossings which has continued in places since the Fleadh finished.
- Wider issues with seating, rest areas, barriers and toilet provision during the event.
- A lack of clear and accessible communication about access changes to the city centre including the short notice changes that took place during the week of the Fleadh. Information provision was often too limited in terms of accessibility and the mediums used.

Insufficient access provision during the Fleadh had practical consequences for Disabled people. The barriers created by the arrangements were not mere inconveniences for Disabled people, they effectively removed our ability to access the city independently.

Our experience and expertise suggest that measures introduced to address accessibility were poorly considered, insufficient or failed to account for the practical realities faced by disabled people. We recognise that Belfast City Council has its own accessibility advisory arrangements. However, we have concerns that the consultation undertaken ahead of the Fleadh was not sufficiently comprehensive or

[1] Research undertaken by Imtac has shown that up to 200 Blue Badge holders park daily on these streets where parking was removed - https://www.imtac.org.uk/report-surveys-blue-badge-use-belfast-city-centre-undertaken-november-2025 .

effective in identifying and addressing the barriers that subsequently arose. We believe meaningful engagement with a wider spectrum of representative organisations such as Imtac could have helped prevent many of these difficulties.

Eastern Transport Plan proposals

The Fleadh has created a widespread and not unreasonable desire to extend current pedestrian areas in the City Centre. Imtac is aware the Eastern Transport Plan includes plans for greater pedestrianisation of Belfast City Centre. It is important to recognise that the footfall during the Fleadh is not typical for Belfast City centre even during peak shopping periods and a complete banning of vehicles from such a large area could be inappropriate and disproportionately impact on Disabled people.

We have no doubt that greater pedestrian priority for the City Centre is needed but we have major concerns about how proposals will ensure Disabled people and older people who currently rely on buses, private vehicles, taxis and other modes such as community transport will continue to access the City Centre on an equal basis to others in future.

Imtac believes pedestrianisation and accessibility are not competing objectives. Properly designed, pedestrianisation and greater pedestrian priority should improve accessibility for Disabled people, not create new barriers or exclude sections of our society. A simplistic approach focused on removing all traffic may benefit some but will inevitably exclude others. The Committee's preferred approach would be to remove unnecessary traffic from the city centre but maintain essential access for people for whom the walking distances involved in widespread pedestrianisation are prohibitive.

Recommendations

We believe Belfast has an opportunity to demonstrate how major cultural events, public realm improvements and pedestrianisation can be delivered in a way that genuinely includes everyone. Achieving that requires clear accountability, meaningful consultation, a willingness to learn from experience and a commitment to ensuring accessibility is built into decisions from the outset. We are making the following recommendations to support the realisation of this opportunity.

1. Imtac recommends that a formal review of the accessibility arrangements for this year's Fleadh be undertaken as a matter of urgency. Using the experiences of Disabled people the review should identify barriers encountered to accessing this year's event. Feedback from Disabled people and lessons from similar events should be used to develop practical improvements for the Fleadh 2027 and other future events.

2. In addition to the above recommendation, we recommend the Council appoint a senior council official to lead on accessibility matters for the Fleadh 2027. The official should have clear and agreed responsibilities including acting as a dedicated point of contact for Imtac and others before and during the 2027 event.

3. The Committee recommends that the Council procure the services of a suitably qualified Access Consultant to provide technical advice around accessibility for Fleadh 2027.

4. The Committee recommends that both Belfast City Council and the Department for infrastructure develop formal mechanisms for engagement and coproduction with Deaf and Disabled people both for planning the Fleadh 2027and planned consultation around the Eastern Transport Plan. Engagement must be meaningful, timely, inclusive and importantly deliver practical changes. Deaf and Disabled people should be involved in testing proposed arrangements for the Fleadh in 2027.

5. Linked to the above the Council and other stakeholders including DfI must demonstrate how proposals for the Fleadh 2027 and Eastern Transport Plan meet statutory equality duties. This includes undertaking appropriate equality screening exercises and where necessary producing Equality Impact Assessments.

6. Imtac recommends that lessons from other cities and events, both good and bad, be used to inform decisions about the Fleadh 2027 and future access to the City Centre.

7. The Committee recommends interim measures are introduced as soon as possible to better enforce current access restrictions to the City Centre, reducing unnecessary traffic on main streets and through existing pedestrianised areas.

Next steps

Easy access to Belfast City Centre, both for the Fleadh and at all other times ought to be accepted as a fundamental right for everyone. It appears to Imtac that Disabled people are being denied that right and are presented with a binary choice that a pedestrian friendly city centre is one we cannot access.

We want to work with key decision makers to help deliver a better Belfast, a city that is accessible to everyone. Fundamentally we want everyone to work together to deliver an attractive and thriving city centre that Disabled people can access, navigate and enjoy on an equal basis to others.