



**Recommendations from Imtac on public realm proposals for Portaferry town centre**

**(October 2019)**

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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 key transport professionals. Its role is to advise Government and others in Northern Ireland on issues that affect the mobility of older people and disabled people.

The aim of the Committee is to ensure that older people and disabled people have the same opportunities as everyone else to travel when and where they want.

Imtac receives support from the Department for Infrastructure (hereafter referred to as the Department).

## **About this report**

This report has been developed by Imtac in response to a consultation from Ards and North Down Borough Council about proposals for public realm improvements for a number of streets in Portaferry. To inform this report Imtac undertook an audit of the streets proposed for improvement in September 2019. This paper highlights the findings of the audit, identifies current issues and challenges on the streets concerned and includes key recommendations from the Committee designed to ensure future improvements benefit everyone including older people and disabled people.

## **Street audit findings**

The streets included in the public realm are Castle Street, Ferry Street, the Square, the Ropewalk and parts of High Street and Meeting House Street.

The street audit has identified a number of issues with current public realm provision on all the streets in the town centre including:

- Restrictions created by the historic built environment
- Restrictions created by the topography of the town
- Narrow footway widths throughout
- Poor footway conditions
- Clutter on footways
- A lack of accessible crossing opportunities
- Impact of parking and traffic levels
- Poor linkages to off street car parks
- Poor public transport facilities

Photographs have been used to illustrate the impact of each of the issues identified by the audit.

## *The Historic Built environment*

The historic nature of the streets in Portaferry creates multiple issues for pedestrians, and older people and disabled people in particular. On both Ferry Street and Castle Street there are large sections of the street with no footway. Sections of footway alternate between both sides of the road along both streets.



Where there are footways these are obstructed in places by the historic building lines including stepped access to buildings.



In places, historic features such as the cobbles on The Square and a weigh-bridge on Castle Street have been retained, directly impacting on the accessibility of the pedestrian environment.



### *Topography*

The topography of the site is challenging in places with steep gradients and cross falls on the footway.



## *Footway widths*

Where footways are provided on the streets in Portaferry, widths are generally narrow.



On sections of Ferry Street, Castle Street and Meeting House Street the footways are exceptionally narrow, accommodating pedestrians single file only and inaccessible in places for wheelchair users.



### *Footway condition*

Where present, footway are generally in poor condition and in need of an upgrade. The type of surfaces finish material is also an issue around the Ropewalks area.



There are a number of locations where the footway is in very poor condition.





### *Clutter on footways*

Clutter, such as shop displays, is a problem in a number of places in the town, further restricting what are already narrow footways.



### *Pedestrian crossings*

There are no safe, accessible step free crossing opportunities for pedestrians in a number of locations in the town including at Meeting Hall Street, on Ferry Street and on Castle Street.



Tactile paving is completely absent at all uncontrolled crossings in the areas of the proposed public realm, even where the kerb has been dropped.



### *Impact of parking and traffic*

Despite the narrow streets the town is heavily trafficked with on-street parking dominating the area covered by the public realm scheme.



There are a number of locations around The Square where the footway and carriageway are flush and cars park on the footway to access shops. Footway clutter adds to the access problems caused by parking.



### *Linkages to off-street car parks*

The scheme includes a number of off-street car parks close to the main streets on Meeting House Street and the Ropewalks. These car parks were under utilised on the day of the audit



Pedestrian routes to and from the car parks are not step free, making them inaccessible to many older people and disabled people.



There is a busy car park located in The Square including accessible parking bays. Accessibility to, from and around the car park is poor with an absence of dropped kerbs.



## *Public Transport facilities*

The main bus stop in the town is located beside the car park on the Square.



There is dropped kerb access to the stop from the eastern side only. With no safe and accessible crossing at the car park entrance some disabled people can only access the bus stop by traveling on the carriageway for a considerable distance.



## Comments on the design proposals

Aecom has developed design proposals for the scheme which go some way to addressing some of the issues identified by the street audit.

These include:

- Broadening footway widths where possible.
- Improving surfaces.
- Ensuring that for the most part there is footway provision along each street, even though this may mean crossing the road.
- Providing more frequent and accessible crossings with tactile paving throughout the streets in the area.
- Improving linkages to off-street car parks including step free access to the two car parks on Meeting House Street.
- Using a mix of materials including asphalt on the footways rather than natural stone in places, recognising the challenging topography of some of the streets.
- The creation of a public space on The Square with revised car parking arrangements.
- A relocated bus stop on the Square with much improved access.

Whilst the proposed changes are welcomed by Imtac as a considerable improvement, they will in essence only introduce basic levels of accessibility to the central streets in the town. There remain a number of locations, most notably on Ferry Street, where step free access is still difficult and where some disabled pedestrians may be forced to use the carriageway rather than the footway.

The Committee recognises that the challenging topography and historic built environment create much of the reason for ongoing access issues in the town. However some of the issues are also due to the desire to maintain a significant amount of on street parking in the town, prioritising the movement of traffic and vehicles over the basic needs of all pedestrians in the town. This has restricted, albeit to a limited extent, further changes that could have been made to broaden footways.

## Recommendations

Portaferry represents one of the most challenging environments to develop an inclusive town centre public realm in Northern Ireland. The topography and historic built environment creates streets which are narrow and so constrained that it is almost impossible to provide basic levels of footway provision. In developing the proposals Imtac recognises that Aecom has had to work within these constraints and has largely proposed the best solutions possible to improve the pedestrian environment.

However there do remain a number of issues within the town including basic accessibility for pedestrians on Ferry Street and potential hazards created by the retention of historic features including cobbled surfaces on The Square. The Committee recommends that other design solutions be sought for both these areas, improving access whilst minimising the impact of the historic built environment.

On a wider issue there is often a friction between the historic built environment and providing safe and accessible pedestrian infrastructure. Portaferry town centre exemplifies this friction and presents an opportunity to identify potential solutions. Imtac recommends the Council work with the Committee and other stakeholders such as DfI Roads and Historic Environment Division exploring how this scheme can better balance the need to preserve our built heritage whilst ensuring it is accessible to all.

Whilst there is little that can be done to change the topography of the town and the nature of the built environment, problems are currently exacerbated by traffic levels and extensive parking on the main streets. Car parks located a short distance away, meanwhile, appear to be underutilised. The Committee recognises that most businesses and residents in the town are opposed to reductions to parking on the main streets. However if the public realm scheme is to make the streets more accessible and attractive to visitors and local pedestrians it is vital that something is done to reduce the current impact of traffic in the town. The Committee recommends that consideration be given to introducing limited waiting or on-street car parking charges on the Square to encourage use of free off-street alternatives and/or reducing the level of car parking around the Square. The impact of both changes should be significantly reduced by the opening of a new off-street car park at the Spar development on the Square.

Connected to the above, the current and proposed level of accessible on-street parking on streets covered by the scheme is, in the opinion of Imtac, insufficient. The Committee recommends that consideration should be given to prioritising on-street parking for people who require access, increasing the

numbers of accessible bays for disabled people and designating loading bays for deliveries.

Finally given the narrowness of the footways in the town it is essential that action is taken to tackle street clutter. The Committee expects the public realm scheme only to include street furniture, including seating, bins and cycle parking, where space permits. Action is required to stop businesses from placing clutter on the footway including shop displays and A Boards on all streets. Consistent with comments on other public realm schemes Imtac recommends that agencies including the Council and DfI Roads work together to introduce a zero tolerance approach to A Boards similar to that recently introduced in Edinburgh. Any outdoor seating/pavement cafe must be licensed and meet clear access requirements.