



Improving access to Belfast City Centre for older people and disabled people

January 2012

Imtac is committed to making information about our work accessible. Details of how to obtain information in your preferred format are included on the next page.

Making our information accessible

As an organisation of and for disabled people and older people Imtac recognises that the way information is provided can be a barrier to accessing services and participation in public life. We are committed to providing information about our work in formats that best suit the needs of individuals.

All our documents are available in hard copy in 14pt type size as standard. We also provide word and pdf versions of our documents on our website – www.imtac.org.uk. In addition we will provide information in a range of other formats. These formats include:

- Large print
- Audio cassette or CD
- Daisy disc
- Braille
- Electronic copies on disc or via email in PDF or word
- Easy read
- information about our work in other languages

If you would like this publication in any of the formats listed above or if you have any other information requirements please contact:

Michael Lorimer
Imtac
Enterprise House
10-18 Adelaide Street
Belfast BT2 8FE

Telephone/Textphone: 028 9072 6020

Fax: 028 9024 5500

Email: info@imtac.org.uk

About Imtac

Imtac is a committee of disabled people and older people as well as others including key transport professionals. Our role is to advise Government and others in Northern Ireland on issues that affect the mobility of older people and disabled people.

Our aim 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 Regional Development.

Background to this paper

Imtac has been involved in the consultation around changes to Belfast City centre since the early design stages. From these early stages it was clear that emerging proposals for changes to public realm and traffic management had created a paradox in relation to the accessibility of the city to disabled people and older people.

Nobody can dispute that high quality public realm makes the city more attractive. Level surfaces, good seating, and better lighting all contribute to a more accessible environment for disabled people and older people. Reducing traffic levels also benefits the users of the city centre including older people and disabled people.

Despite the positives the design of the city centre has made access more difficult for some disabled people. This is largely due to increased walking distances¹ in the city centre created by the large pedestrian core, a problem accentuated by proposed restrictions to parking in the core of the city.

¹ Detailed information about the relationship between walking distances and the built environment is contained in “Inclusive Mobility – A Guide to Best Practice on Access to Pedestrian and Transport Infrastructure” published by the Department for Transport

The importance of walking distances was recognised by the design consultants for Streets Ahead. EDAW identified key access points in the core of the city centre where provision of specific facilities such as car parking would allow access to the pedestrian areas of the city within a 50 m walking distance². Subsequently an Access and Mobility Study for the city centre has been developed recommending exploring the potential to develop these and other locations into specific Mobility Hubs where disabled people could travel with ease in and out of the city and where facilities such as accessible toilets and Shopmobility services would be available.

The purpose of this paper is to look at how we can maximise access to the city centre so everyone, including disabled people and older people, can benefit from the improvements that have been made. To do this we have made an assessment of how easy it is and will be to access the city by different modes of travel, what could make this easier and whether dedicated Mobility Hubs are the best way to make things easier.

Our assessment

We have looked at how easy it is currently to access the city centre by car, public transport, taxi, and door2door transport. We have also looked at the provision of key services such as toilet provision and Shopmobility services. In making the assessment we have factored in proposed changes to traffic management envisaged by the recent consultation on Sustainable Transport Enabling Measures as well as the next phases of the Belfast Streets Ahead Project.

Access by car

Work undertaken by Imtac³ indicates there is strong demand for Blue Badge parking in all areas of Belfast City Centre. Currently there are significant parking opportunities on street in areas around the city centre.

² See “Belfast City Centre Public Realm – Stage D Sketch Scheme Design Report July 2006”

³ Imtac undertook parking surveys in Belfast City Centre in November 2010 looking specifically at Blue Badge usage

However Belfast on the Move proposals will reduce on-street parking opportunities in the city centre for disabled people and older people making it impossible to provide sufficient on-street provision to meet current levels of demand in the Mobility Hub locations suggested by ARUP. Both Victoria Square and Castle Court do offer good off-street parking but in other locations off-street parking does not meet the required standard of accessibility to be of practical use.

In our assessment it is impossible to develop a Mobility Hub that can meet the current demand for parking for Blue Badge parking at the key access locations in the City Centre although measures have been introduced to ensure some accessible parking is provided at each location.

It is likely that if and when Donegal Place is pedestrianised there will be further demands placed on limited parking opportunities for disabled people as there are currently around 20 parking opportunities in this location. In our assessment Phase 2 of Streets Ahead could significantly reduce access to the city centre by car for many disabled people and older people.

Access by public transport

Using public transport could provide many disabled people and older people with an alternative to using the car to access the city centre. To date there is only been simplistic assessments⁴ made of how easy it is for disabled people and older people to use public transport to access the city. Because most public transport here meets accessibility requirements and because buses serve the streets around the core the city centre it has been assumed that the potential already exists for this to happen.

This is an oversimplification of what is a complex issue. It assumes that disabled people will have no problems getting to the public transport in the first place. Equally important it ignores the design of public transport

⁴ Best illustrated by the assessment of public transport provision in the Access & Mobility Study (pages 39 and 40)

servicing Belfast City Centre. In simple terms it is extremely difficult to access all the key locations in the city centre using public transport due to the walking distances involved from where services terminate and the lack of opportunities to move easily between services. These fundamental structural issues make it impossible to provide to easy access to the key locations in the city centre using public transport. These problems are compounded by poor quality walking routes in streets around the core of the city centre.

It is our assessment that for the reasons outlined above public transport provides only limited access to the city centre for disabled people and older people.

Access by taxi

Evidence shows disabled people and older people use taxis more than others. The majority of these journeys are made using pre-booked private hire services. There is no indication from our assessment that access to this type of service to the city centre will change significantly in the future and that these services will continue to access the key locations in the City Centre. From our assessment there appears to be no need for additional taxi infrastructure to make the city centre more accessible.

Access using Door2door

Some disabled people and older people use dedicated door2door transport to access the city centre. Currently if passengers require the lift on vehicles to be used the service can only drop off and pick up in two locations in the city centre. In our assessment this clearly limits the locations in the city centre a disabled person using door2door can visit and does not allow access to the key locations identified by EDAW.

Access to Shopmobility services

Shopmobility services play a key role in making the city centre accessible. The services enable many older people and disabled people to stay longer and travel further in the city using a range of mobility aids. Given the restrictions around parking and public transport highlighted

above there is no ideal location in the city centre for Shopmobility services. Nor is it feasible or desirable to extend the services to each of the key access points in the city. In our assessment current provision of Shopmobility services is adequate in meeting the needs of a city the size of Belfast but access can be limited by availability of parking or lack of access for other transport services.

Toilet provision

Whilst there is limited public toilet provision in Belfast City centre there are significant numbers of retailers who provide accessible toilet facilities. In our assessment providing additional public toilet facilities in the city centre around the key access locations will be difficult and better use could be made of existing provision.

Promotion of facilities

Given the major changes in the city centre that have happened already and that are planned for the future it is essential that disabled people and older people can access information about facilities in the city. BCCM working with Disability Action and Shopmobility Belfast recently published an Access Guide for the city centre detailing facilities provided by shops and businesses in the city centre. In our assessment it is essential there is better information available to disabled people and older people about how to access the city centre and about facilities and services in the city centre.

Our conclusions

In assessing how easy it is for disabled people and older people to access the city centre one thing is clear. Current Blue Badge use for instance indicates that disabled people and older people are using the city centre in large numbers. This usage is spread across all areas of the city centre indicating that people are visiting different locations right across the area not specific locations. Maintaining this level of access in the future will be difficult given the changes envisaged by Belfast on the Move and Phase 2 of Streets Ahead.

Imtac does not believe that developing dedicated Mobility Hubs represent the best solution to maintaining access to all areas of the city centre. Instead Imtac believes there is merit in look at a series of measures that will maintain and enhance access to the key areas of the city centre identified by EDAW. This will ensure that disabled people and older people have the same opportunity as everyone else to access all areas of the city centre.

Measures should include:

- Enhanced enforcement of Blue Badge misuse to ensure that only genuine Blue Badge holders can use reduced on street parking opportunities
- The inclusion of accessible parking in the design and implementation of Phase 2 of Streets Ahead to compensate for the loss of parking opportunities in Donegall Place
- Integration of public transport services allowing disabled people and older people to move easily between services and access all areas of the city centre
- Accessible and safe walking routes and crossing in areas around the city centre outside the Streets Ahead project
- A safe location where door2door transport can drop off and pick up at each of the key access areas identified by EDAW
- Measures that enhance access to Shopmobility services in the city centre – such more accessible parking provision in Gresham Street, a parking discount scheme at Victoria Square and the permit parking scheme at Queen Street
- Better information about where to park, how to access the city centre by bus or train, Shopmobility services and toilet provision – a revised version of the recently published Belfast Access Guide offers an opportunity to do this

Imtac is keen to work with all the agencies involved in implementing the measures outlined above.