Belfast
A World Health Organization
Healthy City

Walking Belfast: Older People's Views

Report on developing a walkability assessment tool

October 2016

BELFAST HEALTHY CITIES

Our Vision

Our vision is to be a leader in creating a healthy, equitable and sustainable city.

Our Mission

Our mission is to promote health and well-being, provide inspiration and facilitate innovative collaborative action and good policies through:

• Leadership and learning from the WHO European Healthy Cities Network

• Supporting research, sharing evidence and building capacity

• Introducing and piloting innovative concepts and approaches

• Maximising partners impact on health and inequalities

Belfast Healthy Cities is a partnership organisation seeking to improve health and well-being, by identifying ways to tackle inequalities in health and create healthy urban environments. The organisation's key role is to fulfil the requirements of Belfast as a World Health Organization (WHO) Healthy City, and to act as the link between Belfast and WHO Europe. Within the city, the key roles for Belfast Healthy Cities are to facilitate intersectoral collaboration, to build capacity and share evidence on the social determinants that shape health, to share learning from the WHO Europe and the 100 member cities of the WHO European Healthy Cities Network, and introduce and test new concepts relevant to health and wellbeing. Key partners include Belfast City Council, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, Department of Health (DOH), Department for Infrastructure (DFI), Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), Public Health Agency (PHA), Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University.

Walking Belfast: Older People's Views
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was launched by

The Right Honourable, The Lord Mayor, Alderman Brian Kingston

to celebrate

WHO International Day of Older Persons on 1 October 2016

'Belfast was the first city in Northern Ireland to join the World Health Organization's Global Network of Age-friendly Cities. An age-friendly city is one in which organisations work together to make sure the quality of life for people is enhanced as they age. Seeking older people's views and engaging older people in decision making is valuable and essential to create an environment that supports all age groups.'

Foreword

Age-friendly cities is a key programme for Belfast as a WHO Healthy City and aims to create the conditions to support healthy and active ageing. Walkable environments are a core element of this, as a supportive environment enables people to remain active in their communities into advanced years. This, in turn, contributes to preventing isolation and also facilitates physical activity, both of which contribute to reducing need for residential care.

The World Health Organization (WHO) Checklist of Essential Features of Age-friendly Cities highlights areas to consider when creating an environment where older people continue to participate in social, economic, cultural, spiritual and civic affairs. The Checklist and a literature review provided the basis for a self-assessment tool developed by Belfast Healthy Cities. This report provides an overview of the age-friendly tool and presents findings from a series of pilot assessments undertaken with 200 older people across Belfast. Recommendations from this report outline key areas for action, including suggestions for how local government can involve older people in the design of their city.

Engagement with older people is important to ensure needs are understood and older people's knowledge and voice is recognised within city planning. This project demonstrates a way of engaging with older people to gain their opinions and use their experience and knowledge to progress the city towards its goal as an age-friendly city.

As the next stage of this programme, opportunities to validate the tool in collaboration with academic colleagues will be explored. The tool and the findings from the pilots will also inform the development of a place standard, which aims to identify the key elements of high quality liveable places.

It has been a privilege to work with the older people and older people's groups on this project and we express our most sincere thanks to all participants. We also wish to thank all stakeholders who helped shape and implement the project. Special thanks must also go to Anne McCusker within the Belfast Healthy Cities team, who led the development of the project and compiled this report.

Joan Devlin
Chief Executive, Belfast Healthy Cities

Executive summary

The Walkability Assessment for Healthy Ageing (WAHA) tool was designed for use by older people and organisations to evaluate the age-friendliness of the built environment on local streets and in parks. The project was piloted in the Sydenham area of east Belfast and in parks across Belfast in 2013 by older people with various mobility levels. In 2015, the pilot was extended to neighbourhoods across Belfast to explore older people's perceptions of walkability across the city. In total 24 walks were completed in local neighbourhoods and parks across Belfast with 250 older people.

The tool is designed to identify key elements in the built environment that affect older people's active mobility. The aim of the project is to engage older people in Belfast to assess the built environment in their local area, while also collecting their view on elements of their area.

The pilot was undertaken through short guided walks on routes familiar to walk participants, who were supported to assess the environment using the tool.

The pilot highlights consistent provision of maintained pavements and dropped kerbs, sufficient public seating, good street lighting and pedestrian crossings in appropriate locations as key positive aspects that support older people to remain active in their local neighbourhood. Key barriers identified focused on maintenance of pavements, seating and dog fouling. The project also highlighted the importance of the personal safety of older people.

The key recommendation from the pilot is the need to formally engage older people in policy and decision making on planning and physical development in the city. The next step of developing this area of work is to identify how this tool can support and inform policy and decision making across sectors.

A walkable environment supports and encourages people of all ages and abilities to use the local neighbourhood, which in turn enables older people to maintain social networks and also their independence. Social networks and community involvement support both physical and mental health, for example through reduced isolation, increased sense of personal safety, higher levels of physical activity and a sense of belonging. The project highlights that creating a supportive environment can be achieved with relatively minor adjustments. The benefits, however, are significant, enabling older people to remain active for longer in their communities in later life.

Key recommendations

• Engage older people in the design of their city

• Promote consistent provision of dropped kerbs and tactile paving

• Promote high quality and well maintained pavements

• Engage older people in design and planning provision of public seating

• Identify opportunities to review placement of pedestrian crossings and crossing times

• Awareness on fear of being out alone

• Engage with key agencies to ensure appropriate signage

• Reduce dog fouling

• Consistent provision and standard of public toilets

Contents

1. <u>Introduction and Context</u>

The World Health Organization (WHO) has reported that a greater number of older people die from noncommunicable diseases such as heart disease, cancer and diabetes, than any other cause.[i] Studies emphasise that this can be prevented through supportive environments which are healthier places for people of all ages.[ii]

A key element in encouraging older people to remain physically active and participate in civic society is by providing supportive environments that enable this to be an easy choice. A focus on older people as assets in our society, with good quality of life in later years and remaining active has been identified as a priority by older people in Belfast. Participation in physical activity can reduce social isolation, which is complemented by an accessible built environment.

Healthy Ageing has been on the World Health Organization (WHO) European Healthy Cities Network agenda since 2003, when Healthy Ageing was introduced as one of the Phase IV core themes. Belfast Healthy Cities pioneered work in this field through the intersectoral InterAction plan 2007-09, which put older people's issues on the agenda of the city and also introduced innovative actions that have since been mainstreamed by partner organisations. Among the projects pioneered was a buddying scheme for public transport, which has since become part of the work of Volunteer Now. This work identified the need for a strategic focus on healthy ageing across agencies within Belfast and led to the establishment of the Healthy Ageing Strategic Partnership (HASP) in 2010. The partnership was focused on strengthening coordination of action on healthy ageing.

In 2012 Belfast joined the WHO Global Network of Age Friendly Cities and Communities.[iii] HASP is leading delivery of the Belfast Age Friendly action plan, which includes action on the eight domains identified as central for age friendly cities within of the *WHO Global Age-Friendly Cities Network guide*.[iv] The quality of outdoor spaces and buildings has been identified as one of eight key priority areas on the WHO *Checklist of Essential Features of Age-friendly Cities*.[v] Key issues within this area include the promotion of physical activity amongst older people and staying active in their local community.

2. Project outline and rationale

This pilot project was undertaken by Belfast Healthy Cities in 2013-15. The project focused on developing and piloting a tool designed to engage older people in assessing their local environment and identifying core elements of walkable environments for older people. The aim of the project was to develop an engagement tool, which also can provide qualitative evidence and data to support policy and decision making in relation to regeneration, pedestrian networks and planning.

The built environment includes a mix of land-use patterns, transport systems, urban design, green spaces and all buildings and spaces that are created by people. Most daily physical activity occurs during everyday activities within the built environment rather than during specific leisure activities. Hence the quality of the built environment has a significant role in facilitating more active lifestyles by reducing barriers to, and creating opportunities for physical activity. There is increasing evidence that adapting the built environment has the potential to encourage increased physical activity to levels that are beneficial to health.[vi] Older people are more vulnerable to barriers in the built environment, which in turn can determine their ability to carry out daily activities. Assessment of and provision for older people's needs is important to generate evidence that can inform policy and practice aimed at addressing these needs. Provision of supportive environments for older people will lead to a built environment accessible for the general population.

For example, contact with green spaces has benefits for mental health.[vii] However the design and features of green spaces are influential in an individual's perception of safety, which will largely determine usage. The level of concealment and presence or absence of people is of particular importance, especially for many women.[viii] Perception of the built environment will greatly influence an older person's decision to walk around their local environment. Experience of a fall or a fear of falling may inhibit an older person's participation in physical activity; the quality of pavements has particular influence on this.

3. Methodology

The Walkability Assessment for Healthy Ageing project was designed to develop an engagement tool focused on older people, and to gather qualitative data to supplement the Knowledge Exchange, Sustainable and Healthy Urban Environments (KE-SUE) study undertaken by Queen's University Belfast in 2012-13, which developed a GIS map of walkable networks in Belfast and Derry. Using the GIS maps combined with demographic and Census statistics, Sydenham was identified as an age vulnerable area and selected as a key area for initial piloting the assessment tool.   A number of Belfast City Council parks were also included in the assessment, as they were identified as areas which are potentially frequently used by older people for leisure and therefore a valuable asset in the community.

A draft project outline of the pilot was developed and discussed with key partners to guide the development of the project. Partners included members of HASP, East Belfast Partnership, Engage with Age, and Belfast City Council (Parks and Leisure Department). The views of Imtac and the then Department for Social Development (DSD) were also sought. The project outline was presented to the East Belfast Seniors Forum, confirming support and providing advice for potential participant groups to pilot the tool. The pilot project was carried out in autumn 2013 and further walks across Belfast were conducted during 2014 and 2015. Following the initial pilot conducted in East Belfast, Belfast Healthy Cities worked with groups in North, South and West Belfast to undertake walks across the city and gather a city wide data set.

The findings of the walk assessments collated in this report provide an insight into the positive aspects of the built environment in local neighbourhoods and parks assessed, as well as barriers to walkability identified by older people in Belfast and parks across the city. Using the Walkability Assessment for Healthy Ageing the common barriers and positive aspects of the area have been identified.

3.1 Walk methodology
A snowballing method was used to identify pilots in other areas of the city. In practice, this meant identifying groups through existing networks, such as Seniors Fora, Belfast Area Partnerships or local organisations.

The walks were conducted at a time agreed in advance with each group, around routes that groups used regularly or alternatively were familiar with. Initial introductions included a brief overview of the aim of the project and the context within which the results would be used. Participants were given an opportunity to view the questionnaire and familiarise themselves with assessment criteria. The group took part in a short walk of at least ten minutes around their local area or park, at their own pace. Research on older people and physical activity has deemed 800m a crucial distance for walking and remaining active.[ix] Questionnaires were completed following the walk, with group discussion on positive aspects and challenges of the local built environment that participants faced on a daily basis. The group discussion allowed participants the opportunity to raise issues that had not been included in the questionnaire and proved very helpful.

4. <u>Walkability Assessments for Healthy Ageing</u>

4.1 East Belfast

The Walkability Assessment for Healthy Ageing tool was piloted in neighbourhoods in East Belfast during autumn 2013 with local older people. Participants included a walking group facilitated by Engage with Age; Mullan Mews and Sydenham Court supported housing schemes and the RNIB.   All groups had established walking groups, except Sydenham Court and Mullen Mews supported housing schemes, who were interested in setting one up and used the project as an initial test opportunity.

Findings from all walk assessments were collated and highlighted a number of recurring key features of the built environment which could improve walkability for older people in East Belfast:

- Increase seating available along main routes
- Keep pavements free from obstructions such as parked cars
- Increase time at pedestrian crossings

A full report collating the findings from the assessments and outlining recommendations is available on the Policy and Publications section of Belfast Healthy Cities website.

Case study: Sydenham Court Supported Housing Scheme – East Belfast

Sydenham Court Supported Housing scheme is located at the bottom of a steep hill which presents an immediate barrier to residents, all of whom are living with dementia and have different degrees of mobility. A women's group and a men's group of residents meet weekly and walk to a local coffee shop on the Belmont Road. The route from Sydenham Court to the coffee shop was surveyed with each group; it was noted that there was a general lack of lowered kerbs along Sydenham Gardens and the Holywood Road, which made it difficult for the older people to manoeuvre the paths and roads. Previous falls meant there was a general fear of slipping or falling among group participants. A lack of seats along the route, was felt by participants to be off putting for anyone walking the short distance to the shop or local coffee shop, as the route did not provide any resting places for those needing to break up the journey into achievable distances. On the day of the assessment one potential par-

ticipant decided not to attend, as the hill and lack of seating made them feel less confident about being able to complete the walk. Participants felt that while certain aspects of the built environment cannot be transformed, the introduction of seating along main walking routes would encourage older people with mobility issues to engage in physical activity and stay active in their community.

✅ Positive aspects of area

General Impression of the area: Participants assessed the cleanliness and overall appeal of the area as good. However on the day of the assessment the presence of ice, leaves and dog fouling increased concern about falls.

Walking Environment: The streets on the route assessed were identified as accessible.

Outdoor safety: Participants on the walk assessment generally feel safe in the area but not at night. Drivers give way to pedestrians and there are not too many dogs which also contributed to individuals' sense of safety.

Pavements: Participants assessed pavements on main road were as wide enough for multiple users.

🚧 Identified barriers

Pavements: A lack of dropped kerbs, uneven pavements and raised man holes were identified as barriers to walkability along the route. Cars parked on the pavement made it too narrow to pass in places. Other obstructions identified included lamp posts positioned at differing points along the route, tree roots sticking up through tarmac, pot holes and a bus shelter in the middle of the footpath.

Seating: A lack of public seating or railing along the route to help older walkers feel safe, participants suggested they currently use fences of private properties for support or resting spots.

Pedestrian Crossings: The route assessed included a main road with heavy traffic. Participants felt there was a lack of safe crossings and the crossing time was not long enough for a secure crossing.

Outdoor Safety: There were few others out walking along the route which increased awareness of personal safety. Participants also expressed a fear of going out in the dark.

4.2 Belfast City Council Parks

The Walkability Assessment for Healthy Ageing pilot was conducted during autumn 2013 and included assessment of a number of parks as participants had highlighted local parks as a frequently used resource for walking. The original tool was developed for street assessments and was amended to focus on features of parks to identify positive aspects and barriers to walkability. Walk assessments were conducted by the following groups in their local park:

- North Belfast Seniors Forum – Waterworks Park
- The Health Education and Relaxation Therapy Project (HEART) – Falls Park
- Engage with Age – Botanic Gardens
- RNIB – Ormeau Park

Findings from park assessments highlighted a number of key features of the built environment which could improve walkability for older people using Belfast City Council parks:

- Stronger action to deal with high instance of dog fouling
- A visible uniformed park warden to increase personal safety of older people
- Placement of park furniture, clear signage in parks, free from graffiti

The full report is available on the Policy and Publication section of Belfast Healthy Cities website.

Case study: North Belfast Seniors Forum - Waterworks Park

North Belfast Seniors Forum assessed Waterworks Park. The group are familiar with the park and their walking group use it regularly. The group felt that paths in the park are well maintained, however there is a steep hill in the park, and participants suggested that this section of the path should have seats or be widened, to ensure others can pass if older walkers are stopping to catch their breath.

Seating was readily available and walkers noted there had been recent additions to the number of seats in the park. However, in some places seats were felt to be too high off the ground so those resting on the seat found their legs did not reach the ground. The immediate area around the seats was not concreted resulting in puddles of dirt surrounding the seats, which was off putting for users. Participants expressed a significant fear of being out alone, both during the day and at night time, following reports of a number of attacks on older people in the area and instances of older people being followed from the city centre. Therefore walking as part of a group provided a much needed sense of personal safety and opportunity to socialise. Participants felt that dog fouling was a significant problem both on the street and in the park.

While it was evident there are improvements being made to the park, participants identified a number of adjustments to the built environment that could be made to ensure older people continue to remain both physically active and visual in the community. These include more bins, specifically to deal with dog fouling; enforcement of fines, minor adjustments to the placement of park furniture and a visible uniformed park warden.

✓ Positive aspects of area

Walking environment and shops: Participants felt it was a friendly local area and noted that staffs in local shops and Post Offices have been warning older people to stay safe.

Outdoor safety: Participants reported that drivers stop and give way on the streets surrounding the park. There is good visibility in park with few high hedges.

Paths: Participants felt park paths were well maintained, and wide enough for multiple users including those with wheelchairs and rollators. Walking routes around the park provided were found to be a manageable distance to walk.

BARRIER Identified barriers

Paths: Participants felt that a lack of lowered kerbs on footpaths adjacent to the park and a number of steep gradients in the park and residential areas impacted walkability of the area.

Outdoor safety: Participants expressed a fear of falling due to previous falls. There was a lack of appropriate signage in parks, with current signage damaged.

Seating: A lack of seating and poor positioning of seats in parks was identified by participants as a barrier.

General impression of the area: Participants identified a high instance of dog fouling in the park area.

Pedestrian crossings: Available at some of the entrances to the park. However, participants expressed a wish for longer crossing times to accommodate older people.

Public toilets: Available in Waterworks Park are insufficient in the view of this group of participants, who reported that they are situated at the bottom of the park and poorly maintained.

4.3 Belfast City Centre
During the pilot project, which took place in autumn 2013, RNIB participated in a walk assessment of Ormeau Park. At the group's recommendation, an assessment of Belfast City Centre was also conducted. The participants met at Linenhall Library, walking down Donegall Place, Castle Place, through Corn Market and along Arthur Street, Upper Arthur Street, finishing on May Street.

Findings from the walk assessment are outlined in the case study. Participants also identified a number of key features of the built environment of Belfast city centre which could improve walkability for visually impaired pedestrians:

- Yellow strips along street furniture such as seating and bicycle stands to make it clearly identifiable
- Pavements free from obstructions
- Improved pavements in city centre beyond main routes

Case study: RNIB – Belfast City Centre

The group's general impression of the city centre was very positive, pavements were found to be well maintained and non-slip on Wellington Place and Donegall Place. However, there were a large number of sandwich boards, bollards, and other street furniture on the route which was hard to identify for the visually impaired participants. The group noted that a simple addition of a yellow strip along the top of bollards and bicycle stands would make them easily identifiable and make the city centre more user friendly for people with visual impairments.

Participants found that on side streets beyond Donegall Place, the quality of pavements greatly decrease from this user group's perspective. Upper Arthur Street had badly cracked and uneven pavements with a number of obstructions including bins and lamp posts. On a crossing at May Street, a driver was observed driving through a red light as the walkers had started to cross the road. Tactile paving was available at crossings; however the group felt that the appropriate level of paving differs greatly within the city centre.

Seating was widely available on Royal Avenue, but was at times difficult to identify for people with visual impairments as seats were made of stainless steel and had no back rest. The walking environment was felt to link well to shops. However, prior to the redevelopment of Donegall Place the partially sighted members of the group had used breaks in kerbs as location markers. While the new smooth pavement is easy to walk on, it has presented a challenge for many. Older people stated they have a fear of going out alone and therefore benefit greatly from befriending schemes.

![✓] **Positive aspects of area**

Pedestrian crossings: A rotating knob was identified by participants and alerts partially sighted pedestrians of an appropriate time to cross the road. A sound signal could also be clearly heard.

Seating: The route assessed included Royal Avenue which was well maintained and had a large variety of seating available.

Walking environment and shops: Participants felt the area of the city centre assessed had good street linkage to shops and places of interest.

![BARRIER] **Identified barriers**

Seating: There was high availability of public seating; however general street furniture was not easily identified.

Outdoor safety: Participants in the walk assessment experienced drivers who do not always give way, even at pedestrian crossings.

Pavements: Some pavements along the route assessed had obstructions such as bins, lamp posts and bicycles. Partially sighted pedestrians reported this was difficult to manoeuvre and had to leave the pavements and walk in the cycle lane.

4.4 West Belfast

Following the pilot of the Walkability Assessment for Healthy Ageing tool it was decided to complete walk assessments across the city to develop a stronger evidence base. The walk assessments carried out in West Belfast used the same methodology developed in the initial pilot. This research was conducted in July 2014 as part of an MSSc dissertation with Queen's University.

A total of 55 questionnaires were administered to five groups of older people in West Belfast. The majority of walk assessments took place on local streets in neighbourhoods identified by participants. One group of five participants completed an assessment in Falls Park.

The following groups conducted walk assessments in their local neighbourhoods and park:

- The Health Education and Relaxation Therapy (HEART) - Falls Park
- Holy Trinity Centre, Turf Lodge – Norglen Gardens
- Hemsworth Court – Shankill Road
- Ardoyne Shankill Healthy Living Centre – Ardoyne

Complete findings from the walk assessment are available in a full report on the Policy and Publications section of Belfast Healthy Cities website.

Participants identified a number of key features of the built environment of West Belfast which could improve walkability in the area. These include:

- Taking action on dog fouling
- Providing street seating, particularly considering steep hills within the area
- Improved pavements free from obstructions

General impression of the area

The general impression of the area was assessed rating cleanliness and overall appeal. Throughout the five street assessments ratings ranged from good to very poor: 68% of participants rated the cleanliness of their local streets as average, poor or very poor. Similarly when considering the overall appeal of the area responses ranged from good to very poor. Of the 50 participants who took part in the questionnaire, 50% rated the overall appeal of their area average, poor or very poor.

The survey results collated from data collected as part of the 'outdoors spaces – parks' identify 80% of respondents rated the quality of the general cleanliness of the park as excellent, with the remaining 20% of respondents rating it as good. The overall appeal of the park was rated by 60% as excellent with a further 20% selecting good; participants described the park as 'enjoyable' and 'well kept'. Despite this, information provided in the open questions indicated a high instance of dog foul throughout the park.

Paths and pavements

The older people involved in the research assessed the pavements for streets for being well maintained; free of obstruction; non-slip; wide enough and having dropped curbs. Results from the questionnaires suggest participants consider the condition

of pavements to range from good to very poor; 86% of participants rated the pavements average to very poor. Older people assessing the pavements on being free from obstructions rated them from average to very poor with over 82% selecting poor or very poor. Obstructions on the pavement include cars, motorbikes and bins, meaning older people using a rollator, wheelchair or mobility scooter have to use the road in order to pass. The majority of responses from participants rated the non-slip condition of the pavement as average or poor, with responses ranging from average to very poor. Pavement width was assessed on whether it was considered wide enough for wheelchairs or safely passing other pedestrians. Responses ranged from excellent to very poor, with 84% of participants rating the width of pavements as average, poor or very poor. Finally pavements were assessed for provision of dropped kerbs to road level at crossings, assessment ranged from good to very poor, with 64% rating the provisions of dropped kerbs as poor or very poor. Older people suggested they have to lift their rollator on and off the pavement which can unsteady it, leaving the person fearful of falling especially when it is wet.

Similar elements of the paths in the park were assessed: 80% of respondents rated the maintenance of paths as excellent; 80% rated excellent for free of obstructions; assessing the paths as non-slip, 80% rated excellent; and 100% assessed the paths as being wide enough for wheelchairs. The provision of dropped kerbs was rated excellent or good by 100%.

Outdoor safety
Assessing whether drivers give way at crossings on local streets, responses ranged from excellent to very poor, with the 78% selecting excellent to average. A varied response was delivered on sufficient provision of separate cycle paths; 50% suggested the provision was good or average and 40% identified provision as poor or very poor. In total 68% of participants assessed street lighting as between excellent and average. Continuing to assess outdoor safety, participants were also asked to assess the visibility of the streets with regard to the instance of high hedges or dark corners. Responses ranged from excellent to very poor with 22% rating it average. Finally streets were assessed on being busy or used by others, overall 68% of participants rated this as good or average.

The sense of outdoor safety in the park was rated very highly by the older people involved in the research; responses included 60% excellent rating for street lighting, visibility and used by others. The older people also recognised that walking as a group and walking during the day had a positive impact on their sense of safety, suggesting they would not walk at night due to the occurrence of anti-social behaviour.

Pedestrian crossings
The older people involved in the research suggested placement of pedestrian crossings at busy locations and at local shops and services ranged from good to very poor, 78% identified placement as poor or very poor in their area. Safety for people of all levels of mobility was indicated to be poor or very poor by the majority of respondents, tactile surfacing at crossings was rated good or average, despite this one older person indicated it 'is sore on my feet and I find it hard to use my rollator'. Traffic light visibility was rated as good by 36% and the sound signal was rated by 28%

of responses as poor or very poor. Among the respondents 29% indicated the current crossing time was either average or poor.

Public seating
The questionnaire assessed the availability of seating and whether it was well maintained and comfortable. Across all five surveyed areas availability of seating was rated as poor or very poor by 84%. One participant explained 'there is no seating except for the bus shelter, then the bus stops and the driver is not happy I am just resting there.' Of the available seating 40% was rated as very poorly maintained and 40% very poor for comfort.

Seating was available at intervals around the park but not enough to facilitate the walking routes, therefore older people had to stop and rest without necessary seats to rest at. However the seats that were available were rated as well maintained and comfortable by 60% of respondents.

Public toilets, walking environment and shops
Older people felt the streets are situated together and accessible with 56% rating good or average. The majority of participants indicated the street links to places they want to go, 50% rating it good or average.

Public toilets were assessed as part of the park study, rated as sufficiently provided, well maintained and accessible by park users and an essential feature of an age-friendly park.

The built environment
Seating in many areas was non-existent, availability being rated as poor or very poor by 84%. Provision of seating creates an opportunity for people to rest mid walk and to socialise with others in the neighbourhood, one participant stated exactly this 'I don't walk often as it is very hilly round here, but if I knew there was a seat along the way I would give it a try'. An increased presence of people may also improve the perception of personal safety among older people in the local area, the Glasgow Centre for Population Health (2013) suggest modest changes such as provision of seats can transform the physical environment. Creating neighbourhoods with people at the centre can improve physical and mental health (GCPH, 2013; Gehl, 2010). Data from the park assessment specify the opportunity to socialise with participants as a positive element of the walk, highlighting their increased sense of safety when walking as a group. Getting some fresh air and enjoying the flowers were also given as reasons they regularly use the park. Seating in the park surveyed was available at internals but not throughout the park, feedback in the questionnaires suggested greater provision may encourage greater use of the park. If the perceived positive elements of the park experience could be replicated on streets it may encourage older people to walk more in their neighbourhood.

The park and a number of the streets in West Belfast surveyed as part of this research are on a steep gradient with many hills which act as a natural barrier to walking for the older and less mobile members of the community. This natural landscape could be supported by the provision of features in the built environment which would buffer the perception of the hills.

4.5 South Belfast

Walk assessments in South Belfast were conducted during autumn and winter 2014, in partnership with South Belfast Partnership Board who identified participant groups. Assessments were conducted by members of existing walking groups and interested local residents. The groups listed below assessed an area they were familiar with, walked regularly or had identified within their local area.

- Lower Ormeau Resident's Action Group (LORAG) - Lagan Towpath and Ormeau Road
- Hong Ling Gardens Supported Housing – Markets and St George's Market
- Ballynafeigh Men's Shed – Ormeau Park
- Ballynafeigh Men's Walking Group – Ormeau Road and Lagan Towpath from Stranmillis
- Blackstaff Community Development Association - Boucher Road
- Windsor Women's Centre – Donegall Road and Sandy Row

The walk assessments highlighted a range of aspects of the built environment which promote walking within an area and others that can cause barriers to walkability especially to those most vulnerable or who have mobility issues. The three most frequently highlighted ways of improving walkability for older people in the South Belfast were:

- Increasing seating available along the route
- Increasing time at pedestrian crossings
- Taking action on dog fouling and litter

A full report outlining the findings from all assessments conducted in south Belfast is available on the Policy and Publications sections of Belfast Healthy Cities website.

Case study: Hong Ling Gardens Supported Housing – Markets area and St George's Market

Hong Ling Gardens is a supported housing scheme in South Belfast for members of the Chinese community. Participants taking part in the walk assessment have very limited English and were accompanied on the walk by a support worker who translated instructions and elements of the built environment to be assessed. The participants were aged 65-91, including a partially sighted participant and another participant using a bicycle. The group are physically active in the local area with the majority of participants choosing to walk regularly for transport. Participants reported they choose to travel in groups for safety, while also feeling vulnerable in the local area due to anti-social behaviour. The group take regular trips from the Hong Ling Gardens to St George's Market to purchase fresh fruit and vegetables and chose to assess this route.

✅ Positive aspects of area

Outdoor Safety: Participants said that the neighbourhood is very friendly and neighbours offer help to the older people with their shopping. A lot of work has been done in the area to develop personal safety and a sense of community with older Chinese people and the local community association. Further intergenerational work is planned.

Pavements: Participants suggested that pavements are well maintained in some areas where there has been recent development. While pavements are wide enough for a wheelchair or rollator to pass, cars parked on the pavement made this difficult at times. Participants reported having to use the road and said it increased their sense of vulnerability.

Identified barriers

Pedestrian crossings: The participants selected a route that included assessment of a pedestrian crossing ideally positioned at a busy junction. Although conveniently placed, participants reported they did not have enough time to cross the road. It was

felt that an increase to the standard crossing time would facilitate a safer crossing for older people or those with mobility issues.

General impression of the area: Participants highlighted the high instance of dog fouling and litter. A suggested solution requested a greater availability of bins for dog foul to help reduce the problem.

Seating: Along the route assessed there were no seats available for people to rest, break up the journey or allow casual socialising. The group reported a lack of seating in St George's Market which would allow rest after their journey, during shopping and to enjoy some of the food.

Outdoor safety: Graffiti, anti-social behaviour and vandalism to both cars and houses were identified as concerns for participants during the walk assessment. Community relations work has been done recently to build relationships with older Chinese residents and members of the local community; however, a sense of vulnerability exists in relation to being out alone.

Street Lighting: The route chosen was familiar to the group as it is the most direct path to St George's Market, which many residents visit regularly. The walk assessment was conducted during the day, but many members of the group reported taking this journey in the early morning for the market opening, and felt that during this time there was not adequate street lighting in the area, especially during winter. Participants reported the area feels connected, as they can use short cuts through the alleyway.

4.6 North Belfast
A number of walk assessments were conducted across North Belfast during summer 2015. The walk assessments were conducted by a range of groups and interested residents including:

- Harmony Court - Crumlin Road
- Milewater Court – North Queen Street
- CLARE CIC Project - Mount Vernon
- Ardavon Supported Housing - Somerton Road
- Wolfhill Centre – Ligoniel Road and Ligoniel Park

The assessments identified a range of barriers as well as positive aspects to the built environment. The three most commonly mentioned ways of improving walkability for older people in the area were:

- Increasing seating available along the route
- Reducing the high instance of dog fouling in the area
- Considering the placement of pedestrian crossings

A full report on the findings from all walks that were conducted in North Belfast is available on the Policy and Publications section of Belfast Healthy Cities website.

Case study: Milewater Court – North Queen Street

Milewater Court is a retirement and sheltered housing scheme providing flats to residents aged over 60. The scheme includes non-resident management staff and a community alarm service. The scheme is located on a busy main road; a regular bus service provides easy reach to a local shopping centre, post office, health and leisure centres and train station. The route from Milewater Court was identified by participants and was designed to survey a number of identified features within the local area along main roads in the immediate vicinity of the Court.

✅ **Positive Aspects of the area**

Pavements: Along the main route pavements were well maintained, free of obstructions and wide enough, beyond this pavements were not available.

Outdoor safety: Participants felt that the local streets were well used and there was good street lighting; however there were no separate cycle lanes for bicycles. Al-

though the route being assessed was a main road, drivers did give way. Participants reported the area is very friendly and easy to move around.

Pedestrian crossings: Crossings were available at convenient locations along this particular route assessed.

Walking environment: Participants assessed the local environment as well connected and felt that there were connections that enabled them to access their desired destinations.

 Identified Barriers

Overall appeal of the area: This was assessed as poor due to the high level of derelict residential and commercial property along the route. Dog fouling was identified as an issue in the area.

Outdoor Safety: Participants reported feeling safe in the day time but would not go out in the evenings or when it is dark.

Seating: Although available in the park and at the housing scheme, there are few other public seats available. However, participants expressed concerns about seating attracting anti-social behaviour.

5. <u>Conclusion and recommendations</u>

The information from the case studies suggests involving older people in carrying out the assessments is a successful way of engaging and gathering their views on the built environment surrounding their home and parks in the local area. A number of common themes have been highlighted from the case studies as recurring issues for older people in relation to the built environment. These include in particular an identified wish and need for greater partnership with older people in the planning and design of the city. Concrete issues in the built environment consistently highlighted include:

- the quality of the pavements
- a desire for more community space
- public toilets
- access to transport and public seating

Personal perceptions of how safe and accessible the built environment is will influence participation in the community, while efforts to address the needs of older people will improve the quality of life for all.

In relation to the template there are two areas to consider:
- **Promote use of the assessment tool in policy development:** This assessment tool could support agencies including Transport NI and Belfast City Council to consider the needs of older people in any development being carried out in Belfast.

- **Modify the assessment tool in partnership with academic colleagues for use in planning services and new initiatives such as active travel.** This project engaged older people to assess the walking environment in local neighbourhoods and parks across the city. It identified many positive aspects, as well as common barriers that may prevent older people engaging in physical activity in their local area. The small scale of the pilot project was a limitation of the study; Belfast Healthy Cities are currently discussing the option of validating the tool in partnership with Queen's University Belfast.

Recommendations in relation to use of the tool to consider:

- **Engage older people in the design of their city:**
  o This project has highlighted the importance of agencies formally engaging older people in policy and decision making on planning and physical development in the city. For example, this could initially be achieved through including representatives from the G6 (a group made up of representatives from six older people's area fora throughout Belfast) in relation to planning, road and regeneration initiatives with Belfast City Council relevant committees. There are a large number of older people's groups in the city and where relevant, engaging at local level can help yield valuable local knowledge and evidence.

- o Build capacity of older people to engage with elected representatives and committees; this involves understanding the decision making process as well as identifying the best points at which to engage.

- **Identify opportunities to review placement of pedestrian crossings and crossing times:**
  Participants in this project reported that the placement of some pedestrian crossings are not in line with typical desire lines, resulting in older people attempting to cross the road at an earlier point. It was also reported that longer crossing times are needed for older people to walk across the road safely.

- **Engage with key agencies to ensure appropriate signage:**
  A lack of appropriate signage or graffiti on signs made it difficult for park users to navigate paths, particularly for the visually impaired. Assessments by the visually impaired participants suggested incorporating yellow strips along signs would ensure easier identification. It was also suggested that engaging older people in identifying designs and locations for signage would build confidence and encourage use of public space.

- **Promote consistent provision of dropped kerbs and tactile paving:**
  This project has shown that pavement maintenance and the provision of dropped kerbs at appropriate crossing points varies throughout the city centre, in local neighbourhoods and adjacent to local parks. The path surface in parks was considered to be generally good; however, the RNIB group found some parts of the path in Ormeau Park challenging. Guidance on the Use of Tactile Paving and Inclusive Mobility Standards is currently in place, and older people would significantly benefit from consistent use of this guidance throughout the city.

- **Promote high quality and well maintained pavements:**
  - o *Guidance on fear of falling:* Leaves, ice and obstructions on paths and pavements as well as experience of previous falls has made older people who took part in the assessment, apprehensive of falling. Falls prevention work is undertaken by a number of agencies, including Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, and building capacity on this within other sectors could assist in identifying appropriate policy and practice responses.

  - o *Pavements free from obstructions:* Obstructions on pavements, such as parked cars, bins, bus shelters and lamp posts make it difficult for walkers to navigate a clear path. An integrated approach should be considered to developing and enforcing accessible and clutter free pavements across the city. The new legislation in relation to licensing and controlling pavement cafes may offer a strong starting point for this.

  - o *Clearly marked street furniture:* This project, in particular walks with RNIB, has highlighted the importance of good visibility in the street environment. In particular, it is important that items of street furniture including public seats, bins, bollards and bicycle stands need to be clearly marked, potentially using luminous strips to highlight them, particularly for the visually impaired, in parks and on streets. Evidence from this and other reports can offer a basis for identifying appropriate solutions with key agencies.

- **Engage older people in design and planning provision of public seating and location of pedestrian crossings:**
  - There has been a great improvement in the provision of public seating in the city centre but participants in this project are reporting a gap along main routes in local areas. Consideration should be given to incorporating seating also in residential areas, as seating provides a resting place and informal social meeting point for older people using local shops and services along the route.

  - Provision of seating in public parks varies. This project highlighted a desire for more seating in Waterworks and Falls Park, with consideration given to placement of seats. There was good provision in Botanic and Ormeau parks.

  - Engaging older people, for example through the G6 seniors' fora and RNIB, in the planning and positioning of increased public seating would offer an important opportunity to create more age friendly local environments suited to older people's needs.

- **Awareness on fear of being out alone:**
  - Concerns for personal safety and a fear of being out alone both during the day and at night were reported by all groups. Better street lighting was suggested as a way of improving a sense of personal safety in the city centre at night. Engaging older people in policy and decision making can contribute to strengthening understanding of the importance of street lighting.

  - Participants in this project also expressed concerns about being out alone during the day after reports of personal safety incidents. A key recommendation was ensuring understanding of older people's concerns; front line staff in key agencies can also contribute to this through visibility in local neighbourhoods. Consideration should also be given to natural surveillance options, for example ensuring active frontage along streets that increases perceived safety.

- **Reduce dog fouling:**
  Dog fouling was a major issue highlighted in parks assessed. It was stressed that this discourages use of parks, and in addition dog mess causes a trip hazard, in particular for partially sighted people. Suggestions for change include a greater number of bins could be provided and dog owner penalties enforced more strictly. Bins for dog foul should be clearly marked with luminous strips to support safe use of public space by the visually impaired.

- **Consistent provision and standard of public toilets:**
  Participants in this project found that public toilet provision and standard varied across the city and throughout parks. Consistent provision of access to facilities was also highlighted as a key measure that would encourage older people to go out more often.

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