Walkability Audit Summary Report

January 2024

Walkability audits of towns, outdoor spaces and public buildings can help to promote access needs of people with a wide range of abilities and disabilities. Walkability is defined as [‘the extent to which the built environment is friendly to the presence of people walking, living, shopping, visiting, engaging or spending time in an area’.](https://universaldesign.ie/built-environment/walkability-auditing#:~:text=Walkability%20is%20the%20extent%20to,spending%20time%20in%20an%20area.) Audit reports highlight barriers and enablers to walkability as well as suggestions to improve walkability.

[Age Friendly Ireland (AFI)](https://agefriendlyireland.ie/) is a Local Government led service, working to prepare Ireland’s infrastructure and services for the predicted rapid increase in our older population. AFI has programmes across each local authority area in Ireland and leads on initiatives such as coordinating Walkability Audits across towns and public buildings, as well as producing audit reports.

The National Disability Authority (NDA) has prepared this report which provides a summary of 48 AFI Walkability Audits conducted between 2013 and 2024.

The report covers the following;

* how walkability audits were carried out and reported upon,
* aggregated findings across audits on towns and outdoor spaces,
* aggregated findings across audits in and around public buildings.

The purpose of the report is to help improve future audit practices and reach accessibility policy goals for public buildings and the public realm. This report will help inform the development of future and complementary tools to assess and improve access to buildings and the public realm for all people.

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# Executive Summary

## Background

Walkability audits of towns, outdoor spaces and public buildings can help to promote access needs of people with a wide range of abilities and disabilities. Walkability is defined as ‘[the extent to which the built environment is friendly to the presence of people walking, living, shopping, visiting, engaging or spending time in an area](https://universaldesign.ie/built-environment/walkability-auditing#:~:text=Walkability%20is%20the%20extent%20to,spending%20time%20in%20an%20area.)’. Audit reports highlight barriers and enablers to walkability as well as suggestions to improve walkability.

[Age Friendly Ireland](https://agefriendlyireland.ie/) (AFI) is a Local Government led service, working to prepare Ireland’s infrastructure and services for the predicted rapid increase in our older population. AFI has programmes across each local authority area in Ireland and leads on initiatives such as coordinating Walkability Audits across towns and public buildings, as well as producing audit reports. This report provides a summary of 48 AFI Walkability Audits conducted between 2013 and 2024.The purpose of the report is to help improve future audit practices and reach accessibility policy goals for public buildings and the public realm. It covers the following;

* how walkability audits were carried out and reported upon,
* aggregated findings across audits on towns and outdoor spaces,
* aggregated findings across audits in and around public buildings.

## Methods

A thematic content analysis of 48 AFI walkability audit reports was employed. These were further broken down with, 32 audits that focused on towns and outdoor spaces and 16 that focused on buildings. We also reviewed the differences and similarities in the audits such as:

* where audits took place,
* the type of organisations that were involved,
* different aims of audits,
* frameworks and data collections tools used,
* the format and level of detail reported,
* the type of participants who were involved including people with disabilities.

## Findings

### Towns and Outdoor Spaces

The walkability of towns and outdoor places were found to be enhanced by factors such as strong communities, new accessibility features, and feelings of safety. The main issues and challenges found across the 32 reports of audits in towns and outdoor spaces were in relation to footpaths, crossings and junctions, public spaces, road user behaviors, as well as a lack of public seating, and lighting. Common actions suggested in the reports to improve walkability were calls for adherence to best practice on age friendly design, engagement with relevant stakeholders, and a deeper investigation of key issues and challenges.

### Public Buildings

There were 16 walkability audit reports in and around public buildings. The walkability of buildings was found to be enhanced by progressive accessibility features in buildings and attitudes of staff. The main challenges were found in relation to approach to buildings such as footpaths and crossings, car parking, and signage. Common actions suggested in the reports to improve walkability related to improving external areas around public buildings, signage within buildings, and disability/age friendly awareness training initiatives.

## Conclusion

In summary, differences in audit practices and gaps in reporting suggest a need for a flexible approach and training going forward. Common challenges and suggestions to improve walkability were found. These findings can help inform the development of future and complementary audit tools.

# Background and Purpose

## Background

This report provides a descriptive summary of Walkability Audits carried out across Irish towns, outdoor spaces, and public buildings through Age Friendly Ireland.

[Age Friendly Ireland](https://agefriendlyireland.ie/) (AFI) is a Local Government led service, working to prepare Ireland’s infrastructure and services for the predicted rapid increase in our older population. AFI derived from the WHO Age-friendly Cities framework developed in the [Global Age-friendly Cities Guide](https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/43755). The framework proposed eight interconnected domains that can help to identify and address barriers to the well-being and participation of older people, including the ‘outdoor spaces and buildings’ domain. AFI has programmes across each local authority area in Ireland and leads on initiatives such as coordinating Walkability Audits across towns and public buildings, as well as producing audit reports.

Walkability is defined as “the extent to which the built environment is friendly to the presence of people walking, living, shopping, visiting, engaging or spending time in an area”.[[1]](#footnote-1) Auditing the ‘walkability’ of outdoor spaces and buildings is essentially to promote age friendly design and improve the lives of older people. Walkability audits, however, also serve to increase awareness of the specific access needs of people with a wide range of abilities, including parents with buggies/strollers and persons with disabilities at all ages.

In 2021, the National Transport Authority (NTA) published a [Universal Design (UD) Walkability Audit Tool](https://www.nationaltransport.ie/news/the-universal-design-walkability-audit-tool/), developed through collaboration between the NTA, Age Friendly Ireland, Green-Schools, and the National Disability Authority’s (NDA’s) Centre for Excellence in Universal Design. To reflect a UD approach, the tool is designed to be used by a group of people with a diverse range of ages, abilities and disabilities. Typically, audits involve small groups of people, with local knowledge, who travel a chosen route of up to an approximate 20-30 minute walking distance, allowing for stops to discuss questions related to common issues covered in the Tool such as:

* problems with footpaths such as surface conditions or obstacles,
* inaccessible facilities such as public toilets, parks, public buildings, or shops,
* difficulties in crossing roads or around road junctions,
* problematic or good road-user behaviors,
* issues related to feelings of safety and security,
* the general look and feel of towns and places,
* access issues outside school gates.

The audit process can enable the identification and reporting of barriers to walkability and priority recommendations/actions to improve walkability. Improved walkability can contribute to a wide range of societal and health benefits including:

* improved levels of fitness,
* cleaner air,
* safer environments,
* better social inclusion.

## Purpose

The purpose of this report is to describe how audits across Ireland, conducted by AFI, were carried out and reported upon as well as to provide a summary of the aggregated data. This report also provides a description of similarities and differences in how audits were carried out and reported upon and highlights ways to improve future walkability audit practices and audit reporting in Ireland.

In addition, a description of the main accessibility issues and recommended actions found relating to Irish public buildings can be used inform the development by the NDA of the **User Experience Audit Tool** that will accompany the new ‘[Code of Practice on Accessible Public Buildings’](https://nda.ie/uploads/publications/Code-of-Practice-on-Accessibility-of-Public-Services-and-Information-Provided-by-Public-Bodies.pdf).[[2]](#footnote-2) Accessibility goals for public buildings highlighted in the code include:

* Pre-visit information: The public body should provide pre-visit information about the accessibility of its public buildings. This information is available through multiple means of communication.
* Building approach and entry: The principal public entry point to the public building, and the route to this location, is designed, managed and maintained to be accessible.
* Way finding: on the approach to, and within the public building is designed, managed and maintained to be accessible. Signage is an example of wayfinding information.
* Circulation within buildings: The circulation routes within the public building are accessible.
* Internal environment: of a public building is appropriately designed, managed and maintained to ensure accessibility.
* Public Facilities: designed, managed and maintained to be accessible. (Facilities include toilets, public refreshment areas, equipment, switches, outlets and controls that are available to use by the public).
* Programmes, meetings, exhibitions and events: organised by a public body are accessible and remain accessible.

# Methodology

This study analysed 48 walkability audit reports of audits carried out between 2013 and 2024. These audits, conducted across 32 ‘towns and outdoor spaces’ (see appendix 1), and 16 ‘public buildings’ (see appendix 2), involved diverse participant groups, including individuals with varying ages, abilities, and disabilities.

A thematic content analysis was employed to synthesise audit findings. This method involved a review of:

* audit objectives and the use of frameworks such as Universal Design,
* data collection tools, including bespoke instruments for specific audit purposes,
* inconsistencies and gaps in reporting formats,
* demographics of participants, focusing on representation from different disability experiences,
* common barriers and enablers of walkability,
* priority recommendations for improving accessibility.

Data was aggregated to highlight key accessibility issues and actionable insights to inform future walkability audit practices.

# Findings

The findings resulting from the analysis are grouped under the following three themes. First, an overview of differences and similarities in audit reporting is presented to highlight gaps or inconsistencies to improve future practice and standards. Then aggregated data across audit reports on ‘Towns and Outdoor Spaces’ is presented to highlight the main barriers and enablers to walkability, and common actions to improve walkability. In the third theme aggregated data across audit reports on Public Buildings is presented in a similar form.

## Walkability Audit Reporting

Audits reports were produced from audits carried out across 48 towns, outdoor spaces, and public buildings. Audits were carried out for differing reasons and reported in a variety of ways. For example, some audits formed just one part of wider consultation on age friendliness across areas and others were from small pilot audit projects. Some reports were four pages long while others were over 70 pages. Some audits only focused on the experiences and needs of ‘older people’ while others sought to include views of younger people with disabilities. Differences, similarities, and inconsistencies were found across the following key areas.

### Place and year of audits

Three audits took place in 2013, and the remainder were carried out between 2018 and 2024.

Audits were conducted in 32 ‘Towns and Outdoor Spaces’ across 14 counties (see appendix 1) including:

* 28 towns or villages,[[3]](#footnote-3)
* one public park,
* one housing estate,
* one beach,
* one city (Limerick).

Audits were carried out in and around 16 ‘Public Buildings’ across 11 counties (see appendix 2) including:

* five healthcare services (i.e. hospitals or nursing homes),
* three train stations,
* two libraries,
* two airports,
* two sports grounds,
* one tourist attraction,
* one civic office.

### Types of organisations involved

Organisations or groups involved in audits typically included representatives from:

* older people’s councils/executives,
* local access/inclusion groups,
* disability advocacy charities/service providers including:
  + Irish Wheelchair Association,
  + Alzheimer Society of Ireland,
  + National Council for the Blind Ireland (now known as Vision Ireland),
  + Dementia: Understand Together, (Understand Together is a public support, awareness and information campaign led by the HSE, working with the Alzheimer Society of Ireland (ASI) and Genio campaign),
  + Muiroísa Foundation (supports individuals with an intellectual disability and/or autism and their families).
* technical staff from local authorities,
* transport and development groups,
* education, health, or research groups,
* organisations for older people,
* Gardaí.

### Aims of audits

All reports, apart from six, explicitly stated the aims of audits. In general, the purpose of audits was reported to “increase awareness of the specific spatial needs of older people, people with cognitive and sensory impairments and people with dementia” in a given area. However, some audits had more bespoke or specific aims such as:

* to assess effectiveness of the works carried out to date and to agree future priorities (Celbridge),
* to ensure the attraction reaches the required standard according to the WHO four stage process for age friendliness (Avondale House tourist destination),
* an initial assessment of the built environment and public realm part of the town centre and is a ‘first step’ in the Town Centre First process which will assist when creating and prioritising projects for the town in the future (Ferbane, Co Offaly).

### Guiding frameworks and data collection tools

Most reports, apart from five, explicitly stated and explained the underpinning concepts used including universal design, walkability, and/or age friendliness.

Eight reports were unclear about how exactly data was collected. Most audits across towns and outdoor spaces used, or adapted the National Transport Authority (NTA) published [Universal Design (UD) Walkability Audit Tool](https://www.nationaltransport.ie/news/the-universal-design-walkability-audit-tool/). More bespoke data collection tools were used around public buildings such as:

* Age Friendly Walkability Survey for Civic Offices (Dublin civic offices),
* bespoke questions to audit a library (Cavan),
* a mini walkability audit tool provided by researchers in Trinity College Dublin to engage participants and allow them to identify the positive and negative experiences along the route (Drogheda nursing home).

### Audit participants

Across reports there was inconsistency in reporting regarding participants involved. From the information provided it can be inferred that between one and three walking groups took part in each of the 32 audits around Town and Outdoor Spaces. This means that approximately between 500 to 600 people participated across these audits. Only ten of these reports explicitly mentioned the number of people with disabilities involved and their different disability experiences.

However, most audits reported general wording such as “each group consisted of several participants with a range of ages and abilities, including individuals using wheelchairs, people with low vision, older people with reduced mobility and people with intellectual disabilities”. For the ten audit reports that reported on disability, the most common participants were:

* wheelchair or mobility scooter users (25 explicitly mentioned),
* people with reduced mobility (13),
* people who are deaf or hard of hearing (12),
* people who are blind or have low vision (8),
* people with intellectual disabilities (5),
* buggy/stroller users (4),
* carers or personal assistant (1).

Audits carried out in and around the 16 ‘Public Buildings’ included approximately 175 (mostly older people) including approximately 55 people with disabilities, who were:

* wheelchair users (16 explicitly reported),
* people who are blind or have low vision (14),
* people with reduced mobility (10),
* people who are deaf or hard of hearing (6),
* carers (3),
* buggy/stroller users (4).

## Towns and Outdoor Spaces

### Overall snapshot of key walkability domains

Out of 32 audit reports of towns and outdoor spaces, 25 reports explicitly reported an overall rating of walkability/age friendliness across the key domains below. For example, ‘footpaths’ were rated as ‘Very Poor’, ‘Poor’, ‘OK’, ‘Good’, or ‘Very good’. These scores when aggregated across all reports capture a snapshot of areas:

* **Crossings and Junctions** were rated **Poor** overall,
* **Footpaths** were rated between **OK and Poor**,
* **Road User Behaviors** were between **OK and Poor**,
* **Public Spaces and Facilities** were **OK** overall,
* **Look and Feel** of towns were rated between **OK and Good**,
* **Safety and Comfort** between **OK and Good**.

### Common issues and challenges

Across all the reports common issues and challenges were discussed in further detail. In order of importance[[4]](#footnote-4), the issues and challenges that people faced across towns and outdoor spaces are outlined below.

#### Footpaths

Problems related to footpaths were the most common issue raised across all audit reports. Barriers to ‘walkability’ included:

* footpaths that are too narrow,
* absent footpaths or footpaths that suddenly end,
* poor surface conditions (e.g., cracks, tilted, uneven, slippery, lodged water from drainpipes, and missing dropped kerbs),
* older poorly designed footpaths with sporadic and inconsistent maintenance,
* hazardous footpath obstructions including raised cobble blocks, overgrown shrubbery, dog fouling, leaf litter and moss, manholes with no covers, utility boxes and poles, rubbish bins, parked vehicles, signage at inappropriate locations, and clutter from businesses,
* markings to delineate the edge of footpaths are either missing, faded, or confusing because of contrasting materials used.

#### Crossings and junctions

Problems related to crossing and junctions were a major issue highlighted across all reports. Challenges raised involved:

* a lack of pedestrian crossings in key locations (e.g., town centres, schools, train stations) or for key functions such as to get to the public toilet,
* dangerous surface conditions around crossings such as missing or damaged dropped kerbs,
* inappropriately positioned crossings such as in busy areas,
* difficulty crossing at certain junctions due to insufficient traffic light signal time for people of all mobility levels to cross safely,
* traffic lights with no sound, needed to alert those with visual impairments when it is safe to cross.

#### Public spaces, facilities and building entrances

Inaccessible aspects of public spaces and buildings were raised as significant barriers to walkability across reports, such as;

* certain prominent areas of towns perceived as completely inaccessible (e.g. market squares/centres, access to bay/beach areas),
* entrances to businesses and buildings missing ramps or have unsafe to use ramps, or when access is only possible at the rear of buildings,
* lack of accessible public toilets facilities or none at all,
* bus stops with no shelters or seating.

#### Road user behaviours

Problematic road user behaviours were also reported as a significant issue, including:

* driving at excessive speeds or not looking out for pedestrians,
* inconsiderate or illegal parking practices such parking on pavements or parking in accessible parking spaces without a blue badge,
* behaviours related to noisy traffic, littering and dog fouling.

#### Public seating

Reports highlighted a lack of adequate public seating, benches, rest spots, or [age friendly seating](https://agefriendlyireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/AFI-Seating-Guide.pdf) as a common major challenge for people with mobility issues.

#### Public lighting

Feeling unsafe due to poor lighting, out of order lighting or no public lighting at nighttime in particular areas was also raised as a significant problem across audit reports.

#### Other issues

Other concerns, less frequently raised but still significant, included:

* Parking: a lack of dedicated and appropriately placed [Age-Friendly Car Parking](https://agefriendlyireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/AFI-Parking-Space-Guide.pdf) spaces or accessible parking spaces. For example, when disabled parking spaces are not well connected to local amenities.
* Signage: a lack of appropriate signage such as when wayfinding signs were either in poor condition, inappropriate, or entirely unhelpful.
* Cycling infrastructure: a lack of bike lanes, cycle paths or bicycle parking facilities add to walkability barriers.

### Areas that enhanced walkability of towns

Of the 32 audit reports, 21 explicitly reported on the following four areas that enhanced the walkability of towns and outdoors spaces.

#### The look and feel of spaces

The look and feel of towns were often reported as an area that enhanced walkability. For example, reports highlighted the value of:

* well-maintained public green areas or private gardens,
* the historic or architectural heritage of towns,
* clean and tidy streets,
* visually attractive areas and pleasant environments such as town centres, sea fronts, river walks, church grounds,
* colourful flower displays in public spaces or outside local businesses.

#### Community spirit

A sense of community can also add to walkability experiences. This was evident in how reports often highlighted that towns had:

* a strong sense of community spirit and volunteerism,
* an engaged business community,
* a strong local Age Friendly Programme,
* a collective ambition to become an Age Friendly community,
* a great sense of pride and sense of place,
* generally friendly people living in the area.

#### Accessibility progress in spaces, facilities, and buildings

When public spaces, facilities and buildings incorporated accessible features, this progress was often acknowledged across reports, such as:

* excellent facilities in new community centres,
* new local authority housing with universal design features,
* access to new greenways as having great potential,
* new handrails in public buildings,
* refurbished and accessible public buildings (e.g., the library),
* good accessibility to local amenities and services,
* the provision of new footpaths on all streets that are generally wide, flat, and in good repair,
* the provision of new bins, sheltered bus stops, and seating areas,
* public toilets when sufficient in number, clean, well-maintained, and accessible,
* new clear forms of signposting.

#### Feelings of safety and comfort

Audit reports also expressed positive comments in relation to feelings of safety and comfort, such as when:

* older people feel they have access to variety of organisations who value their membership and inclusion,
* villages and towns are perceived as safe places to visit or live in,
* participants in audits were happy overall with how well lit the streets were at night.

#### 5. Other issues

* Other positives, less frequently raised but still significant included when: there are good transport connections through towns,
* there is free on-street car-parking in all areas,
* there is good provision of car parking and disabled spaces in the town, especially accessible parking near key amenities,
* drivers generally respect older pedestrians when crossing the street.

### Common actions to improve walkability

In order of the most raised/prioritised areas, the following actions/recommendations to improve the walkability of Towns and Outdoor Spaces were reported.

#### Footpaths

Actions towards improving the accessibility of footpaths were most common and imperative across reports. Priority actions proposed included:

* place street furniture in clearly delineated zones in order to create a clear and predictable layout for the user,
* keep the footpaths free from business paraphernalia including unauthorised signage, trolleys and merchandise,
* undertake an audit of poorly located utility boxes and poles to see if any can be relocated,
* seek commitment from relevant individuals or groups (e.g., roads engineers) that their work will include any identified areas for footpath repair,
* conduct a photographic survey to determine locations of defective footpaths and create priority list for footpath repairs in the area,
* identify the blackspot areas for drainage issue such as rain-water pipes discharging onto the footpath and liaise with relevant stakeholders to repair,
* engage residents association with county councils in order to repair the identified areas,
* create targeted awareness campaigns to relevant audiences (members of public, businesses, utility service providers) to highlight problems with overhanging hedges, street furniture, utility boxes, and dog-fouling,
* work with businesses in relation to on-street signage and other clutter and the negative impact they can have for pedestrians,
* engage with councils to upgrade/improve/replace/paint existing public footpaths,
* ensure all footpath dips are even for exit/entrance of wheelchairs users,
* build new footpaths in accordance with best practice standards so that they are flat, crack free, and dished appropriately.

#### Crossings and junctions

Common priority actions proposed to improve road crossings included:

* review pedestrian traffic light signal timings and audio alerting,
* engage and collaborate with stakeholders/councils to determine the potential for an improved pedestrian crossing,
* make existing partially completed crossing points more visually obvious,
* install traffic calming measures and provision of safe pedestrian crossings especially at schools, in collaboration with schools,
* improve and maintain the road surfaces so that it is smooth and gives priority to pedestrians over motorists,
* improve the provision of safe, accessible pedestrian crossing points,
* invest resources (people, time, finance) to improve, provide new and maintain the road crossings.

#### Public spaces, facilities and building entrances

Actions proposed to improve accessibility around public spaces and buildings included:

* develop/provide dedicated Age-Friendly areas in towns,
* review inaccessible building entrance doors for potential solutions to be found,
* form action committees with an aim to making improvements to public spaces and buildings,
* invest resources (people, time, finance) to improve designated facilities across towns,
* investigate the appropriate re-design of steps to a ramped surface or add alternative ramped access to compliment steps,
* investigate the potential of an urban re-design to improve access to key/prominent public spaces (e.g. market squares/centres, access to bay/beach areas),
* create accessible paths throughout parks to facilitate all users.
* provide Age Friendly Public Toilets,
* fix doors to toilets to allow wheelchair access,
* encourage local businesses to make their toilet facilities available to public,
* install Age Friendly Bus Stops with dedicated waiting areas with seating and shelter.

#### Parking

Common actions proposed to improve concerns related to parking included:

* develop a clear parking policy in the town and enforcement of parking restrictions,
* develop an awareness campaign to highlight the impact of inappropriate or inconsiderate parking,
* identify locations for, and install, Age Friendly and accessible parking spaces,
* consider the purpose of bollards. Ensure bollards do not restrict or impact access and mobility of people with disabilities. When a bollard is considered necessary, design bollards to have a high architectural design and be of high visibility,
* investigate how parking for business deliveries can be better catered for in the town.

#### Public seating

Priority actions proposed to improve and increase the provision of public seating included:

* install Age Friendly seats in appropriate locations; placement of the seats is critical so collaboration with the public is necessary,
* provide regularly-spaced public seating particularly in areas with heavy footfall,
* provide seating at the top and bottom of inclines to facilitate rest periods,
* provide seating on level surfaces with no change in level between the path and the seat platform,
* investigate the potential of using existing utility boxes as public seating; to be agreed with the local authority.

#### Road user behaviours

To improve road user behaviours, suggested actions included:

* work with Garda to request additional checkpoints,
* install traffic calming measures the town is needed as cars can drive too fast, causing stress for pedestrians,
* stop cars parking on footpaths,
* invest resources (people, time, finance) to improve road user behaviour and introduce traffic calming measures across towns.

#### Public lighting and signage

Actions to improve public lighting and signage included:

* engage with county council to upgrade/improve/replace the existing public lights,
* undertake an audit of towns signage,
* plan for clear signage for all areas of the town with a consistent design and uniform standard,
* provide direction signage at decision points and changes of direction,
* follow best practice in Universal Design for signage in terms of font, colour, size, position, height for ease of use by all people.

## Public Buildings

Audits were carried out in and around 16 ‘Public Buildings’. Internal and external areas of most buildings were audited, while four audits just focused on external areas only such as the approach to a nursing home or library.

### Common issues and challenges

In order of importance[[5]](#footnote-5), the issues and challenges that people faced within, and around public buildings are outlined below.

#### Footpaths and crossings

Problems related to footpaths and crossings were the most common priority issue raised across reports. Barriers included: uneven surfaces; narrow footpath; hazardous obstacles; lack of tactile paving at crossings; no handrail at steps; confusing or missing paths from carparks to buildings; and lack of visible pedestrian crossings near buildings.

#### Car parks and parking behaviours

Problematic parking behaviours and inaccessible car parks were also reported as a significant issue, including:

* parking on dipped kerbs or at bus stops,
* the sense of entitlement of motorists to park on footpaths and anywhere they want,
* lack of enforcement of parking laws,
* lack of bike parking, resulting in bikes locked to railings, lampposts etc, creating obstructions,
* lack of Age Friendly and disabled parking near to public buildings,
* disability parking on steep inclines.

#### Signage and wayfinding

Missing, confusing or inaccessible signage and wayfinding procedures within and outside public buildings was the third most common issue raised across audit reports.

#### Public seating

Reports highlighted a lack of adequate public seating and [age friendly seating](https://agefriendlyireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/AFI-Seating-Guide.pdf) as major challenge for people with mobility issues in public buildings.

#### Entrances to public buildings

Inaccessible entrances to buildings were also highlighted as a priority issue including difficulties negotiating revolving doors, confusing wheelchair ramps, lack of colour constants on steps or flooring, as well as check in desks deemed too high for wheelchair users.

#### Internal accessibility issues

The final area of importance concerned inaccessible features inside public buildings. Problems involved too many steps, missing ramps, high counters, obstacles in corridors, lack of audible cues in lifts, lack of automatic doors, narrow corridors, and inaccessible features of ‘accessible’ toilets such as poorly placed toilet roll holders and heavy doors.

### Areas that enhanced walkability of buildings

Of the 16 audit reports, 13 explicitly reported on the following areas that that enhanced walkability within and around public buildings.

#### Internal accessibility features

When public buildings incorporated accessible features, this progress was often acknowledged across reports, such as when:

* accessible ticketing features are found in train stations,
* obvious thought was put into the needs and the safety of the patients in nursing homes,
* handrails were fitted on both sides of the corridor in hospitals,
* ramps were found near reception areas in buildings,
* rooms and corridors were well-lit,
* rooms could be adapted to suit the different patients’ needs,
* communal kitchens and social areas were well designed to give residents in nursing homes their independence,
* Age Friendly initiatives already in place were acknowledged such as books at eye-level, Age Friendly trollies, and Age Friendly champions,
* wheelchair accessible lifts, wide corridors, clear signage, good lighting were in place.

#### Attitudes

Inclusive attitudes of people who worked in and around public building were often reported, such as when:

* staff knowledge, attitude, and willingness to help were noted to make an airport more accessible,
* participants commented on the friendliness and helpfulness of staff, including members of the security staff in a civic office,
* opportunities were in place to work in partnership with management teams to improve building facilities,
* when staff were very helpful in carrying out audits.

#### Other

Other positives, less frequently raised, but still significant included when participants:

* were impressed with the outdoor garden areas and connections to the community,
* felt safe approaching/leaving a nursing home,
* noted accessible external footpaths, crossings, and good road user behaviours,
* when participants noted adequate street lighting approaching public buildings.

### Common actions to improve walkability

In order of the most raised/prioritised areas, the following actions/recommendations were reported to improve the walkability within and around public buildings.

#### Footpaths and crossings

Actions towards improving the accessibility of footpaths and crossing external to buildings were most imperative across reports. Priority actions proposed included:

* provide footpaths from car parks closer to the main entrance of buildings to make access easier for wheelchair and mobility aid users,
* to improve footpath conditions:
  + provide colour contrast on kerbs,
  + refresh faded colour contrast on tactile paving,
  + improve tapering of paths,
  + replace gravel with non-slip smoother surfaces,
  + remove grass verges to make footpaths wider,
  + add rails along paths,
  + replace drains,
  + cut shrubbery back.
* add bollards to prevent motorists parking on pedestrian/wheelchair user crossing point and remove bollards to allow wheelchair access,
* add road markings required to guide pedestrians/wheelchair users to dipped kerbs, and to indicate to drivers that they must slow down and give way to people crossing,
* support an audit of street furniture and prepare priority list of footpath repair works in conjunction with relevant stakeholders,
* request the provision of an additional pedestrian crossing at entrances to buildings where needed,
* extend timing on pedestrian lights and increase volume of ‘pips’,
* paint the crossings to indicate pedestrian crossing points.

#### Signage and wayfinding

Common priority actions proposed to improve signage and wayfinding included:

* provide signage in car parks beside the Age Friendly and disability spaces to help people find their way,
* clearly define walkways in carparks that lead to clearly identifiable pedestrian crossings,
* increase enforcement against illegal parking through more parking wardens and greater visibility of parking wardens,
* consider colour coding on the footpaths to different attractions,
* provide signage at drop off locations and for toilets,
* provide braille on ticket machines and information signage,
* provide large print signage and/or use colour contrasts on ticket machines, handrails, automatic doors, lifts, reception areas, doors, floors, steps, and carpets,
* increase the availability of Hearing Loops at public counters,
* improve signage throughout buildings,
* provide signs that can be lit up or in picture form which would benefit passengers who are non-English speaking or people living with dementia,
* consider positioning ‘meet & greet’ persons at entrances (e.g. to hospitals),
* support the provision of clearly defined walking and cycling lanes to ensure all pedestrians and road users are safe.

#### Communications and engagement

Actions proposed to improve communications and collaboration involved:

* consider communication plans to effectively communicate with older people,
* create policies in airports on dealing with needs of older customers and people with reduced mobility,
* develop bespoke Age Friendly & disability awareness training for staff,
* enhance customer services to cater for as many service requests as possible,
* create ‘one stop shop’ customer service centres,
* collaborate with relevant local businesses and relevant stakeholders to implement accessibility changes.

#### Other actions

Other actions proposed to improve access in, and around public buildings that were less frequently mentioned included:

* increase and provide Age Friendly and disabled parking spaces closer to public buildings,
* increase the range of bike parking options to cater for different bike sizes/types such as cargo bikes and trailer bikes,
* support the provision of age friendly priority seating at appropriate locations in and outside buildings,
* consider the importance of clean, accessible and welcoming entrances to public buildings,
* install and improve toilets so they are accessible to everyone,
* make wheelchair spaces available in waiting areas (e.g. train platforms),
* consider concessions to tourist attractions for older people, families and people with disabilities on quieter days and off-peak hours.

# Conclusion

In summary, this analysis of 48 walkability audit reports provides useful information to inform practice and policy towards reaching accessibility goals for public buildings and the public realm.

Differences found across audit practices and reporting highlight the flexible approach that can be taken to choosing and applying appropriate data gathering tools, methods and methodologies for future walkability audits for similar projects. Audits can and should be tailored to focus on key issues for specific communities. The NDA advises those conducting walkability audits to capture participant information so that it is possible to discern the range of viewpoints being captured. The focus on the perspective and participation of older people with diverse abilities across the audits in this report, while primarily key to goals of age friendliness, can be usefully extrapolated to inform universal design agendas. The NDA advises that training is provided for walkability coordinators in terms of involving a diverse range of people and reporting on who took part, while also adhering to the specific aims of their audits.

Similar challenges and suggestions to improve walkability were found across audits, in particular for audits of towns. Based on 32 reports, the many issues related to footpaths, crossing and junctions are the clear challenges that need to be addressed across Irish towns and outdoor spaces. As some of these challenges and actions are relevant to local businesses (i.e., street furniture) it could be worth engaging and involving wider relevant stakeholders from the private sector in future audits.

In comparison to audits of towns, less audits were carried out in and around public buildings, and even less focused on internal aspects of buildings. Across these 16 reports there was much greater variation in functions of buildings, stakeholders involved, and methods used to collect information. That said, the feedback in relation to problems with footpaths, car parking, and signage, as well as suggestions to improve walkability such as disability awareness training initiatives, can be incorporated into the development of the User Experience Audit tool that will accompany the new ‘[Code of Practice on Accessible Public Buildings’](https://nda.ie/uploads/publications/Code-of-Practice-on-Accessibility-of-Public-Services-and-Information-Provided-by-Public-Bodies.pdf) developed by the NDA.

It is hoped this report can help inform the development of future and complementary tools to assess and improve access to buildings and the public realm for all people.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Audited Towns and Outdoor Spaces** | **County** |
| Cootehill (2018) | Cavan |
| Cootehill (2022) | Cavan |
| Killrush | Clare |
| Killkee | Clare |
| Shannon | Clare |
| Donegal Town | Donegal |
| Dungloe | Donegal |
| Ballyshannon | Donegal |
| Narin/Portnoo Beach | Donegal |
| Howth | Dublin |
| Blanchardstown | Dublin |
| Ballymun Age | Dublin |
| Balbriggan | Dublin |
| Rahney | Dublin |
| Palace Grounds Community Park | Galway |
| Athy | Kildare |
| Celbridge | Kildare |
| Castlefen Housing Estate | Kildare |
| Naas | Kildare |
| Thomastown | Kilkenny |
| Abbeyleix | Laois |
| Mountmellick | Laois |
| Manorhamilton | Leitrim |
| Limerick City | Limerick |
| Knock village | Mayo |
| Foxford | Mayo |
| Athboy | Meath |
| Ratoath | Meath |
| Trim | Meath |
| Ferbane | Offaly |
| Collinstown | Westmeath |
| Moate Town | Westmeath |

## Appendix 2

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Audited Buildings** | **County** | **Internal and/or external areas** |
| Virginia Library | Cavan | Both |
| Cavan General Hospital | Cavan | Both |
| Kingspan Breffni Park | Cavan | Both |
| Shannon Airport | Clare | Both |
| Donegal Airport | Donegal | Both |
| Ballyshannon Community Hospital | Donegal | Both |
| Dublin City Council - Civic Offices | Dublin | Both |
| Galway City Library | Galway | External only (challenges in accessing the library on foot, by public transport and by car) |
| Naas Racecourse | Kildare | Both |
| Ballybrophy Train Station | Laois | Both |
| Portarlington Train Station | Laois | Both |
| Carebright Bruff | Limerick | Both |
| Drogheda | Louth | External only (mini walkability audit to assess the external environment on the approach to the nursing home) |
| St. Brendan’s Unit, Mulranny | Mayo | External only (for the approach to a Nursing Home |
| Laytown Train Station | Meath | External only |
| Avondale House (tourist destination) | Wicklow | Both |

1. https://universaldesign.ie/built-environment/walkability-auditing#:~:text=Walkability%20is%20the%20extent%20to,spending%20time%20in%20an%20area. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This new code is under Ministerial review for signing. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Two audits were carried out in Cootehill, Cavan (one in 2018 and one in 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Issues that were raised frequently or stated as priority challenges in reports. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Issues that were raised frequently or stated as priority challenges in reports. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)