

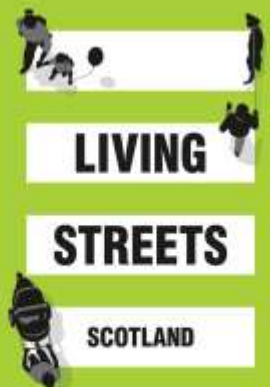


Edinburgh Cowgate

Community Street Audit Report

JUNE 2016

We are Living Streets Scotland, part of the UK charity for everyday walking. We want to create a walking nation where people of all generations enjoy the benefits that this simple act brings, on streets fit for walking.



This project received funding through the Smarter Choices, Smarter Places programme, which is administered by Paths for All and funded by Transport Scotland.



Contents

Executive summary	4
1. Introduction – the project	6
2. Cowgate historical and geographical context	7
3. Summary of Street Review findings	9
4. Street Audits – main problems identified	11
5. Street Audits – key problem locations	18
6. Street Audits – good practice identified	20
7. Street audits – wider policy implications	23
8. Recommendations for action	25
Acknowledgements	28

Executive summary

The Scottish Government's Smarter Choices, Smarter Places programme helps councils to promote sustainable forms of travel. In Edinburgh, the council's programme included a series of street checks aimed at identifying improvements in the pedestrian environment. This work was delivered in partnership with Living Streets Scotland and included a community engagement exercise focused on the Cowgate a busy street in the heart of the old town, where future improvements were being planned.

The community street audit identified a wide variety of under three 'theme' headings:

- (i) roads and traffic issues,
- (ii) pavements and road crossings problems
- (iii) environment quality and ambience.

A key finding is that the overall walking experience in and around the Cowgate is very unpleasant and unsafe, with the pedestrian 'place' dominated by moving and parked traffic. A number of participants suggested that Cowgate is 'the worst street in Edinburgh' for walking.

The audit clearly identified **heavy vehicular traffic** (often perceived to break the speed limit) as the biggest problem for pedestrians. It was noted that vehicle traffic has increased in recent years, partly as a result of a lack of alternative east-west routes across the city. One participant described the Cowgate as 'a dumping ground for traffic'. Pedestrian traffic has also been growing, despite the poor conditions, due to access requirements for students, three newly-opened hotels and festival-goers visiting venues.

In terms of pedestrian movement pavement and road crossing problems were prevalent. **Narrow pavements** (for example, less than a metre wide under George IV Bridge) and the **lack of dropped kerbs or raised crossings** at side streets, mean walking was perceived as both unpleasant and dangerous. Conditions were, particularly bad for older people, and disabled people and parents with children - especially if wheelchairs or buggies were needed.

The overall environment quality and ambience along Cowgate was generally seen as very poor. This is despite the streets inherent historic and architectural interest. This affects not just on residents and local 'transit' pedestrians such as commuters, but also tourists. Such poor environmental quality seems incompatible with the areas World Heritage status. For users of the street, perceptions of **poor air quality** were prevalent and a significant concern. Factors leading to this view include traffic levels, especially

large diesel vehicles and the ‘canyon effect’ of tall buildings aligned with a relatively narrow road corridor.

The key policy theme identified by Living Streets and audit participants was an obvious **failure of enforcement**. This related to a wide range of existing regulations, laws and policies and not just road traffic regulations related to speeding, obstructing pavements, and illegal parking. Of equal concern were infringement of rules regarding A-boards, flyposting, litter, waste management, and on-street table & chair licensing.

Recommendations for action include **‘quick wins’** such as (i) early engagement with CEC staff to gather feedback on audit findings and to discuss timescales for local multi-disciplinary team implementation, and (ii) police enforcement of road traffic regulations.

Recommendations for **‘longer-term implementation’** include:

- (i) creation of experimental ‘chicanes’ under George IV Bridge and South Bridge, providing for just one lane of vehicular traffic, but much increased space for pedestrian movement, and
- (ii) Co-ordinated CEC street inspection / management, embracing all key aspects of the built and traffic environment impacting on pedestrians.
- (iii) Including the Cowgate within a wider traffic management plan for the old town, focused on reducing through traffic and prioritising non-motorised travel

A plan is needed if this street is to reach its potential for both residents and visitors. The streets audit demonstrates many areas where the community want to see improvements. However, given the range and complexity of issues any changes must form part of an overall plan for the street – which delivers a shared vision between residents and the council.

1. Introduction – the project

In early 2016, as part of the Scottish Government supported 'Smarter Choices Smarter Places' programme, the City of Edinburgh council (CEC) commissioned Living Streets Scotland (LSS) to assess six key street corridors from a pedestrian perspective. In the case of Cowgate, a community street audit for Cowgate, involving local people was undertaken. The focus on this street reflected the council's concerns about this street and emerging plans for improvements to the street fabric.

This report follows an expert 'Street Review' undertaken by LSS to confirm the key issues likely to be of concern to both the local community and council officers. It draws out the **main problems** (grouped in three themes), some **key problem locations**, and a few examples of **good practice**, as well as **wider policy implications**, before proceeding to set out **recommendations for action**. These conclusions and recommendations are based on the outcomes of:

- The Street Review by LSS, undertaken over a number of days in February
- Two informal 'walkabouts' in April by representatives of local community groups, and Living Streets Scotland, including Living Street Edinburgh
- The community 'Street Audits' undertaken by four interested volunteers and LSS on 6th / 7th May in conjunction with the LSS team
- A follow-up discussion led by LSS on 11th May, attended by three of the audit volunteers and a further four interested individuals – including representation from the Access Panel, Edinburgh World Heritage, Grassmarket Residents Association and the Old Town Community Council.

2. Introduction – Cowgate historical and geographical context

The Cowgate is an historic street in the heart of Edinburgh's Old Town, running just south of, and parallel to, the Royal Mile. Its name derives from its function in mediaeval times as a major route for cattle being driven to market. It lies in a natural hollow and is crossed, at higher elevation, by two major north-south streets, George IV Bridge and South Bridge and at street level by a number of closes, many pedestrian-only, to both the north and south.

It forms a major east-west route for both pedestrians and vehicles from the Grassmarket in the west to the junction with Holyrood Road in the east, which continues eastwards on to Dynamic Earth, the Scottish Parliament and Holyrood Park. The street is classified as 'Retail / High Street (secondary)' in the Council's Street Design Guidance.

The street is a busy night-time attraction, with many bars, clubs and increasingly people returning to hostels and hotels. This led to vehicles being banned many years ago from using the street from 22.00 until 05.00, for safety reasons. The 'feel' of the street, and the way in which it is used by pedestrians changes significantly from day to night. While the Street Review and Street Audits have been undertaken from a day-time perspective, the various recommended actions would also deliver benefits at night time.



Looking east under George IV Bridge



Looking east towards South Bridge

3. Summary of Street Review findings

The Cowgate is a historic street, accommodating many modern functions and activities. Based on Living Streets Scotland's experience this is a complex street in terms of balancing 'place' against 'movement'. From the initial street review the overall impression was that:

"Pedestrians are overwhelmed by traffic, subject to extensive pavement parking and confined to narrow footways (well outwith the stipulations of the Street Design Guidance). Vehicles, including frequent buses and lorries, pass at significant speed close to pedestrian"

It's clear that historic decisions in terms of traffic management have favoured 'movement' ahead of 'place' in the Cowgate. This situation runs counter to both [Edinburgh's Street Design Guidance](#) and the Scottish Government's [Designing Streets Policy](#).

An initial expert Street Review (including a detailed assessment against CEC Street Design Guidance stipulations) by Living Streets identified no fewer than 192 location-specific problems on Cowgate. These include:

- narrow footways
- lack of level access along pavements
- lack of restrictions on loading and waiting
- street clutter.

As regards management issues, the Street Review reported a number of problems from the pedestrian perspective, in particular:

- volume, speed and weight of traffic
- illegal parking and loading
- accumulations of rubbish
- roads-related debris.



North side, looking west near Blair
Street junction

4. Street Audits – main problems identified

A wide variety of problems were identified in the course of two informal walkabouts with the community in April 2016. In May, two street audits were coordinated by Living Streets Scotland. These harnessed the efforts of interested community members. Soon after the audits were concluded a follow-up discussion with participants identified concerns under three themes:

- (i) Roads and traffic issues
- (ii) Pavement and road crossings problems
- (iii) Environmental quality and ambience

In the discussions with the community it was concluded that:

“The overall walking experience was agreed to be very unpleasant and unsafe, with the pedestrian ‘place’ dominated by moving and parked traffic.”

A number of participants suggested

“The Cowgate is ‘the worst street in Edinburgh’ for walking.”

(i) Roads and traffic issues:

Clearly identified as the biggest problem for pedestrians – among all three themes – was the **heavy vehicular traffic** (often perceived to be breaking the speed limit). It was noted that vehicle traffic has increased in recent years, partly as a result of a lack of alternative east-west routes across the city, one participant describing Cowgate as ‘a dumping ground’ for traffic. Pedestrian traffic has also been growing, despite the poor conditions, due to access requirements for students, three newly-opened hotels and Festival-goers, for example.

Other problems highlighted were:

- the large number of waste lorries, with multiple companies serving adjacent premises (and also passing through Cowgate between jobs) – and related issues of pavement parking by these lorries (working for CEC)
- the large number of tour buses, particularly at the western end of Cowgate, linking to Candlemaker Row
- the large number of delivery vehicles
- endemic pavement parking (not least by delivery vehicles and waste lorries) – including an unsatisfactory formalised ‘dual use’ pavement design at the new Soco development; participants noted that consequent damage to pavements was an ongoing cost to CEC in terms of maintenance expenditure
- a number of bent / displaced road signs for traffic which are no longer clearly visible to drivers, and arguably this will impact on the safety of driving behaviour.



Looking east from under George IV Bridge



Looking west towards West Bow



Looking west at South Gray's Close



Looking east from West Bow to Candlemaker Row



(ii) Pavements and road crossings problems:

Within this theme, key concerns were the prevalence of narrow pavements (for example, less than a metre wide under George IV Bridge) and the lack of dropped kerbs / raised crossings at side streets, making progress along Cowgate on foot both unpleasant and dangerous, particularly for older / infirm people and disabled people in wheelchairs or buggies.

Other problems highlighted were:

- pavement obstructions / clutter – roads equipment (barriers, traffic cones, sandbags etc); utility boxes; signs, poles & other street furniture; waste bins (including the failure of binmen to leave emptied bins in safe positions, avoiding obstruction to pedestrians and disabled people in buggies); and A-boards (particularly at the eastern and western ends of the street)
- mostly poor quality of pavement surface and road surfaces at crossings – but with just a few examples of high-quality surfacing (and adequate width), particularly at the eastern end of Cowgate (north and south sides)
- the lack of sufficient signalled and informal pedestrian crossings of Cowgate at appropriate intervals relating to key pedestrian desire lines
- the related issue of poor walking 'connectivity' to and from Cowgate – including the lack of high-quality / safe links through closes, along Candlemaker Row and along Victoria Street.



Looking east under George IV Bridge



Looking east under South Bridge



Looking east towards Candlemaker Row



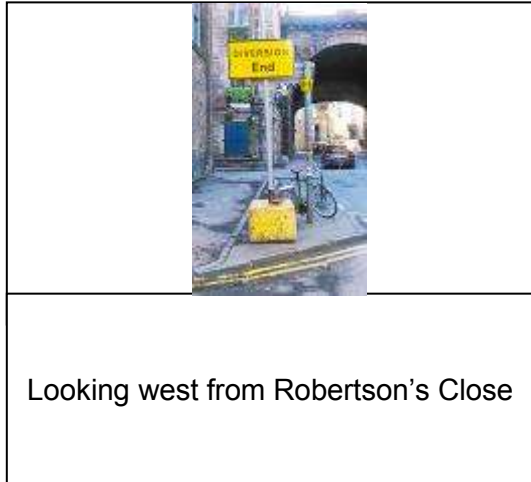
North side, looking east towards Holyrood Road (Old Fishmarket Cl)



Looking west at Dyer's Close



Looking north between South Bridge and Guthrie Street



(iii) Environment quality and ambience:

The overall environment / ambience along Cowgate is seen as generally very poor, despite much of inherent historic and architectural interest in the buildings and streetscape of the Cowgate. This impacts not just on residents and local 'transit' pedestrians, but also tourists – and is completely inadequate for World Heritage status. A key concern is perceived **poor air quality**, with contributory factors being the 'canyon' effect of tall buildings (and a relatively narrow road corridor) and the number of large vehicles such as delivery trucks, waste lorries and tour buses.

Other problems highlighted were:

- litter and dumping of waste
- dirty streets and vennels (eg Anderson's Close, to left of Cowgate Clinic)
- endemic flyposting of signs, poles, and all other street furniture (eg see photo of Dynamic Earth sign)
- poorly-maintained / poorly-accessible historic buildings (eg see photo of Magdalene Chapel)
- dirty, graffiti'd and poorly lit overbridges
- lack of signage / street names – discouraging pedestrian use of closes
- lack of seating in more open, south-facing areas with wider pavements.



Looking south, between Pleasance and High School Wynd



Looking north between George IV Bridge and West Bow (Access Project)



Looking north between George IV Bridge and West Bow (Anderson's Close)



North side, looking east between South Gray's Close and Holyrood Road



South side, looking east from Candlemaker Row junction



South side, looking west towards South Bridge



Looking south, beside St Cecilia's Chapel



Under South Bridge looking north



North side next to Office of the Auditor of the Court of Session

5. Street Audits – key problem locations

The various problems highlighted are not evenly spread along Cowgate. There are particular concentrations of problems at specific locations, notably:

- the **Candlemaker Row junction** – where the carriageway of both Candlemaker Row and the Cowgate is too wide (with traffic speeds consequently too high) and the (informal) crossing and adjacent pavements have very poor surfaces
- **under George IV Bridge and South Bridge** – where pavements are far too narrow, dropped kerbs are absent and the bridge surfaces are dark, dirty and graffiti'd – a widening of pavements, and associated 'chicanes' reducing the carriageway to one lane, are seen as the potential solution
- **Blackfriars Street junction** – the corner radius of the carriageway at the junction with Cowgate has been widened in the past (cutting off the pavement corner) to allow vehicles to turn too fast (eastbound) from Cowgate into Blackfriars Street; adjacent pavements and the crossing surface are also poor
- **High School Wynd junction** – the corner radius to the west is too wide and generous to motorists and the road crossing has a poor surface
- **Stevenlaws Close and Guthrie Street** – this is an important but under-utilised north-south pedestrian route which suffers from the absence of a crossing over the Cowgate; consideration should be given to moving the signalled crossing opposite Blair Street (which has a too-narrow footway at the south) here
- **Junction with St Mary's St / Pleasance / Holyrood Road** – the road is suddenly transformed from two to four lanes wide, making for a lengthy crossing on foot.



Looking north from Candlemaker Row



Under George IV Bridge, looking north and west



Under South Bridge, looking north and east



Blackfriars street junction, looking west



High School Wynd junction, looking east



Junction with Pleasance, Holyrood Road and St Mary's Street, looking south

6. Street Audits – good practice identified

Despite the multiple problems faced by pedestrians on the Cowgate, there are a few places where good practice can be seen. Pavement widths and quality at the very eastern end of the street are of a consistently good standard, and there are a few other stretches where the combination of wide pavements and bollards / recently-applied yellow lining have significantly reduced or eliminated longstanding pavement parking problems. But these are very much the exception.

The introduction of a 20 mph speed limit, as part of the City of Edinburgh Council's city-wide initiative, could be transformative for the Cowgate, if properly enforced. However, as we shall see, a wider failure of enforcement of existing regulations, laws and policies is one of the key factors in the currently poor walking experience.

In the six illustrative photos below clarification of the good practice is given, plus comment on remaining outstanding issues where this is appropriate.

South side, looking east towards South Bridge:

Bollards prevent footway parking – but bike racks have since been added, partially obstructing road crossing opportunities.



South side, looking east towards South Bridge

South side, looking east between Gorge IV Bridge and South Bridge (Edinburgh Sheriff Court):

Flush, well-maintained footway at vehicle access point.



South side, looking east between Gorge IV Bridge and South Bridge (Edinburgh Sheriff Court)

North side, looking east between South Gray's Close and St Mary's Street:

Well-built and well-maintained footway, with no clutter.



North side, looking east between South Gray's Close and St Mary's Street

Looking north, immediately east of South Bridge:

Advertising without footway clutter.



Looking north, immediately east of South Bridge

Looking south to re-opened stairs to High School Yards:

A convenient new link – but not signposted.



Looking south to re-opened stairs to High School Yards

Looking north, immediately west of St Mary's Street:
One of the very few trees on Cowgate – but this spot would benefit from public seating too.




Looking north, immediately
west of St Mary's Street

7. Street audit: wider policy implications

The key policy theme which emerged from the street audits and follow-up discussion with the community was the **failure to enforce** a range of existing regulations, laws and policies that affect the Cowgate's walking environment. This related not just to road traffic regulations (eg speeding, obstructing pavements, parking illegally), but also A-boards, flyposting, litter, waste management, and on-street table and chair licensing.

A related point was the evident absence of co-ordinated **street inspection and management** system. For example, it was clear City of Edinburgh Council (CEC) departments have not been taking responsibility for removing abandoned / redundant roads equipment (barriers, traffic cones, sandbags, etc) and signs, poles and other street furniture no longer required for their original purpose. However, CEC road crews have, within the past month, been present in the street installing double yellow lines along its length.

The size of vehicles was a concern to the community, including bin lorries, delivery trucks and tour buses frequently entering the Cowgate. The large number of bin lorries in part reflects multiple contracts for waste collection this is an area where CEC could consider additional external costs are imposed on the community at large by existing arrangements involving a range of council (domestic waste) and non-council contractors (trade waste). A small but important point, for disabled people and other pavement users, is that if bin men took more care to return emptied bins to where they were left, then needless obstruction of the pavement would be avoided. Meanwhile, the delivery truck problem could be linked to the possibility of a city-wide logistics strategy, more in line with mainland European experience. For example, more progressive continental cities use a bespoke edge-of-town freight consolidation depot redistributing the contents of very large lorries into a fleet of well-loaded smaller electric vehicles. And finally the intrusive impact of tour buses on Cowgate should be linked to exploring the possibility of a ban on large tour buses in the Old Town. This issue has been discussed by the Old Town Community Council and Edinburgh World Heritage and needs to be progressed to improve streets like the Cowgate.



The associated with mitigating the impacts of heavy vehicular traffic along Cowgate (e.g. restrictions or diversions) raises the wider question of developing a city centre **integrated traffic planning and management policy**. This is needed to give much greater priority to more sustainable modes of transport (including walking). A street-by-street strategy risks simply displacing traffic from one vulnerable area to another.

8. Recommendations for action

Three broader contextual points emerged from the audit discussion. First, that while some (but not all) of the recommended actions set out below will incur additional costs (capital and/or revenue expenditure), a broader perspective recognises that ultimately there will be **net benefit from transforming the walking experience** on and around Cowgate. A safer and more pleasant environment will attract businesses, increase rate values, encourage residents to remain in the city centre and draw in more tourists.

Secondly, **long-term and adequate investment is clearly an issue**. However the project shows the type of improvements requiring capital and/or revenue expenditure which could be supported by a tourist tax. Clearly, local hotels and businesses would be the beneficiaries of this type of upgrade to the walking environment in terms of greater patronage. Meanwhile, frustrated residents would see some benefit from the level of tourist activity in this neighbourhood.

Third: residents of the area have seen many City of Edinburgh Council (CEC) consultations over the years without any significant improvement in the quality of their surroundings. There is a danger of disillusionment if robust actions are not delivered to meet local issues perceived to have been ignored for many years. **A plan with clear timescales for action** is required be it for 'quick wins' or 'longer-term implementation', as set out below. The various actions are listed in broadly descending order of suggested priority.

(i) Potential quick wins:

- Early engagement with CEC staff to gather feedback on audit findings and to discuss possible timescales for local multi-disciplinary team implementation
- Police enforcement of road traffic regulations (eg speeding, obstructing pavements, parking illegally), particularly at hotspots such as the Three Sisters
- CEC to provide clarity on the rules and general practices regarding traffic enforcement, and to issue a code of practice and contact details to report problems

- Mobile speed camera enforcement or permanent automated signs to be introduced in co-ordination with 20mph implementation
- CEC monitoring of air quality
- CEC monitoring of footfall
- CEC removal of abandoned / redundant roads equipment (barriers, traffic cones, sandbags, etc);
- CEC removal of signs, poles and other street furniture no longer required for their original purpose, or which can be rationalised
- CEC enforcement of litter and waste laws / regulations
- CEC Waste Department led trial (extending to other contractors), where waste collectors return all emptied bins in a way that avoids creating needless pavement obstructions
- CEC enforcement of licensing conditions for A-boards and on-street tables & chairs
- CEC to put right bent / displaced road signs
- CEC to clean up all flyposted signage and other street furniture
- CEC to erect key pedestrian route / street signs currently missing
- CEC to install seating beside horse chestnut tree at east end of Cowgate
- CEC to assess scope for deliveries to Cowgate premises to be banned after 11.00 / 12.00.

(ii) Longer-term implementation:

- creation of experimental ‘chicanes’ under George IV Bridge and South Bridge – and at perhaps one other location where pavements are particularly narrow – providing for just one lane of vehicular traffic, but much increased space for pedestrian movement
- clean-up of key structures such as the undersides of the George IV and South Bridges, potentially incorporating public art works
- co-ordinated street inspection / management, embracing all key aspects of the built and traffic environment impacting on pedestrians
- review the design of the Cowgate junction with Candlemaker Row, for example removing the roundabout entirely, and the potential for complete closure (and pedestrianisation) of Candlemaker Row

- review the location of pedestrian crossings in the Cowgate to reflect desire lines and safety concerns; especially to consider moving the signalled crossing from Blair Street to just east of Guthrie Street
- greater controls on vehicle sizes: in the case of tour buses, as part of a wider plan for the Old Town; in the case of delivery trucks as part of a wider logistics strategy for the city
- review waste contract policy to consider the traffic side-effects of multiple contractors

(iii) The strategic objective:

The overall strategic objective should be to develop and implement – in conjunction with local interests – a Street Design & Management Plan for Cowgate (as part of a wider Old Town plan), encompassing:

- reduced vehicular traffic volumes / speeds / air pollution and noise
- adequate widths of pavement, meeting Street Design Guidance requirements
- corner radii at junctions reduced to meet Street Design Guidance requirements
- continuous pavement on both sides of Cowgate (through raised tables, dropped kerbs, etc), meeting Street Design Guidance requirements
- well-located pedestrian crossings, based on pedestrian ‘desire lines’ and north-south linkage through closes etc: in the case of signalled crossings, with appropriate limits for the wait for the ‘green man’ and appropriate lengths of ‘green man’ phase.
- improved presentation and maintenance of, and access to, historic features of the street, such as Magdelene Chapel (and adjacent close) and St Cecelia’s Hall
- consistent enforcement of regulations, laws and policies impacting on the walking experience on Cowgate.



Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to all those individuals who participated or contributed to in the street audit, and to the Old Town Community Council and Edinburgh Access Panel.

Photo credit: front cover Flickr user Alan Stanton; back cover Jessica Spengler.



**For further information about how to promote walking in Scotland, please
contact Living Streets Scotland at:**

Thorn House,
5 Rose Street,
Edinburgh,
EH2 2PR

Telephone: 0131 243 2645
Email: Scotland@livingstreets.org.uk