

# Hertford High Street Recovery – Parliament Square and Fore Street Engagement Survey Report

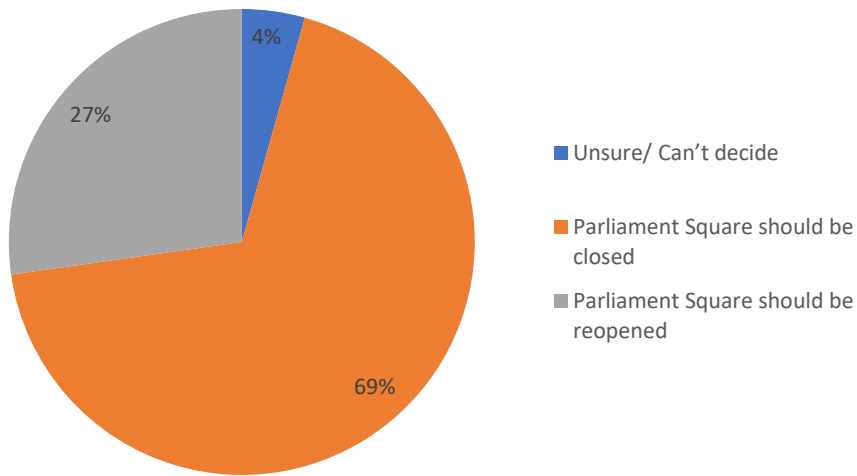
**Topline statement:** Due to the level of public support, the project team would like to propose that

- the Parliament Square area of the trial is taken permanent with some minor amendments subject to resolution of the lodged formal objections;
- the Fore Street scheme is also made permanent; and
- concept designs to enhance walking and cycling are pursued.

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1. Between July 2022 and July 2023 the project's online engagement survey has been active and 1,356 completed responses were received. For a Highways consultation this is considered a very good result however this sample size would be regarded as statistically insignificant to produce an accurate opinion for the population of Hertford overall.
- 1.2. Based on the feedback received so far, **40%** of respondents were supportive of both sections of the trial as they presently stand without any changes. This rises to **55%**, who, as well as supporting the traffic closure of Parliament Square, would like the changes to Fore Street retained with minor changes.
- 1.3. **69%** would like the Parliament Square element of the trial made permanent (Chart 1). Supporting comments praised the feel of the area, that it has created a safe, social space that is good for the business in the area and attracts footfall supporting other areas of Hertford. The outdoor seating, dining and drinking opportunities are also praised by many of these respondents. Of those that prefer the area to be re-opened, comments centre around perceived congestion and car travel time, perceived air quality degrade from queuing traffic, and the lack of a release valve/cut-through when there are issues on the A414.
- 1.4. **42%** of respondents would like the changes in Fore Street becoming permanent, with a further 17% wanting the changes to be kept but with some minor changes. (mainly about tidying or removing the planters, providing some pop-in parking, creating more pedestrian space and clarifying the signage. (Comments included, for example, what does loading actually mean, is it for businesses only, can blue badge holders use the space?) Therefore, **59%** of respondents would like the changes to Fore Street retained (Chart 2). 36% would like the changes in Fore Street to be removed.

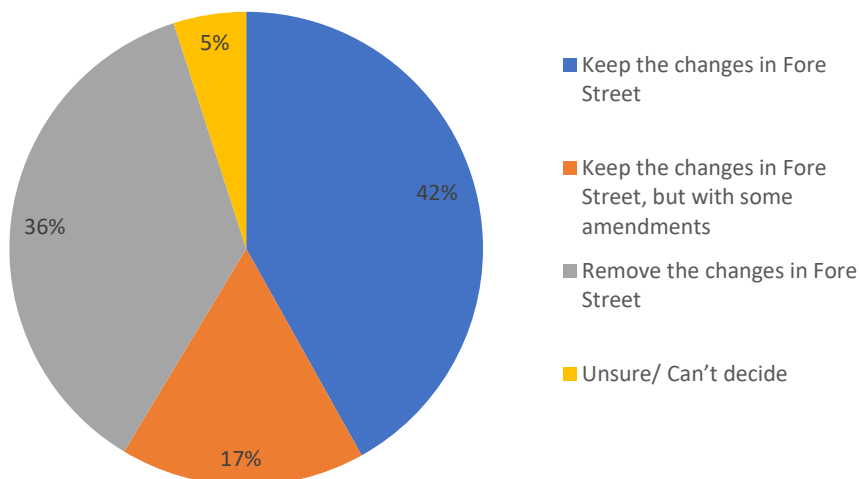
### Overall Parliament Square Open or Closed



Unsure/ Can't decide	59
Parliament Square should be closed	924
Parliament Square should be reopened	368

**Chart 1 – Overall Parliament Square Open or Closed**

### Overall Changes in Fore Street



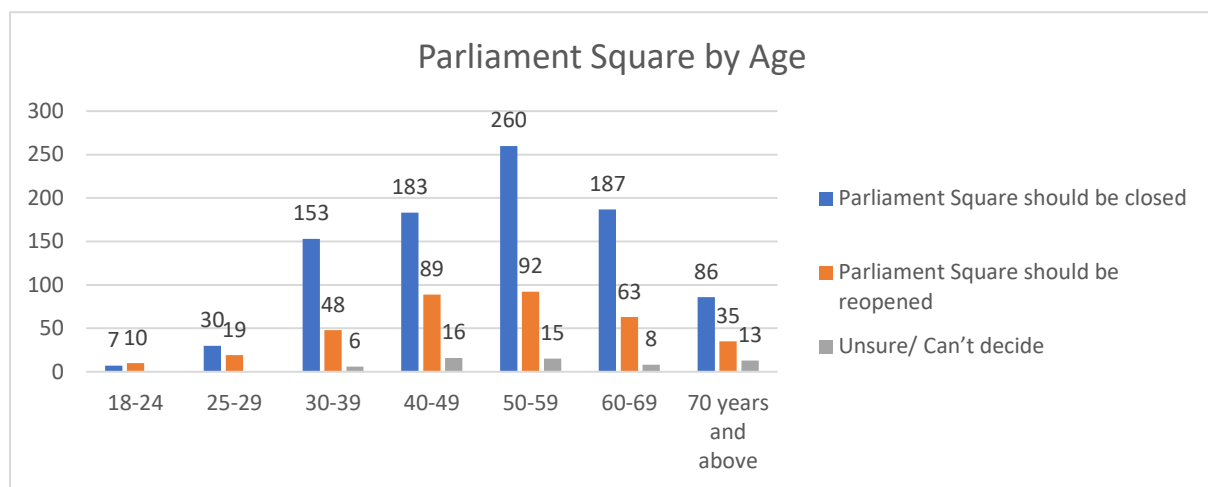
Keep the changes in Fore Street	566
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Keep the changes in Fore Street, but with some amendments	226
Remove the changes in Fore Street	492
Unsure/ Can't decide	67

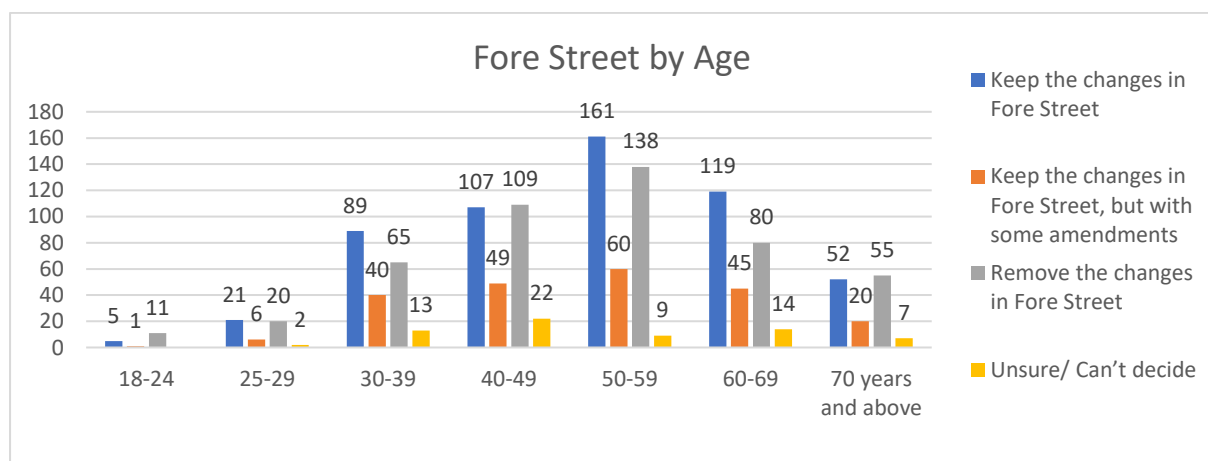
**Chart 2 – Overall Fore Street: keep or remove**

## Equalities

1.5. The modal age group of people responding to the survey is 50-59 year-olds, with the majority of responses coming from ages 30 to 69. In all age groups except 18-24 a majority of respondents are supportive of Parliament Square remaining closed (Chart 3). Age groups 30-39, 50-59 and 60-69 are most likely to be supportive of retaining the changes in Fore Street.



**Chart 3 – Opinions by age – Parliament Square**



**Chart 4 – Opinions by age – Fore Street**

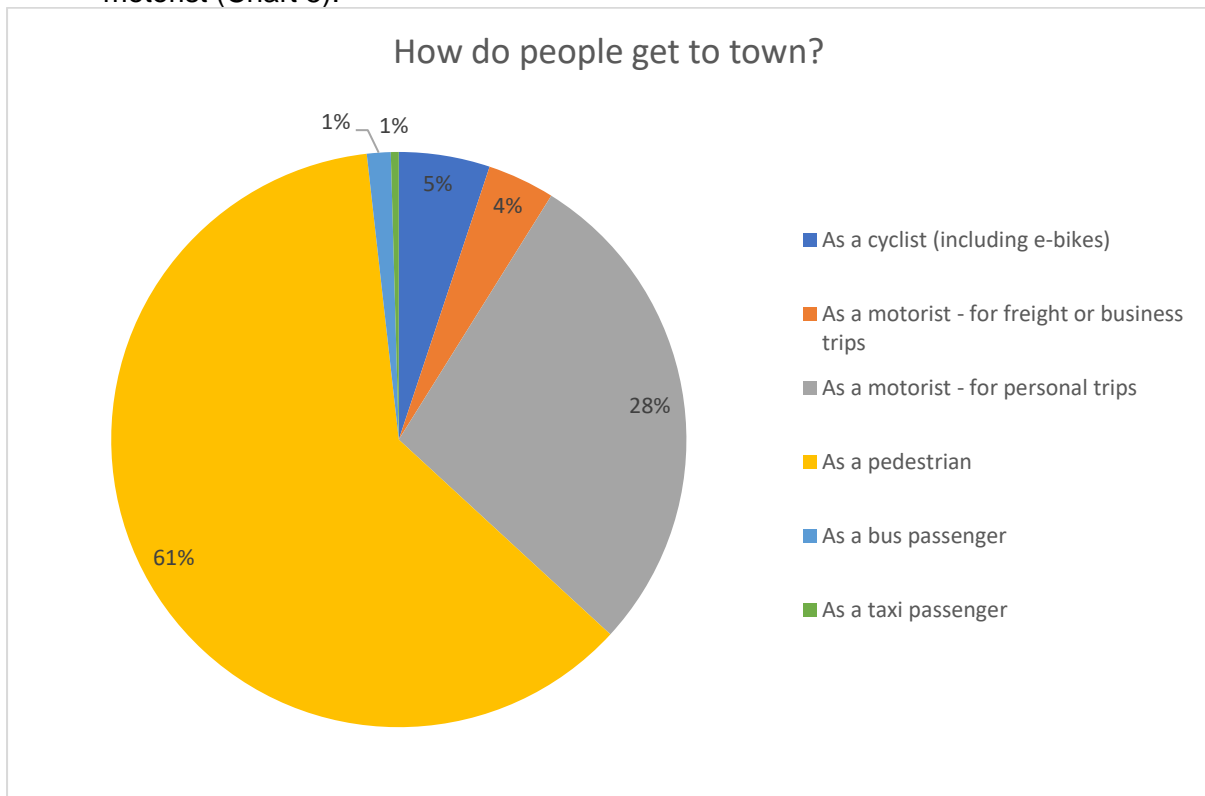
Analysis reveals a similar pattern of support for the Parliament Square closure amongst females and males. Females are slightly more likely to want the Fore Street changes to be removed. It is reasonable to have the perception that females often bear more burden for chained journeys (i.e. to schools/shops), so may value short stay parking more. Females were more than twice as likely to state that they visit Hertford as a motorist for personal trips than males. A survey respondent highlighted that they felt unsafe while walking through Parliament Square as they could not see past the large planter, expressing concern

someone could be hiding behind it. This will be considered as part of a revised equalities impact assessment and can be remedied by removal or realignment of the planters to ensure sight lines.

Responses from different ethnicities seem broadly aligned with no discernible differences in sentiment among different ethnic groups. Because of small response numbers in some instances, it is impossible to discern whether this is a valid assertion or not.

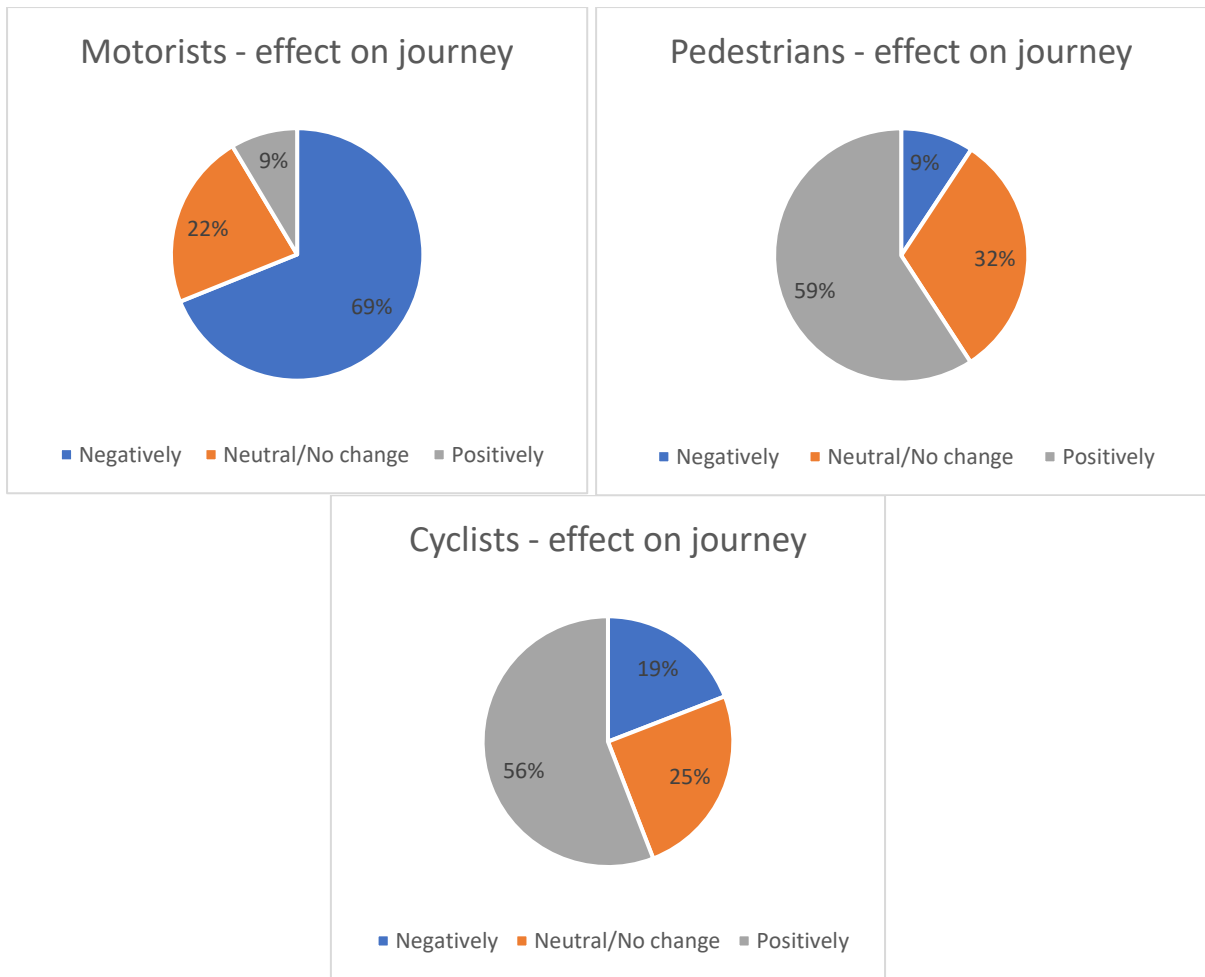
## 2. Perception of Journey and Preference by Modes of Transport

2.1. 61% of respondents most often travel to town on foot, with 32% travelling as a motorist (Chart 5).



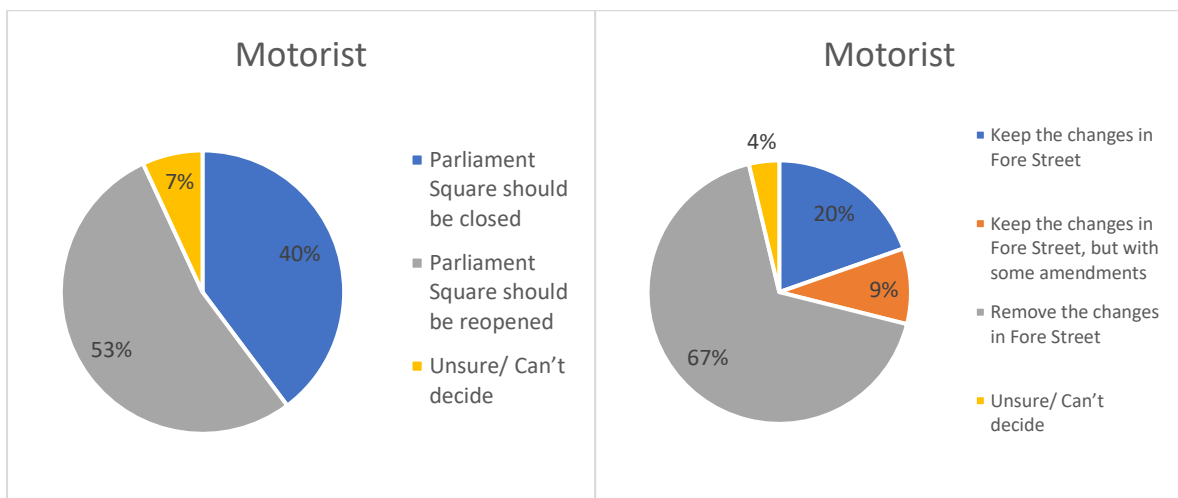
**Chart 5 – Journey by modes of transport**

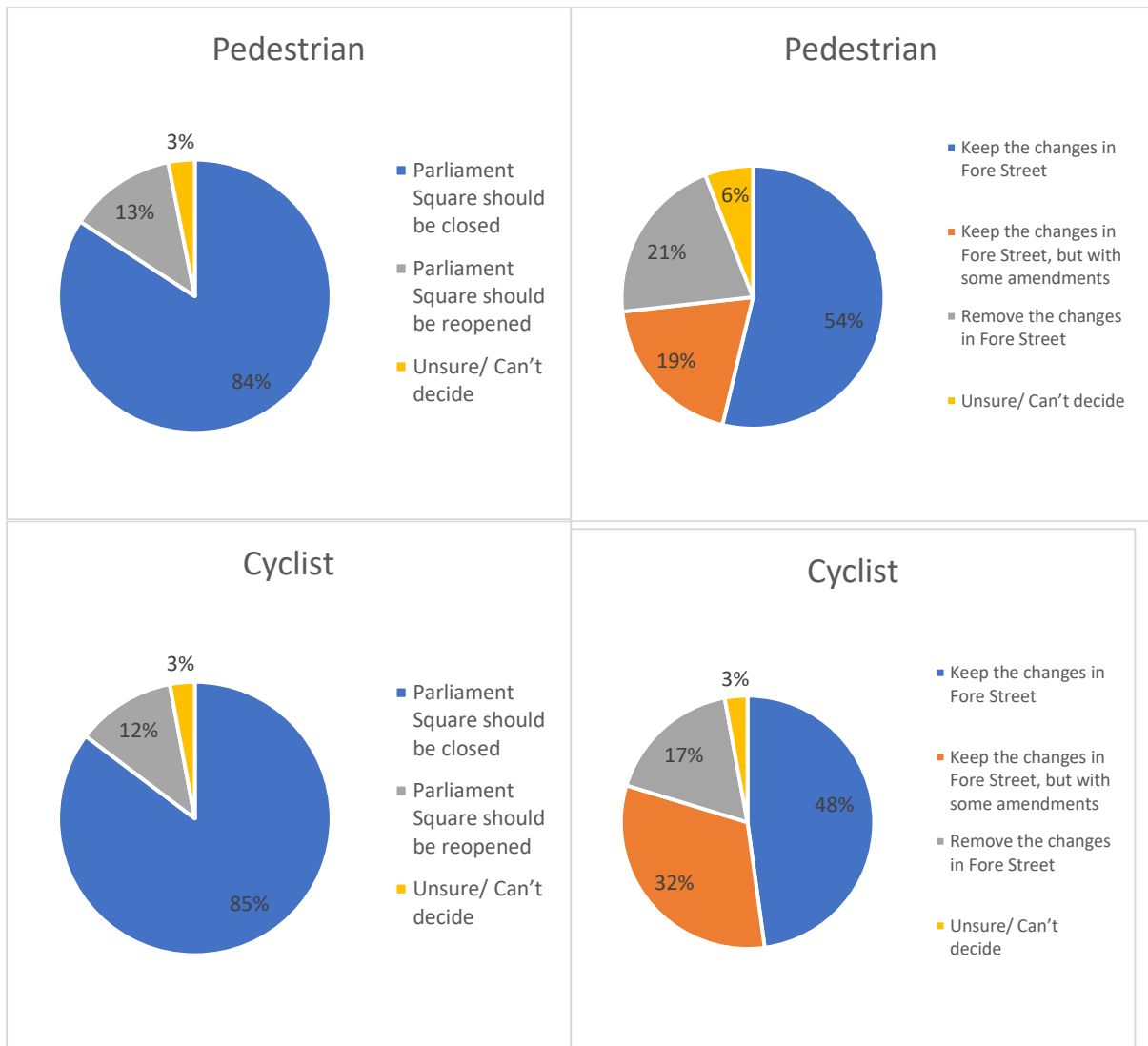
2.2. Chart 6 shows perceived impact on journey comparing motorists, pedestrians and cyclists. Almost 70% of motorists consider their journeys have been negatively impacted by the trial, while a majority of those that travel on foot or by bike feel the effect has been positive. While their number is lower, a greater proportion of cyclists than pedestrians feel their journey has been negatively impacted. When considering comments, this is likely to be because of street clutter and a lack of a defined space through Parliament Square impacting journeys. One respondent noted that their partner (with a mobility impairment) uses an adapted cycle that does not fit past the large planter. This will be addressed in the revised equalities impact assessment and can be resolved by realigning or removing the planter.



**Chart 6 – Effect on journey: views of motorists, pedestrians and cyclists**

2.3. The majority of those who usually visit Hertford by car oppose to the trials remaining in place, though this is by a small margin in the case of Parliament Square (53%). Two-thirds would like the Fore Street changes removed. However, the majority of those arriving by foot or by cycle support both trial areas being made permanent by at least 70%. (Charts 7a-f).

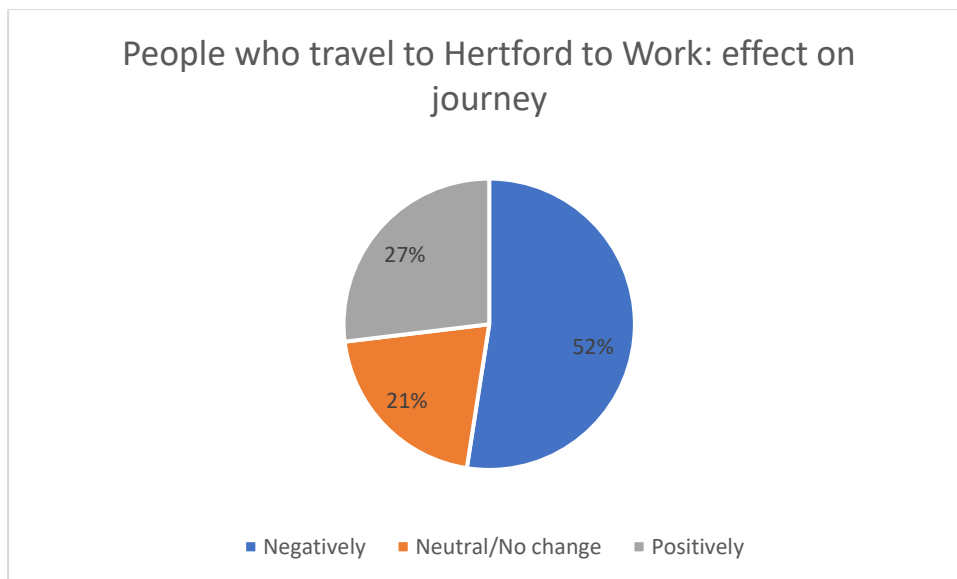




**Chart 7a-f: Trial Perception by Mode of Transport**

### 3. Business & Employment Viewpoints

3.1. A small majority (52%) of respondents that work in Hertford indicated that they feel their journeys have been negatively impacted by the trials. (Chart 8).

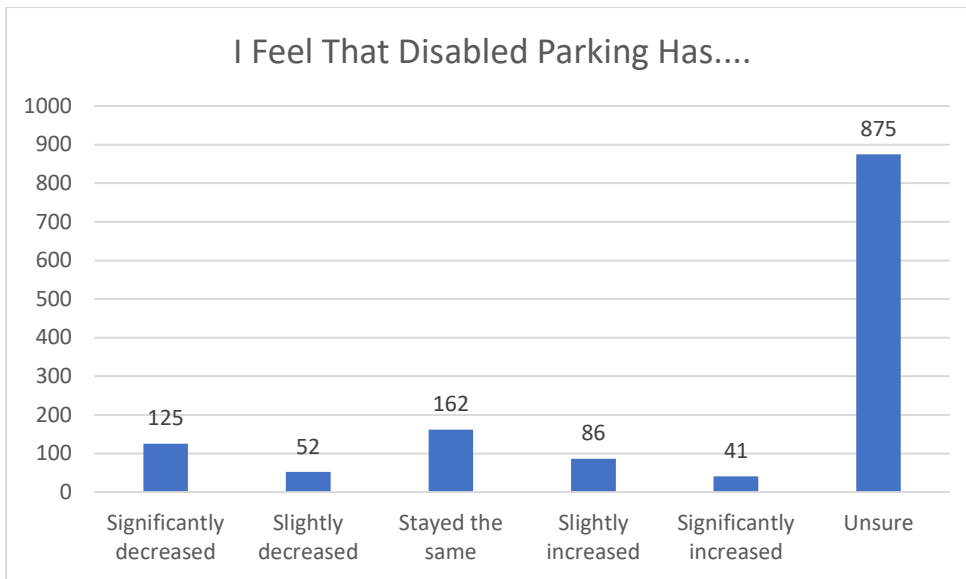


**Chart 8 – Effect on journey: work in Hertford**

While the survey was targeted at the public, 19 responses were received on behalf of businesses. 11 businesses expressed a preference that Parliament Square should be reopened and 12 thought that the changes in Fore Street should be removed. Because of the small numbers of businesses responding it is not possible to draw conclusions from this. A specific business survey could provide a more comprehensive understanding of business sentiment. Our experience is that business surveys do not always attract a large number of responses and on occasion local issues that businesses can influence (i.e. the High Street Recovery trials) are blamed instead of larger issues that businesses cannot influence (i.e. the cost of living crisis).

#### **4. Blue Badge Holders and People of Infirmity**

- 4.1. 58 respondents indicated that they held a Blue Badge, 32 of which stated they would ordinarily travel the Hertford using a car, 20 as a pedestrian, 3 via bus and 3 on a cycle. 29 of those driving felt the trial had a negative effect on their journey. Overall speaking, 44 thought the trials had a negative effect on their journey (71%).
- 4.2. 72 respondents indicated they had a long-term illness, disability or infirmity which limits their daily activities. Again, the majority (61%) of respondents felt the effect of the trials was negative on their journeys.
- 4.3. The closure of the Parliament Square cut through has impacted bus services who has previously been using it, therefore bus operators have formally objected to the traffic order. People living with illness, infirmity or disability are often more reliant and dependent on bus services than the able bodied, therefore not surprisingly the three bus travellers all feel their journeys have been negatively impacted. When looking at comments, it is clear that street clutter and planters have had, in some cases, a negative impact on accessibility. A permanent scheme could look to address level issues and obstructions so as to reduce and remove accessibility barriers in Hertford. Interest groups could be consulted in formulating this.
- 4.4. When analysing comments from individuals, there is some confusion as to what Blue Badge provision is available. There was a mixed response as to whether disabled parking provision had increased or decreased (see Chart 9). There is misunderstanding over whether Blue Badge holders can park in loading bays. There is misunderstanding over the function of Bull Plain and what parking is or isn't allowed there. According to comments, the loading bay and permit holder only area at Parliament Square is also abused. Signage is sometimes hard to interpret, and particularly challenging for people with neurodiversity.

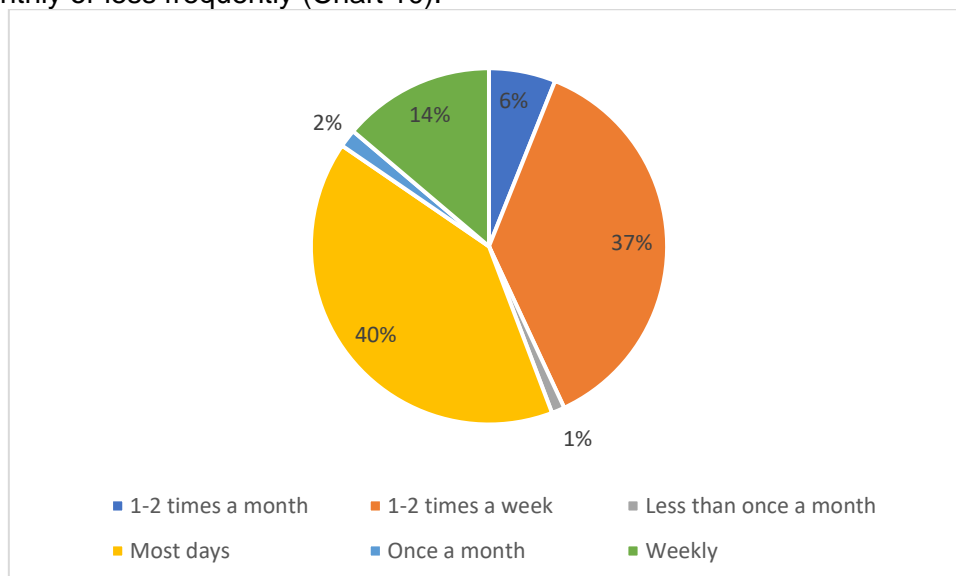


**Chart 9: Perceptions of Blue Badge parking provision**

4.5. The Equality Impact Assessment considers the impact of the trials and considers whether it discriminates in relation to the nine protected characteristics. The document concludes that trials open up space and makes roads easier to cross, though it does concede that some of the heritage surfacing and level differences between footway and carriageway do not provide easy transitions, particularly for anyone with limited mobility. This is exasperated sometimes by the presence of A-boards and other obstructions placed on the footways. The EQIA will be revised following the comments received.

## 5. Town Usage and Congestion Issues

5.1. 91% of respondents visit the town centre weekly or more frequently; only 3% visit monthly or less frequently (Chart 10).

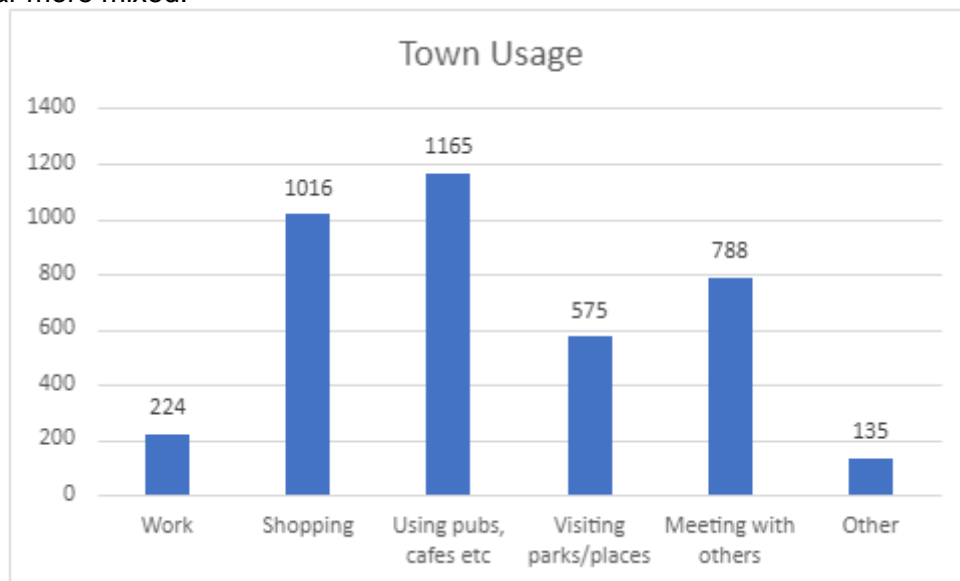


**Chart 10 – Frequency of visiting the town centre**

5.2. 86% of respondents used the town centre for visiting pubs and cafes as one of their main reasons for visiting. Shopping was also a main reason, cited by 75% (Chart 11).

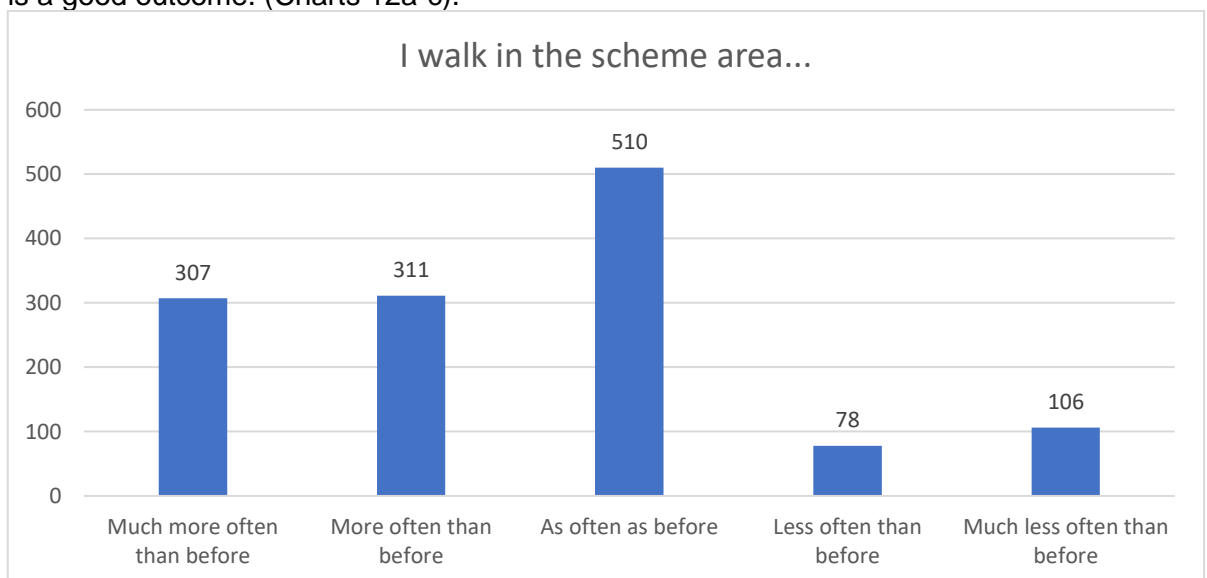


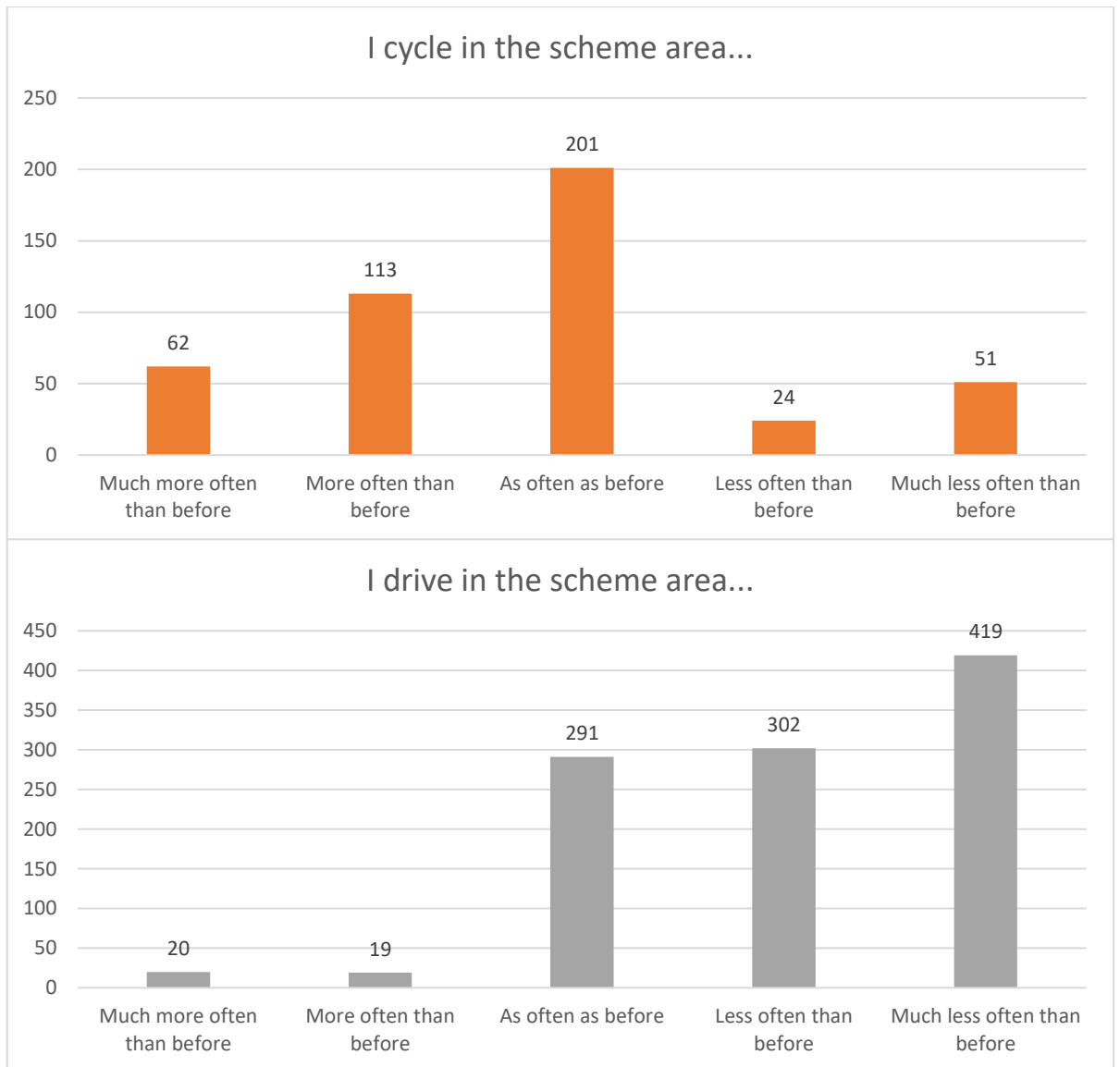
Hertford town centre showed similarity with Hitchin, where there is a large hospitality base and similarly positive response to their High Street Recovery trial. At St Albans and Rickmansworth, reasons for visiting were more likely to be shopping, work or visiting parks and spaces as visiting pubs and cafes. For these trials, responses were far more mixed.



**Chart 11 – Town Usage**

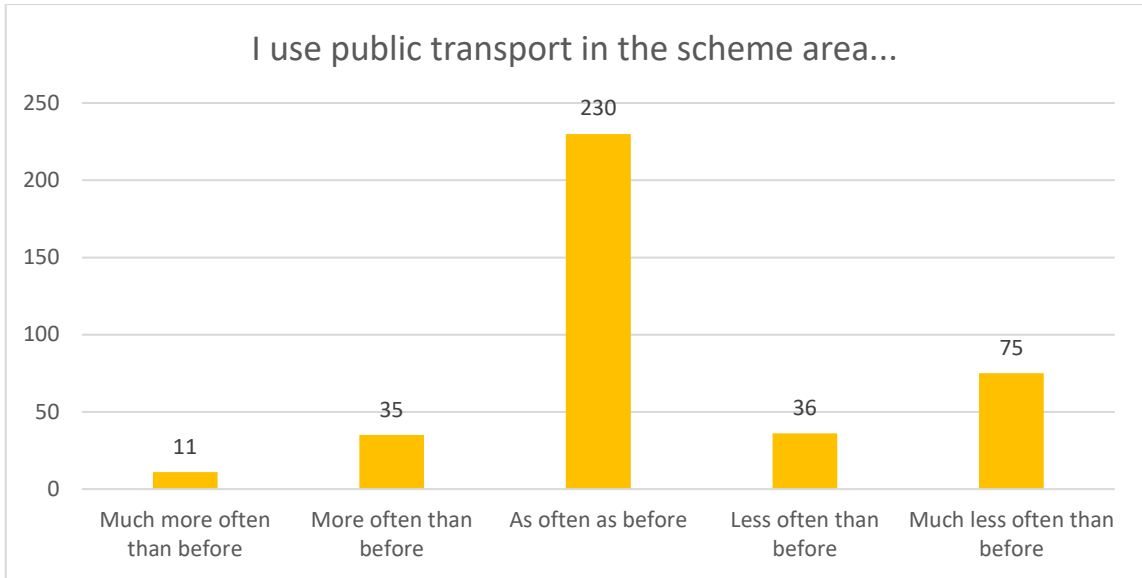
- 5.3. 86% of respondents stated that they walked more or as often as before in the trial area. 84% cycled more or as often before in the trial area. 69% of respondents said they drive in less in the area in comparison to before the scheme. In creating a space that feels safer and traffic free, discouraging traffic away from a people focused, this is a good outcome. (Charts 12a-c).





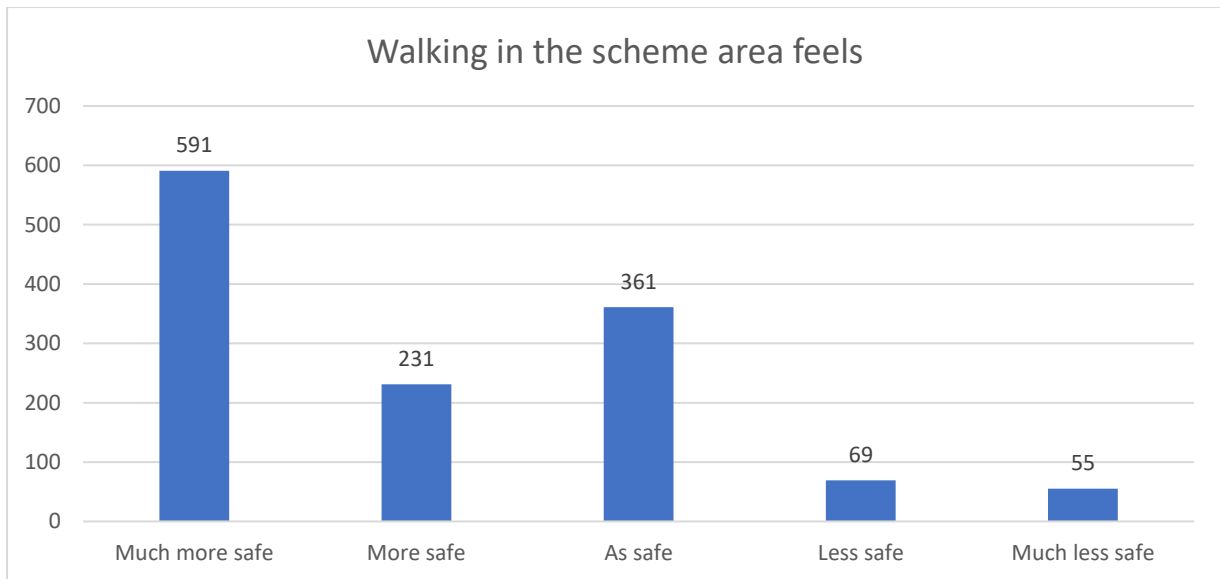
**Chart 12a-c - Journeys within the scheme area**

5.4. 387 people responded how their use of public transport had changed. While 71% stated they use public transport as often or more often than before, 29% indicate they use it less often than before. While it is encouraging that 12% are using the buses more, potentially representing the fact that Parliament Square is a potential destination for some. Formal objections to the trial have been received from bus operators because of the loss of a bus priority section through Parliament Square. The basis of their objection is the impact the scheme has on diverting buses onto Gascoyne Way which is congested at peak times, impacting scheduling, diverting away from the centre of town and putting people off buses. Another approach to consider is to see how to encourage the 71% who did not respond to the question (who potentially do not use the buses) as to how they might see the benefits of catching the bus into town to visit pubs, restaurants and cafes (Chart 13).



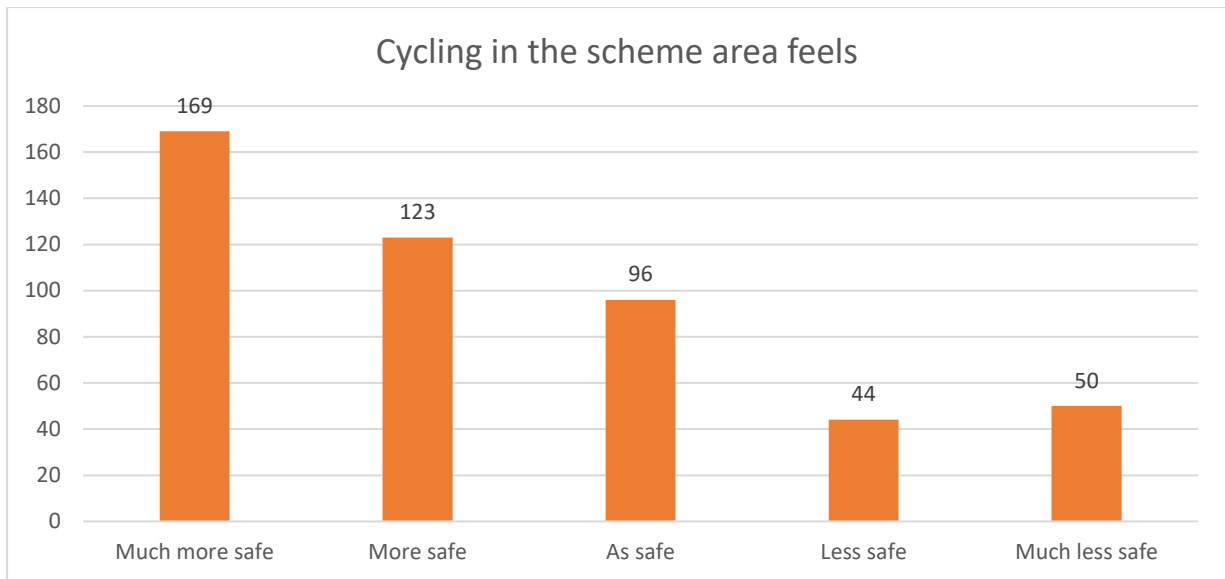
**Chart 13 – Public transport journeys in the scheme area**

5.5. Over 90% of respondents felt walking in the trial area at least as safe as before, with 63% saying it felt more safe (Chart 14), obviously with pedestrianisation of area.



**Chart 14 – Perception of safety by pedestrians**

5.6. Of those giving an opinion, 60% of respondents felt cycling had been made more safe or much more safe (Chart 15). Just under 20% feel it has been made less safe. This might relate to the perception of obstructions and access issues through Parliament Square.



**Chart 15 – Perception of safety by cyclists**

5.7. The modal response relating to traffic congestion and journey times in and around Hertford was that they have stayed the same (Chart 16a-d). 39% of respondents felt traffic congestion has worsened. 39% felt journey times to the town have increased. 46% thought journey times through the town centre have increased. 49% thought journey times across Hertford have increased. 23% of respondents actually thought traffic congestion has improved in Hertford. Speed and volume data shows that more than 3,500 vehicles daily used Fore Street prior to the trial. Some would have come into conflict with buses travelling contraflow through Parliament Square and this would frequently cause congestion issues along narrow streets. Congestion was frequently cited in comments by those whose preference is that the road is reopened. There are 119 specific references in comments relating to worse or displaced traffic, and 45 specific references to longer journey times. They argued that the situation has become worse through the Wash and along Gascoyne Way. Some specifically commented that there is a lack of what is described as a “release valve” when there is an incident on the A414. Some residents of Folly Island were frustrated as well that when using their cars they have to pass through the Bluecoats roundabout to get to and from their houses. As Chart 12c previously demonstrated, most respondents were stating that they drive less in the scheme area.



**Chart 16a-d: Congestion and journey times**

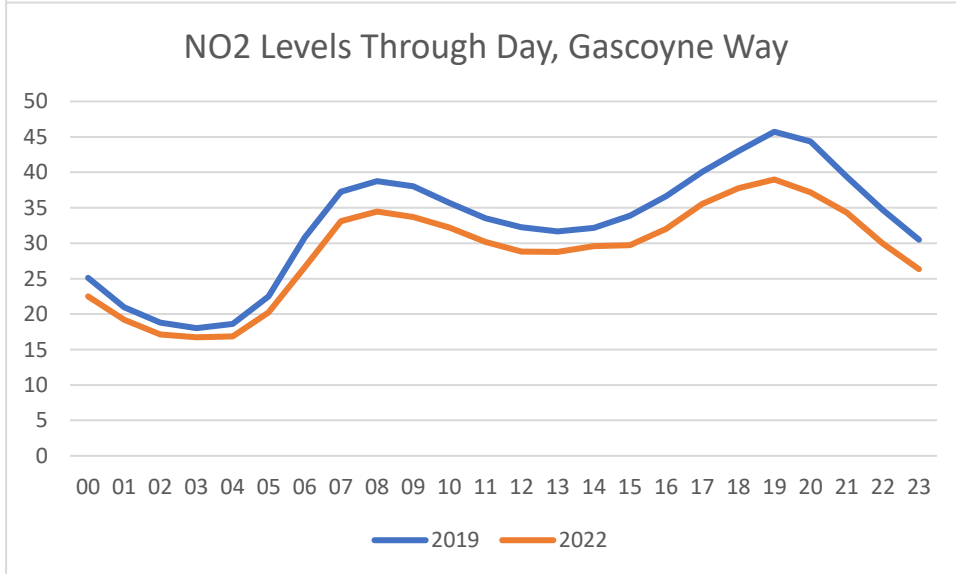
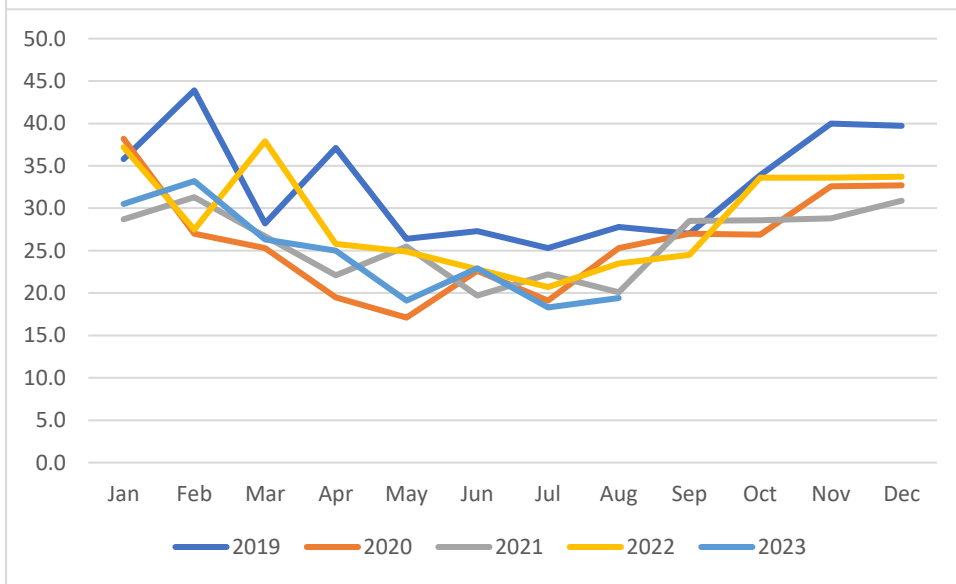
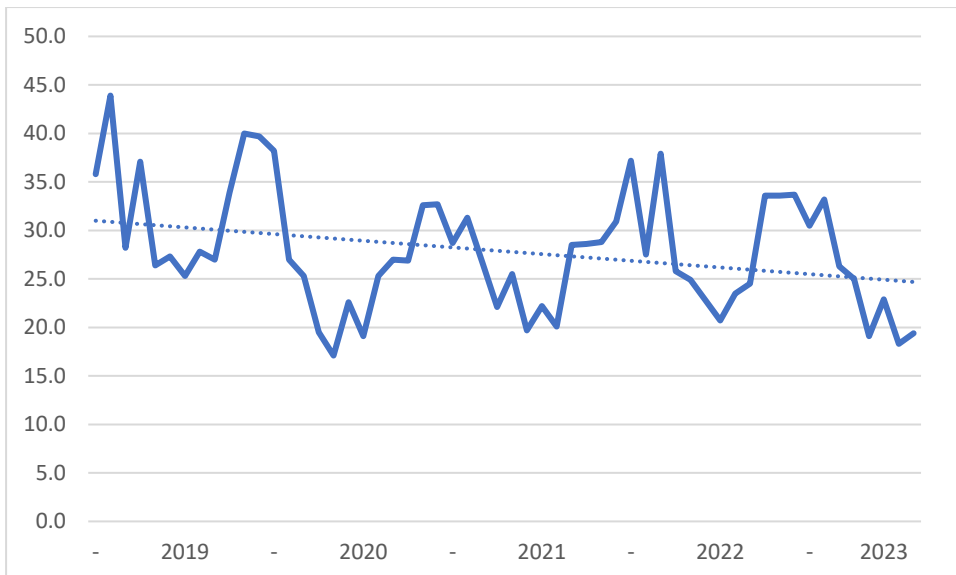
## 6. Air Quality and Traffic Noise

- 6.1. 43% of respondents felt air quality in Parliament Square has improved. 9% thought it has worsened (Chart 17a).
- 6.2. 38% of respondents think air quality in Fore Street has improved. 9% think it has worsened (Chart 17b). While more work is required, initial investigations indicate that NO<sub>2</sub> concentrations in Hertford town centre have not been unduly impacted by the trial.
- 6.3. When commenting views about the scheme, 51 respondents cited worsened air quality and only 9 cited improved air quality. As seen with other trial schemes, people opposed to road closures were more likely to claim an assumption of worsened air quality caused by increased congestion and journey times to justify their position.



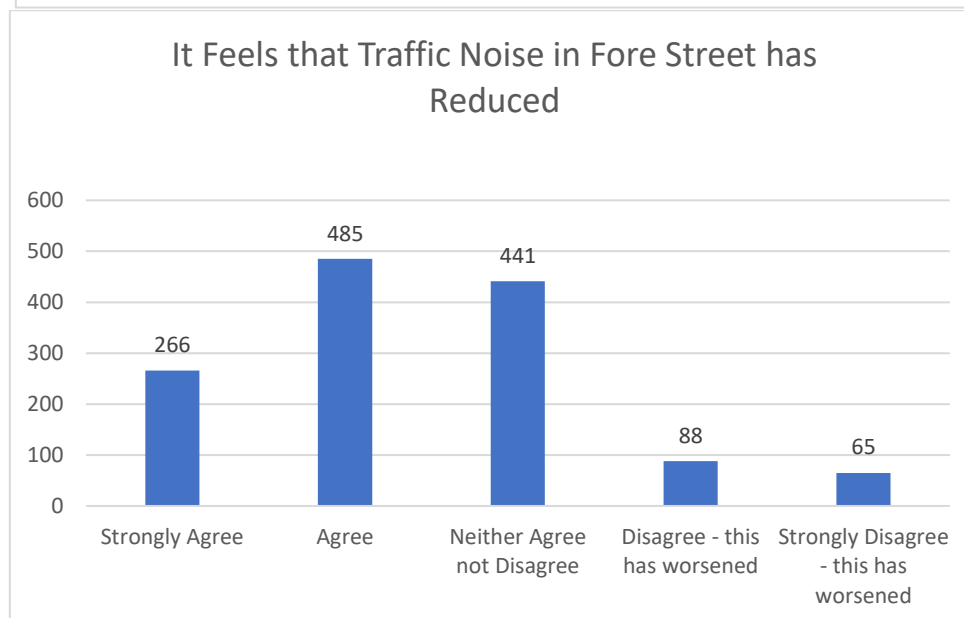
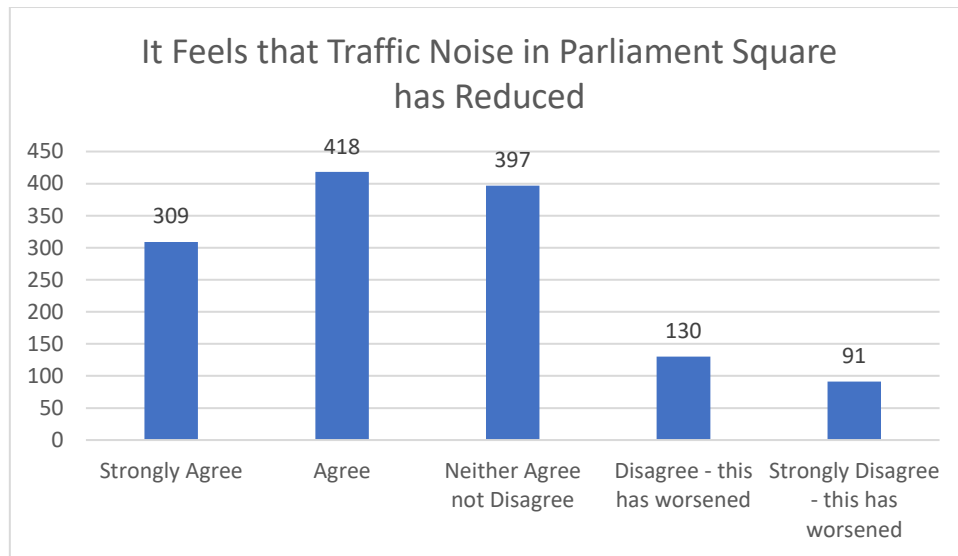
**Chart 17a-b – Perception of air quality**

- 6.4. There has been a 10% reduction in NO<sub>2</sub> levels when comparing 2022 to 2019 air quality in Gascoyne Way using monthly averages. There are a number of factors that are influencing this reduction and it cannot be attributed to the scheme. However, there is no evidence of adverse impact on air quality caused by any traffic displaced onto Gascoyne Way. Gascoyne Way is an Air Quality Management Area. This monitoring site last exceeded the government’s threshold targets in 2019. Peak evening traffic does not, on average, cause NO<sub>2</sub> levels to exceed 40ugm-3. 2023 data is currently below the trend line (Chart 18a-c).



**Chart 18a-c: Air quality: NO2 levels Gascoyne Way 2019 to present**

- 6.5. 54% of respondents thought traffic noise has reduced in Parliament Square. 16% felt it has worsened (Chart 19a). It could be that proximity to traffic in the Wash that might have led those feeling it had been worsened.
- 6.6. 56% of respondents thought traffic noise has reduced in Fore Street. 11% felt it has worsened (Chart 19b). Less people have a negative view of noise in Fore Street than Parliament Square perhaps because of a perceived reduction in circulating traffic looking for parking and less use by buses (excepting the period where the bus station was temporarily closed).
- 6.7. There were 24 respondents that specifically commented on noise; 16 citing it had been made worse, 8 citing that it had been made better. Those feeling it had been made worse often commented about excessive noise from restaurants and bars.



**Chart 19a-b – Perception of traffic noise**

**7. Look and Feel of the Area and Footfall**

- 7.1. 71% of respondents thought the Parliament Square had a more pleasant look and feel, while 15% disagreed (Chart 20a).
- 7.2. 55% of respondents thought the Fore Street looked and felt more pleasant, while 26% disagreed (Chart 20b).



7.3. 173 respondents specifically commented on the better environment that the trial had created. Only 12 respondents specifically commented that the environment had been made worse.



**Chart 20a-b – Perception of look and feel of the area**

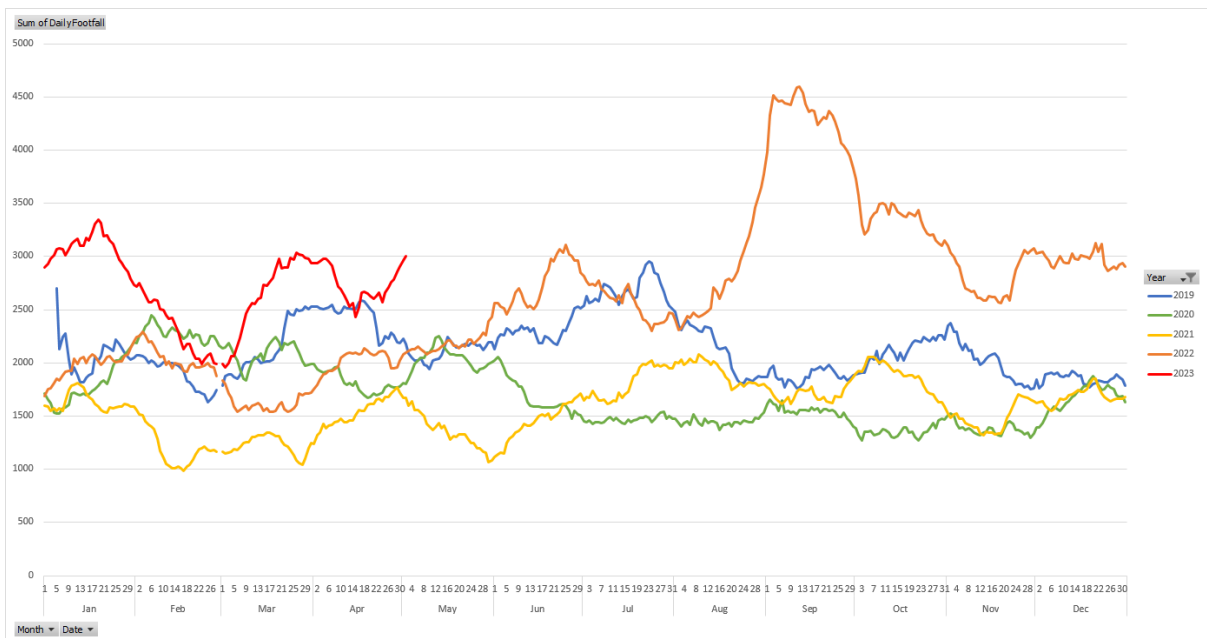
7.4. 53% of respondents stated they spent more time in Parliament Square and 36% stated that they spent more time in Fore Street. Due to the stickiness of cafes, bars and restaurants, it is perhaps inevitable that more people feel they spend more time here.

7.5. 17% claimed they are spending less time in Parliament Square and 22% indicated they are spending less time in Fore Street (Chart 21a-b). It is inevitable in these surveys that a certain proportion of people who were upset about a loss of free short stay parking, stated they are no longer visiting the area.



**Chart 21a-b – Time spent in the area**

HUQ data shows footfall based on mobile phone location data. Average footfall in Q4 of 2022 tracked 3,037 unique visitors per day. This was an increase of 86% year-on-year in comparison with Q4 2021, showing impressive post-Covid recovery. The linear graph from 2019-April 2023 and year-to-year comparison (Charts 22a-b) shows footfall throughout 2022 and 2023 is almost always above 2019 pre-Covid and pre-trial levels. (Chart 22b – the blue line is 2019, the orange line is 2022 and the red line is 2023.) HUQ’s 2022 report for East Hertfordshire towns states: “Hertford currently attracts the highest footfall among all centres measured, and its average daily unique footfall is 25% above the overall East Hertfordshire mean”.



**Chart 22a-b – Footfall, Hertford**

## 8. Other Comments and Responses

8.1. Further analysing themes raised in comments from consultation, there is a considerable portion of respondents (14%) requesting the reverting of provision of short-term parking in the Fore Street. Reading this in relation to the frequent mentioning of “planters” in these comments, the respondents considered the poorly maintained planters, occupying the original short-term parking which they believed to be beneficial to the local business by enhancing car accessibility for short shopping trips, should be removed.

8.2. 173 comments mentioned the environment being better in Hertford centre as a result of the scheme. (Only 12 commented that it was worse). Amongst respondents who were supportive of the trials, the provision of outdoor eating and drinking, creating a “a more European cafe vibe with the seating” is one main reason. For those opposed

- to the trial, themes tended to focus around congestion, air pollution, reduced accessibility (for car traffic) and a feeling any concessions of public space away from the car would have a negative economic impact on the town centre.
- 8.3. Certain number of respondents suggested closure of Parliament Square only in the summer time with the argument that outdoor seating is beneficial only when weather is nice and warm.
  - 8.4. 76 respondents commented that they felt the trials had made the situation worse for businesses; 35 comments included it made things better for businesses. This is the impression by the general public. As previously analysed in paragraph 3.5, with the consideration of comment from business reopening Parliament Square and Fore Street might be more favourable to businesses. A more business-focus survey would deem to capture business sentiment in a better way, especially on the effect of the trial to business compared to more general economic environment.
  - 8.5. Echoing the results in paragraphs 5.5 and 5.6, 44 respondents highlighted that they felt safer visiting the trial area, mainly because of the pedestrianisation. Having said that, we received some comments about feeling less safe of the area, with diverged reasons including anti-social behaviour in the streets in the night, weaving of cycles among outdoor seating at Parliament Square, etc.
  - 8.6. Alternative or complementary suggestions included 20mph zones, better parking enforcement, amending the closure to a weekend-only (or evening-only) one and an effective bypass for the Gascoyne Way.

## **9. Conclusion**

- 9.1. The public engagement shows high levels of support for keeping Parliament Square closed to traffic, with 69% of respondents supporting the trial measures (with 27% preferring it re-opened). While some people feel there has been an adverse effect in terms of increased congestion and longer journey times, this is not a majority view. The barrier to making the current Experimental Traffic Regulation Order permanent is the formal objections received from Arriva and the Hertfordshire Bus & Coach Operators Association (HBCOA). The project team continue to work with Arriva (who are also acting on behalf of the HBCOA) to resolve these objections. The project team would be able to offer small-scale, short-term mitigations (which might include a bus facility along the Wash) but is not in a position to offer promises to developing larger scale mitigations that requires wider public engagement and stakeholder support. HCC is investing in the Hertford-Hoddesdon corridor as part of its BSIP programme, which is likely to incorporate improvements to improve bus reliability through Hertford, though this would likely be over the longer term. HCC would like to avoid but still be in a position to pursue a public enquiry to resolve these objections. A permanent scheme could replace planters with bollards to improve sight lines and ensure an informal corridor for cyclists (and additionally allowing access for accessible cycles) to travel carefully through what is a pedestrian priority area. This could be accompanied by signage for an alternative cycle route through town via Maidenhead Street as well.
- 9.2. There is also majority support for the changes in Fore Street to be made permanent. 176 respondents commented on the planters, primarily negatively. A permanent scheme could eventually incorporate wider footways and more clarity regarding loading, taxi and Blue Badge bays, with the planters removed. The project team would prefer that there is no day-time short-stay parking along Fore Street, with priority given instead to loading and Blue Badge parking. A classified count identified around 10 per day cycling contra-flow along Fore Street – if infrastructure to support this could be incorporated into designs for longer-term development, that could be beneficial.

- 9.3. The project team would like investigation to continue into further interventions to encourage, promote and reduce friction for active and sustainable travel modes in Hertford. This could include Bull Plain, the Wash and Gascoyne Way – all cited by respondents as areas that could be improved in these contexts.