

St. Albans High Street: Public Consultation Survey Report

Topline statement: 38.4% of survey respondents were supportive of the Phase 2 trial measures, where George Street and Market Place were shut to traffic (except for loading 7-11am) and High Street was shut to traffic at weekends. 42.5% of respondents wanted George Street and High Street to be reopened to motor traffic. Most walkers and cyclists are more positive about the trials, and report to feeling much safer when travelling around the area. Most drivers are opposed to the trials, the main reason being negatively impacted journeys, perceived worsening of congestion and rat-running in residential streets.

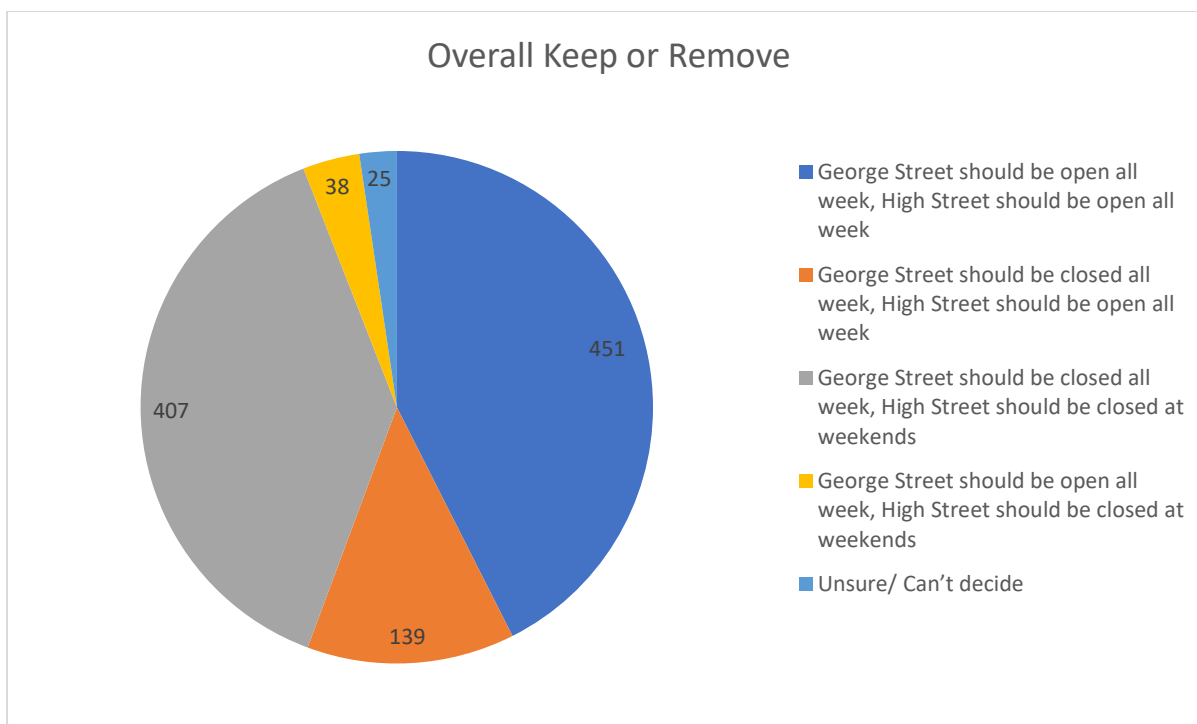
BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

1. Stakeholder Engagement – Summer 2021

- 1.1. Through summer and autumn 2021, public and stakeholder engagement took place to seek feedback on the temporary Covid-19 measures and gauge opinion for a possible trial. The feedback was shared with the Project Board for its consideration.
- 1.2. An online survey sought feedback from residents and businesses during summer 2021. HCC officers visited St Albans to deliver posters to local businesses on a number of occasions asking for them to be displayed on counters and in windows. Social media and website posts were created to share the information with the general public and letters were sent to local addresses.
- 1.3. The principle of a trial was supported by 60% of respondents for Market Place, 55% of respondents for High Street, and 62% of respondents for George Street.
- 1.4. St Albans BID (Business Improvement District) indicated they would be supportive of proceeding to a formal trial.

2. ETRO Engagement and Consultation – from November 2022

- 2.1. A formal consultation on the ETRO began in autumn 2022 to give consultees an opportunity to comment on the proposal.
- 2.2. From November 2022 to May 2023, an official 6-month objection period took place during which the project team received nine objections. Two further responses were also received that were classified as comments.
- 2.3. In parallel, between November 2022 and September 2023, the project's online feedback survey has been active and 1,060 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 St Albans overall.
- 2.4. Based on the feedback received, **38.4%** of respondents were supportive of the Phase 2 measures as they currently stand, with George Street's timed closure to motor vehicles all week and High Street's weekend closure (Chart 1). An additional 13.1% are supportive of the all-week George Street measures but would like to see High Street accessible to motor vehicles at weekends. **42.5%** would prefer both streets to be reopened to motor traffic.



| | | |
|---|-------------|-------|
| George Street should be open all week, High Street should be open all week | 451 | 42.5% |
| George Street should be closed all week, High Street should be open all week | 139 | 13.1% |
| George Street should be closed all week, High Street should be closed at weekends | 407 | 38.4% |
| George Street should be open all week, High Street should be closed at weekends | 38 | 3.6% |
| Unsure/ Can't decide | 25 | 2.4% |
| Grand Total | 1060 | |

Chart 1 – Responses to “How do you feel about the changes?”

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

3. Changes in Views Over Time during Consultation

- 3.1. It was thought that views may change over time; i.e. increasing frustration with traffic may mean views harden against the trials or summer might encourage growing appreciation of outdoor space being made available. Chart 2 (below) shows how respondents have viewed the scheme on a quarterly basis. The largest proportion of responses (488) were received during the first two months. 56% of these respondents stated a preference that both George Street and High Street were fully reopened after the trial. This may have been based on preconceptions of what the impact of the trial may cause. This coincided with other road closures in St Albans (particularly the rail bridge at Victoria Street). It is worth noting that this also coincided with a pre-Christmas boost in footfall to St Albans that was equivalent to the pre-pandemic situation in 2019. Any presumed deterioration in traffic attributed to either the High Street trials or the works on Victoria Road did not seem to be putting people off visiting St Albans.
- 3.2. Subsequent quarters demonstrated gradual increases in support for the Phase 2 measures. Following the announcement in August 2023 that Phase 2 was to finish in favour of a less ambitious Phase 3, there was a noticeable increase in people responding to highlight their support for the Phase 2 measures. By July to September 2023, 56% of respondents were supportive of the Phase 2 measures, with only 29% wanting both streets to be fully reopened.

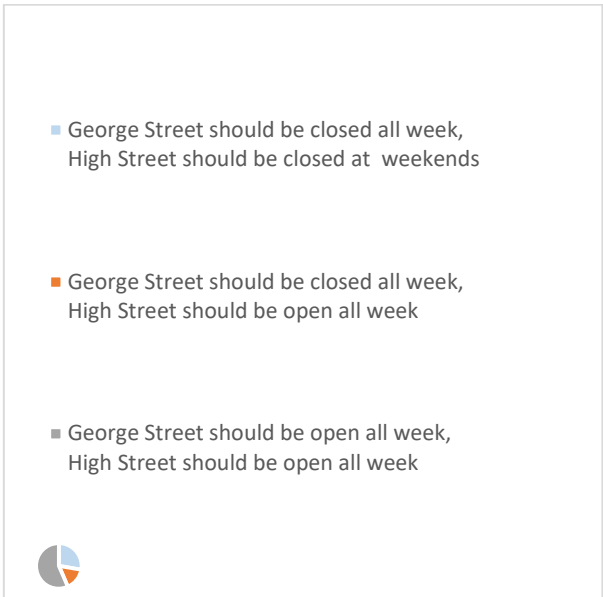
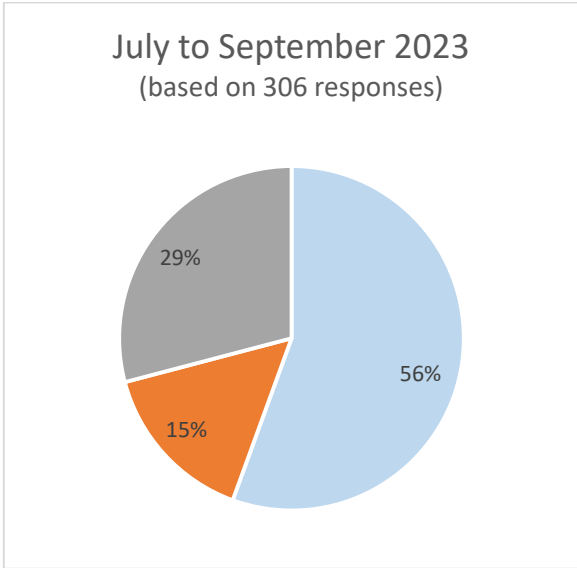
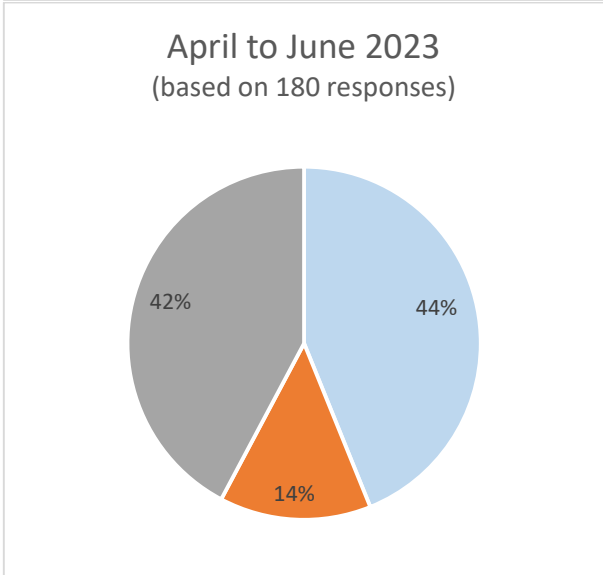
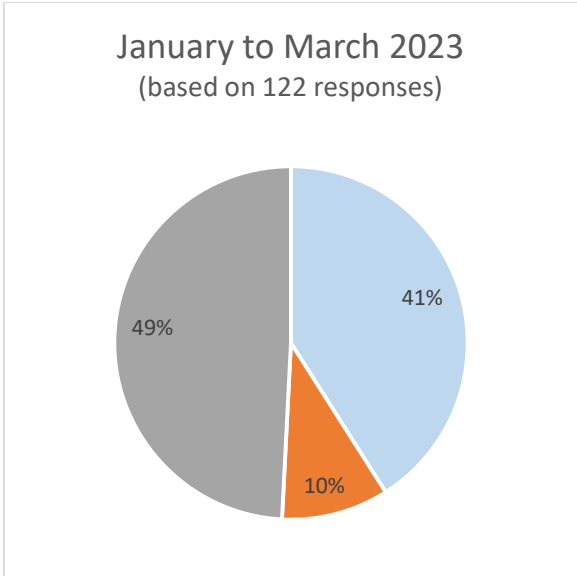
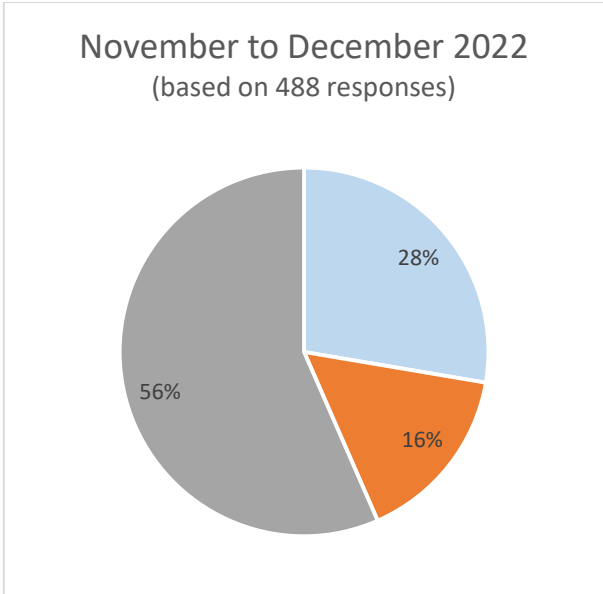


Chart 2: Responses to “How do you feel about the changes?” – sentiment over time

4. Sources of Engagement and Demographic Responses

- 4.1. It was also possible to assess support or opposition to the current trial by the mode of transport used to travel.
- 4.2. As is increasingly the case with consultation surveys, the primary source of engagement for the survey was from social media (Chart 3). However, a significant number of respondents also responded to posters, banners, flyers, local networks/friends and press reports.

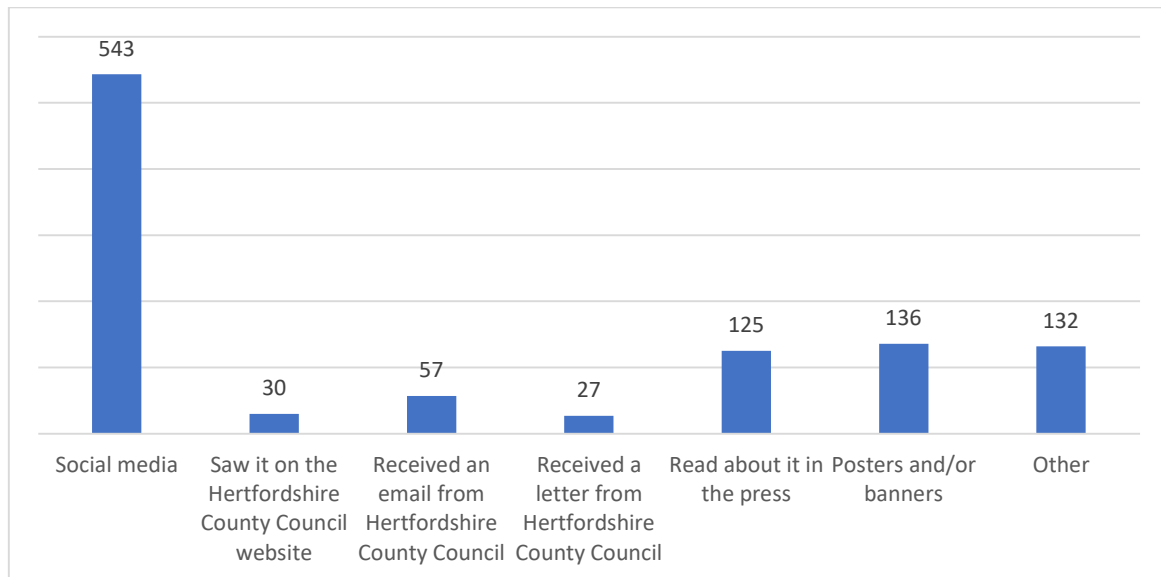


Chart 3 – Sources of engagement

- 4.3. Looking in more depth at these sources of engagement, almost two-thirds of those responding following social media posts viewed the effect of the scheme negatively (see Chart 4a). It was more even for those who read about it in the press. However, almost three-quarters of those responding to banners and posters viewed the scheme positively.

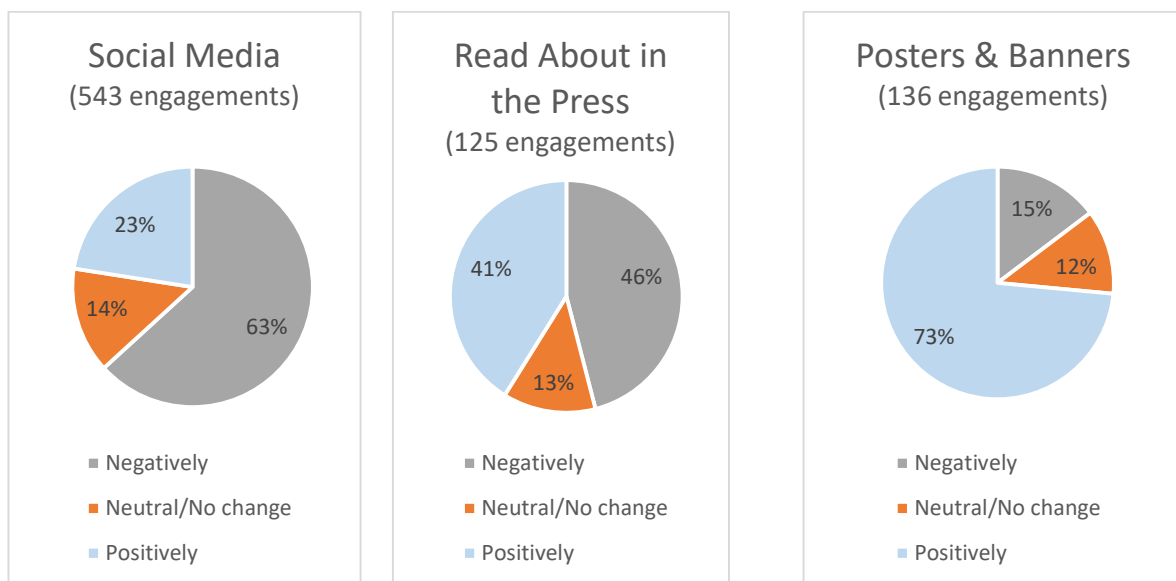


Chart 4a – Effect on journey by source of engagement

- 4.4. However, looking in more depth, it can be seen that of those that read about it in the press, there was a dramatic difference between those that responded before the

announcement of the move to Phase 3 measures and those that responded after (see chart 4b).

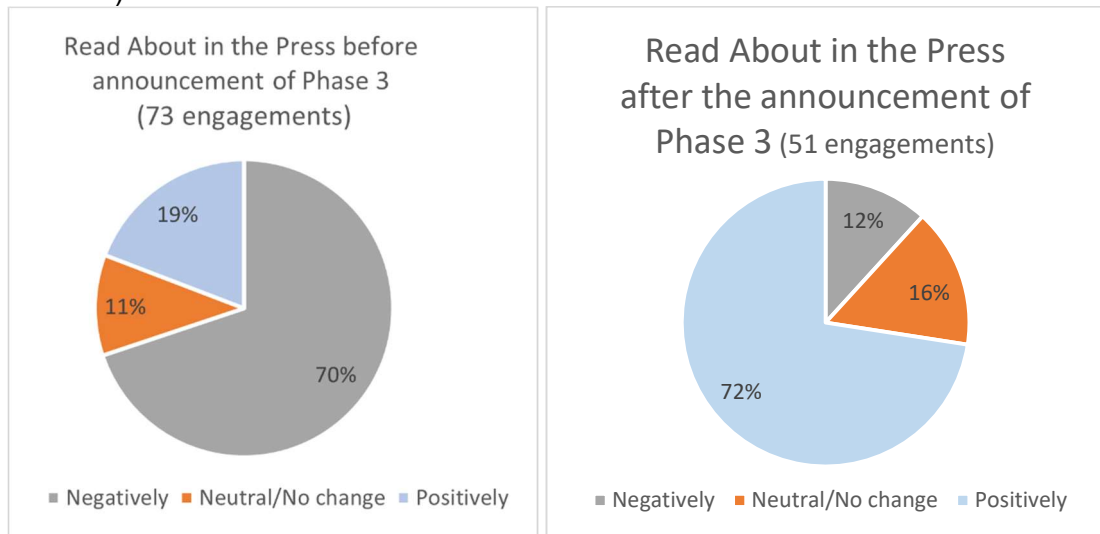


Chart 4b: Effect on journey by source of engagement: before and after announcement of move to Phase 3

4.5. The main age groups of people responding to the survey fall between 30 and 69 year-olds. Chart 5 shows the overall opinion of each age group. Age splits 25 to 59 show a majority of respondents supportive of Phase 2 measures.

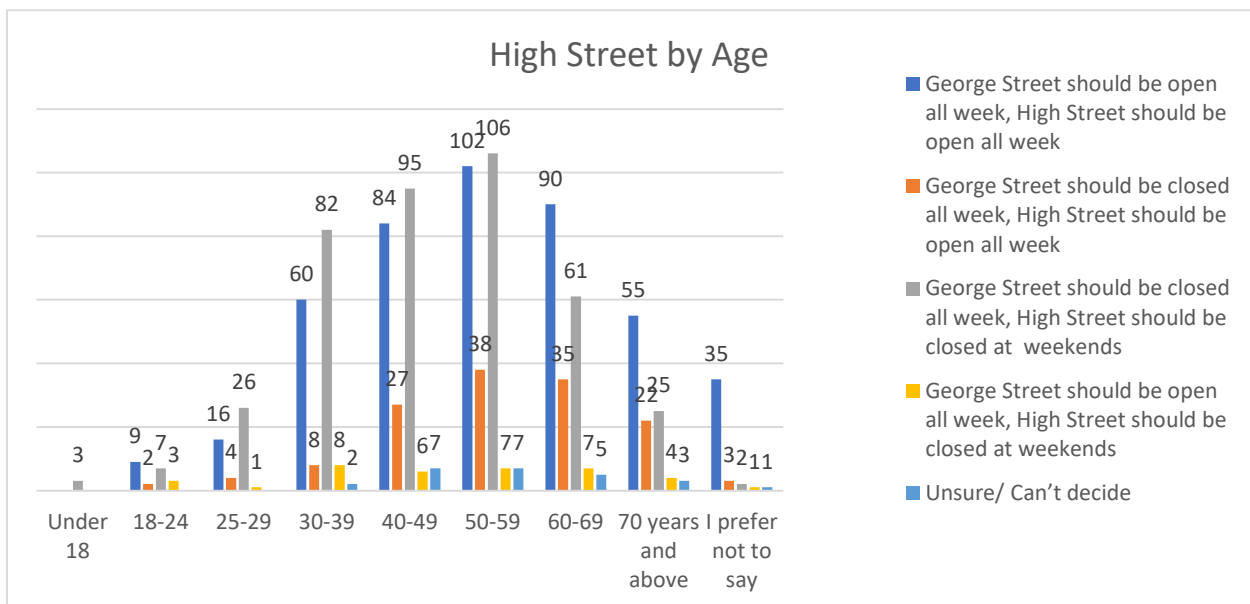


Chart 5 – Opinions by age

5. Perception of Journey and Preference by Modes of Transport

5.1. Chart 6 shows how the project has affected people's perception of their **journey** based on how they get to town. 60% of people walking thought the trial had a positive effect on their journey. 71% of those cycling through the city thought it had a positive effect on their journey. 86% of motorists and 79% of bus travellers thought it had a negative effect.

Travel preferences from 1,068 responses

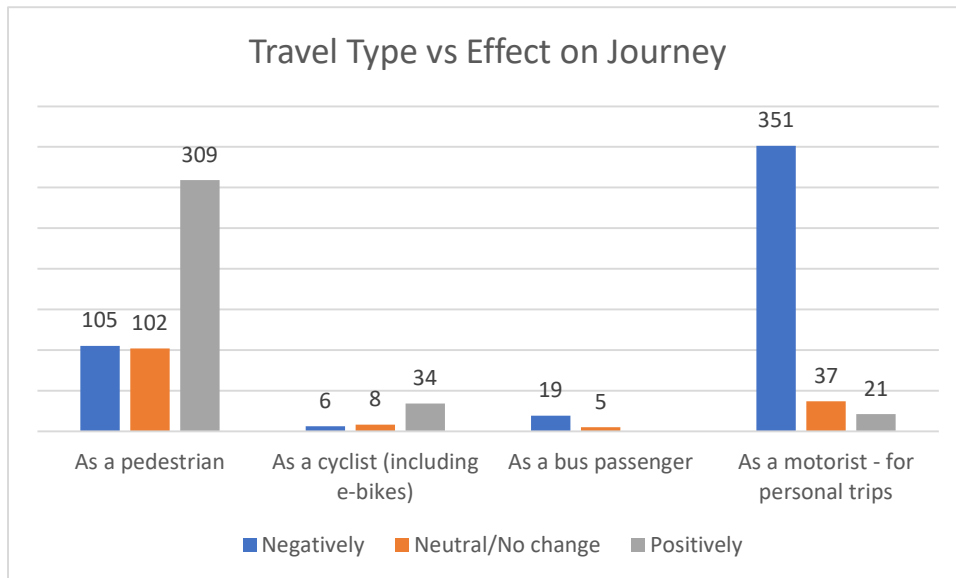


Chart 6 – Perception of Journey by modes of transport

- 5.2. Chart 7 shows comparison of views towards various options on High Street and George Street between motorists, pedestrians and cyclists.
- 5.3. While 67% of motorists think both George Street and High Street should be open and accessible to them, the majority of pedestrians and cyclists favoured Phase 2 measures.

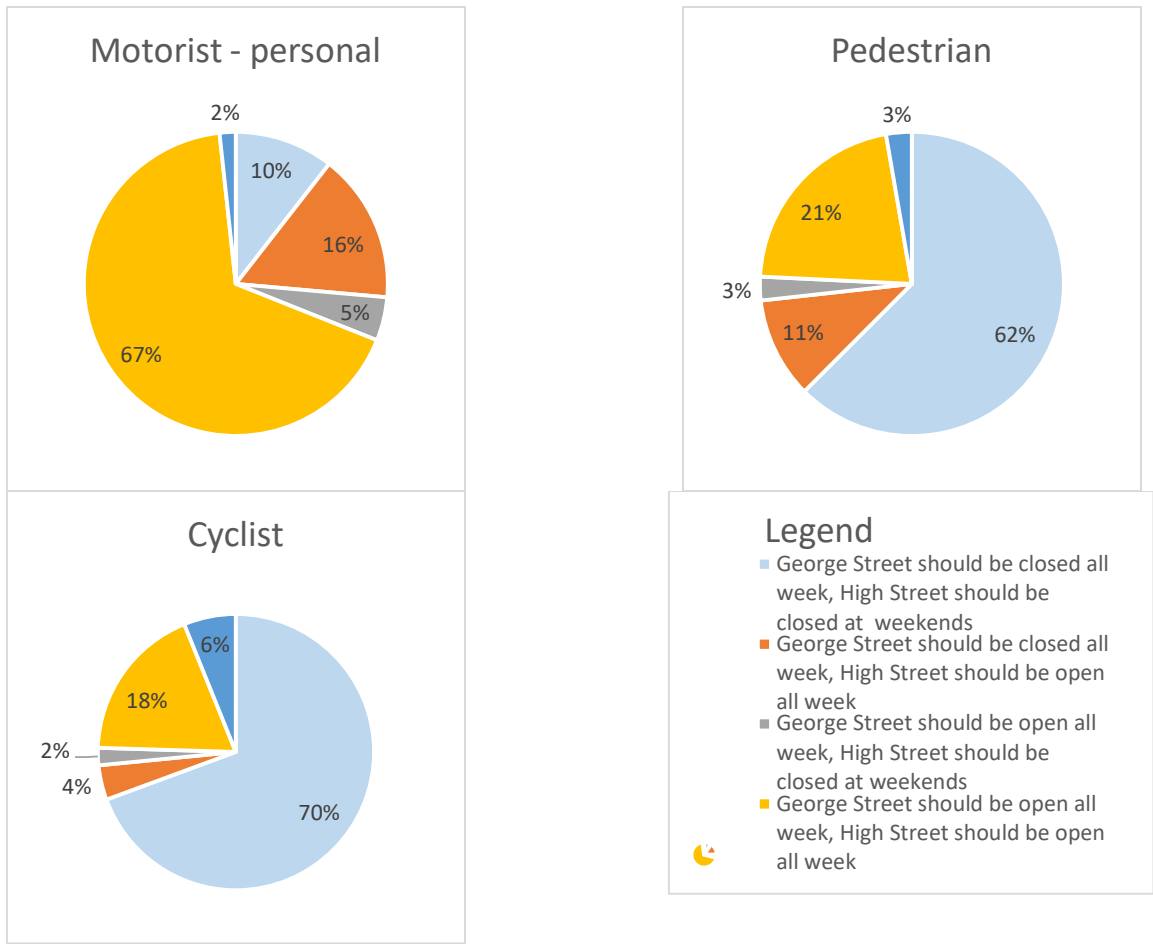


Chart 7 – Views towards various options between motorist, pedestrian and cyclist

5.4. The majority (71%) of respondents that work in the city indicate that they feel their journeys have been negatively impacted by the trials. (Chart 8).

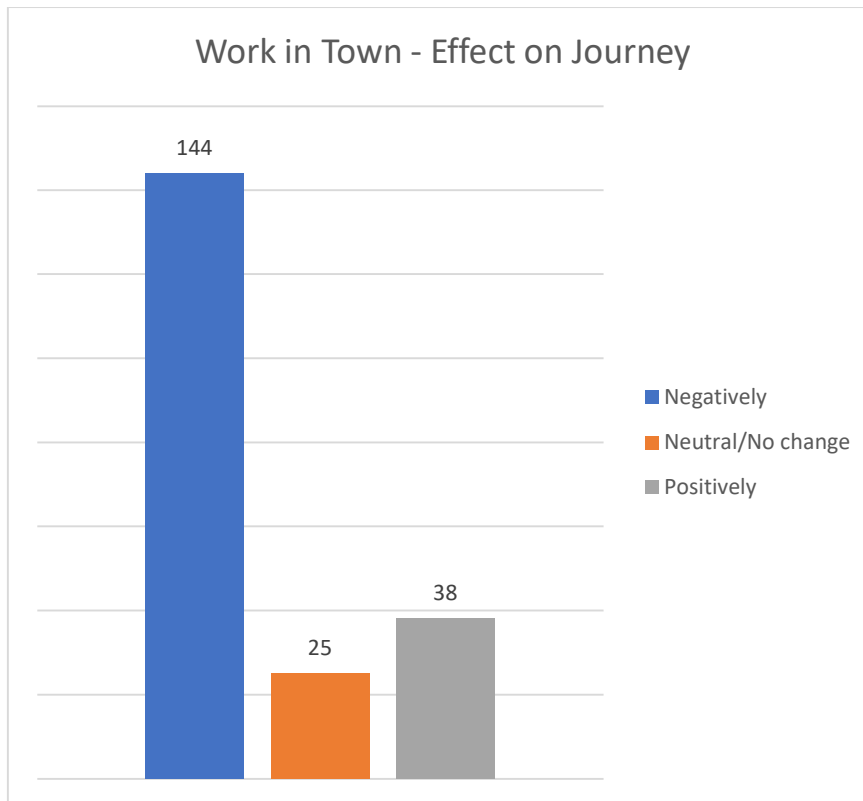


Chart 8 – Effect of scheme by travel type

6. Blue Badge Holders and People of Infirmity

- 6.1. 44 respondents indicated that they held a Blue Badge. 66% expressed a preference for both George Street and High Street being reopened to motorised traffic (Chart 9a).
- 6.2. 67 respondents indicated they had a long-term illness, disability or infirmity which limits their daily activities. 58% expressed a preference for both George Street and High Street being reopened to motorised traffic. (Chart 9b).
- 6.3. When analysing comments from individuals, a lack of Blue Badge bay provision and the scheme having a negative impact on accessibility came up only a handful of times (certainly in comparison to responses given in High Street Recovery consultations elsewhere in Hertfordshire). A lack of Blue Badge parking provision was highlighted by seven respondents (only one of whom indicated they had a Blue Badge). Disability was raised as an issue on 19 occasions; four of these respondents highlighted they had a long-term illness, disability or infirmity which limits their daily activities.
- 6.4. The Equality Impact Assessment considers the impact of the trial and whether it discriminates on the basis of age or disability. The document concludes the trial opens up space and makes roads easier to cross, though 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.

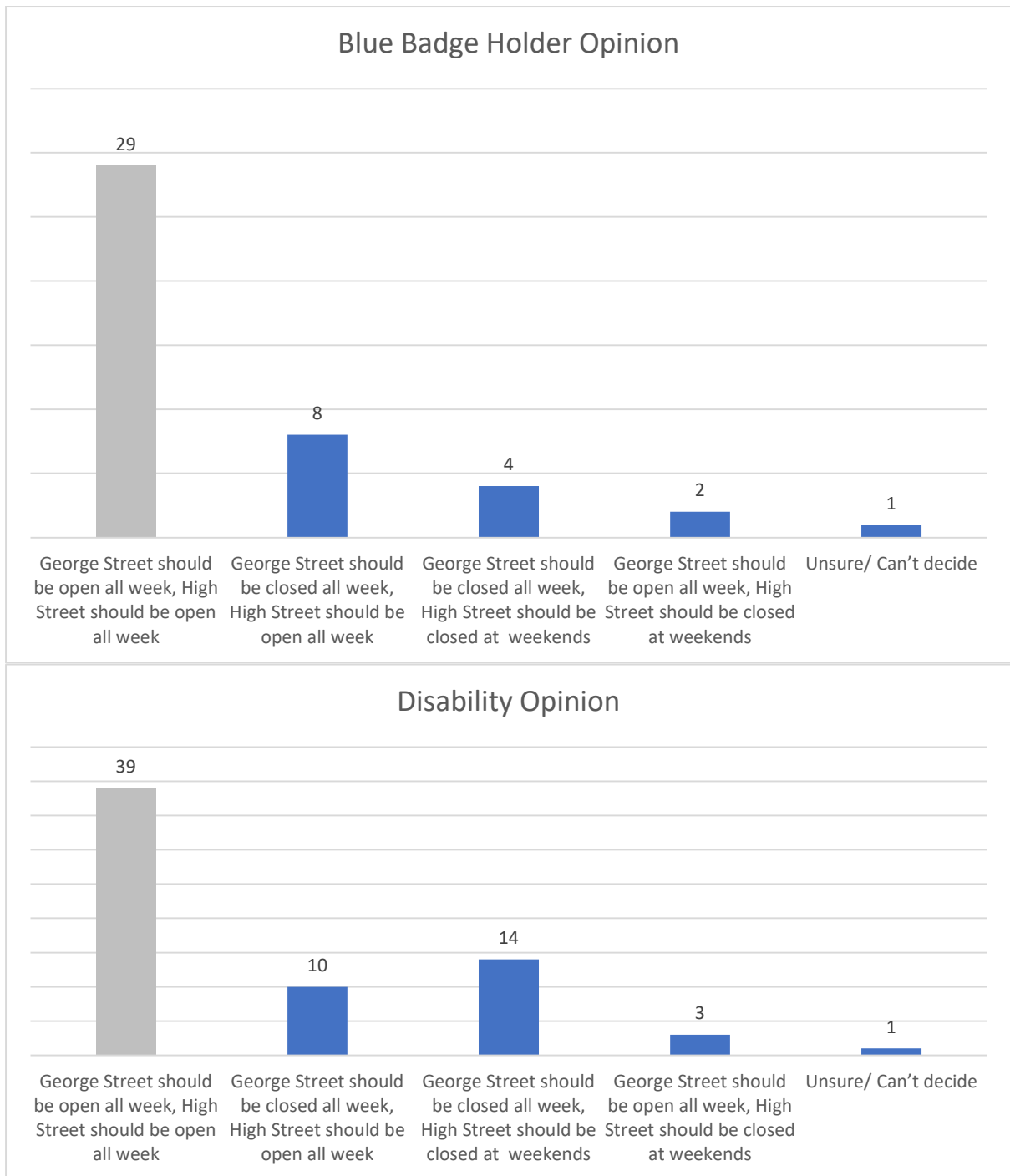


Chart 9 – Opinion from Blue Badge Holder and Disability

7. Pedestrian and Cyclist Safety

7.1. 82.5% of respondents felt walking in the trial area felt at least as safe as previously, with 46.5% saying it felt more safe (Chart 10).

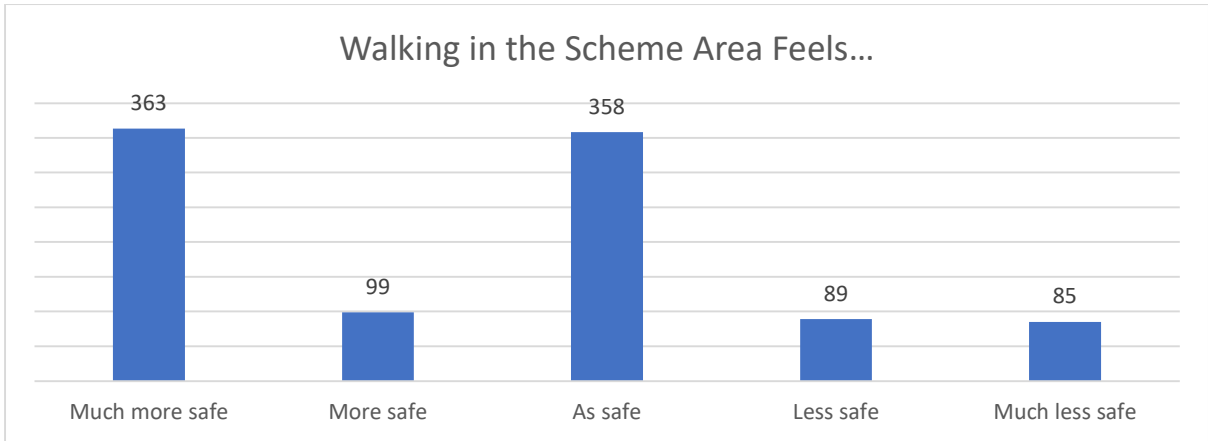


Chart 10 – Perception of safety by pedestrian

7.2. Of those that gave an opinion, 56% of respondents felt cycling had been made more safe or much more safe. (Chart 11).

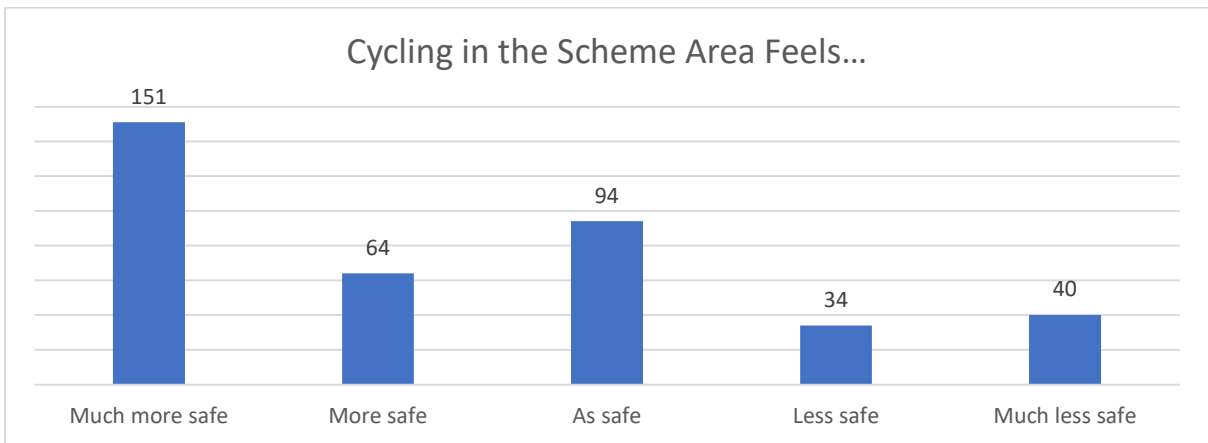


Chart 11 – Perception of safety by cyclists

8. Town Usage and Congestion Issues

8.1. The majority of respondents visit the city centre weekly or more frequently (Chart 12).

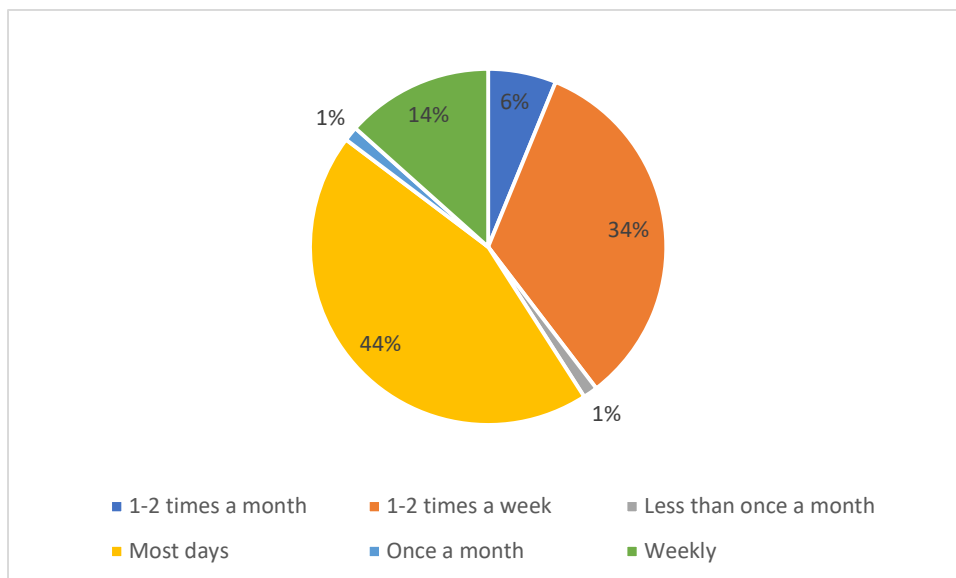


Chart 12 – Frequency of visiting the town centre

- 8.2. Most respondents use the city centre for shopping or visiting parks & places. When asked what their top three reasons for visiting St Albans were, ‘Using pubs, cafes etc’ was only cited in 14.4% of responses (this compares to 28% for Hitchin where activation of space has been more widely embraced as part of that town’s High Street Recovery trial and where there was a high degree of public support for taking the scheme permanent).

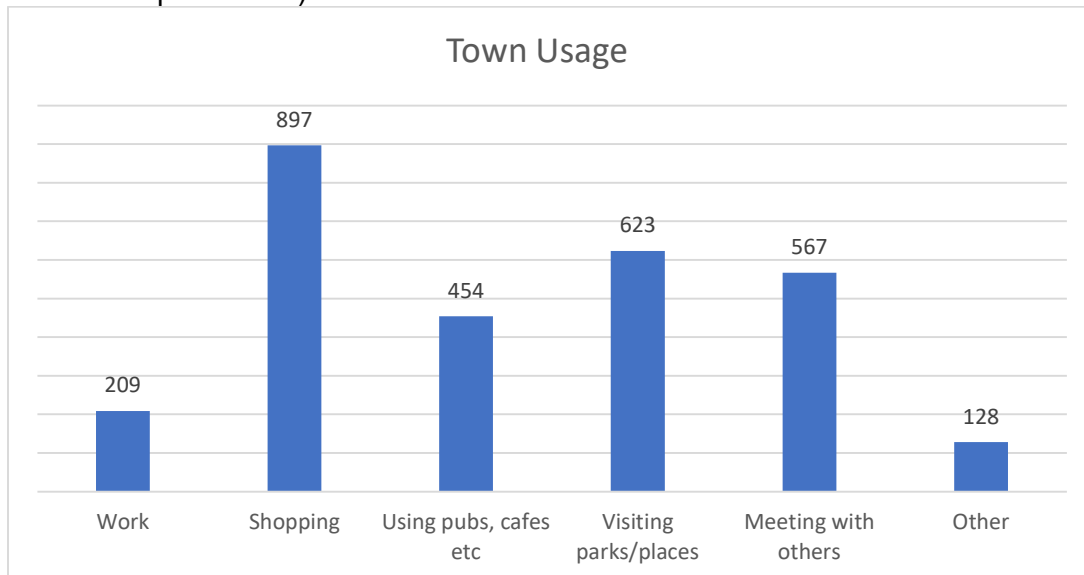


Chart 13 – Town Usage

- 8.3. Overall there is a sense that traffic congestion has increased, both within the scheme area (affecting George Street), also in Catherine Street/Folly Lane and at Peahen junction, as well as overall in St Albans (Charts 14a-b). While traffic exclusion characterises the scheme area, there is the perception from some respondents that traffic is arriving and having to turn around, or stopping to pick up takeaways or drop people off, making the situation worse in the immediate vicinity.
- 8.4. The overall perception is that traffic has increased at Holywell Hill and along St Peter’s Street. Some respondents cited that at weekends, traffic intending to turn into High Street (turning left after coming up Holywell Hill) is instead diverted up St Peter’s Street resulting in additional traffic and congestion. Traffic is re-routed a longer distance to find car parks (the Christopher Place car park is especially affected, with traffic re-routed past several SADC car parks, which might be part of the reason that Christopher Place has raised concerns about the scheme). Initial traffic volume analysis does not support this perception, suggesting traffic volumes through Peahen Junction are lower than pre-pandemic levels and pre-trial levels. This may be because on a weekend, the traffic lights reverted to three-phase rather than four. Additionally, NO₂ monitoring at this site (an AQMA) is indicating that peak pollution days are midweek rather than at the weekends. There was also some upset that charges for under 2 hour stays at Westminster Lodge car park had been re-introduced – some respondents claimed this would make an ideal Park & St (Ride) option to the south of the City, easing pressure on the Peahen Junction.
- 8.5. Perception is also that traffic congestion along Folly Lane and Catherine Street has also significantly increased and this has also precipitated rat-running in residential streets in the area. The automatic traffic counter along Folly Lane suggests a 28.6% increase in Saturday traffic. Initial Google API routing analysis suggests minimal use of residential streets and that use of these streets is likely to be based on local knowledge and yielding no time benefits over distributor roads. NO₂ monitoring in Folly

Lane suggests peak pollution days are midweek, not at weekends when High Street is closed to vehicular traffic.

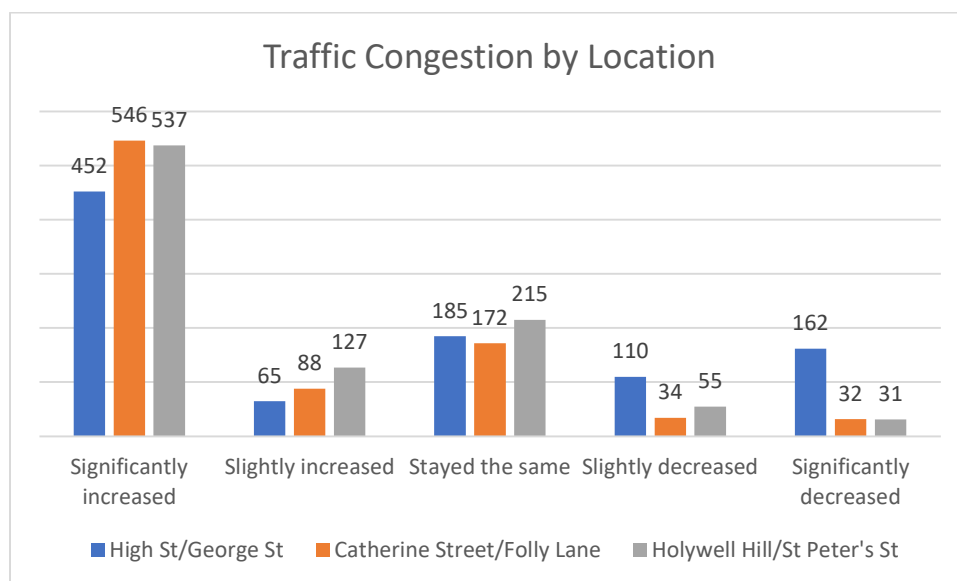


Chart 14a – Perception of traffic congestion by location

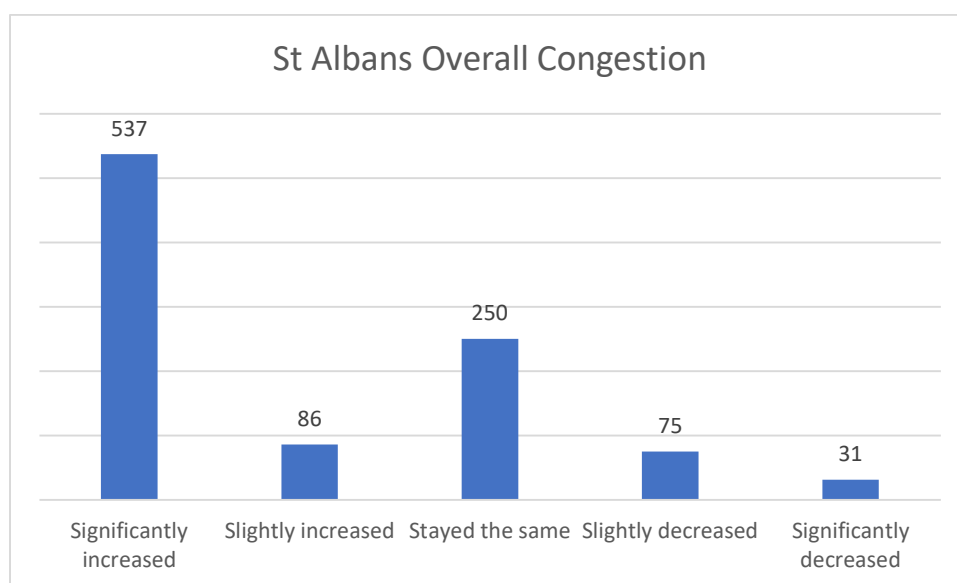


Chart 14b – Perception of overall traffic congestion

8.6. When asked about their journeys in the scheme area, perhaps inevitably since the roads are more likely to be closed to traffic, over half (50.5%) are reporting that they drive less in the trial area (Chart 15). This clearly ties in with some of the objectives of the trial as less traffic means more space and time to allow people to travel actively through the area. 34.5% of respondents who expressed a view reported that they were cycling more in the trial area. While 33.5% of respondents who expressed a view said they were walking more in the trial area, 19.5% said they were walking less often than before in the trial area. However, this is distorted by drivers (especially) indicating they walk less in the scheme area (some respondents say they now prefer to travel to other locations such as Hemel Hempstead and Watford now – towns that have benefited from road space reallocation and pedestrianisation in the past).

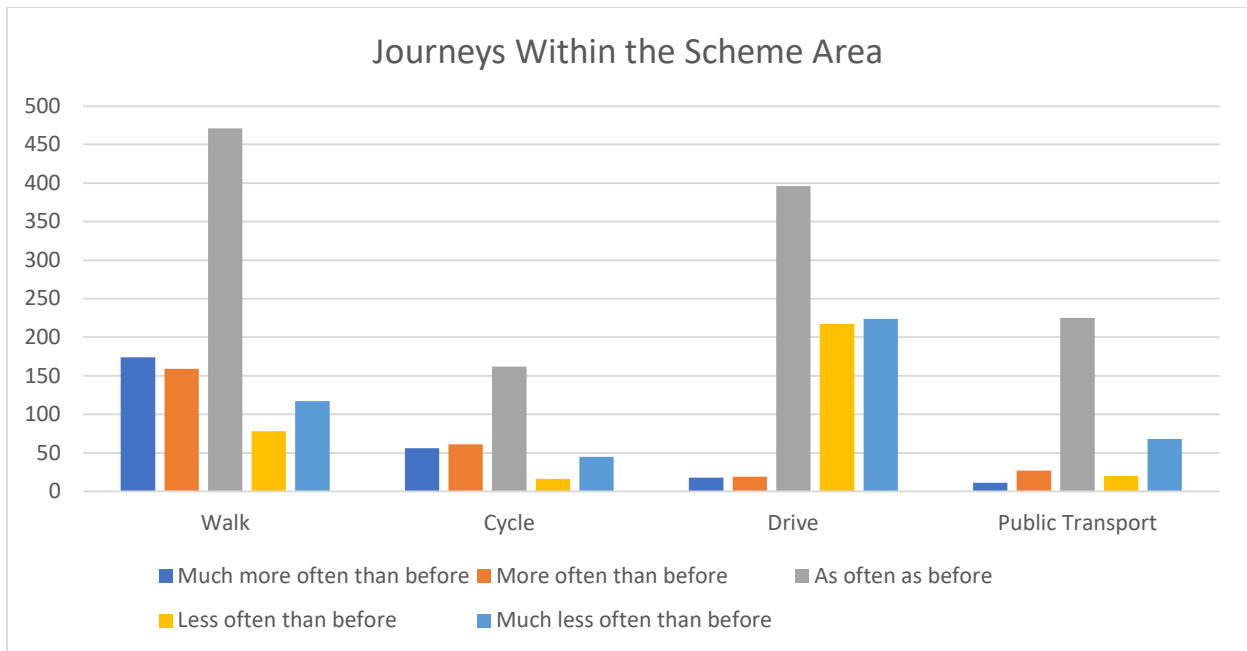


Chart 15 – Journeys within the scheme area

9. Air Quality and Traffic Noise

9.1. 34% of respondents think air quality within the trial area has improved and 28% think it has worsened (Chart 16). Investigations indicate that NO₂ concentrations in central St Albans locations have not been impacted by the trial and some locations have shown improvements.

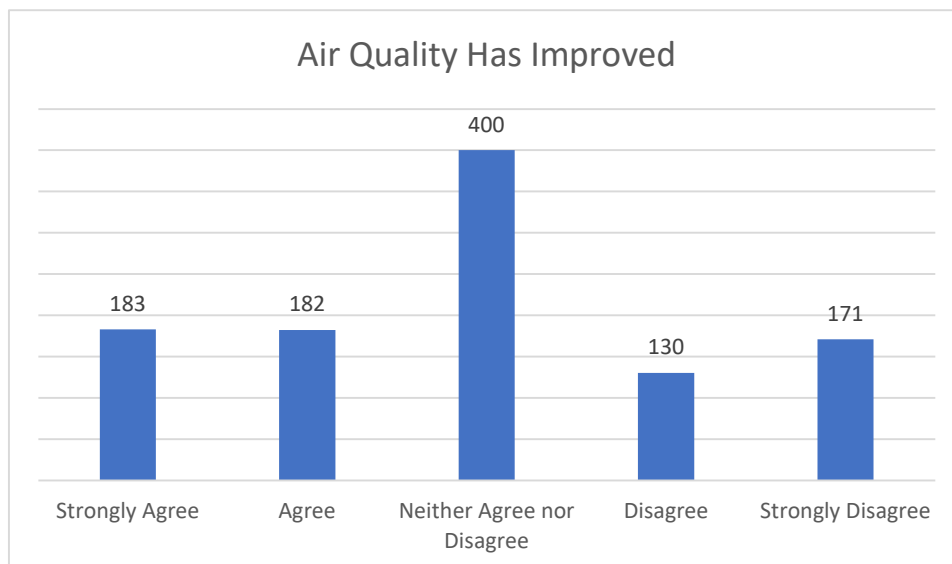


Chart 16 – Perception of air quality

9.2. 41% of respondents think traffic noise has reduced in the trial area and 27% feel it has worsened (Chart 17).

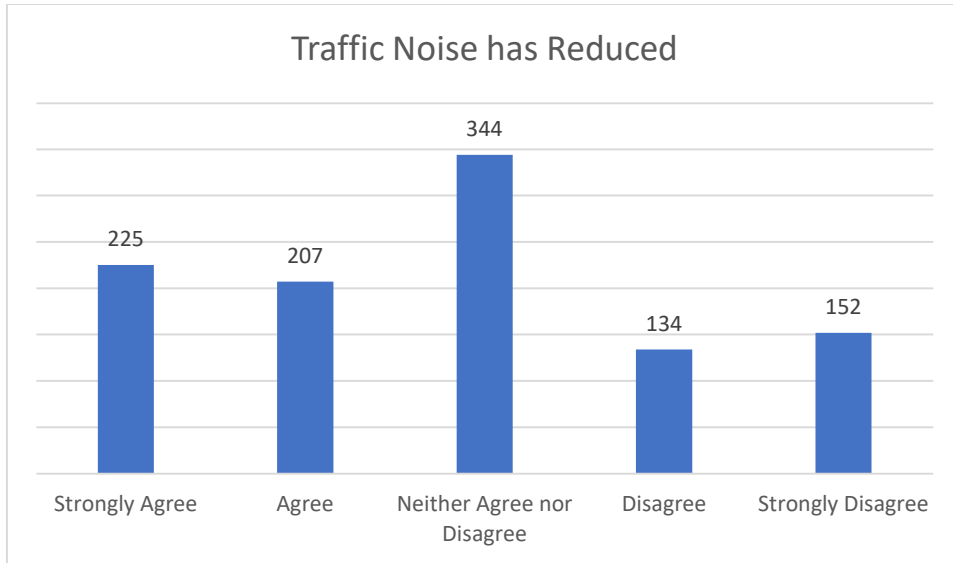


Chart 17 – Perception of traffic noise

10. Look and Feel of the Area and Dwell Time

10.1. 33% of respondents strongly agree the area in and around the scheme looks and feels more pleasant; 44% being positive about the look and feel and 37% disagreeing (Chart 18).

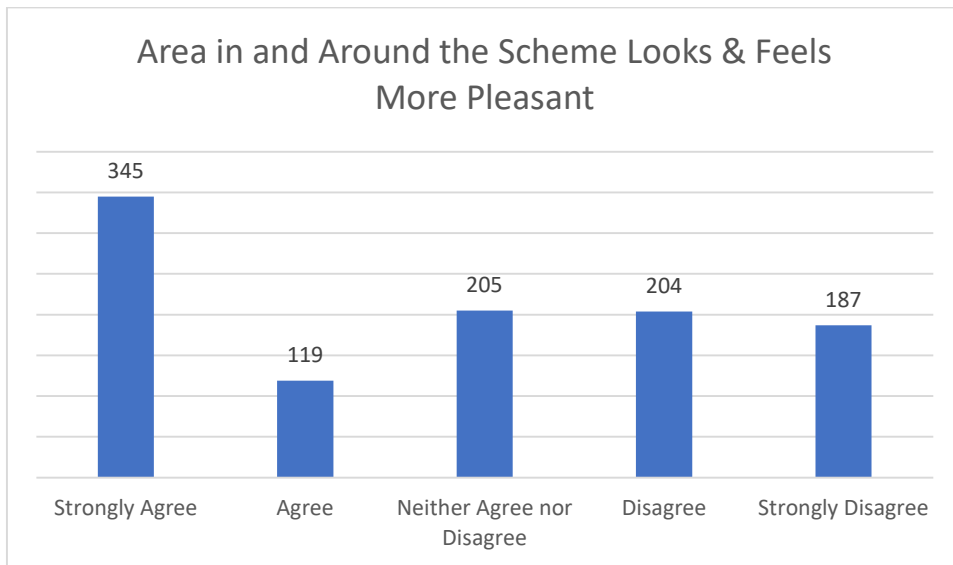


Chart 18 – Perception of look and feel of the area

10.2. 37% of respondents indicate they are spending more time in the trial area and 33% indicate they are spending less time there (Chart 19). Dwell time data suggests people are spending about the same amount of time in St Albans with the trial in place in comparison with pre-trial.

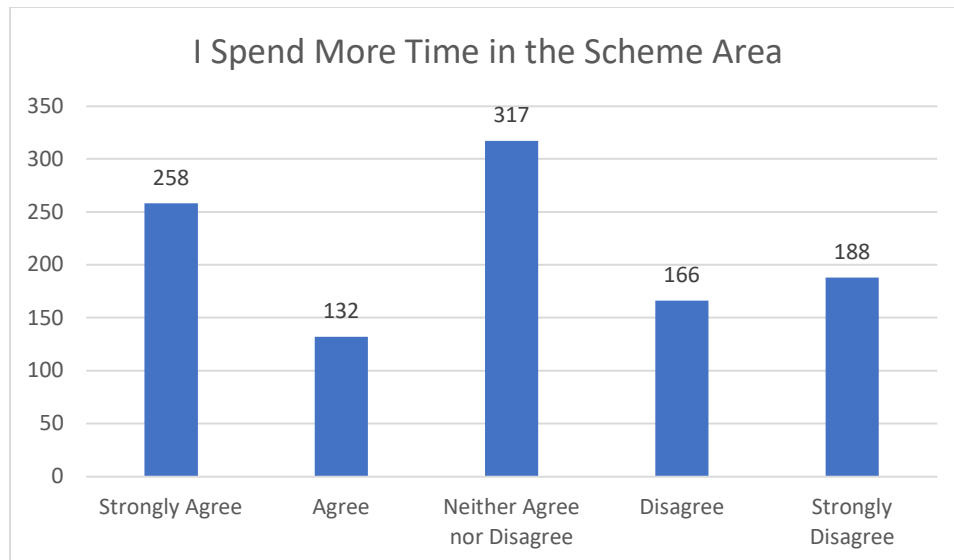
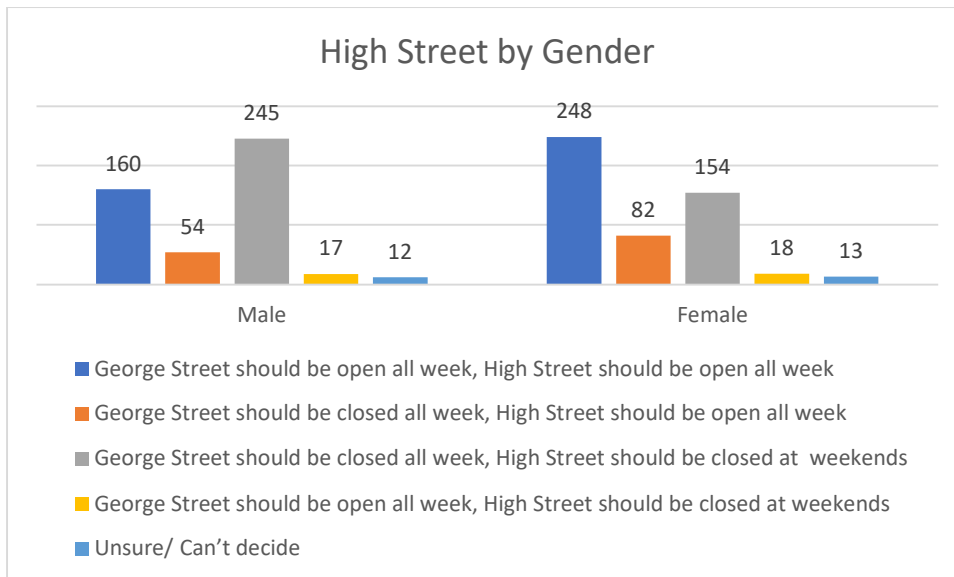


Chart 19 – Time spent in the area

11. Views by Gender

- 11.1 One of the more intriguing outcomes from the High Street Recovery trials, which was matched in consultation responses in St Albans (Chart 20) as well as elsewhere, was that male respondents were more likely to be supportive of the projects and females were more likely to be opposed. This clearly has an impact on the equalities assessments we are running in parallel with the trials across the county. In creating more people friendly spaces, the expectation is that these spaces become more equal, but that doesn't appear to match the perception of respondents by gender. Females are often unequally burdened with the need to carry out a broad range of tasks, often leading to trip chaining (for example having to take children to school, do the shopping, get to work, care trips for others). Given that road systems are presently set up to make driving the easiest option, and cultural expectations often also lead to car dependency, it might be considered that females are more likely to value access to private vehicles and availability of pop-in parking to fulfil tasks quickly and easily. It is also worth pointing out that females do sometimes associate a degree of personal protection within a car that might be absent on foot, on a cycle or on public transport. It is unfortunately still the case that women remain more likely to be the subject of discriminatory abuse on in public spaces (and some of this is on occasion physical). In creating more people friendly spaces, it is hoped that abusive behaviour is discouraged and that if it were to occur, it is more likely that it is called out.
- 11.2 While the majority (245) of male respondents support the Phase 2 measures and most (248) female respondents want both roads to reopen, there is complexity. More (82) females support George Street staying closed all week compared to 54 males. Perhaps this is because females favour more movement-focused areas to remain open to traffic and are more supportive of place focused spaces becoming pedestrianised.
- 11.3 Four people who identified as trans-gender responded. Two were supportive of Phase 2 measures and two indicated they would like the roads reopened. One respondent identified as non-binary and they were supportive of the Phase 2 measures.



12. Other Comments and Responses

12.1. Further analysing themes raised in comments from consultation responses, issues around parking and Blue Badge space are less prevalent than in other areas under trial (Hertford, Hitchin, Rickmansworth and Royston); whereas issues around traffic displacement, congestion, journey times and air quality are more prevalent.

- There were 500 instances where worse and displaced traffic occurred in comments. 134 also commented on longer journey times.
- 169 comments cited worse air quality but only 15 comments cited improvements in air quality.
- 74 comments mentioned the environment being better in St Albans as a result of the scheme. (21 commented that it was worse.) 101 comments were inclined towards wanting more pedestrianisation. Amongst respondents who were supportive of the trials, public realm enhancements are perhaps more of a priority. 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 city centre.
- 80 respondents commented that they felt the trials had made the situation worse for businesses. 21 comments included it made things better for businesses.
- 48 survey respondents specifically commented on reports that emergency services had been delayed or inconvenienced in responding to incidents as part of the trial. This includes suggestions that response vehicles have not been able to gain access through the gates. Emergency services have been engaged in this project since the initial deployment of emergency measures and having worked with them extensively they have not indicated any negative opinion on the project stating that their needs are being met when travelling to and through the city. Combination codes are shared with emergency services and these are subsequently distributed to crews. Some respondents commented that the need to retain a suitable corridor for emergency access had limited activation opportunities.
- Other comments that were raised of pertinence include rat-running through residential streets being problematic, that the trials (and the timings) were confusing, there was a lack of effective signage, traffic speed and noise. A perceived lack of activation of the space was also a recurrent theme.

- Alternative or complementary suggestions included 20mph zones, park & ride, improving bus services, congestion charging, George Street reverting to a weekend-only (or evening-only) closure and an effective bypass.

13. Conclusion

- 13.1. The feedback received so far via public engagement is somehow diverged, if not opposing, to the trial. 38.4% of survey respondents were supportive of Phase 2 measures. Nearly half of the respondents 42.5% wanted George Street and High Street to be reopened to motor traffic, with a much higher percentage from motorists compared to pedestrians and cyclists.
- 13.2. Looking into the feedback in detail, the main reason of opposition is negatively impacted journeys, perceived worsening of congestion and possible rat-running in residential streets.
- 13.3. Most walkers and cyclists are more positive about the trials, and report to feeling much safer when travelling around the area.