
Thinking about Stevenage High Street



APRIL 2022

MutualGain
for Stevenage Borough Council

Thinking about High Streets

Conversations with residents and businesses

Stevenage Borough Council has been inviting local people to talk about the High Street. Keen to ensure they get the balance right between preserving the historic nature of the High Street and supporting the local economy, they invited local people to complete an online survey and/or attend one of two in person meetings in March 2022.

Using the findings from the survey and the events, the Council will provide a safe, clean and sustainable environment for residents to enjoy, and for businesses to thrive as the high street adapts over time.

This report shares the findings from the two in person events held during March 2022 at The Cromwell Hotel. Both events offered an opportunity for people to discuss and deliberate themes that were highlighted in the survey of 1600 residents.

Event Design

Each table at the venue had a theme that was drawn from the survey findings:

1. Transport
2. The Public Realm
3. Support for Local Businesses and Relationship with Residents
4. Events and Promotions
5. Climate Change
6. Safety and Access

Additional tables were left open and unthemed for residents to discuss other matters they felt were not covered by the themes above.

After an initial introduction to the purpose of the session, participants spent 20-30 minutes on the theme that mattered most to them. At the end of the discussion the wider group listened to what others had been discussing and responded with support or challenge.

The meetings were relatively small in number which meant that it was possible to facilitate a whole group conversation connecting and responding to the initial themed conversations. The points raised in the whole group were captured using post it notes.

Each post it note was entered into a spreadsheet of comments for analysis. That analysis forms the basis of this report and is accompanied by the survey finding headlines to support the reader in bringing the results of both engagement opportunities together in one place.

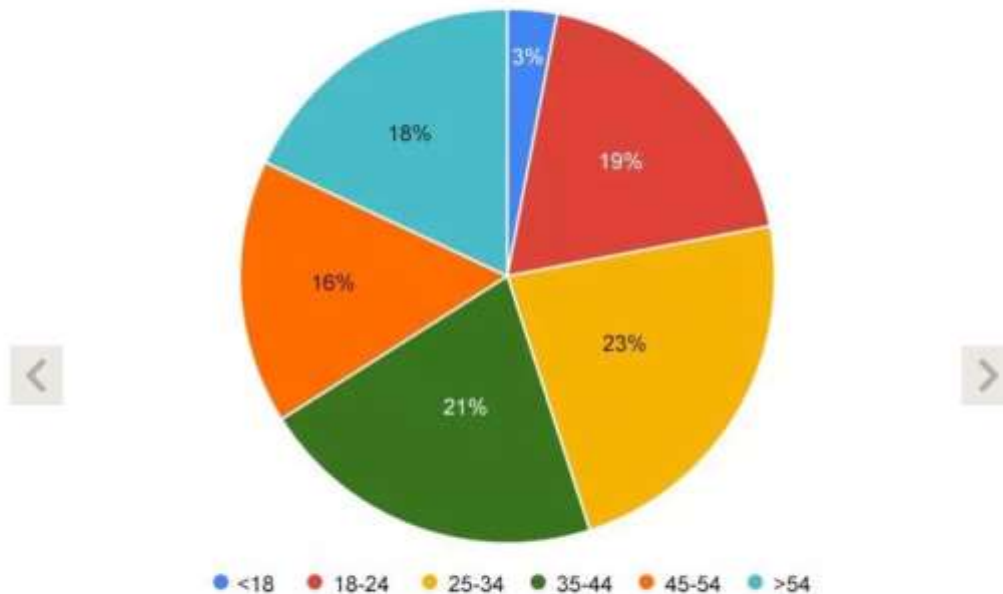
Attendees

A total of 42 participants attended the events. No formal diversity data was collected at the meetings, but the majority of participants were aged over 50 at both meetings.

Local businesses were represented at both events, as were 5 local Councillors, and residents who were active in other areas of community life: those in attendance supported recruitment to the event through their networks.

The age demographic of residents attending the in person events differed from those who responded to the survey online, where all age groups were represented (see graph below)

Age of respondents



All age groups were represented in the consultation. Younger respondents (18-24) make up 19% of the sample, while older respondents (>54) represent 18% of the participants, indicating that chatbot consultations are an effective way to target all demographics, not just the tech-savvy Millennials and Gen Z.

Findings: Transport

Transport: *parking duration*

The most popular conversations at both events were focused on Transport, particularly parking. Whilst there were many complaints about how people park, and how they drive through the high street, there were strong views shared about if and how parking should change to support businesses and the environment.

The most popular discussion was how long people should be able to park on the high street and in local car parks along with the associated costs for parking. There was no agreement on the number of hours residents should be able to park: some argued 30 mins would be sufficient to stop, collect something, and go, if the surrounding car parks were free to enable people to spend longer on the high street. Others argued longer periods should be allowed to support local businesses.

There was sufficient agreement in the room that all local car parks should offer a standardised two hours free parking with charges incurred for longer periods. Participants spoke about the length of time varying from one car park to another calling for some consistency.

Transport: *parking angles*

The way in which parking on the high street is designed came under much criticism: residents argued for better parking angles, particularly favouring herringbone parking due to the way in which long vehicles and vans can prevent clear sight lines when reversing out of a space. Parallel parking options were also discussed and promoted.

Transport: *parking for those who need it most*

Disabled residents and older residents were cited as being those most affected by changes to parking regulations. Those in attendance felt

that there should be more disabled parking in the high street and in line with comments above, this should be improved.

The town employs lots of shift workers in the hospital and other public services: it is not always easy to use public transport at their work times, and therefore they want to stop at the Tesco express to get their shopping on the way home, without further cost.

Transport: for villagers

Some of those in the room lived in the surrounding villages and felt that the infrastructure was not in place yet to make the move from driving to bus journeys: the price of one bus journey is now £2.30 - some residents would have to take two buses to get into town which could also take much longer than driving. Historically there had been a 'pay once' price which enabled local people to use the buses.

Participants made the case that the high street needs local villagers and therefore shopping needs to be made easy by parking freely.

Transport: enforcement

Whilst enforcement was not a key issue for many there were some comments made about the consistency of enforcement: some welcomed greater enforcement across all parking sites, whilst others felt that businesses enforcement was overlooked compared to what appeared to be strict enforcement for residents.

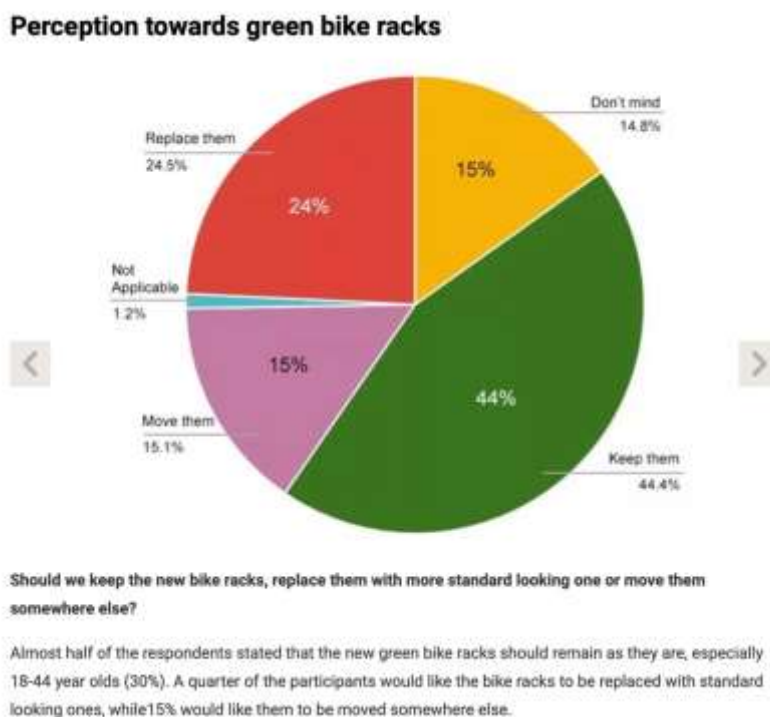
Transport: an alternative view on parking

The status quo - with some minor changes (as above) - was the strongest view in the room. However, there were alternative views put forward that welcomed using the car parking to generate new market places. Some suggested exploring pedestrian only high streets inviting the Council to learn from places like Waltham Forest particularly in relation to how they worked with business owners to make their changes.

Transport: *cycle racks*

Whilst the new cycle racks were welcomed by residents on one level there seemed to be agreement that the design was unwelcome. Residents spoke about them being out of kilter with the historic nature of the old town, whilst also being placed in the wrong parts of the high street. They argued that they should be moved out of the laybys and onto low footfall areas near the trees, and in places where the curbs did not present a problem. This was felt to be a good way of encouraging more people to want to cycle in.

Those who were asked about the cycle racks in the survey also had mixed views about them, but with a greater number welcoming them and wanting them to stay (see graph below):



In the meetings there were more people wanting them to be moved or replaced.

Transport: *cycling*

Some residents felt that cycling was generally too dangerous in the town: they spoke about the roads and pavements feeling too dangerous, preferring to drive. The cyclists in the room described the route into town as challenging due to the vertical nature of the journey – through the underpass etc.

Others welcomed greater encouragement of cycling. They felt there was good availability of dedicated cycle paths through the borough, and good availability of cycle racks in the town, but there were no/limited signage from those routes onto the high street. This missed passing trade for the high street.

On a related note, the group asked how cyclists and walkers could be incentivised to use the High Street, for instance, instead of offering free parking when shopping in some local shops, is there a way of supporting those who cycled in by reducing their shopping costs? Some felt this could positively impact on the increased cost of living and specifically the price of fuel.

Segregated cycle lanes were welcomed by residents as was greater encouragement and support for young people to use their bikes. One resident asked if there was a plan to link Hitchin/Walkern by cycle ways.

Transport: *traffic flow*

The traffic flow through the high street was met with mixed views: some felt no change was needed and it all flowed well, whilst others felt it could be more ‘people friendly’ – not banning cars but reducing them to make the high street feel like a destination: a place you go to spend the day/evening to shop, dine and socialise, without car pollution.

There was some support for 20mph signage and split views on a one way system. A one way system was felt to negatively impact on the Church Lane area and roads coming off there, with residents reporting high levels of speeding and dangerous driving in the area.

The gyratory system was touched on briefly with some calling for it to be revised as they felt it was no longer fit for purpose, and others describing it as the cause of division within the town. However, there were a few participants who felt the gyratory worked well.

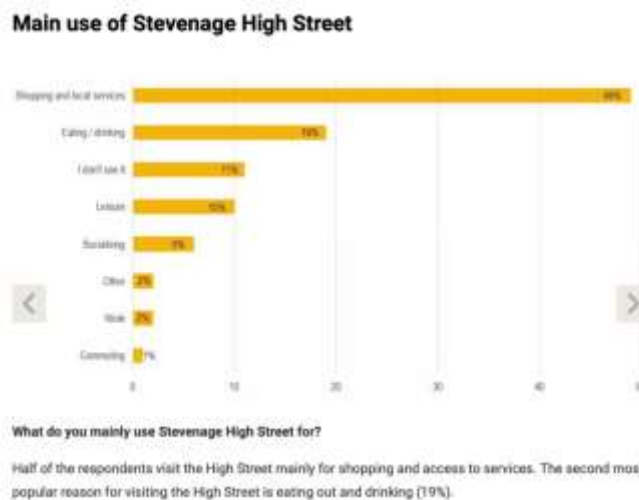
New developments across the borough were met with different views: some asking if the impact had been considered on local traffic flows, and others asking why they were being built without parking spaces.

Findings: The Public Realm

Thinking deeply about the bigger plan for the high street was welcomed by many, including those who would consider themselves less open to Council led change.

Preserving the historic nature of the high street was seen as essential when rethinking its future. Residents felt the newer shop fronts were out of keeping with tradition, and greater use could be made of the town's history using benches, signage and walkways.

The high street primary purpose should remain shopping and social. At *present* the survey findings show that the high street is used primarily for shopping and local services. This was supported as a *future* use by those attending the in person meetings.



Public Realm: *a destination*

Whilst many enjoyed the way the high street had evolved into a social dining place; they were keen that the Council considers how to strike the right balance between shopping and socialising.

Residents welcomed small pop-up bespoke shops that made use of empty premises: an empty shop was not securing any rent, so this was

seen to be a good way of charging affordable rents to local entrepreneurs.

Locals wanted to see a variety of uses that would encourage sustainability, from bespoke fashion outlets or local bakeries to an improved health and wellbeing offer. Ideas from the group included learning from previous traders why they no longer trade in the area and what the council could do to mitigate those circumstances happening again in the future.

The walkways in between the restaurants and the dining areas were considered to be hazardous at times, with staff waiting on the tables with hot food and drink as residents passed through. The pavements were often occupied by signage advertising offers and services. These walkways were felt to be important for non-diners and so redesigning the layout to enable non diners to walk easily through would be welcomed.

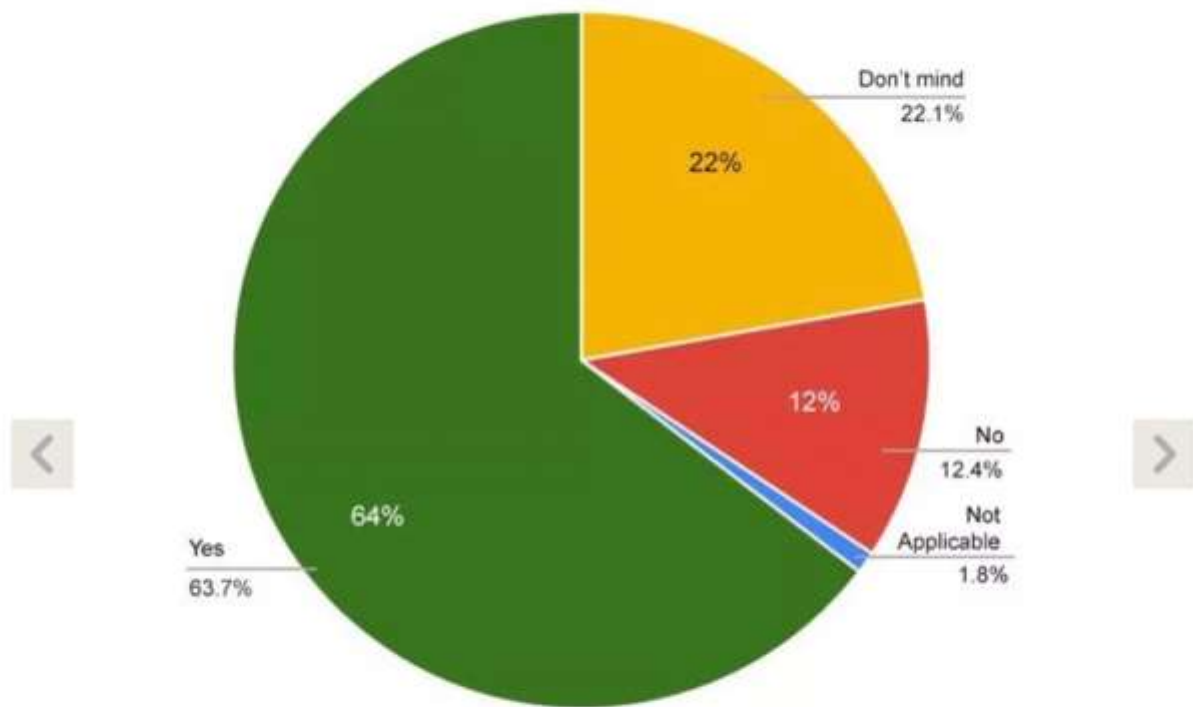
There was some support for rethinking the high street to become a central plaza area that could encourage the plaza to be used for events, exhibitions, markets and not just eating and drinking. Ideas from the group included building on the success of Cinebar to use the same venue for different purposes dependent on time of day or season.

Interest in market spaces led to some debate. The passion and energy of the current market provider enabled cleaner, greener provision but we also heard that they had experienced challenges in sustaining the take up of the market. Exploration on how solutions to the current challenges could align with the future direction of high streets was welcomed.

Public Realm: *greening the area*

Like those who responded to the survey, the people at the meetings welcomed more trees in the high street (see graph below)

Need for more trees



Would you like to see more trees on the High Street?

Most respondents (64%) across all demographics would also like to see more trees on the High Street.

During the discussion about creating a tree lined public realm, one resident with a water specialism highlighted that tree roots were one of the single biggest causes of floods, and therefore would err on the side of caution when thinking about tree lined high streets. Someone else spoke about the trees pushing up the cobbles on the pavement, and another spoke about the birds living in the trees and the impact that has on the cleanliness of the area.

This led to a discussion about the use of trees and plants in pots rather than in the ground, to improve the public realm, or to explore if there were 'good types' of trees that mitigate the issues raised above.

Plants or trees there was appetite to theme them – commending NHS workers or essential workers that helped the community survive through the pandemic.

Public Realm: *cleanliness*

Continuing on the theme of cleanliness the group questioned the impact of cuts to the cleansing department at the Council with some suggesting it had reduced from 40 to 12 staff members. There was a general feeling that the team did a good job with some arguing they were ‘amazing’, but it was felt they were restricted by the available hours, and access to smaller places with their machines.

The change in use for the high street was viewed as a key reason for increased litter. Recognising the council’s staffing limitations, the group shared the details for a Stevenage Wombles Group that businesses contribute to, and local people litter pick and tidy whilst enjoying social interactions. Extending this opportunity far and wide was welcomed by residents who would like to know more about how they could positively contribute to their area whilst meeting new people.

Waste management carts weren’t always removing all the litter leaving behind remnants of drinking and eating from the night before. Suggestions of working with the local schools and community groups to create a collective commitment to maintaining a clean public realm were welcomed.

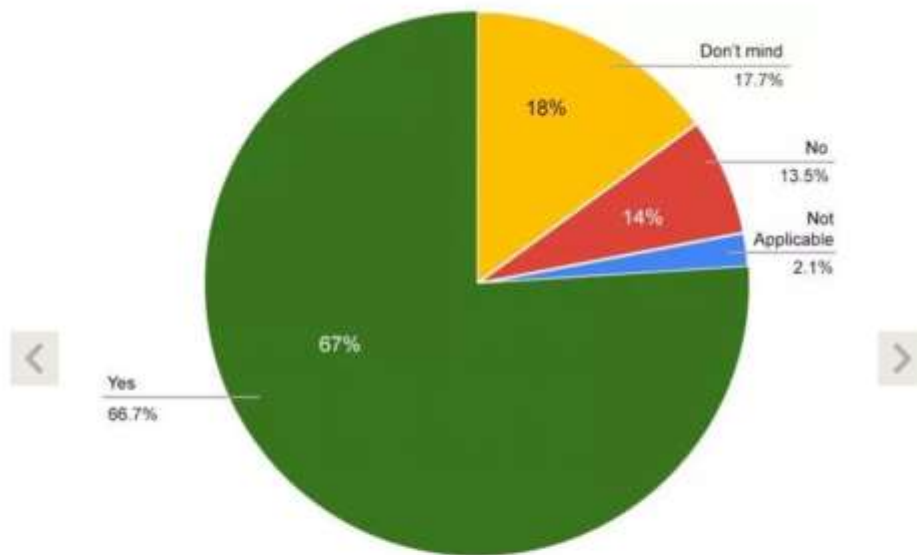
The new seating in the area was positively welcomed with some describing them as ‘amazing to stop at’. Some in the group suggested that in future it might be preferably to use the metal benches as in the millennium garden as they will last longer. Some warned of the negative implications of fixed seating on the Charter Fair.

Two other suggestions were made to improve the existing seating further: to place a bin next to each and to consider ways of promoting

greater social interaction when someone sits down – coffee vans and conversation starters.

Those answering the survey reflected this positive experience of the new outside seating areas (see graph below)

Perception towards outside seating

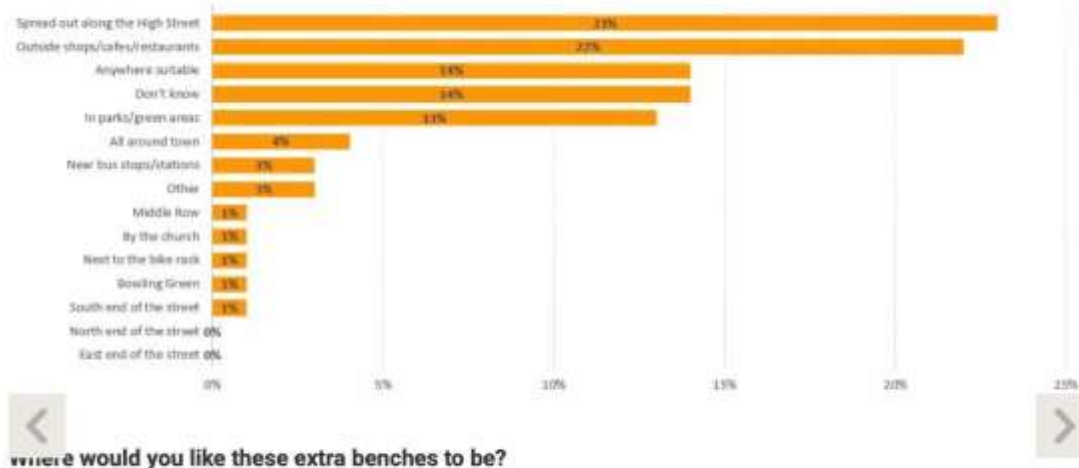


Do you like the outside seating at the southern part of the High Street?

Most participants (76%) enjoy the outside seating at the southern part of the High Street, with only 7% stating that they don't like it. In fact, keeping/expanding the outside seating area is 7th on the list of the desired improvements to the High Street.

When asked where extra benches should be placed 45% of those answering the survey said they should go along the high street and outside shops and cafes (see graph below).

Desired location of extra benches



Participants want these extra benches to be placed along both sides of the high street (23%), or outside shops, restaurants and cafés where most people gather.

Public Realm: *pavements*

As in other sections of this report an inclusive space was considered to be essential. For the public realm this could mean smoothing out the surface level so that curbs are removed, and the space redefined using the surface area. There was a lot of talk about pavements being uneven and cobbles not being good for arthritis. One resident spoke about the step by the hospice shop being so steep that it knocked the battery out in the mobility scooter. Getting that balance right to ensure those with all disabilities are involved in a rethink of surface level was encouraged.

Public Realm: *historical preservation*

A strong sentiment to retain the heritage of the old town was heard within each of the meetings. The 'conservation' rules and sentiment were felt to have been forgotten in the previous four years with coloured shop fronts, music licenses issued, and signage varying. The history and heritage of the area was a strength that is felt to be currently under utilized: suggestions of weaving the history into the signage and seating were welcomed. In addition to the history new public art that brings the

town's heritage together with a positive aspirations could be externally funded to support local artists to exhibit.

Findings: Climate Change

The issues emerging within this theme overlap with other themes but were the points made specifically about climate change in the meetings.

This theme challenged some to move beyond the here and now to what a future might need to look like, with one resident arguing that this theme requires us to “*think about what will sustain the high street, not what residents necessarily want*”. There was a feeling that policies and politics didn’t always match actions, and that for Stevenage to respond well to climate change a bigger conversation is needed.

Climate Change: *policy and practice*

Moving to electric vehicles led residents to argue that the high street was not ready to support them if that move was made: more charge points were needed. It was also noted that electric vehicles were more expensive to buy albeit cheaper to run, and this move would exclude residents who were unable to afford a new car.

The Council wants to encourage behavioural change to enable local people to meet the challenge of climate change, but residents raised the following questions about how consistent that could be in the high street:

- If the high street was closed people would still drive – where would the traffic go?
- How can people cycle to Stevenage from Hitchin when there are no cycle lanes or footpaths?
- Why aren’t all the bins in public places reflecting the recycling commitment?
- What is being done to support businesses to improve their buildings and recycle more?
- Why has the council approved the build of 7500 homes that are not being designed for carbon neutrality?
- The town has signed up to the Green Town Policy but how green is the new bus station?

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- Where are the electric charging points?
 - Where are the solar panels on buildings?
 - How green are the large outdoor heaters in the restaurants?
 - What schemes could be promoted to encourage more car sharing and enable local people to feel the financial benefit?

There was a strong feeling that policy needs to be matched by practice at all levels. St Alban's was put forward as an area that has done some good work on climate change for the Council to learn from. Some argued a regional plan is needed similar to that of the London plan, whilst others promoted greater investment in local artists to help lead the behavioural change needed.

Findings: Safety and Access

Speeding and the suggestion of a one way system merged as a conversation in this theme. Outside of traffic related issues residents raised feeling unsafe in relation to substance misuse and asb in some places. Suggestions to create safer connectivity between the old and new town were heard as were similar points about pavements which are covered in previous sections.

Safety and Access: speeding and a one way system

This was the most popular discussion in this theme. Speeding was seen as a safety issue on the high street with some calling for the use of speed cameras. However, there appeared to be more support for lower speed limits, with general agreement on a 20mph limit. Speed humps were welcomed at the south end of the old town (holy trinity area) as this is particularly bad for pedestrians and cyclists.

Making the high street one way was seen by some as a way of increasing safety particularly the Botrain & Drapers Way section, which would also help with cycling as cyclists reported feeling unsafe, citing the way in which cars reverse as a particular safety issue. Others however objected, arguing that a one way system would encourage faster driving and negatively impact on people using the high street.

Blocking the high street off was a suggestion by one resident which would limit the motorcycle speeding as well as the cars, but this had limited support from others in visiting that theme. One resident suggested leaving the high street as is but re routing the national express coaches and the 586 bus.

Safety and Access: connecting the old and new

Connecting the station and the new town had caused concern about the dependence on the bridge into the car park or the underpass into a car park: both felt unsafe at times and should be improved.

Sticking with connectivity residents highlighted the need to work on safety around connecting the leisure park and the high street where this was felt to be ‘unpleasant’.

Safety and Access: *substance misuse and anti-social behaviour*

Greater police presence was required by this group of residents. They spoke of drug dealing and violence going unenforced. Church Lane was cited as having an increased level of anti-social behaviour but limited (if any) visible police presence to make residents feel safer. The group spoke about ‘beautiful Mediterranean gardens’ that no one wanted to use because of the drug dealing and use that happens within them.

Graffiti was viewed by some as a sign of anti-social behaviour, calling for a ‘zero tolerance’ approach, but others felt that only graffiti that involved ‘tagging’ (gangs and territorial statements) should have zero tolerance and that graffiti of other natures should be embraced as art.

Findings: Business Support and Resident Relations

This theme focused primarily on the need for greater dialogue with residents and businesses before making decisions. Using dialogue tools as opposed to surveys was welcomed to understand the drivers of different perspectives.

Communication and dialogue between the different council departments, the county council and business and residents was felt in need of more transparency and collective decision making. Residents spoke about rebuilding respectful relationships between everyone. Good monthly meetings that used to take place between councillors and the public had now stopped; residents were feeling ignored when consultations seemed limited, or decisions were made without understanding the impact on residents. Whilst they recognised the challenge of attracting local people into the decision making spaces, they felt that more work should be done to encourage local dialogue through participation. Making dialogue and decision making enjoyable and meaningful for everyone was felt to be a big challenge but one that should be embraced and invested in to build stronger relationships between residents and residents; residents and businesses; and residents and councillors/council departments.

Political partnerships were encouraged: parties sharing surgeries so that they hear the same issues together, and work together to avoid funding driving decisions was welcomed. It was felt that decisions attracting the right funding could be better achieved with shared political commitment to work together for the benefit of residents and businesses.

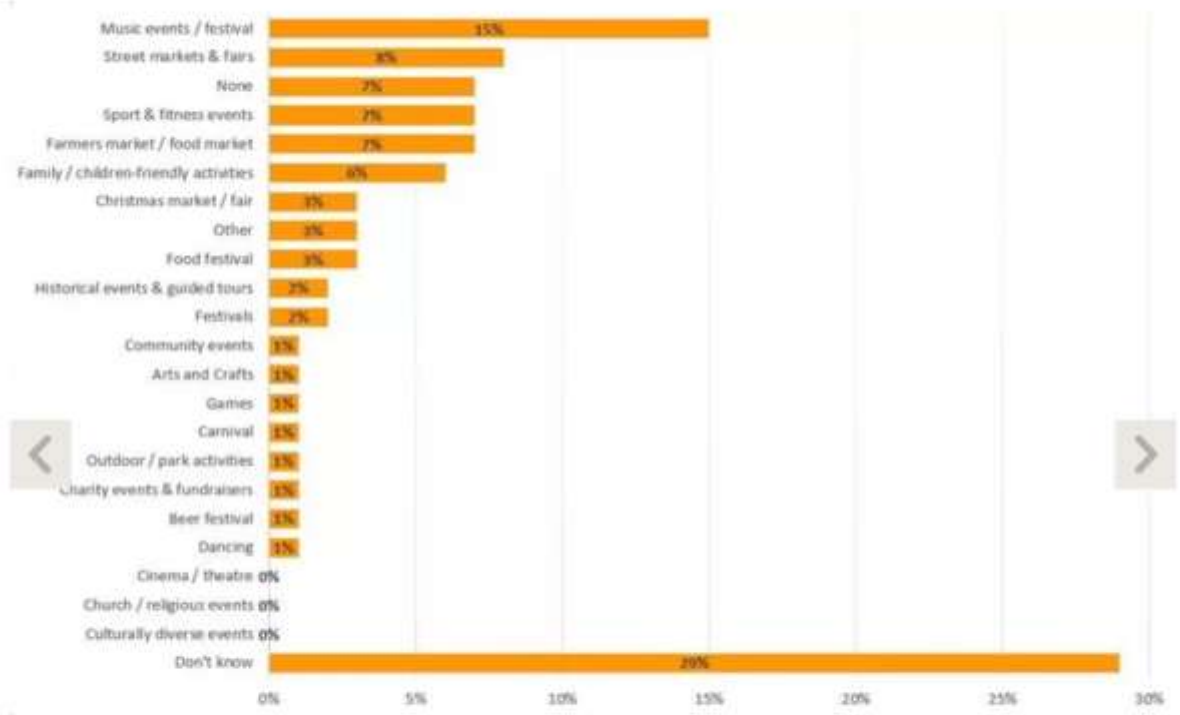
Residents felt that businesses were prioritised by the council and its partners, and the impact on residents was unsupported at times. One example of this was the night time economy being supported but despite

three years of complaints about the noise, a local resident felt unsupported in trying to limit the impact of noise on his quality of life.

Findings: Events and Promotions

When responding to the survey residents didn't know what they liked best about the high street. Where they did have a preference, they were for the music events and markets and fairs (see graph below)

Favourite things about Stevenage High Street



What do you value most about Stevenage High Street?

The majority (26%) values the local shops on the High Street, particularly the variety of independent small shops, as well as the street's character and history (11%).

A lot of the conversation in the meetings focused on the Charter Fair. Whilst there were some in the room who felt “it was not what it used to be”, others spoke about how it was ‘amazing; at attracting business and supporting the local economy, as well as building community spirit. The old town line was considered to bring great bands and draw on the different skills of the community. However, it was acknowledged that

more volunteers could strengthen the communication reach of the Fair as well as support the organisation of it in the future.

More themed markets were welcomed whilst acknowledging the challenges that the existing farmers market might be experiencing. The farmers market is currently being run single handedly with a drive and passion to be sustainable and green in its delivery. However some felt it could be strengthened if more people were involved in running it.

Building on the desire to keep the heritage of the area alive residents suggested local historic tours be designed and delivered as part of the promotion and events theme.

Places like the Springfield Centre and the local churches/community groups are doing really good work to support the local community. Residents asked how that work could be better connected with the high street to encourage shoppers/diners to learn more about how they too could support a thriving strong community.

Conclusion

The meetings attracted a low number of residents primarily from the white, over 50 age bracket, and as such the findings should be read with caution when generalising for the whole community. However, the main content of this report does provide good insight into how that age group might envisage the future of the high street. Where relevant the survey findings have been included to provide an overview of the perspectives of a wider group of residents and recommendations are suggested below.

There were a few participants in attendance at the meetings who had not been to a meeting before and welcomed the opportunity to engage in local decision making. They participated fully and were able to bring their experiences to the table to inform the dialogue. Those who had participated in meetings previously were keen to express their discontent with decisions to date and their desire to protect the parking in the high street, which can be seen in the content of the report. Opening up discussions pre policy making was welcomed by all.

All residents arrived with a positive passion and local experiences that added to the wider dialogue about the future of the high street. Despite initially feeling unhappy with the Council, they did feel at the end of the meeting that they had been able to share their views and welcomed a refreshed relationship with the Council.

At the end of each meeting residents were invited to sign up and be kept informed of changes. If/when changes are proposed to the future of the high street, residents would welcome in person discussions to collaboratively identify any risks and how those might be mitigated for the benefit of all.

Over 1600 people responded to the online digital consultation during October and November 2021. The respondents gave feedback, supporting the improvements on the High Street; were in favour of more

trees and benches; public transport improvements and supported more local shops and events.

Suggestions for Change

This section summarises key conversations from each theme as suggestions for change.

Transport:

1. Provide consistency to the free parking offer to support quick and convenient stops on the high street as well as encouraging longer shopping stays. A possible solution could include a 30 minute free stay on the high street supported by a 1-2 hours free stay in all local car parks, with payment thereafter. Review it properly
2. Rethink the layout of the transport stops on the high street to incorporate a herringbone style or parrelle parking system and repositioned cycle racks.
3. Support local villagers to cycle to the High Street through better signage to the high street from cycle lanes, incentivisation for shoppers on cycles, and better connection for those in Hitchen and Walkern.
4. Engage in future thinking with other local authorities who have adapted their high streets with the support of local business and residents (this could be visits or in depth explorations).
5. There was support for the green bike rack from the digital engagements, with 44% wanting them kept, and a further 15% kept but relocations. Improve the cycle rack offer.

Public Realm:

1. Level off and green the high street to make it more attractive, more inclusive and better for the environment
2. Work with restaurants to re-design the areas that non-diners pass through

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3. Explore with market providers and residents how to use local learning to extend and strengthen market provision
 4. Develop community led litter picking approaches that extend Womble Groups, and school and business commitments to keep the high street clean
 5. Install benches to connect and support isolation, along the High Street, near the restaurants and open spaces.
 6. Increase the amount of trees, along the High Street and the open spaces.
 7. Make it prettier and more colourful.

Climate Change:

1. Review current local policies for consistency in supporting climate change.
2. Carbon reduction measures.

Safety & Access:

1. Explore the possibilities of discouraging speeding
2. Review ways in which the old and new town can be better connected through safer access routes
3. Work with the community safety teams and groups supporting those with substance misuse to reduce the level of drug taking in the Church Lane and Mediterranean Gardens areas.
4. Improved disabled access.

Business Support and Resident Relations:

1. Build in opportunities to talk about change and enable shared problem solving before any policy decisions are made
2. Work with political parties to adopt shared approaches to listening to residents and attracting funding
3. Post Office.

Events and Promotions:

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1. Consider how to develop an events and promotions volunteer force that could support a range of events from the Charter Fair to thematic markets and historic events.
 2. More flowers and better cleaning.
 3. More and better shops.
 4. Promotions and discounts.
 5. Better links to the historical heritage of the High Street.
 6. Food Market
 7. Children's events
 8. Arts and crafts events
 9. Games, sports & fitness
 10. Beer Festival.

This report was created by MutualGain for Stevenage Borough Council in April 2022.



www.mutualgain.org