Hitchin Town Centre
Recovery & Development Plan
(July 2022)

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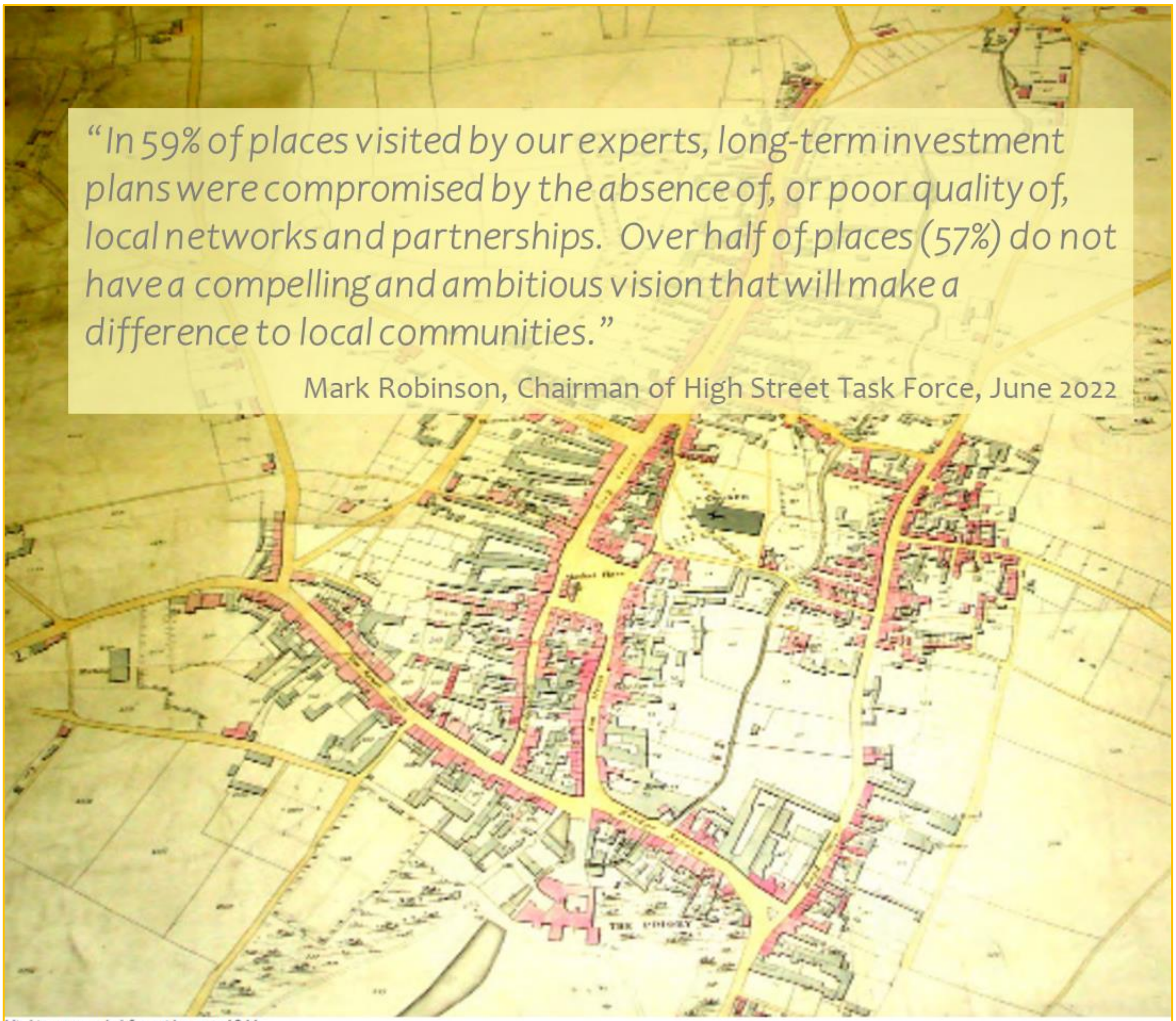
This report has been produced for North Herts Council with support from the European Regional Development Fund through the Department for Levelling Up, Housing Communities and in association with Hitchin BID, the Hitchin Initiative and Hertfordshire County Council.

The report was prepared by Chris Wade & Jekaterina Ancane of the People & Places Partnership, based on survey work undertaken in Hitchin during spring 2022.

"In 59% of places visited by our experts, long-term investment plans were compromised by the absence of, or poor quality of, local networks and partnerships. Over half of places (57%) do not have a compelling and ambitious vision that will make a difference to local communities."

Mark Robinson, Chairman of High Street Task Force, June 2022



Hitchin, as recorded for a tithe map, 1844.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This work uses a tried and tested methodology developed by the People & Places Partnership as a basis for preparing a COVID-19 Recovery and Development Plan for Hitchin town centre on behalf of North Hertfordshire Council.

It is part of a District-wide initiative taken by the Council to work with key stakeholders in Hitchin, Baldock, Royston and Letchworth Garden City. This seeks to map out both a high level strategic and effective COVID recovery plan for its town centres in the short-term, and a medium- and longer-term development plan framework to assist the town centres develop successfully over the next decade.

This report follows the methodology prepared nationally by the People & Places Partnership for the Local Government Association to guide the local leadership of town centre revitalisation. In-line with the requirements of North Herts Council, this methodology focuses on helping local the council and local partners to develop a 'Forward Framework' that focus on both the 'what' and the 'how' of town centre recovery and development.

Review: Existing Strategies

Work to prepare the Hitchin Town Centre Recovery Development Plan commenced with engagement with members of the Town Strategy Group and a detailed desktop review and analysis of existing local strategies, relating to Hitchin town centre. The findings of this strategy review are presented using the town centre revitalisation themes provided in the LGA toolkit.

Planning and property

North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011-2031

The North Hertfordshire Local Plan sets out a strategic vision and spatial strategy for the District over the period 2011 to 2031. The Local Plan seeks to promote, protect and enhance the provision of shops, financial and professional services, café or restaurants, pubs or drinking establishments or takeaways in the main centres of Hitchin, Letchworth Garden City, Baldock and Royston.

The Local Plan acknowledges Hitchin as one of North Hertfordshire's main towns and the District's busiest town centre. It recognises the significance of Hitchin as a shopping destination, with the primary shopping area located around the Market Place and along the High Street and Bancroft. Secondary shopping areas are along Hermitage Road, Bucklersbury and Sun Street. In addition to that, the Churchgate Centre and its surroundings provide an additional significant amount of retail floorspace as well as a large quantity of surface level car-parking.

At the time of the Local Plan, there was a projected need for 11,100 gross m^2 of additional retail floorspace in Hitchin by 2031. Churchgate and its surroundings (4,000 m^2) and Paynes Park (4,000 m^2) areas were indicated as two key sites providing opportunities to meet these floorspace requirements.

Discussions and proposals for the redevelopment of Churchgate and its surrounding area are still ongoing and could have a major impact on the town centre. The Local Plan defined how in providing a mixed-use redevelopment, proposals should provide for provision of residential accommodation on upper floors; identification of suitable, long-term location for Hitchin Market; ensuring an appropriate level of car parking is retained and / or provided across the town centre as a whole; provision of high quality public realm including strengthened pedestrian links with the Market Place and along the River Hiz; preservation and enhancement of heritage assets including Hitchin Conservation Area and listed buildings.

The Local Plan aims to ensure that the town centres maintain their primary retail function whilst increasing their diversity with a range of complementary uses, promoting competitive and flexible town centre environments. It is proposed that this be achieved by monitoring and the strategic allocation of retail primary frontages, avoiding appearance of non-retail uses that can create 'dead frontages'. It is probably timely to review the effectiveness of this approach in the light of recent national policy changes.

Local Plan Policy SP4 sets-out specific policies for protecting the vitality and viability of the District's town and local centres, including preparing town centre strategies.

Hitchin Town Centre Strategy (2004)

The most recent Hitchin Town Centre Strategy was developed by North Herts Council as a supplementary planning document in 2004 for the period up to 2016. The Strategy set out a vision and key aims that acknowledged the distinctive historic character of Hitchin and proposed the continuous enhancement of its vibrancy to serve the local community and attract visitors. The Strategy was divided into five key themes with supporting policies: Built environment and public spaces; land use activities; community facilities; accessibility; community safety; promotion and marketing. In considering the scope for an updated town centre strategy, it will be important to review these themes and consider any necessary additions such as parking and travel; business engagement and support; digital development and the partnership and governance structure necessary for delivery.

North Herts Council Climate Change Strategy 2021-2026

The North Herts Climate Change Strategy outlines the Council's commitment to contributing to the reduction of carbon emission and while not outlining town centre related policies, it influences activities managed by the Council, including planned new developments and green infrastructure.

Parking, travel and access

Hitchin Transport Strategy

Within a broader approach for North Hertfordshire, transport proposals are suggested for Hitchin that are based on analysis of local issues and qualities. To address these, the strategy highlights strategic elements and measures to be undertaken including behaviour change to encourage shift to sustainable travel; improving walking and cycling through improved crossings and longer-term increased pedestrianisation; improved bus services; traffic management including 20mph limit across the town and junctions improvements; and the overarching concept of a "sustainable spine" with improved bus frequency and better walking and cycling provision.

Hertfordshire County Councils' High Street Recovery plans

In summer 2021 an online engagement process organised by Hertfordshire County Council with support from North Herts Council, sought feedback and views on the potential modification and retention of some of these changes. The changes included keeping the High Street closed to traffic between 10am to 4pm, 7 days a week and have been approved to continue on 18 months extended trial. Additional restrictions include limits to on-street parking on the High Street and Market Place.

There is a focus on parking and traffic management in the projects proposed by the Hitchin BID under the Save and Support objectives of its business plan. These proposals include the implementation of a car parking signage feasibility study and a reduction in through traffic in and around Market Place, that is compatible with County Council's current extended trial.

Streetscape and public realm

North Hertfordshire Urban Design Assessment – Hitchin (2007)

North Hertfordshire Urban Design Assessment for Hitchin was developed through public consultation to examine the perceptions and suggestions about the current quality of the public realm and physical appearance of the town. A selection of topics that are most relevant to this Town Centre Recovery and Development Plan and merit further review and possible policy revisions to safeguard and enhance them include:

- *Building types*: Detailing of new build should replicate original plot sizes and building scales, with opportunities sought to redevelop buildings which do not fit in with the majority typology.
- *Open space*: Market Square is an important hard-landscaped area in the town, and efforts should be made to expand the soft landscaping found to the east of St Mary's Church around the banks of the River Hiz.
- *Land use*: The town centre contains A1, A3 and A4 uses, including independent retailers and multiples. The balance of these uses and types of retail is an important part of Hitchin's character as a town and its strength as a district comparison shopping location.

- *Circulation, demand and linkages*: Existing links should be protected and enhanced, and the barrier caused by traffic along Park Way addressed. Connections to the multi-storey car park are a major challenge in Hitchin.
- *Parking*: Parking along the River Hiz should be rationalised to make room for new public space along the banks of the river.
- *Streetscape elements*: There is a major opportunity to create a new river- side walk with a distinct landscape right at the heart of the settlement.
- *Security*: Alleyways should be well-lit to reduce security risks across the settlement.

Conservation Area Statement (2011)

The Conservation Area Statement suggested a set of overarching improvements to be addressed in the town centre. These include:

- *Main entries or 'gateways'*: the main 'entries' into the town are disappointing and failed to reflect the high quality of the historic environment within the town.
- *Public realm*: Additional improvements to the public realm through better maintenance and use of appropriate materials, street furniture and street lightening is recommended.
- *Historic shopfronts*: Additional recommendations are made towards maintenance of historic shopfronts to avoid poor design and signage that detract from the character of conservation area.
- *Areas identified for improvement*: The key area identified for improvement is the Churchgate shopping centre, market & car parks.

In addition, Hitchin BID has proposed activities in relation to public realm with more immediate impacts including encouraging additional planting, improvements to decorations, funding of floral displays, as well as for the longer-term encouraging Churchgate's refurbishment and improvements to riverside waterfront and riverside walkway.

Business support

Hitchin BID Business Plan 2019-2024

The Hitchin Business Improvement District (BID) was established in 2009 and represents over 600 businesses working together collaboratively to support and improve the trading environment and promotion of the town.

Hitchin BID Business Plan for 2019-2024 describes the process of bringing businesses' together and defines the vision for Hitchin town centre. Further, it allocates budget for projects across four objectives:

- *Vibrant*: Hitchin BID will fund the installation of public realm installations and will support major town centre events.
- *Promoted*: The BID will invest into the consistent promotion and marketing of the town centre, attracting local, regional and national audiences.

- *Clean and safe*: The BID will continue the funding of town night time rangers; provide extended CCTV camera coverage; offer discounted rates on commercial waste disposal; and fund deep cleaning and graffiti removal
- *Save and support:* The BID is planning to retain its function as a voice and representative of local businesses to deliver and support their views and opinions. Hitchin BID is also dedicated to contributing to townscape regeneration projects and supporting traffic and parking management programmes.

The BIDs' Business plan sets-out how it is measuring its success in delivering benefits across its objectives and different town centre business sectors.

Place branding and marketing

One of the Hitchin BID Business Plan core objectives is to enhance promotion of the town centre amongst locals and visitors. Its Business Plan proposes activities aimed at:

- marketing, promotion and collective branding for the town by:
- promoting the town as a tourist destination:

To deliver its objective of boosting town centre vibrancy, the BID also commits to organising major town centre events, independent shopping days and promotions.

Digital technology and data

Whilst there is no comprehensive social media or digital strategy for Hitchin, a recognised part of Hitchin BID's Business plan aims specifically to improve existing town-centre website and other social media.

A variety of social media platforms exist to promote different aspects of the town. Whilst each of these sites serves slightly different audiences and organisational roles, it will be important to coordinate and clarify the town's digital footprint.

North Herts Council has recently adopted a new mobile phone-based footfall monitoring system for Hitchin as part of a wider scheme with other East and North Herts towns. This system will potentially give very useful baseline data as well as routine updates to understand the changing use of the Hitchin town centre post-pandemic with benchmarking possible with neighbouring towns.

Evidence: The Survey Findings

The place

The business mix

The business data for Hitchin indicates that that the current retail offer focuses on provision of goods for home, luxury and personal care. There is an adequate provision of fashion retail that can serve the needs of most of the age and gender groups. While the proportion of convenience retail outlets is relatively low (5%), the inclusion of supermarkets located in the town centre, ensures it serve can everyday existing demand. The combined proportion of comparison and convenience retail (40%) is slightly lower than that of similarly sized towns (49%), because of the diversity of other business uses.

The proportion of hospitality businesses is representative of large town centre's data benchmarked nationally indicating that Hitchin serves social and leisure function well.

Hitchin town centre has a slightly lower proportion of financial and professional services (8%) compared with large towns nationally (13%). The proportion of town centre offices (9%) is significantly higher than the typical proportion in national towns (2%), with most of the office premises clustered in dedicated buildings within the town centre thus contributing to the number of the town centre customers.

Levels of Sui Generis uses (12%) are higher when compared to towns nationally (6%) and indicate presence of other diverse services within the town centre.

Overall, the Hitchin town centre business mix seems suited to the needs of residents in terms of staple goods, comparison shopping, social life and community function. High number of independent comparison outlets as well as good provision of office spaces contribute to the daily footfall and can be appealing for locals and visitors.

Comparison verses convenience retail

The modest proportion of everyday, convenience retail (12%) in Hitchin is slightly less than in the large towns nationally. These convenience retailers include four chain supermarkets that add greatly to the town centre offer. These businesses meet local needs and attract footfall that other nearby town centre businesses could benefit from.

Ownership types

The data for Hitchin indicate that there are 13 key attractors in the town centre (5%) and that this lower than towns nationally. Similarly, the combined proportion of other national multiples (17%) and regional multiples (2%) is also lower than large towns nationally (35%). Conversely, there is a high proportion of independent retail businesses (75%) which is higher than the national average. Such numbers indicate that the town is a local service centre that meets most of its residents needs with a good choice of popular brands, though some demand might still have to be met elsewhere. The high proportion of independent retailer provides variety and a distinctive marketing opportunity.

Vacant business units

The vacancy data for Hitchin indicates there are 6% of unoccupied units in the town centre which is lower than the level for benchmarked large towns nationally (13%). This indicates that available premises are being used comparable well, although the total number of the town centre vacancies (26) indicates that some areas of the town offer opportunities for new businesses.

Footfall

Whilst footfall monitoring was not part of this survey work for Hitchin, footfall data is available through a new monitoring system available through North Herts Council. A template is provided showing the normal data that People & Places would look to assess using such a system.

Car parking

The Initial data collected for 8 public car parks and 6 private car park serving Hitchin town centre shows there are a total of 1,665 spaces. Short-stay (55%) and long-stay (45%) spaces are equally available across the town centre and are comparable in proportion to the national average. Out of those available long-term, 631 are in public car parks. A further 573 spaces are available in more peripheral sites around Nightingale Road, Fishpond Road and Hitchin Station.

The people

Response to business survey

Survey forms were electronically distributed to all the town centre businesses in Hitchin. The following percentage figures are based on the 55 returned business confidence surveys from a total of 435 town centre businesses and organisations. This is a return rate of 13% compared to 25% nationally and suggests possible survey fatigue within the town's business community, despite the high proportion of independent businesses within the town.

Of the businesses that responded to the survey, 40% were shops of some kind, 12% were providers of retail services such as hairdressers, 19% providers of professional services such as solicitors, banks or accountants, and 9% were hospitality businesses. This is broadly representative of the town centre's business mix, however with notably lower response across hospitality businesses. Similarly, 91% of these respondents were independent businesses and this is also broadly representative.

A total of 84% of these businesses are long-established in Hitchin, having been based there for more than six years. This compares to 70% of business in benchmarked towns nationally. The fact that none of Hitchin businesses surveyed had been established for less than a year and only 16% for less than 5 years, may indicate significantly lower turnover in the town's traders, compared to benchmarked towns nationally.

Response to customer survey

A sample of 122 Hitchin town centre users were surveyed online through social media using the help of local community partners. Slightly less than two thirds of respondents were female, and that is only a slightly lower proportion than typical when compared to surveys conducted in towns nationally. There was healthy participation amongst all age groups, with 36-45s providing the highest number of responses, followed by the high level of responses across 46-55s and 66-75s.

It is evident from the responses that most customers surveyed (40%) typically visit Hitchin for leisure, which is likely to include socialising as well as visiting the many pubs and cafes located in the town centre. The second most popular purpose of a visit (37%) is for everyday convenience shopping. Only 8% of respondents visit town centre to access services, with the same proportion (8%) coming to town for comparison shopping.

Analysis of the responses received from town centre users reveals that impact of COVID-19 pandemic was varied, and only 37% of town centre customers have decreased their frequency of visits to Hitchin due to the pandemic. For 48% of respondents, there was no change in frequency of town centre visits and 16% of users said that they have been visiting the town centre more frequently.

When asked how often users visit town centre now with the pandemic restrictions being lifted, 52% of users responded that are visiting town centre more than once a week, only 14% are in the town centre daily and 20% are visiting Hitchin weekly. Only 6% of respondents visited the town centre fortnightly and 8% visited less frequently than that. 2% of the respondents had visited Hitchin only once.

Answering question on duration of their visit, more than a half of users (56%) said that they are spending one to two hours in town, while another third (30%) of shoppers are staying in the town centre for up to 4 hours. A further 11% are and out of the town centre within one hour, 2% dwell up to 6 hours, and 1% are staying in the town centre for the whole day.

The figures for shoppers' origin for Hitchin from this survey indicate that 71% of town centre users sampled, live locally and that 29% visit from within 30-minute drive distance.

The survey also asked town centre users about their preferred primary and secondary methods of travelling into town. The responses on travel to town show that on foot (61%) and car (32%) are the preferred primary methods of travel to town. Travelling to town by car (46%) and on foot (24%) are also the most popular secondary choices, followed by moderately high responses for cycling (11%), bus (11%) and taxi (5%). The high response for walking, suggests that Hitchin town centre is well connected to nearby residential areas.

As part of the survey, users were asked which other local towns they visit regularly, making at least one trip per month. Letchworth Garden City appeared to be visited by 58% of respondents, Stevenage is visited by 31% and Baldock by 9%. Within the category of 'other' (17%), Luton and Welwyn Garden City appeared as the most popular options.

The positives & negatives

Positive perceptions

Hitchin town centre businesses were first asked about their opinions on the town centre's appeal. From the responses to the survey, businesses appear most positive about the town's physical appearance (78%), pedestrian access around town (73%), events and activities (73%) and the offer relative to nearby towns (70%). Other aspects that slightly smaller but still significant proportion of businesses appeared to be positive about floral displays (68%), cleanliness (66%), Christmas lights (66%), public spaces (63%), outdoor seating for hospitality (63%), potential local customers (63%) and appeal compared to out-of-town experiences (59%).

Subsequently businesses were asked about their perceptions of the town's trading environment. In this case businesses appeared to be positive about the town's cafes & restaurants (74%), the prosperity of the town (72%), the work undertaken by Hitchin BID (64%) and the town's pubs & bars (62%).

When asked about the town centre environment, customers were very positive about built heritage (90%), physical appearance (81%) convenience (79%) and public spaces (78%). They were also positive about floral displays (73%), pedestrian access (71%) Christmas lights (70%), events and activities (69%), cleanliness (63%), outdoor seating for hospitality (62%) and leisure and cultural facilities (59%).

Subsequently, customers were asked to indicate what are the positives and negatives of the current provision of town centre services and businesses. Aspects that received the most positive response were Hitchin's hospitality offer with cafes and restaurants (87%) ranked highest and pubs and bars with slightly smaller positive response (63%). Customers were very also positive about number of independent shops (81%), access to banks and ATM's (80%), provision of health services and pharmacists (72%), grocery retail offer (72%), customer service (71%), and overall mix businesses (60%).

Negative perceptions

When asked about town centre's appeal, negative sentiments were selected by much smaller proportion of businesses, with the mix of other businesses (24%) and leisure and cultural facilities (20%), the only aspects receiving mildly negative responses and these smaller than the corresponding positive sentiments of 46% & 37%, respectively.

In terms of the most negative aspects of town trading environment, half of businesses selected on-street parking (54%), rental values and rates (50%), followed by availability of suitable staff (34%) and off-street car parks (33%).

In terms of customers' negative aspects of Hitchin's town centre's environment, traffic (48%) received the higher number of responses, followed by on-street (37%) and off-street (28%) parking. There were some negative sentiments expressed about walking and cycling routes (23%), though these were less than the positive sentiments (41%). Generally, though responses appeared to be strikingly more positive than those expressed nationally.

When asked about Hitchin town centre's services, the highest negative response received were about fashion retail offer (22%) and national chains (19%), though even these were countered by higher positive responses of 48% and 31% respectively.

Customer sentiments

A word cloud was created from the single words most popularly used by town centre users to sum-up Hitchin. Such a word cloud, whilst only indicative, is useful in understanding how the town centre is perceived by current users who are familiar with it. It gives a visual representation of sentiments and can be helpful in determining how the town can be honestly promoted to potential new users in a way that creates achievable expectations. Many of the most prominent words used for Hitchin are positive, such as lovely, lively, welcoming and vibrant. There were more moderate volumes of negative sentiments expressed such as congested, disappointing, tired and expensive.

When asked how their experience of Hitchin town centre had changed in recent years, 29% of town users said it had improved and a further 28% stated that it has remained the same. This was followed by 25% saying that their experience had changed in a mixture of good and bad ways. Only 14% of respondents said that their experience had worsened, and this is a significantly smaller proportion than that for benchmarked towns. This indicates that there are opportunities and space for improvement to support this already generally positive opinion about the town.

When users were asked if they would recommend a visit to Hitchin town centre, 97 out of 109 of users said 'yes', which indicates that the town centre offers an appealing experience for visitors. Such response is significantly higher of the one expressed nationally, confirming that the town centre is highly appreciated by local users.

Future priorities

Businesses' priorities

When businesses in Hitchin were asked to propose two suggestions to improve the town centre, their top priorities related to various aspects of parking and travel (44%). Within this, sentiments regarding improved parking management (12) included increased availability, better signage, accessibility, increased stay and consistency across all car parks. This was followed by comments on reduction of parking costs (7), increased pedestrianisation (4) and conversely, a desire to remove all traffic restrictions (3).

The second priority for businesses surveyed was improving the visitor economy, promotion and events (17%). Business expressed sentiments to enhance the promotion of the town centre (6) to attract visitors, with some comments highlighting a perceived need for better digital promotion (3). Businesses also suggested better management of events (3), specifically to distribute existing ones across the whole town centre.

Customers' priorities

When customers were asked to suggest two priorities for improving the town centre, the theme receiving the most comments was the one related to the town's retail, hospitality & general business mix (58). Within this theme, general sentiments about the lack of retail and business diversity (15) received the highest number of comments, followed by similar sentiments regarding the fashion retail mix (11) and independent shops (11). Other comments indicated that management of current market (7) and provision of high street brands (7) is prioritised by the customers.

The broad theme of parking and travel (52) gathered only slightly lower number of comments, with pedestrianisation (20) having received the greatest number of comments, indicating high priority given to retaining and improving existing car free zones within the town centre. Further, sentiments were expressed in relation to traffic management (10), parking costs (9) and parking management (5). Comments were also made in relation to cycling facilities (7).

The appearance and signage theme received 34 comments in total. Within these, sentiments were expressed in regard to accessibility (7), pointing out issues with disabled and pram access. The same number of comments were received in relation to cleanliness (7) and general appearance (7, with sentiments indicating requests for a better maintenance of the town centre. A further 5 comments were made in relation to the area around Churchgate in particular, and the same number of comments expressed about improving maintenance and use of the market (5) on non-market days.

The public amenities' theme received 19 comments in total. Out of these comments, 11 were made about better public spaces and outdoor seating.

Digital Development

Businesses' digital drive

In terms of digital priorities, businesses gave investment in infrastructure such as a fast broadband connection across the town centre, as the greatest number of priority and high priority responses (74%), followed by digital phone network coverage (61%). In terms of digital services, businesses prioritised the creation and management of business websites (61%), town centre Wi-Fi coverage (55%), and the regular use of social media (49%). The provision of on-line sales and targeted use of customer data were given a lower priority.

Customers' digital drive

Customers ranked receiving regular updates from businesses (53%) as a priority or high priority amongst digital development options. This was followed by improving the digital phone network coverage (52%) and insights through social media (52%). Provision of click and collect services was prioritised in 40% of responses.

Local Leadership: Creating a Forward Framework

Revitalising a town centre is a complex and long-term venture and experience shows that it requires resources and leadership that should not be left to chance. For a partnership to evolve in its effectiveness, it is important to plan for constant progress through regular review and writing things down! This can be achieved by annually reviewing the checklist and updating a 'Forward Framework' comprising an over-arching strategy and two component plans covering the 'how' and the 'what' of town centre revitalisation.

Business Planning: An organisational business plan covering the foundations, form, folk and organisational finances will determine whether there is an effective and sustainable partnership able to deliver improvements. This organisational plan should define the inter-relationship and respective roles of partners such as the local authority, town council, business partners, Chamber of Commerce or a BID.

Action planning: A town centre action plan is necessary to determine and define objectives, projects, responsibilities, budgets, timescales, outcomes and impact measures as the building blocks of the coordinated delivery of improvements on the ground. The annual review of such an action plan should begin and end with a review of available evidence and the monitoring of impacts and changes.

This report concludes with potential themes and a forward framework for guiding the 'how' and the 'what' of town centre recovery and revitalisation in Hitchin. The themes can be used to bring stakeholders together and use the forward framework's template as a basis for preparing a detailed delivery plan by partners with budgets, responsibilities, defined outcomes and measurable indicators of success.

THEME 1: Planning, travel and streetscape enhancement to transform use

- Planning & property
- Parking, travel & access
- Streetscape & public realm

THEME 2: Business support, place promotion and digital development to boost appeal

- Place branding & marketing
- Business support
- Digital technology & data

THEME 3: Partnership development driven by effective communication and coordination

- Communications & engagement
- Coordination & monitoring

Issue	HITCHIN PRIORITIES ON A PAGE: Headline evidence	Outcomes sought
Planning for the evolving role of the town centre	• Opportunity to review progress & scope for replacement of 2004 town centre strategy • Customers positive about business mix though gave priority to increasing diversity • Businesses positive about the town's hospitality offer & negative about rents/rates • Vacancy rate for Hitchin is only 6% compared to 13% for benchmarked towns • Acquisition of Churchgate Shopping Centre offers chance to enhance wider town centre	Clear vision & priorities leading to physical change, enhanced business mix & strengthened identity, valued
Easing the journey into town	• Businesses rated parking as top concern and top priority, alongside travel • Customers' top negative perceptions & second highest priority were traffic & parking • Businesses & customers very positive about pedestrian access around the town centre • Customers' travel switches between on foot & car with 11% using bus or bike as back-up • Extended traffic regulation on High Street offers opportunity to develop long-term scheme	Development & delivery of travel & parking strategies that enable easier access & address businesses and customers' concerns.
Conserving an attractive & authentic streetscape to draw people around town	• Opportunity to review urban design & conservation policies in joined-up town centre strategy • Customers very positive about built heritage, physical appearance & public spaces • Businesses were most positive about physical appearance & pedestrian access • Appearance & access were a high customer priority including the area around Churchgate • Proposed Churchgate redevelopment can include public realm enhancement	Creation of policies and plans to enhance key public spaces in deliverable ways that improve foot-flow & meet stakeholder
Maintaining a variety of thriving businesses (& services)	• Two-thirds of businesses reported profits negatively impacted by the pandemic • More than 4-in-10 businesses expect profits to be negatively impacted over next year • Boosting the retail, hospitality & business mix a top priority for nearly half of customers • Businesses were positive the town's local appeal including relative to neighbouring towns • Businesses were positive about Hitchin BID's work	Increasingly confident & diverse business mix reflected in improved stakeholder perceptions.
Boosting the town's appeal & animating through events	• Over a third of customers said the frequency of their visits has reduced post-pandemic • Nearly a third of customers said experience of the town centre had improved recently • Asked if they would recommend a visit to Hitchin town centre, 9-out-of 10 said 'yes' • Only 4-in-10 businesses were positive about the potential for tourist customers • The second highest priority for businesses was the visitor economy, promotion & events	Increased local 'pride in place' with increased visits by residents & tourists shown by footfall & increased
Growing the digital 'footprint' to track pride in place & footfall	• Over 4-in-10 customers were positive about existing online information and promotion • Over half of customers gave a priority to direct marketing from businesses & social media • A quarter of businesses had positive perceptions about Hitchin's online identity • Three-quarters of businesses prioritised town-wide investment in digital infrastructure • 6-in-10 businesses prioritised the creation & management of town/business websites	Enhanced digital activity & profile along with sentiment monitoring & increased foot-flow as ongoing
Putting partnership in place to deliver joined-up progress	• Existing & proposed revitalisation necessitates engagement & can boost civic pride • Communication and engagement about the Churchgate redevelopment will be key • Hitchin already benefits from the BID & groups such as the Hitchin Initiative • There is a track-record of policy and & practice focused on enhancing the town centre • Strengthened communication & coordination can maximise benefits of increased ambitions	Positive community & business perceptions of progress shown in re-survey and indicators of pride in place.

Introduction: Revitalising Town Centres

This work uses a tried and tested methodology developed by the People & Places Partnership as a basis for preparing a COVID-19 Recovery Strategy for Hitchin town centre on behalf of North Hertfordshire Council.

North Hertfordshire Councils' requirements

This report follows the methodology designed by the People & Places Partnership for preparing Town Centre Recovery and Development Plans for the North Herts towns of Hitchin, Baldock, Royston and Letchworth Garden City. The same methodology is used for each of the four towns to identify their unique character and issues faced, whilst enabling comparisons to be made and complementary plans prepared.

As a part of the North Herts Welcome Back Fund programme, the Council wished to work with key stakeholders in each town to map out: a high level strategic and effective COVID recovery plan for its town centres in the short-term; a medium- and longer-term development plan framework to assist the town centres develop successfully over the next decade.

As part of the council's emerging Local Plan, Policy SP4 Town Centres, Local Centres and Community Shops make references to reviewing each of its town centre strategies. This commission will help inform the scope of work associated with review of the town centre strategies.

People & Places' approach

The People & Places Partnership offers a proven track-record of *bringing facts and faces to centres* through an evidenced-based, collaborative working method for enabling the revitalisation of town and city centres. People & Places have extensive experience of conducting research into town centre performance and perceptions; businesses confidence; stakeholder engagement; partnership development; town centre action planning and delivery; and performance monitoring.

In 2020, People & Places updated its earlier national *revitalising town centres toolkit*, prepared for the Local Government Association LGA). The toolkit provides local leaders with guidance on how to approach the revitalisation of town and city centres.

The methodology used by People & Places to develop the Hitchin Town Centre Recovery and Development Plan will adopt and adapt the approach created nationally as good practice in the LGA toolkit. In-line with the requirements of North Hertfordshire Council, this methodology focuses on helping local authorities and their partners to develop a 'Forward Framework' that focus on both the 'what' and the 'how' of town centre revitalisation.

The methodology used here to prepare the Hitchin Town Centre Recovery and Development Plan has six key elements reflecting the requirements in the strategy brief blended with People & Places' tried and tested approach used in the LGA toolkit. The approach has been used to prepare plans for the other three North Hertfordshire towns.

The People and Places Partnership are creators of the Local Government Association's national revitalising town centres toolkit. This online toolkit provides practical guidance and resources to assist councils in taking a strategic and evidence-based approach to revitalising town centres. The updated version prepared by People & Places in summer 2020, includes newly available case studies and guidance to help local authorities and place partnerships to develop COVID-19 recovery planning as part of wider revitalisation.

The toolkit uses the town centre checklist developed by the People & Places Partnership for delivering the 'how' and the 'what' of town centre revitalisation. Councils can use the self-assessment 'town centre checklist' with partners, to regularly review progress in developing local policy and practice.

Key elements to consider in applying the town centre checklist are:

- Foundations: the process should be underpinned by an up-to-date review of existing strategies, collective objectives and evidence from recent surveys.
- Function: action planning begins with a clear statement of identified issues; recognition of council and partners' roles; creation of suitable responses; acknowledgment of gaps in delivery; identification of impact measures.
- Form and Folk: next comes the development of appropriate organisational 'form' to coordinate activity including defining the roles of key partners and wider stakeholder engagement through 'folk'.
- Finances: financial planning needs to include identifying opportunities for fund raising, inward investment and partnership sustainability.
- Forward planning: finally, everything gets written down as a 'forward framework' and regularly reviewed.

The updated toolkit uses guidance on responding to the COVID-19 pandemic based on an adaptation of the Institute of Place Management's (IPM) national post-COVID 19 Recovery Framework. The IPM's Post-COVID 19 Recovery Framework has much in common with the toolkit's approach. Essentially both frameworks place a strong emphasis on evidence-based planning and delivery whilst focusing on shaping the 'how' (partnership development) and 'what' (action planning & delivery) of recovery/revitalisation. Both frameworks recognise the key roles of local coordination and communication in delivering successful town and city centre outcomes.

1. **Review of how prepared each town centre's economies are to recover from the Covid pandemic**

An understanding of the evidence-base about the preparedness of each town centre's economic and associated social functions will be achieved through the following sequence of research.

- A desktop review will be undertaken of existing district-wide and town specific strategies to understand existing data, identified issues, related policies and existing/proposed interventions.
- Interviews/discussion with key stakeholder groups locally and leading councillors/officers within the local authorities and agencies such as the LEP will focus on achieving buy-in to the process; gauging perceptions/evidence of town centre priorities; and beginning to consider the potential future roles of different organisations/departments.

2. **Clearly articulated recommendations of what needs to be done to strengthen each town centres' recovery as a high-level action plan with immediate and short-term actions**

Undertaking Town Centre Baseline Survey: To help objectively understand the wider economic, social and environmental issues and opportunities facing each town centre, People & Places will adapt its national town centre baseline survey process that forms part of the LGA toolkit. This survey work will comprise:

- Town centre business use survey, analysed against national benchmarks of business mix
- Business confidence survey: An online 'business confidence survey' will be made available to every customer facing, town centre business using social media accounts and email contacts of local partners. own centre users' survey:
- Customers' survey: An online town centre users' survey will be distributed through Council and partners social media accounts to gauge the perceptions and priorities of different types of town centre customers.
- Digital development opportunities: As an adjunct to the business confidence and town centre users' survey, preliminary questions will be asked about each town's digital infrastructure services.

Town Centre Forward Framework: People & Places will use the findings from step (i) and analysis of the baseline survey to prepare an evidence-led 'forward framework' template with a clear set of objectives for the Town Centre to aspire to address identified issues over the next 5 years and beyond. This forward framework will include existing/proposed interventions and recognise gaps in the responses matched with proposals for practical suggestions for ensuring how each town's daytime and nighttime economies and community facilities could act in concert to maximise the draw of the town centre.

A draft Forward Framework template will form the basis for reasoned discussion of which agencies, stakeholders and other interested parties are best placed to lead on which actions recognising resource implications.

FOUNDATION	
Evidence and objectives	Has a baseline survey of issues been completed including COVID-19 impacts, objectives defined and short/long-term outcome monitoring 'dashboard' agreed?
FUNCTION	
Travel, parking and access	Is an integrated town centre travel, parking and access strategy in place with immediate social distancing measures and transition to increased sustainability?
Planning and property	Are town-centre-first policies, master-planning or asset management in place that take account of COVID-19 impacts and engage businesses and landlords?
Streetscape and public realm	Has a prioritised streetscape and public realm improvement plan been agreed that facilitates social distancing and increases long-term, cross-town foot-flow?
Business support	Is there tailored mentoring and support to enhance the quality, performance and distinctiveness of businesses based on recovery needs and future trends?
Place branding and marketing	Is there a clear understanding of the town brand with pooled resources and a creative, collective campaign offering reassurance to existing and new markets?
Digital tech and data	Is there an assessment of digital infrastructure and skills with an investment plan for the collective use of data in marketing and monitoring the town centre?
FORM	
Governance and influence	Is there an appropriate structure, membership and credibility to coordinate local stakeholder activity and influence cross-departmental or strategic partnerships?
FOLK	
Community engagement and coordination	Is there strong public, private and community engagement with active and coordinated involvement in planning and delivery that extends to community assets development and is backed by a clear communications plan?
Capacity mapping and team building	Are there an effective chair, suitably skilled board, employment of necessary staff, effective management of trained volunteers and established relationships for joint working with other stakeholder groups?
FUNDING	
Finances and investment	Is there an organisation with robust financial procedures and strategy agreed for diverse and sustainable fund raising and income to support a town centre? Is it 'run as a business' with inter-relationships understood and investment secured?
FORWARD PLANNING	
Strategy and plans	Is there a well-defined 'forward framework' comprising an overarching vision/strategy, a rolling organisational business plan and a parallel action plan coordinating and monitoring delivery on the ground?

3. **Recommendations on strategic priorities for the medium and longer-term development of each town.**

Based on an understanding of the wider economic, social and environmental aspects, gained following the earlier research and reasoned discussion with key stakeholders, People & Places will respond to issues identified and gaps in current provision/capacity, to outline medium- and longer-term ideas for each of the town centres, recommending how these can be drawn together to form a coherent framework and outline strategy of a wider development plan.

A revised Forward Framework will be presented as a finalised Town Centre Recovery and Development Plan for each town centre. This will be a tabulated document that clearly shows the links between issues identified; short, medium and longer-term actions /recommendations; and outcomes monitoring metrics to measure success.

4. **Identification of funding streams currently or potentially available to support the recovery action plan and the longer- term development plan**

As well as identifying existing and potential sources of funding in the tabulated Recovery and Development Plan, People & Places will use its national-level knowledge and experience to help prepare a compendium of currently or potentially available funding to support delivery. This will clearly identify the various funding routes in relation to the identified actions/recommendation

Similarly, People & Places will use its experience with towns elsewhere and at a national to identify best practice in how similar towns to those in North Herts are utilising existing funding and/or securing new monies to support recovery of both daytime and nighttime economies. This will include suggestions regarding how each town centre can position itself to maximise leverage of inward investment, grant funding and other funds.

5. **Recommending effective partnership and/or governance arrangements for improving, promoting and maintaining the overall 'wellbeing' of each town centre**

The draft Forward Framework and finalised recovery plan will also focus on the 'how' of town centre recovery and revitalisation by recognising the roles of individual organisations and suggesting suitable governance arrangements to address identified themes in a coordinated and clearly communicated way. Importantly, People & Places will build such engagement with partners into recovery planning process from the outset.

The roles of partner organisations in planning, delivery and governance will be recognised in the published plans in a way that fosters involvement in progressing the short to medium term recovery plan and the wider medium to longer term development plan.

6. **Pointers to relevant best practice nationally with regard to the recovery of towns akin to those in North Herts**

People & Places will draw-on its national work including as authors of case studies on COVID-recovery for the LGA's town centre toolkit to support the proposed actions and recommendations with reference to best practice elsewhere in recovery of market towns akin to those in North Herts.

Review: Existing Strategies

Summary of findings by issue

This section of the study reviews existing knowledge, consultations and policies relating to Hitchin's town centre. This review supplements the survey work undertaken by reviewing and analysing existing local reports; secondary data; and existing strategies.

The purpose of this review is to help understand stakeholder perspectives and inform analysis. In doing so this review helps bring together knowledge and understanding derived from organisations and groups with a particular focus on the future development of Hitchin's Town centre. Such a review helps in understanding the complementary approaches and inter-linked strategies. These existing strategies and plans are summarised here as background using the town centre checklist structure developed by People & Places in the *revitalising town centres toolkit* prepared nationally for the LGA.

Planning and property

North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011-2031

Key Challenges, Issues and Opportunities for North Hertfordshire

The North Hertfordshire Local Plan published in 2011 with subsequent modifications in 2018 and 2021, sets out a strategic vision and spatial strategy for the district over the period 2011 to 2031. Among key issues highlighted, the Local Plan stresses that there is a need to ensure that the District's town centres improve in their flexibility to address changing shopping patterns and retain a vibrant and viable retail environment supporting local communities.

Spatial Strategy and Spatial Vision

The spatial strategy sets out the District Council's overall approach for sustainable development and growth and how this will be distributed across the district. The vision is a statement of what North Hertfordshire will be like in 2031. The focus of the vision is predominantly on housing, the contribution to the sustainable communities, protection and enhancement of natural and historic resource, with appropriately allocated new developments to achieve vitality of key towns.

Specifically in relation to the District's four town centres, the vision seeks to ensure that "*the vitality and viability of the towns of Hitchin, Letchworth Garden City, Royston and Baldock are safeguarded in a way that takes account of their distinctive role. This will have been achieved through carefully planned development which meets the needs of these centres, retaining their market share in terms of their retail offer, whilst recognising the importance of preserving and enhancing their historic character*".

The strategic objectives provide the link between the vision for the district and the strategic policies set out in the Local Plan. Objectives cover three topics that are summarised below in relation to town centres:

- *Environmental*: Existing settlement patterns should be maintained and there is need to enhance the historic character and cultural assets of North Hertfordshire's towns by promoting good design and creating a distinctive sense of place. The effects of climate change should be mitigated through encouragement of sustainable construction techniques and protecting existing and enhancing new environmental assets.
- *Economic*: The local economy should be supported to ensure that it is vibrant, diverse and competitive providing a sufficient range of jobs to support new and existing business. It is crucial to ensure an adequate supply of premises and provide opportunities for a greater mix of skilled jobs through skills training. The retail roles of town centres should be strengthened to ensure their competitiveness and viability relative to the modern-day trends. Additional activity can be achieved through tourism and improved infrastructure, services and facilities.
- *Social*: Adequate housing of different types should be provided to ensure needs of increasing and aging residents while building safe and vibrant mixed communities.

Economy and Town Centres

Retail and services

The Local Plan seeks to promote, protect and enhance the provision of shops, financial and professional services, café or restaurants, pubs or drinking establishments or takeaways in the main centres of Hitchin, Letchworth Garden City, Baldock and Royston. The Council aspires to reduce the need for unnecessary travel to alternative centres and ensure that the proportion of expenditure going outside the District does not increase.

A Town Centre and Retail Study established the need for additional 38,100 gross m^2 of retail, commercial and leisure floorspace in the District over the period to 2031. This included 22,500 m^2 of comparison goods, 8,600 gross m^2 convenience and 7,000 m^2 of other uses including food and beverage outlets. The projected numbers included the potential of taking-up currently vacant units.

The Council aims to ensure that the town centres maintain their primary retail function whilst increasing their diversity with a range of complementary uses, promoting competitive and flexible town centre environments. It is proposed that this be achieved by monitoring and strategic allocation of retail and service active primary frontages, avoiding appearance of non-retail uses that can create 'dead frontages'. Units allocated for primary frontages, will majorly be permitted only for retail use. Those units marked as having secondary frontages will be permitted for uses including shops, financial and professional services, restaurants and cafes, pubs or drinking establishments and takeaways; based on their contribution to vitality and viability and their ability to attract people to the centre.

Other uses

The Local Plan recognises that "*business uses within town centres can add to the vitality and viability of centres. Office workers within a town centre will create more custom for shops and services.*" The Local Plan consequently outlines that the Council will proactively encourage sustainable economic growth, support new and existing businesses and seek to build on the District's strengths, location and offer. This includes supporting office, research and development, light industrial and B-class uses in appropriate locations, including offices in main town centres. Office development will also be encouraged above ground floor retail.”

Town centre policy

Policy SP4 sets-out the following specific policies for protecting the vitality and viability of the District’s town and local centres, including preparing town centre strategies.

a. Promote, protect and enhance their retail and service functions following a retail hierarchy that identifies the town centres of Hitchin, Letchworth Garden City, Baldock and Royston; followed by 13 existing local centres.

b. Support proposals for main town centre uses in where they are appropriate to the size, scale, function, catchment area, historic and architectural character of the centre.

c. Identify Primary Shopping Frontages within town centres where A1 retail uses will be expected to concentrate.

d. Make provision for 38,100 m2 of additional A-class floorspace.

e. Maintain up-to-date town centre strategies to support this approach and / or adapt to change.

Hitchin

Local Plan acknowledges Hitchin as one of North Hertfordshire’s main towns and District’s largest Town Centre. It recognises significance of Hitchin as a shopping district, with the primary shopping area located around Market Place and along High Street and Bancroft, and secondary shopping areas along Hermitage Road, Bucklersbury and Sun Street. In addition to that, the Churchgate Centre and its surroundings provide additional significant amount of retail floorspace as well as a large quantity of surface level car-parking. Council points out need for additional retail floorspace setting up the capacity projection of 11,100 gross sq.m by 2031. Churchgate and its surroundings (4,000 sq.m) and Paynes park (3,000 sq.m) areas are indicated as two sites providing opportunities to meet these floorspace requirements.

Housing – there are seven sites allocated within and around Hitchin, with an estimated 971 new dwellings to be built over the plan period. None of the developments located within the Town Centre itself.

Economy – Hitchin is identified as an important employment area, with a number of existing employment areas spread across the town. Council assigns four designated employment areas that include already existing employment hub around Wilbury Way. None of the designated sites are located within the Town Centre directly, with the Station approach site being the closest one.

North Hertfordshire Retail Study Update (2016)

The North Hertfordshire Retail Study Update prepared by Linchfield and Partners in 2016 outlined business growth needs for retail and leisure business specifics to maintain the competitiveness of districts larger towns. The retail study informed the Local Plan targets for A1 growth.

Since Hitchin vacancy rates are significantly lower than those of the other centres in District, the Retail Study suggested that only a small part of the projected 7,400 sq.m floorspace of A1 to A5 uses aimed to be provided by 2026, can be met by reoccupying vacant units. Yet, to tackle vacancy that is still present, Hitchin BID has set an objective to "encourage new business start-ups in available empty units."

As further potential sites to accommodate these numbers three locations are identified: Churchgate Development Area, the Post Office site and the Paynes Park. If projected growth is not accommodated, or if after the delivery of three sites above further development sites have to be identified, the report suggests that Hitchin's market share might have to be redistributed to Garden City.

North Herts Council Climate Change Strategy 2021-2026

The North Herts Climate Change Strategy outlines the Council's commitment to contributing to the reduction of carbon emission and provides a foundation for ameliorating the impacts across service areas. While not outlining town centre related policies in particular, the Strategy is considered in any activities managed by the Council, including new developments and their energy efficiency; green infrastructure and green spaces contributing to biodiversity.

Hitchin Town Centre Strategy (2004)

Hitchin Town Centre Strategy was developed by North Herts Council as a supplementary planning document in 2004 for the period up to 2016. The Strategy set out a vision and key aims that acknowledged the distinctive historic character of Hitchin and proposed the continuous enhancement of its vibrancy to serve the local community and attract visitors.

This Strategy provided a context for promoting changes and improvements in Hitchin town centre. An important element of this was guiding physical development and maximising the opportunities that will benefit the future viability and vitality of the Hitchin town centre, whilst emphasising its historic character, its local distinctiveness and the needs of its local community.
The Strategy was divided into a number of themes, which provide the relevant policies to help deliver the key aims. The themes are: Built environment and public spaces; land use activities; community facilities; accessibility; community safety; promotion and marketing.

The Strategy assigned five key development sites at Paynes Park; Crown House; Post Office, Ransoms, Churchgate and its surrounds. While development has progressed at the first four of these sites, Churchgate and surrounding including Hitchin Market, are still presented as development opportunities in the later plans. Churchgate area, is currently on the early stages of purchase and development process.

Parking, travel and access

The North Herts Local Plan identified need for improvement across transport links connecting east to west. While offering strong connections to London through road and rail links, a lack of direct routes across the District puts pressures on rural roads.

Within the North Hertfordshire Urban Design Assessment (2007), parking in the town centre was described as adequate for day to day use with over ten public or private car parks, including large ones at St Mary's Square and south of Portmill Lane, yet reaching their capacity on market days. Referring to the study performed by ARUP in 2002, the document suggests the introduction of a parking zoning system, changes and upgrades to promote the use of existing car parks and extensions to the residents' parking permits system.

North Hertfordshire Transport Strategy

This Transport Strategy supported the emerging North Hertfordshire District Council (NHDC) Local Plan covering the period 2011-2031, which was submitted to the Secretary of State for examination in June 2017.

Hitchin transport strategy

Within this broader approach, proposals are suggested for Hitchin are based on analysis of key issues and qualities such as location of employment area, future housing developments, current bus and other public transport, role in attracting trips from other towns within the District.

To address these, strategy highlights strategic elements and measures to be undertaken:

- *Behaviour change* – encourage shift to Sustainable Travel
- *Key development sites* – ensure linkage and choice of bus, walking or cycling as preferred travel options
- *Improving walking and cycling* – improved crossings, signage and longer-term increased pedestrianisation of the town centre
- *Bus-based improvements* – better coverage of in and out of town centre bus services, better interchange and more frequent services to Baldock and Stevenage
- *Sustainable spine* – improved bus frequency, better walking and cycling facilities
- *Traffic management* – 20mph across the town, improvements at the focus junctions and long-term relief to the routes on south-west of the town

Hertfordshire County Councils' High Street Recovery plans

During the pandemic in 2020 Hertfordshire County Council introduced High Street recovery programme for road closures. In summer 2021 an online engagement process organised by Hertfordshire County Council with support from North Herts Council, sought feedback and views on the potential modification and retention of some of these changes. The data in the table below shows the breakdown of responses about the perceived positive and negative impacts of the changes implemented during the pandemic.

Road	Positive Impact	Negative Impact	Neither
High street / Market Place	80%	15%	5%

The changes to keep High Street closed to traffic between 10am to 4pm 7 days a week have been approved to go on 18 months long trial. In addition to that, restrictions are imposed to on street parking on the High Street and Market Place.

Some focus on parking and traffic management can be seen in the projects proposed by the Hitchin BID under the Save and Support objectives:

- Investigate how car park usage can be improved through new technology.
- Real time electronic car parking signage feasibility study and possible implementation.
- Seeking a reduction in through traffic in and around Market Place.

Streetscape and public realm

North Hertfordshire Urban Design Assessment – Hitchin (2007)

North Hertfordshire Urban Design Assessment for Hitchin was developed through public consultation to examine the perceptions and suggestions from residents and experts of the current quality of the public realm and physical appearance of the town, such as choice of building materials, shop signs, footpaths and boundaries. It included broad analysis of how people are able to move between different zones of the town. For the assessment, Hitchin town centre is designated as a separate town centre design zone with the Market Square marked as a key point of attraction and the heart of the town.

The assessment emphasises the significance of maintaining design quality according to historical features. Mixed land use is the encouraged approach to new developments, retaining ground floor retail and residential levels above, maximising street level activity and encouraging sustainable town centre living. Below is a selection of topics that are most relevant to this Town Centre Recovery and Development Plan.

Making places

- *Building types*: The town centre contains a large majority of town houses built on narrow plots as continuous frontages. These should dictate the scale and typology of new build in the zone. Where several small plots are combined to accommodate larger buildings, detailing should be used to replicate original plot sizes and building scales. Opportunities should be sought to redevelop buildings which do not fit in with the majority typology.
- *Listed buildings/Conservation Area*: The Conservation Area covers the Town Centre zone entirely, safeguarding Hitchin's medieval layouts and plots, several Grade I and other listed buildings, and a number of buildings of local interest. This is therefore a sensitive area for new architecture, and an area where public realm quality is more noticeable. Public realm improvements should be maintained and cover the whole of the Conservation Area. They should be sensitively designed and use high quality materials.

Continuity and enclosure

- *Building orientation*: Frontages should be directed towards the street, and blank walls modified where the opportunity arises, unless part of the intrinsic character of a historic building.

- *Pavements*: The use of high-quality pavements in the town centre matches the quality of the architecture in the zone. Pavement quality should be maintained.
- *Open space*: The Town Centre zone contains important public spaces which should be protected and preserved. Market Square is an important hard-landscaped area in the town, and efforts should be made to expand the soft landscaping found to the east of St Mary's Church around the banks of the River Hiz. The River should be seen as a major opportunity site for a riverside walk connection Hermitage Road to the north with Bridge Street to the south.

Making connections

- *Land use*: The town centre contains A1, A3 and A4 uses, including independent retailers and multiples. The balance of these uses and types of retail is an important part of Hitchin's character as a town and its strength as a district comparison shopping location. This balance should be maintained. Residential uses may be accommodated above ground, with ground floor uses reserved for retail.
- *Circulation, demand and linkages*: Pedestrian circulation around the town centre is easy thanks to the diverse linkages which permeate the historic layout and pedestrian connections between the town centre zone and outlying zones are strong, with the exception of Park Way. Existing links should be protected and enhanced, and the barrier caused by traffic along Park Way addressed. Connections to the multi-storey car park are a major challenge in Hitchin. Connectivity to the station from the east should be improved.
- *Parking*: Car parks in the immediate centre are prioritised over those on the fringe of the Town Centre zone, causing over-crowding. Several measures have been suggested to tackle this and have been incorporated into the town centre strategy for Hitchin. Parking along the River Hiz should be rationalised to make room for new public space along the banks of the river.

Quality of the public realm

- *Streetscape elements*: Streetscape elements in the town centre match the quality of the built environment and should be maintained. There is a major opportunity to create a new river- side walk with a distinct landscape right at the heart of the settlement.
- *Security*: The town centre strategy has identified anti-social behaviour associated with the night-time economy as a problem in Hitchin and has suggested a number of measures to tackle the issue. Alleyways should be well-lit to reduce security risks across the settlement. Light fittings should be attractive and of a high quality to enhance the character of the town centre.

Conservation Area Statement (2011)

The Conservation Area Statement suggests a list of improvements to several areas targeting low quality and inappropriate building design and lack of maintenance. In addition to detailed improvements to each of the seven character areas identified within the town, the statement suggests set of overarching improvements to be addressed in the town centre. These include:

- *Main entries or 'gateways'*: the main 'entries' into the town are disappointing and failed to reflect the high quality of the historic environment within the town. Improvements were particularly sought at the northern end of Hitchin Hill, where Park Street meets Queen Street and Bridge Street, and along Queen Street, where traffic and modern development dominates.
- *Public realm*: Additional improvements to the public realm through better maintenance and use of appropriate materials, street furniture and street lightening is recommended. Areas highlighted within this issue are the Market Place and the High Street, pathways around St. Mary's Church and the adjoining Garden of Rest, St. Mary's Square and adjoining car parks, and the Western end of Tilehouse Street.
- *Historic shopfronts*: Additional recommendations are made towards maintenance of historic shopfronts to avoid poor design and signage that detract from the character of conservation area. The identification of existing historic shopfronts in the conservation area would help to inform the design process.
- *Areas identified for improvement*: The key area identified for improvement is the Churchgate shopping centre, market & car parks. Any redevelopment scheme should follow the design principles set out in the Urban Design Assessment.

In addition, Hitchin BID has proposed achievable activities in relation to immediately enhancing the public realm:

- work with local group and the council to encourage additional seasonal planting in existing areas
- liaise with businesses on public realm decoration and how we can make improvements.
- fund a large floral display for the town centre with regular enhancements.
- erect coloured bunting in designated areas in the town centre for the summer season.
- fund an extensive Christmas lights display for the town centre
- forcing the pace on the Churchgate refurbishment and development to include improvements to Hitchin Market.
- make more of the riverside waterfront and riverside walkway.
- lobby for public realm improvements in the town centre.

Business Support

The Local Plan vision for North Hertfordshire aims to build robust and prosperous economy with a greater mix of skilled jobs, focused on locations that best support the District's growing population, with a particular emphasis on support for small local businesses.

Hitchin BID Business Plan 2019-2024

The Hitchin Business Improvement District (BID) was established in 2009 and represents over 600 businesses working together collaboratively to support and improve the trading environment and promotion of the town.

Hitchin BID Business plan for 2019-2024 describes the process of bringing businesses' together and defines the vision for Hitchin town centre. Further, it allocates budget for projects across four objectives designed to help boost local business performance:

- Vibrant: Hitchin BID will fund the installation of seasonal floral displays and other public realm installations, Christmas lights decorations and will support major town centre events.
- Promoted: The BID will invest into the consistent promotion and marketing of the town centre, attracting local, regional and national audiences. This will include promoting the town to become a tourist destination, improving digital catchment by developing town centre website and activating other social media platforms, and setting up co-ordinated collective branding of the town.
- Clean and safe: The BID will continue the funding of town city night time rangers and provide extended CCTV cameras to ensure that town centre safety is monitored. BID will also offer businesses discounted rates on commercial waste disposal thus promoting recycling and waste reduction, as well as fund deep cleaning and graffiti removal around the town centre
- *Save and support:* The BID is planning to retain its function as a voice and representative of local businesses to deliver and support their views and opinions. Some of the projects that are planned to be introduced are employee discount cards, a locally co-ordinated jobs website and business development courses. Hitchin BID is also dedicated to contributing to townscape regeneration projects such as regeneration of Churchgate, activation of the riverfront and improvements to Hitchin Market, occupation of vacant units and traffic and parking management programmes, including reduction of traffic around the Market Place.

The BIDs' Business plan contains details of proposed activities and budget allocation across the delivery timeline. It sets-out the benefits for businesses "regardless of their location within the town centre or the sector they trade in." Across its objectives and different town centre business sectors, the BID is measuring its success by aiming to deliver benefits that include:

- A cleaner and safer town centre for those who use it.
- Targeting of a larger and more affluent catchment area meaning more visitors and a higher average spend.
- Those currently visiting wanting to do so more often, staying longer and spending more.

- Staff recruitment made easier and existing staff encouraged to remain in employment here.
- A constantly improving 'look and feel' to the town centre environment.
- A more accessible town centre for all forms of transportation, even the car borne visitor who are presently strongly attracted to peripheral supermarkets and out of town 'sheds'.
- A more effective voice for businesses over the management and future development of their trading environment.
- An opportunity to use the BID income to 'pump prime' additional income from external agencies, growing the overall 'pot' and improving return on investment for businesses.

Place branding and marketing

One of the Hitchin BID Business Plan core objectives is to enhance promotion of the town centre amongst locals and visitors. Its Business Plan proposes activities aimed at marketing, promotion and collective branding for the town by:

- co-ordinated and targeted marketing of the town centre as a place to work, play and stay.
- creating collective branding and style guide for town centre publications and marketing material.
- developing campaigns to promote and encourage town centre shopping.
- encouraging people attending town centre events to stay in Hitchin and explore.

The Business Plan also includes proposals for promoting the town as a tourist destination:

- using expert advice from external companies, develop a robust tourism strategy for the town.
- producing a quality tourism guide for the town and distribute to a wide geographical area.
- investigating new ways of promoting the town using national and international media.
- gaining great exposure for Hitchin through national and regional publications.

To deliver its objective of boosting town centre vibrancy, the BID also commits to organising major town centre events, independent shopping days and promotions, including:

- running a series of major town centre events such as Food Fest and Christmas lights switch-on.
- supporting and organising a number of independent shopping events and promotions.
- encouraging footfall circulation around the town including secondary trading areas.
- designing and printing event guides, programme, maps and posters for various events and promotions

Digital technology and data

Social media and digital footprint

Whilst there is no comprehensive social media or digital strategy for Hitchin, a recognised part of Hitchin BID's Business Plan aims specifically to improve existing town-centre website and other social media. The BID proposes detailed activities and impact measures covering these improvements:

- undertaking extensive improvements to the town centre website.
- using external companies to make improvements to the town centre social media.
- making updates and improvements to the business directory section on the town centre website.
- promoting the town's businesses and their USPs using both the website and social media.

The following web sites and social media platforms are revealed through a quick online search.

- Our Hitchin on Instagram (@ourhitchin) ran by Hitchin BID and https://www.hitchinherts.com
- Hitchingram Instagram (@hitchingram) linked to Hitchin BID and participating local business directory https://www.hitchinbasket.com
- We Are Hitchin Instagram (@wearehitchin)

Whilst each of these sites serves slightly different audiences and organisational roles, it is important to coordinate and clarify the town's digital footprint.

There are also two private, community Facebook pages with a combined total of 9,000 followers and We Love Hitchin for Business Group page with 2,700 members.

Town centre Wi-Fi and footfall monitoring

North Herts Council has recently adopted a new mobile phone-based footfall monitoring system for Hitchin as part of a wider scheme with other East and North Herts towns. This system will potentially give very useful baseline data as well as routine updates to understand the changing use of the Hitchin town centre post-pandemic with benchmarking possible with neighbouring towns. Historic data is available of town centre footfall over recent years and it will be good, if possible, to analyse this for trends before, during and emerging from the pandemic including daytime, evening and nighttime patterns.

Evidence: The Survey Process

The System

The People & Places Town Centre Baseline Survey process has been developed to address the real issues of how to understand measure, evaluate and ultimately improve town centres. The approach offers a simple way of capturing data on 10 key performance indicators (KPIs) selected by those involved in town centre management. By having the tools to measure baseline performance in this way, strategic decision-making is improved and future progress can be monitored. By understanding the baseline performance, forward strategies and action planning can be more focused and effective.

The system is divided into two sections: large towns; consisting of those localities with more than 250 units; small towns; consisting of those localities with less than 250 units

Towns, depending on their size, contribute to either the large or small town analysis. Hitchin with 404 units is classed as a large town and will be compared against data for large towns nationally. The analysis provides data on each KPI for the town individually and in a national context for comparison. The national figure, unless otherwise stated are the cumulative averages for all the towns which participated in benchmarking during since 2014.

Key Performance Indicators

Each key performance indicator (KPI) is collected in a standardised manner as highlighted in the table below.

Key Performance Indicator	Methodology
Core Economic Indicators	
The Place: Commercial Units	
KPI 1: Use Class	On-street survey
KPI 2: Comparison/Convenience	On-street survey
KPI 3: Trader Type	On-street survey
KPI 4: Vacancy Rates	On-street survey
The Place: Cross-town Trends	
KPI 5: Footfall & Foot-flow	Footfall monitoring
KPI 6: Car Parking	Data from Parkopedia
The People: Stakeholder Surveys	
KPI 7: Business Confidence Survey	Distributed by email
KPI 8: Town Centre Customers Survey	Online using community social media
KPI 9: Digital Development	Included in business/customer surveys

Key Findings: The Place

KPI 1: Commercial Units; Use Class

It is important to understand the scale and variety of the "commercial offer" throughout the town. A variety of shops and a wide range of services in a town are important to its ability to remain competitive and continue to attract customers. Sustaining a balance between the different aspects of retail and services ensures that the local population and visitors can spend time and money there, keeping the generated wealth within the local economy. Importantly, it provides local employment and helps to retain local spend rather than lose it to nearby towns. The table below provides descriptions of each of the Use Classes.

Findings

For the purposes of this study a much more detailed analysis has been undertaken of second and third-level use class to enable a better understanding of the town's business composition. This is shown in the table below that provides a detailed analysis of the commercial offering in the town centre by sub-use class. The figures are presented as a percentage of the 435 occupied units recorded. The business composition 'dashboard' overleaf also provides a visual 'snapshot' of the make-up of businesses in Hitchin town centre.

Simplified use classes from Summer 2021

The ways the business use of a building is classified was simplified in September 2020. New regulations created a streamlined new use class system, although the terminology was not changed until July 2021.

The new use classes are: a broad Class E (commercial, business and service), Class F1 (learning and non-residential institutions) and Class F2 (local community). Shops fall into Class E or Class F2 depending on their use, size and location. This change is important in shaping the potential mix of town centre businesses because it is no longer necessary to obtain planning permission for some changes between various non-residential uses required under the previous use classes.

Full details of the changes including the full list of the new use classes and their previous equivalents are provided in People & Places downloadable guide to changing the town centre business mix.

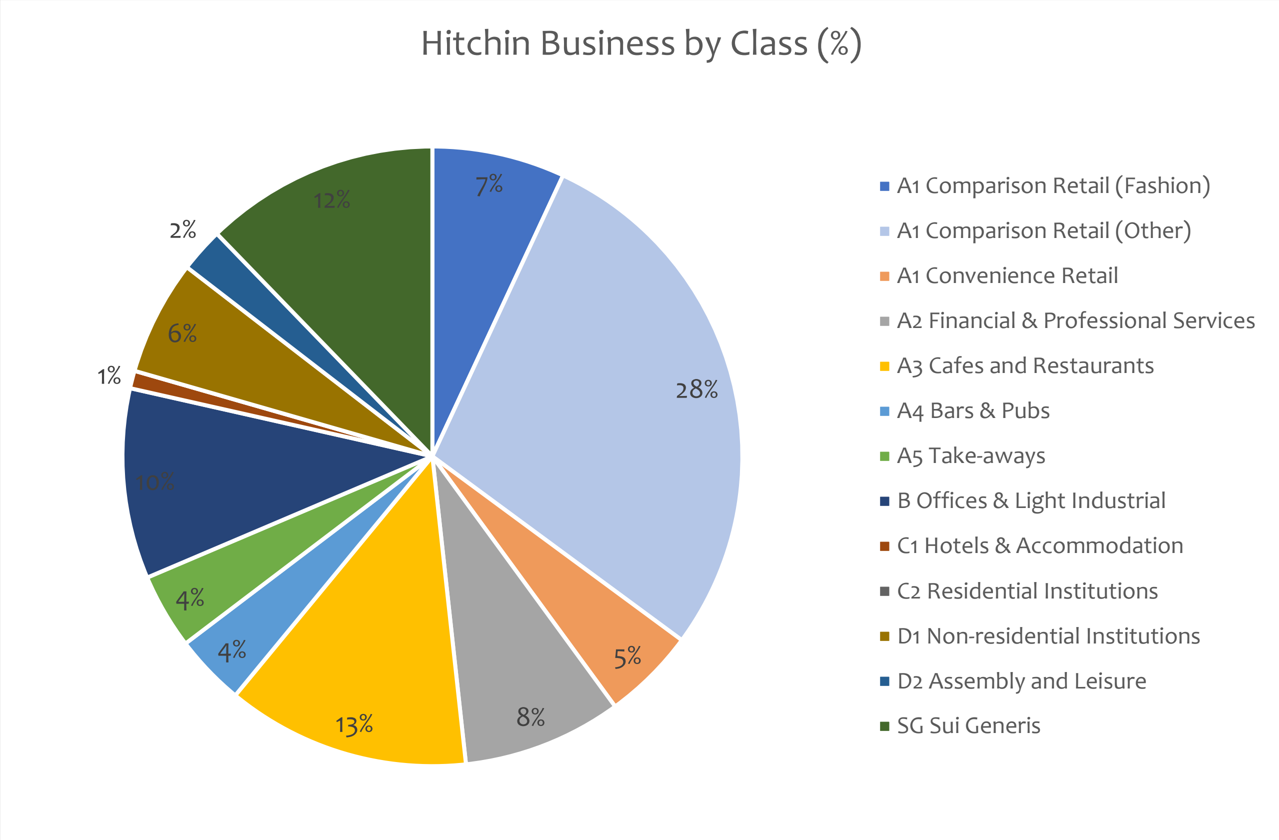
Class	Type of Use	Description
A1	Shops	Shops, retail warehouses, hairdressers, travel and ticket agencies, post offices (but not sorting offices), pet shops, sandwich bars, showrooms, domestic hire shops, dry cleaners, funeral directors and internet cafes
A2	Financial and Professional Services	Financial services such as banks and building societies, professional services (other than health and medical services) including estate and employment agencies and betting offices
A3	Restaurants and Cafes	Food and drink for consumption on the premises- restaurants, snack bars and cafes
A4	Drinking Establishments	Public houses, wine bars or other drinking establishments (but not nightclubs)
A5	Hot Food Takeaways	Sale of hot food for consumption off the premises
B1	Businesses	Offices (other than those that fall within A2) research and development of products and processes, light industry appropriate in a residential area
B2	General Industrial	General Industrial
B8	Storage and Distribution	Warehouses, includes open air storage
C1	Hotels	Hotels, boarding and guest houses where no significant element of care is provided (excludes hostels)
C2	Residential Institutions	Residential care homes, hospitals, nursing homes, boarding schools, residential colleges and training centres.
C2A	Secure Residential Institution	Use for a provision of secure residential accommodation, including use as a prison, young offender's institution, detention centre, secure training centre, custody centre, secure hospital, secure local authority accommodation or use as a military barracks.
D1	Non-Residential Institutions	Clinics, health centres, crèches, day centres, schools, art galleries (other than for sale or hire), museums, libraries, halls, places of worship, law court, non-residential education and training centres.
D2	Assembly and Leisure	Cinemas, music and concert halls, bingo and dance halls (not nightclubs), swimming baths, skating rinks, gymnasiums or areas for indoor /outdoor sports/ recreation (except motor sports/ firearms).
SG	Sui Generis ("unique" establishments)	Theatres, hostels providing no significant element of care, scrap yards, petrol filling stations and shops selling and/ or displaying motor vehicles, retail warehouse clubs, nightclubs, launderettes, taxi business, amusement centres, casinos, haulage yards, transport depots, veterinary clinics, dog parlours, tanning and beauty salons and tattoo studios.

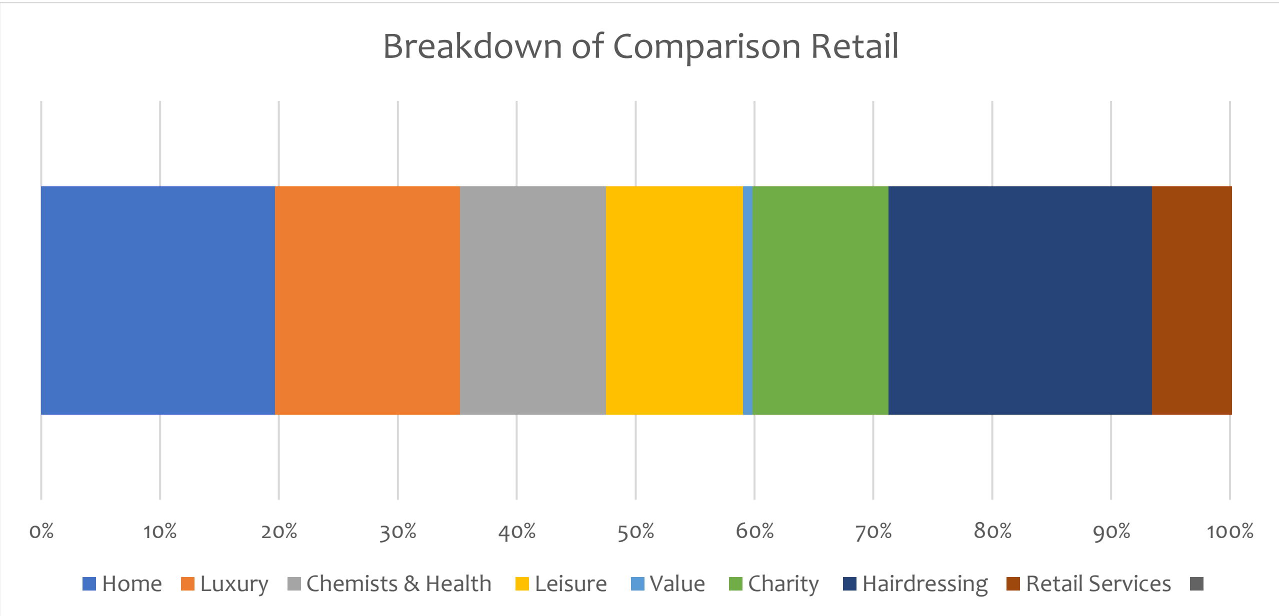
Level 1 & 2 classification	National Large Towns %	Hitchin (number)	Hitchin %
A1 Retail	**49%**	**174**	**40%**
A1 Comparison Retail		**153**	**35%**
Comparison (Fashion)		30	7%
Fashion & Clothing (children)		4	1%
Fashion & Clothing (men)		3	<1%
Fashion & Clothing (mixed)		9	2%
Fashion & Clothing (women)		10	2%
Footwear		3	<1%
Fashion & General Clothing Accessories		1	<1%
Other Comparison Retail		123	28%
Department Stores		0	0%
Home		24	5%
Luxury		19	4%
Chemists & Health		15	3%
Leisure		14	3%
Value		1	<1%
Charity		14	3%
Hairdressing		27	6%
Retail Services		9	2%
A1 Convenience Retail		**21**	**5%**
Supermarkets & Groceries		9	2%
Staples		4	<1%
Gourmet		1	<1%
Off Licenses		1	<1%
Confectionery & Newsagents		6	1%
A2 Financial & Professional Services	**13%**	**36**	**8%**
Banks & Building Societies		7	2%
Estate Agents & Auctioneers		14	3%
Professional Services		13	3%
Repair Services		2	<1%
A3 Cafes and Restaurants	**10%**	**55**	**12%**
A4 Bars & Pubs	**4%**	**16**	**3%**

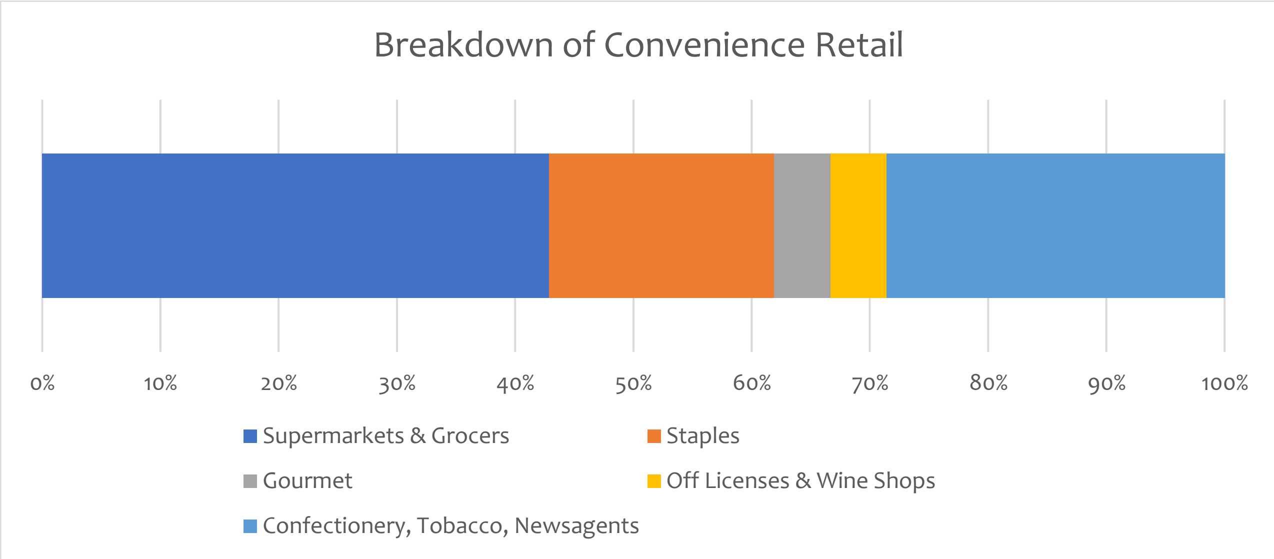
A5 Take-aways	**5%**	**17**	**4%**
B1 Offices	**3%**	**42**	**9%**
B2 Light Industrial	**1%**	**0**	**0%**
C1 Hotels & Accommodation	**2%**	**3**	**<1%**
D1 Non-residential Institutions	**4%**	**27**	**6%**
Medical		11	3%
Civic Buildings		5	1%
Education & Learning		9	2%
Places of Worship		2	<1%
D2 Assembly and Leisure	**2%**	**10**	**2%**
Sui Generis	**7%**	**54**	**12%**
Leisure		3	<1%
Gambling		2	<1%
Entertainment (theatre & concert halls)		1	<1%
Clubs		0	0%
Hostels		0	0%
Auto & Services		5	1%
Personal		46	12%
Eye Treatment; Dentists & Hearing		9	2%
Health & Beauty		31	7%
Tattooing		3	<1%
Veterinary & Pet Grooming		3	<1%
Laundry		0	0%
TOTALS	**100%**	**435**	**100%**

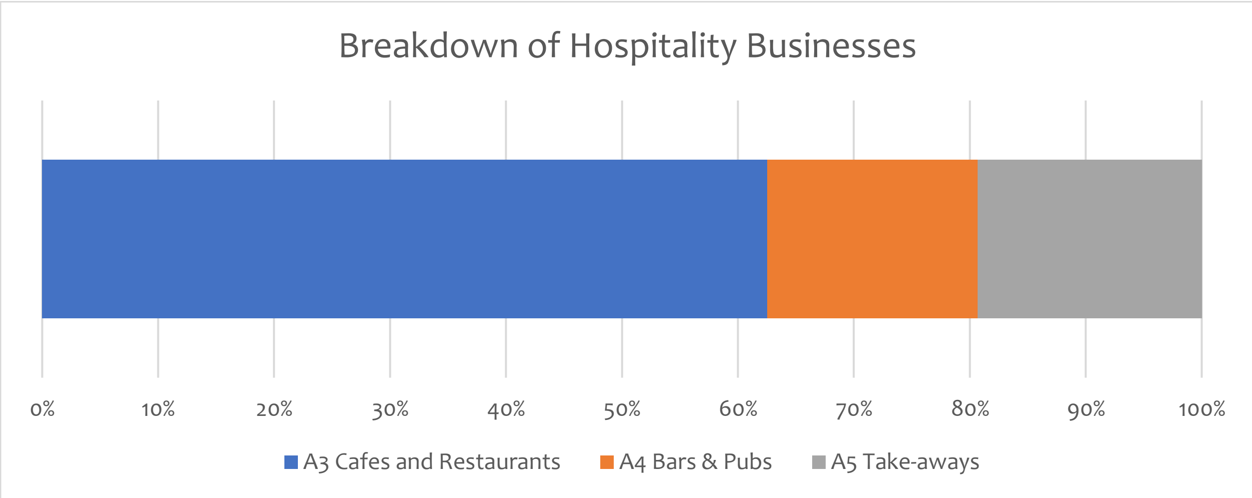
Analysis & Interpretation of Business Composition

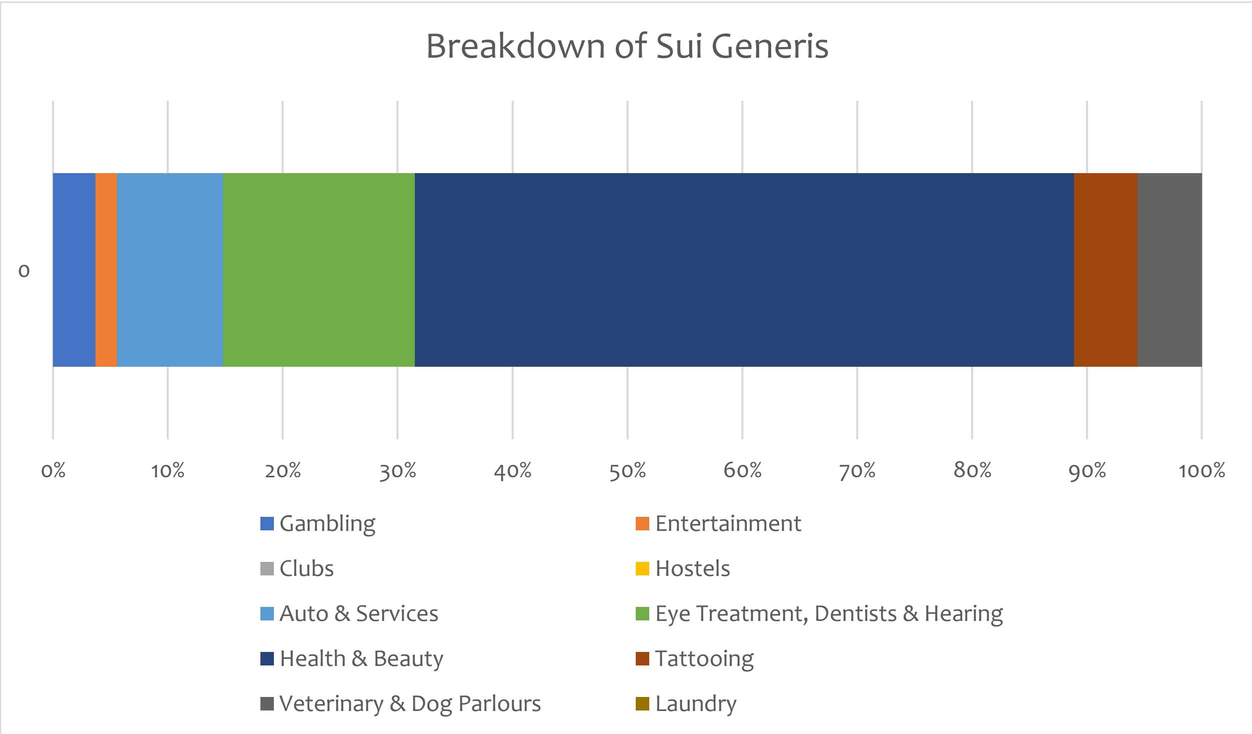
This section of the report has been developed to assist in providing detailed analysis and interpretation of business composition. The presence of key classes of retail and other businesses will be indicative of a town centre's current or potential future role. The graphical business composition dashboard gives a visual representation of the make-up of key sectors.






Breakdown of Convenience Retail
0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%
60%
70%
80%
90%
100%
Supermarkets & Grocers
Staples
Gourmet
Off Licenses & Wine Shops
Confectionery, Tobacco, Newsagents


Breakdown of Hospitality Businesses
0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%
60%
70%
80%
90%
100%
A3 Cafes and Restaurants
A4 Bars & Pubs
A5 Take-aways


Breakdown of Sui Generis
0
0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%
60%
70%
80%
90%
100%
Gambling
Entertainment
Clubs
Hostels
Auto & Services
Eye Treatment, Dentists & Hearing
Health & Beauty
Tattooing
Veterinary & Dog Parlours
Laundry

Fashion retail

Fashion retail is considered an important attraction for regular shoppers to a town. In small, rural towns this may be characterised by a modest number of independent, ladies fashion retailers with a distinctive or somewhat exclusive offering that can attract shoppers from a wider area. Other elements of fashion retail (men's, children's, shoes) will tend to be under-represented in smaller towns. The presence of premium fashion chains in small towns will be indicative of a wider catchment area including day-visitors and tourists. Popular, multiple fashion retailers in medium-format stores may be present in the slightly larger towns and indicate their role as a local shopping destination.

The data indicates that there is a variety of clothing outlets in Hitchin offering 10 women's (2%), 9 mixed (2%), 4 children (1%) and 3 men (0.7%) fashion shopping options. In addition to that, there are 3 footwear outlets (0.7%) and one store selling general fashion accessories (0.2%). Overall, Hitchin provides a range of opportunities for fashion shopping and is capable of meeting the majority of everyday fashion needs for the whole family.

Other comparison retail

Towns will typically have a high proportion of other comparison retail that form an important part of the choice offered to customers and their perception of a place. Comparison shopping is defined by the Government's Planning Portal as retail items not bought on a frequent basis, for example, fashion and electrical goods.

Department store: The continued presence of a vibrant department store in medium-sized town centres offers a key attraction to customers and probably indicates the town is a local shopping destination with a wider catchment.

Home: A high proportion of retailers focused on providing goods for the 'home' (electrical goods furniture, carpets, kitchens & bathrooms, DIY, hardware, florists & gardening) is indicative of a town centre that is serving many of the routine needs of the local population. Such retail remains very vulnerable to competition from elsewhere including out-of-town retail, other larger centres and on-line.

Luxury: A town centre with a high proportion of so-called 'luxury' retailers (gifts, china, leather goods, jewellers, books, arts & crafts, antiques) is indicative of a catchment that extends beyond the local population and is more dependent on visitors or special interest trade.

Leisure: This a mixed category (sports, toys, cycle shops, hobbies, pet shops & supplies, travel agents) that serves local and specialist needs. A high proportion of such businesses may indicate a wider catchment area or that the town is situated in an area known for outdoor leisure activities.

Chemists and health: A small proportion of chemist and health businesses (opticians; chemists /toiletries, beauty products, health foods & products) is a normal part of the retail mix meeting the routine needs of residents.

Value: The presence of discount stores will normally be limited to a maximum of one or two independent businesses in small towns and multiples will only be present in slightly larger towns serving a larger, cost-conscious population.

Charity: The presence of charity shops is typical and often much maligned element of town centre retail that nevertheless adds diversity. The case for the positive contribution of charity shops to the local economy, community and environment is well-represented by the Charity Retail Association. Where there is an over-representation of charity shops the impact needs to be considered in terms of whether they are occupying otherwise vacant units of alternative, viable businesses.

Hairdressers: It is a characteristic of modern town centres that a relatively high proportion of businesses will be retail services such as hairdressers. Whilst local opinion may be disparaging of growth in such provision, these are stable businesses that face more limited competition from other localities, provide a use for premises and help attract modest footfall.

Retail services: Businesses providing services such as dry cleaners, clothing repairs and funeral services will typically be a small yet consistent part of the retail mix in town centres meeting local need.

As the dashboard illustrates, Hitchin's comparison retail (other than fashion) accounts for 28% of total business mix. This is comprised of 27 hairdressers and barbers (6% of the total business mix), 24 outlets selling items for home such as electric goods, furniture, florists and interior items (5%), 19 business selling more luxury items (4%), 15 chemists and health stores (3%), 14 shops dedicated to leisure and hobbies (3%), 14 charity shops (3%), 9 outlets providing various retail services (2%) and 1 value retailer. There is no department store in Hitchin currently, as the former Hawkins of Hitchin is undergoing reconstruction to be transformed into a new development comprising multiple commercial and residential units. There are two shopping centres – Churchgate Shopping Centre and the Arcade, both of which are agglomerations of independent comparison retail businesses such as barbers, luxury outlets as well as some hospitality venues.

Convenience retail

Convenience retail is defined by the Government's planning portal as everyday essential items, such as food. It is usually a small percentage of overall retail provision though encourages regular shopping trips.

Supermarkets & groceries: The presence of town centre supermarkets provides an opportunity to boost footfall more widely if accompanied by medium-stay parking and good pedestrian access links to the town centre. This is preferable to development of out-of-town stores or 'leakage' caused when it is necessary for local shoppers to travel to other towns. Smaller format grocery stores enable top-up shopping as part of a town centre trip.

Staples: Food shops such butchers, bakers, greengrocers are very important parts of the retail mix and help encourage regular, local footfall. Typically, they indicate readily accessible, smaller town centres. It is important to maintain such provision in a way that maintains and strengthens the appeal of town centres to existing and potential new customers by enabling 'pop-and-shop' parking, 'linked-trips' to supermarkets and innovative marketing as they are under increasing pressure.

Gourmet: The presence of food businesses such as delicatessens, tea and coffee suppliers, cheese shops and fishmongers denote a less cost-conscious customer-base. These businesses may in-part be dependent on custom from day visitors and tourists at least for part of the year. They are important in providing a distinctive shopping experience and creates customer loyalty.

Off licenses: Most towns will have some sort of drinks outlet as part of its retail mix. The distinction and mix of discount stores, regular off-license and specialist beer or wine outlets will be indicative of the customer-base for a town centre.

Confectionery & newsagents: Confectionary shop and newsagents are consistently a small part of the retail mix in a vibrant ton centre.

There are 21 convenience retailers in Hitchin town centre, with 9 of those (2% of the total business mix) compromising supermarkets and grocers. Out of these, four are chain supermarkets – Asda, Iceland, M&S Food and Sainsbury's, one a butchers, two bakeries with the rest of the number made up of organic and independent food outlets. In addition to that, there are 2 more outlets comprising 1 gourmet deli and 1 wine shop

Furthermore, there are six confectionary and newsagents, one of which is a WHSmith, with the rest made up of small independent stores. Such mix indicates the Hitchin provides sufficient number of convenience shopping outlets to meet users' everyday needs in the town centre.

Financial & professional services

A mix of various financial and professional services is an essential part of a vibrant town centre serving local customers.

Banks & building societies: Banks and building societies ae very important to the economic health of a town centre in providing a service to businesses and especially older customers. Their cash machines are an important and readily available source of cash. Small towns are, however, ever-increasingly vulnerable to ongoing programmes of bank closures.

Estate agents & auctioneers: Estate agents typically comprise a small though significant per centage of town centre businesses. Although they have a very specific customer-base they are part of the overall economic activity and upkeep of the town.

Professional services: Solicitors, accountants, insurance companies, financial advisers and photographers are an important part of local service provision.

Repair services: Services such as cobblers, locksmiths, engraving and film developers are defined as separate to retail though they provide routine and necessary functions as part of the business within town centres.

Hitchin town centre has a slightly lower proportion of financial and professional services (8%) compared with large towns nationally (13%). The number is comprised by 14 estate agents and auctioneers, 13 professional services and finance support, 7 banks and building societies and 2 repair services such as key cutters and shoe repair outlet. While being lower than the proportion benchmarked for the large towns nationally, Hitchin's offer of professional services is diverse and adds to the rest of the town's offer.

Food and drink

Taken collectively, food and drink establishments are important parts of the town centre business mix that can help encourage footfall, increase dwell times, contribute greatly to the visitor economy and underpin the evening economy as a growth area in town centre economic activity.

Cafes and Restaurants: Whilst some regular users will often be critical of the opening of "yet another café" they are a critical part of the distinctive social and leisure mix of town centres in a way that encourages footfall and dwell-times. Along with restaurants, a mix of appealing cafes will be very important in encourage day-visitors and tourists to the town centre. A mix of suitable restaurants will be in key in underpinning a flourishing evening economy for different local markets and visitors.

Bars & pubs: A mix of suitable bars and pubs will be in key to enabling a flourishing evening economy that attracts different local markets and visitors. The predominant character of town pubs and bars will reflect the customer-base.

Take-aways: A small though significant part of the business mix in most towns will be take-aways. Although closed during the day, they are an important part of the evening economy and typically appeal to a younger customer-base.

Hitchin is well served with cafes and restaurants (12%); slightly exceeding levels of large towns nationally (10%). The proportion of pubs/bars (3%) and take-aways (4%) while being proportionally lower than the café and restaurant offer, is comparable to the national averages. This hospitality offer suggests that the social and leisure function of the town centre is being served well, providing users with enough hospitality services.

Offices, light industrial and storage

Such uses do not tend to be focused on town centres and are more likely to be clustered in out-lying business parks or industrial estates. Neither do these various business types also do not tend to be customer-facing in the same sense as retail and other services though they add to the wider economy. Where they are well-represented in or around the town centre, they contribute to regular footfall.

Hitchin's proportion of town centre offices (9%) is significantly higher than the typical proportion in national towns (2%). Most of the office premises are clustered in workspace dedicated buildings within the town centre thus contributing to the number of the town centre customers.

Hotels & accommodation

The presence of a significant number of bed spaces provided through hotels, guest houses, holiday parks and other serviced accommodation, positively reinforces a town centre's role in the visitor economy.

There are 3 hotels (0.9%) in Hitchin town centre, which while being slightly lower than the national average (2%), indicates that the town is anticipating some tourist and business travellers. One of the hotels is a part of the national Premier Inn Hotel chain, while the others are independent.

Residential institutions (care)

Institutions such as care homes and hospitals provide local social services and can contribute footfall by staff, patients and visitors. In some town, the presence of relatively large boarding schools determines the character of the town centre and creates footfall from students, staff and occasionally visiting parents.

Residential institutions (secure)

Secure institutions such as young offender's institution; detention centres, secure hospitals, and military barracks are rare components of town centres though can provide additional footfall by staff.

Non-residential institutions

This comprehensive grouping accounts for the different civic and public services that can be found in town centres and are an important part of providing social functions in a way that that also attracts footfall more widely. Except for places of worship, all of these functions often face pressures to re-locate to more accommodating edge-of or out-of-town locations and so remove footfall.

Medical: This includes doctors' surgeries, health clinics and day centres that are an important of the social function of towns that underpins their role as 'community hubs'.

Civic buildings: Town centres with a high proportion of civic buildings such as government buildings, council services, community centres, law courts and libraries have an important community role and will attract footfall from a wider area.

Education & learning: Crèches, schools, colleges, training centres, museums and art galleries all add to the wider life and appeal of a community. Schools located close to town centre can cause congestion whilst significantly contributing to footfall at the beginning and end of the day. Museums and art galleries can help attract visitors if their appeal is beyond local interest.

Places of worship: Churches and other places of worship are a key part of the heritage and character of a town. They contribute footfall when services are on, can serve as community facilities for wider population and attract visitors.

Hitchin's proportion of non-residential institutions (6%) is slightly higher compared to large towns nationally (5%). There are 11 medical services (2%), 9 education and learning establishments (2%) that includes nursery, museums and general education courses, 5 civic buildings (1%) and 2 places of worship (0.5%).

Assembly and leisure

Although usually only a small percentage of the overall number of town centre businesses and institutions, assembly and leisure facilities are very important in contributing to footfall, and vibrancy. Such facilities include cinemas; snooker halls; sports grounds & stadiums; party venues & function rooms. It is important to retain such functions as part of the town centre mix in a way that will benefit weekend, evening and visitor economies especially.

Assembly and leisure provision in Hitchin (2%) is slightly higher than the one typical of similar towns nationally (1%), including 3 gyms, several pilates studios, soft plays and events space.

Sui Generis

Certain uses do not fall within any use class and are categorised under the general heading 'sui generis' which literally means "of its own kind". This is a large category that overall accounts for a growing proportion of town centre uses as part of the diversification of town centres. Here we sub-divide the classification to aid understanding.

Leisure: This sub-division includes gambling institutions such as betting shops and amusement arcades that have had a growing presence in town centres over recent years and are not welcomed by all residents. They nevertheless are part of the wider economy and contribute modest footfall.

The Leisure sub-division of Sui Generis very specifically includes theatres & concert halls that could equally have been considered as part of the 'assembly and leisure' function of town centres. Though not present in all small towns, such facilities can be a very important part of the evening and visitor economies.

The Leisure sub-division also includes night clubs; private clubs and social clubs that are an important part of the social life of town centres and evening economy alongside pubs and bars. Most small towns will have at least one social club of this type though night clubs will be restricted to medium-sized and larger towns.

Hostels are categorised as part of this sub-division.

Automotive

Automotive services including car dealers & accessories, petrol filling stations; vehicle hire, car wash & valet services, garage services, tyre dealers and taxis & private hire serve important local needs. Such uses are not necessarily located within town centres and may equally be located in surrounding areas. The proportion of such businesses in the town centre is not necessarily indicative of their wider presence.

Personal

The Sui Generis category includes a varied range of personal services that are a growing part of the business mix within town centres and meet local needs.

Dentists, hearing & eye treatment: Most town centres will have one or more dentists located in the town centre though there may be others in peripheral areas. Hearing specialists are increasingly part of the mix. Such provision can be considered alongside other health-related services such as clinics and opticians that are classified differently by the planning system.

Health & beauty: This is a category with growing representation in town centres and includes hair & beauty salons, beauty salons, alternative & complementary medicines, herbalists; tanning shops and nail salons. Although categorised differently, it should be considered alongside other retail services such as hairdressing.

Tattooing: Most small town centres will have at least one tattoo parlour and they are another example of the mix of services provided to meet local demand in a convenient way.

Laundry: This includes launderettes and laundry businesses as opposed to dry cleaning services that are categorised elsewhere. Launderettes will usually be present in small town centres focused on meeting local needs.

Veterinary & pet grooming: These distinct services for pet-owners may be part of the town centre mix as well as being provided in outlying areas, or in the case of grooming, even through mobile services.

Sui Generis uses make up 12% of Hitchin's town centre businesses and is significantly higher than the number benchmarked for large towns nationally (6%). The diversity is comprised of a noticeably high number of personal care businesses such as 31 (7%) health and beauty outlets, 9 eye and dental treatments (2%), tattoo parlours (0.7%) and pet and veterinary services (0.7%). Further, there are 5 auto services (1%) and several leisure outlets such as gambling (0.5%) and a theatre (0.2%).

Overview

The business data for Hitchin indicates that that the current retail offer focuses on provision of goods for home, luxury and personal care. There is an adequate provision of fashion related comparison retail can serve the needs of most of the age and gender groups. While the proportion of convenience retail outlets is relatively low (5%), the inclusion of supermarkets located in the town centre, ensures it can serve every day, existing demand. The combined proportion of comparison and convenience retail (40%) is slightly lower than that of similarly sized towns (49%), because of the diversity of other business uses.

The proportion of hospitality businesses is representative of large town centre's data benchmarked nationally indicating that Hitchin serves social and leisure function well. Within this there is a slightly higher proportion of restaurants (12%) and slightly lower proportion of pubs and bars (3%), compared to national averages (10% & 4%).

Hitchin town centre has a slightly lower proportion of financial and professional services (8%) compared with large towns nationally (13%). The proportion of town centre offices (9%) is significantly higher than the typical proportion in national towns (2%), with most of the office premises clustered in dedicated buildings within the town centre thus contributing to the number of the town centre customers.

Levels of Sui Generis uses (12%) are higher when compared to towns nationally (6%) and indicate presence of other diverse services within the town centre.

In addition to the town centre's businesses, Hitchin Market is one of the largest outdoor markets in the region. Its website explains that it features over 150 covered stalls and is open every Tuesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday. There are also specialist market days throughout the year, including a weekly Antiques Markets every Friday and Craft & Farmers once a month.

Overall, the Hitchin town centre business mix seems suited to the needs of residents in terms of staple goods, comparison shopping, social life and community function. High number of independent comparison outlets as well as good provision of office spaces contribute to the daily footfall and can be appealing for locals and visitors.

KPI 2: Commercial Units; Comparison versus Convenience

This KPI provides an overview of the composition of retail businesses alone by considering the split between convenience and comparison shops.

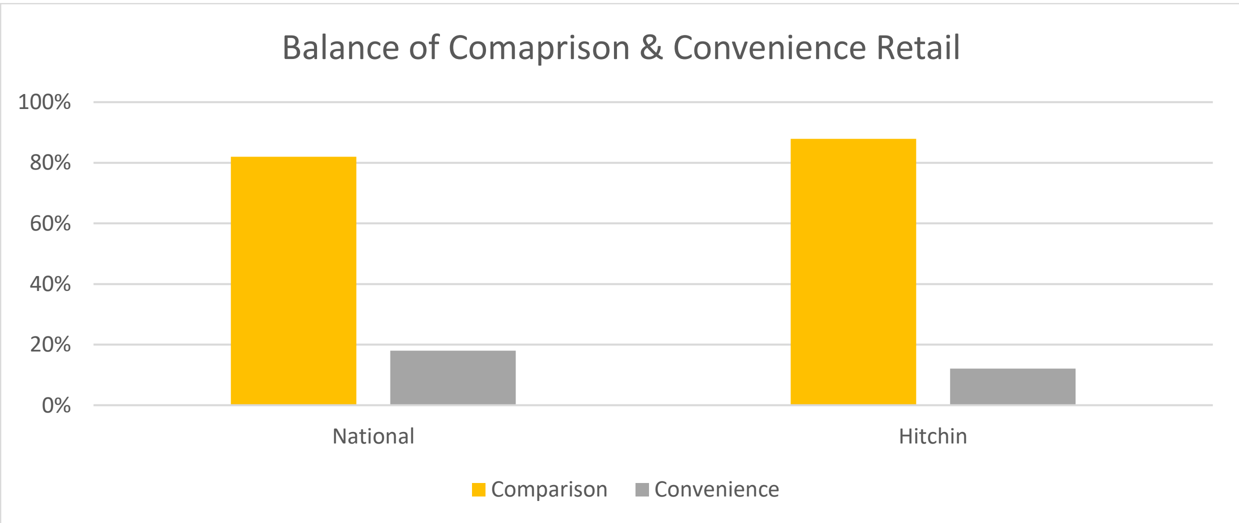
Convenience goods – low-cost, everyday items that consumers are unlikely to travel far to purchase. Defined as: food and non-alcoholic drinks; tobacco; alcohol; newspapers and magazines; non-durable household goods.

Comparison goods – all other retail goods. Defined as: books; clothing and footwear; furniture, floor coverings and household textiles; audio-visual equipment and other durable goods; hardware and DIY supplies; chemists goods; jewellery, watches and clocks; bicycles; recreational and miscellaneous goods; hairdressing.

The presence of a variety of shops in a town centre is important to its ability to remain competitive and continue to attract customers. A balance of both comparison and convenience retail units is therefore ideal in terms of encouraging visitors / potential customers. The following table provides a percentage of the A1 Shops which sell mainly comparison or convenience goods.

The table and chart indicate that more than eight-in-ten of the Hitchin town centre are comparison retailers (88%). This proportion is slightly more than benchmarked by the large towns nationally and indicates that Hitchin town centre has a healthy balance of comparison and convenience retailers. However, it will be important for these shops to have a distinctive offer pitched at local customers and/or potential visitors, in order to fend off competition from neighbouring centres and online.

	National Large Towns %	Hitchin (number)	Hitchin %
Comparison	82%	153	88%
Convenience	18%	21	12%



The modest proportion of everyday, convenience retail (12%) in Hitchin is slightly less than in the large towns nationally. These convenience retailers include four chain supermarkets that add greatly to the town centre offer. These businesses meet local needs and attract footfall that other nearby town centre businesses could benefit from.

KPI 3: Commercial Units; Trader Types

The vitality of a town centre depends highly on the quality and variety of retailers represented. Certain national retail businesses are considered key attractors and are particularly important in terms of attracting visitors and shoppers to a town. The character and profile of a town often also depends on the variety and mix of independent shops that can give a town a "unique selling point". A sustainable balance of key attractors and multiple names alongside local independent shops is therefore likely to have the greatest positive impact on the vitality and viability of a town. The following shops is an updated version of a list of key attractors originally defined by Experian Goad.

Department Stores	Mixed Goods Retailers	Clothing
Debenhams	Argos	Primark
House of Fraser	Boots	Dorothy Perkins
John Lewis	TK Maxx	H & M
Marks and Spencer	WH Smith	New Look
Regional Dept. Stores	Wilkinson	River Island
Supermarkets	Other Retailers	Next
Sainsbury's	Superdrug	Zara
Tesco	Clarks	
Waitrose	Clintons	
Morrisons	HMV	
Asda	Waterstones	

Multiple traders have a countrywide presence and are well-known household names. Regional shops are identified as those with stores / units in several towns throughout one geographical region only and independent shops are identified as those that are specific to a town.

The following table provides a percentage of the A1 Shops which are key attractors, multiples, regional and independent to the locality.

	National Large Towns %	Hitchin (number)	Hitchin %
Key attractor	9%	13	5%
Multiple	29%	42	17%
Regional	6%	5	2%
Independent	57%	182	75%

The data for Hitchin indicate that there are 13 key attractors in the town centre. This number is comprised of 3 supermarkets (Asda, Sainsbury's and M&S), WHSmith Newsagents, Wilko multi-purpose store, Next, Clarks footwear, Superdrug and Boots health and beauty, Waterstones, several mobile phone and broadband providers (O2, Vodafone and EE). While providing the highest number of household brands when compared to other towns in North Hertfordshire towns, it is still lower than national average. Similarly, the combined proportion of national multiples (17%) and regional multiples (2%) is lower than large towns nationally (35%). Conversely, there is a high proportion of independent retail businesses (75%) which is higher than the national average. Such numbers indicate that the town is a local service centre that meets most of its residents needs and offers a choice of popular brands, however some demand might still have to be met elsewhere. The high proportion of independent retailer provides variety and a distinctive marketing opportunity.

KPI 4: Commercial Units; Vacancy Rates

Vacant units are an important indicator of the vitality and viability of a town centre. The presence of vacant units over a period of time can identify potential weaknesses in a town centre, whether due to locational criteria, high rent levels or strong competition from other centres.

The following table provides the percentage figure of vacant units from the total number of commercial units.

	National Large Towns %	Hitchin (number)	Hitchin %
Vacancy %	13%	26	6%

The vacancy data for Hitchin indicates there are 6% of unoccupied units in the town centre which is lower than the level for benchmarked large towns nationally (13%). This indicates that available premises are being used comparable well, although the total number of the town centre vacancies (26) indicates that some areas of the town offer opportunities for new businesses.

KPI 5: Footfall & Foot-flow

The arrival and movement of people, whether as residents, workers, visitors or a shopper is vital to the success of the majority of businesses within the town centre. The more people that are attracted to the town, the better it trades and the more prosperous the businesses in it become. Whilst footfall monitoring was not part of the work proposed for Hitchin, footfall data is available through a new monitoring system available through North Herts Council. The template overleaf, outlines the normal data that People & Places would look to assess using such a system.

Quarterly Footfall Performance Indicators Template		
Summary of Key Indicators for 1st Quarter 2019 & 2022	**Dates** (for same range of days)	**Dates** (for same range of days)
24 hours		
Total visits for period		
Busiest time of day		
Average dwell time		
Dwell over 90 minutes (%)		
Average visits per day		
Busiest zone		
Quietest zone		
Balance of repeat & new visitors		
Frequency of visits	Last week / Last month / Infrequent / New	Last week / Last month / Infrequent / New
Busiest 24hrs & number of visits (1st year & comparison)		
Busiest 24hrs & number of visits (2nd year & comparison)		
Day time (08.00-18.00)		
Total visits for period		
Busiest time of day		
Average dwell time		
Dwell over 90 minutes (%)		
Average visits per day		
Busiest zone		
Quietest zone		
Balance of repeat & new visitors		
Busiest day & number of visits (1st year & comparison)		
Busiest day & number of visits (2nd year & comparison)		
Evening (18.00-23.00)		
Total visits for period		
Busiest time of day		
Average dwell time		
Dwell over 90 minutes (%)		
Average visits per evening		
Busiest zone		
Quietest zone		
Balance of repeat & new visitors		
Busiest evening & number of visits (1st year & comparison)		
Busiest evening & number of visits (2nd year & comparison)		

KPI 6: Car Parking

It is important to understand the way users access a town centre and the opportunity for improvements. This has a big impact on the arrival points into a town and the foot-flow around it. Inadequate or poor-quality provision can also provide perceived and real barriers to people's use of a town centre that will affect the frequency and duration of visits. The need to reduce carbon emissions and the changes in mobility during the pandemic, serve to add to the importance of adding to the need to understand how users travel to town centres.

The provision of adequate and convenient car parking facilities is a key element of town centre vitality. An acceptable number of available spaces with a regular, quick turn-over for shoppers are the ideal, while adequate longer-stay, less convenient spaces for local owners/ workers and visitors must be considered too. As an informal rule of thumb advocated by the British Parking Association, at least 15% of parking spaces should be available at busy times to ensure customers have no difficulty parking.

Data for off-street parking provision was gathered during the access audit visit and from North Herts Council, supplemented by data on private car park parks available on Parkopedia. Data on car park occupancy level data was not collected as part of this survey. In the table below the data is broken down into the following categories:

- Percentage and number of spaces in designated car parks
- Percentage and number of short-stay and long-stay

The Initial data collected for 8 public car parks and 6 private car park serving Hitchin town centre shows there are a total of 1,665 spaces. Short-stay (55%) and long-stay (45%) spaces are equally available across the town centre and are comparable in proportion to the national average. Out of those available long-term, 631 are in public car parks.

A further 573 spaces are available in more peripheral sites around Nightingale Road, Fishpond Road, and Hitchin Station. These car parks probably cater largely for their own users.

The chart below compares these figures for parking in Hitchin to national benchmarks and the table overleaf gives details for individual car parks. The map overleaf shows the location of car parks and indicates the cost for half hour pop-and-shop park at 9am on a mid-week morning.

	National Large Towns %	**Hitchin (number)**	**Hitchin %**
Car parks			
Total spaces:		1,665	100%
Short stay spaces (<4 hours)	45%	918	55%
Long stay spaces (>4 hours)	55%	747	45%

Car park location	Short-stay	Long-stay	Total	Cost for 1 hr	Cost for 4 hrs	Walk to town centre	Notes
Town centre parking							
Asda	76	0	76	£ -	n/a	11 mins	Short stay, customers only (1 hr max)
Biggin Lane	68	0	68	£ 1.30	£ 5.70	9 mins	Short stay (4hr max)
St Mary's Square	133	0	133	£ 1.30	£ 5.70	4 mins	Short stay (4hr max)
Portmill Lane East	81	0	81	£ 1.30	£ 5.70	3 mins	Short stay (4hr max)
Portmill Lane West	71	0	71	£ 1.30	£ 5.70	2 mins	Short stay (4hr max)
Jacksons Yard	0	36	36	£ 2.00	£ 5.00	9 mins	Short & long-stay
Waitrose	200	0	200	£ -	£ 10.00	11 mins	Short stay customers only (2hr max), Long stay
Lairage	0	295	295	£ 1.10	£ 4.55	10 mins	Short & long-stay
Christchurch	29	0	29	£ 1.30	£ 5.70	9 mins	Short stay (4hr max)
Brand street	0	80	80	£ 1.00	£ 5.00	6 mins	Short & long-stay
Wilko	65	0	65	£ 0.80	£ 4.50	6 mins	Short & long-stay, customers only
Woodside	0	211	211	£ 1.10	£ 5.15	8 mins	Short & long-stay
Sainsbury's	195	0	195	£ 1.00	n/a	5 mins	Short stay, (2 hr max)
Bancroft	0	125	125	£ 1.10	£ 5.15	8 mins	Short & long-stay
Totals	**918**	**747**	**1665**				
Peripheral parking (>15 mins)							
Hitchin Swimming Centre	0	91	92	£ 1.00	£ 2.00	17 mins	Short & long-stay
Nightingale Road	24	50	24	£ -	n/a	18 mins	Short stay (3hr max)
B&M	0	97	97	£ -	n/a	21 mins	Short stay, customers only (2 hr max)
Hitchin Station	0	360	360	n/a	£2.90 - £9.10	24 mins	Short & long-stay
Totals	**24**	**549**	**573**				

Key Findings: The People

KPI 7: Business Confidence Survey

The business confidence survey is an important part of engaging local businesses by understanding their perceptions and priorities. It is a first step in working with them and local businesses groups to help develop solutions.

Characteristics of businesses surveyed

Survey forms were electronically distributed to all the town centre businesses in Hitchin. The following percentage figures are based on the 55 returned business confidence surveys from a total of 435 town centre businesses and organisations. This is a return rate of 13% compared to 25% nationally and suggests possible survey fatigue within the town's business community, despite the high proportion of independent businesses within the town.

Nature of business	All Hitchin business types	Hitchin business types surveyed (no.)	Hitchin business types surveyed (%)
What type of business or organisation are you?			
Shop (A1)	40%	23	40%
Retail service (A1)	8%	7	12%
Financial/professional (A2)	8%	10	19%
Hospitality (A3, A4, A5)	20%	5	9%
Public, religious or civic (D1)	6%	4	7%
Office	10%	7	12%
Other	31%	1	2%
What type of ownership does your business have?			
National multiple	23%	1	2%
Regional multiple	2%	4	7%
Independent	75%	50	91%

Business background	National Large Towns %	Hitchin (number)	Hitchin %
How long has your business been in the town?			
Less than a year	6%	0	0%
One to five years	25%	9	16%
Six to ten years	12%	7	13%
More than ten years	58%	39	71%

Of the businesses that responded to the survey, 40% were shops of some kind, 12% were providers of retail services such as hairdressers, 19% providers of professional services such as solicitors, banks or accountants, and 9% were hospitality businesses. This is broadly representative of the town centre's business mix, however with notably lower response across hospitality businesses. Similarly, 91% of these respondents were independent businesses and this is also broadly representative.

A total of 84% of these businesses are long-established in Hitchin, having been based there for more than six years. This compares to 70% of business in benchmarked towns nationally. The fact that none of Hitchin businesses surveyed had been established for less than a year and only 16% for less than 5 years, may indicate significantly lower turnover in the town's traders, compared to benchmarked towns nationally.

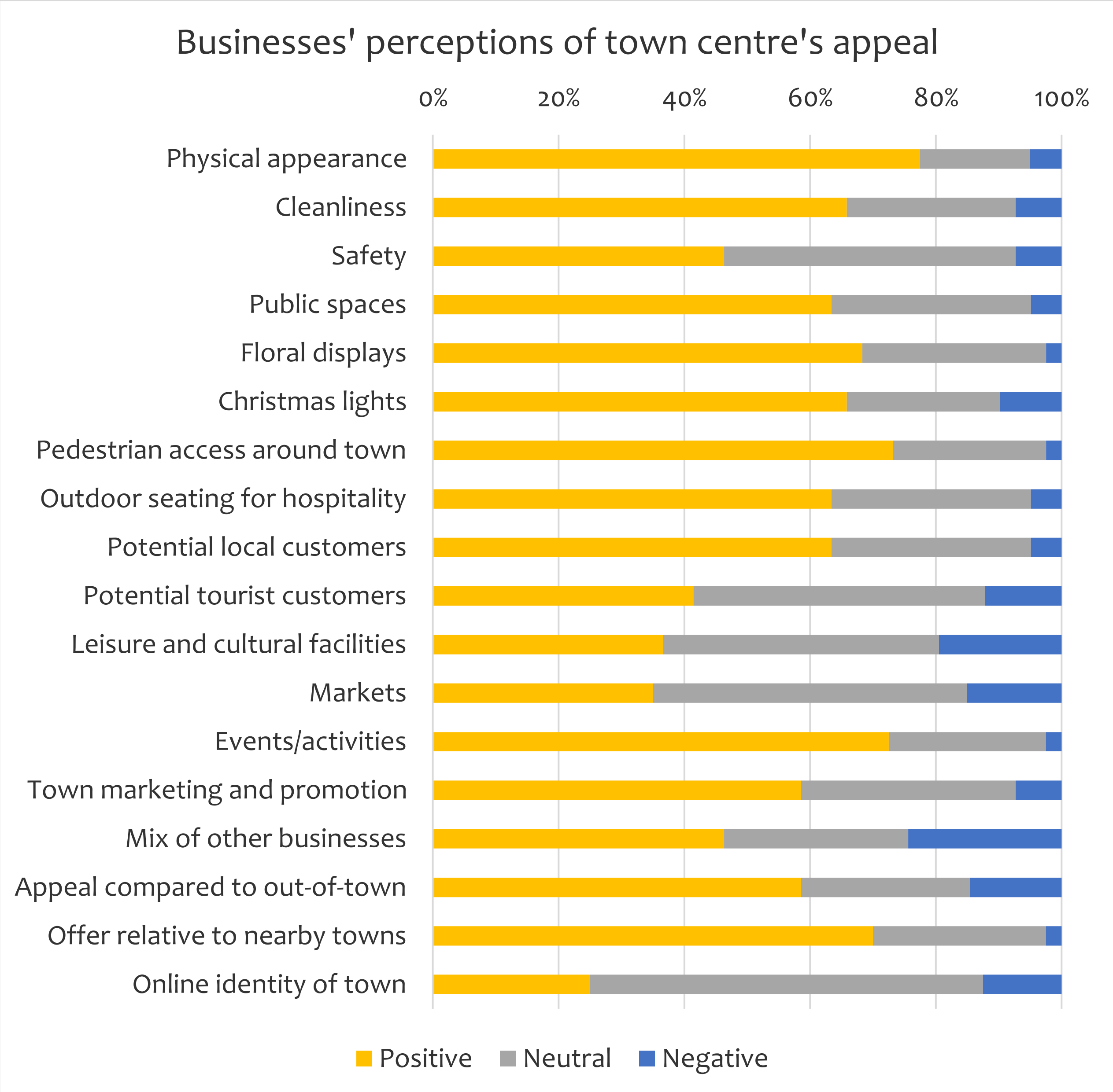
Business' perceptions of the town centre

Positive or negative aspects of the town centre's appeal	National Large Towns %			Hitchin %		
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Physical appearance	47%	33%	20%	78%	18%	5%
Cleanliness	-	-	-	66%	27%	7%
Safety	-	-	-	46%	46%	7%
Public spaces	38%	39%	23%	63%	32%	5%
Floral displays	-	-	-	68%	29%	2%
Christmas lights	-	-	-	66%	24%	10%
Pedestrian access around town	-	-	-	73%	24%	2%
Outdoor seating for hospitality	-	-	-	63%	32%	5%
Potential local customers	82%	16%	2%	63%	32%	5%
Potential tourist customers	72%	26%	2%	41%	46%	12%
Leisure and cultural facilities	-	-	-	37%	44%	20%
Markets	29%	63%	8%	35%	50%	15%
Events/activities	24%	54%	22%	73%	25%	3%
Town marketing and promotion	24%	54%	22%	59%	34%	7%
Mix of other businesses	57%	27%	16%	46%	29%	24%
Appeal compared to out-of-town	-	-	-	59%	27%	15%
Offer relative to nearby towns	-	-	-	70%	28%	3%
Online identity of town	-	-	-	25%	63%	13%

Hitchin town centre businesses were first asked about their opinions on the town centre's appeal. From the responses to the survey, businesses appear most positive about the town's physical appearance (78%), pedestrian access around town (73%), events and activities (73%) and the offer relative to nearby towns (70%). Other aspects that slightly smaller but still significant proportion of businesses appeared to be positive about floral displays (68%), cleanliness (66%), Christmas lights (66%), public spaces (63%), outdoor seating for hospitality (63%), potential local customers (63%) and appeal compared to out-of-town experiences (59%).

Furthermore, businesses appeared to be majorly indifferent to the online identity of the town (63%), appearance of the markets (50%), safety (46%), potential tourist customers (46%) and leisure and cultural facilities (44%).

Negative sentiments were selected by much smaller proportion of businesses, with 24% appearing to be negative about mix of other businesses, leisure and cultural facilities (20%), markets (15%) and appeal compered to out-of-town experiences (15%).



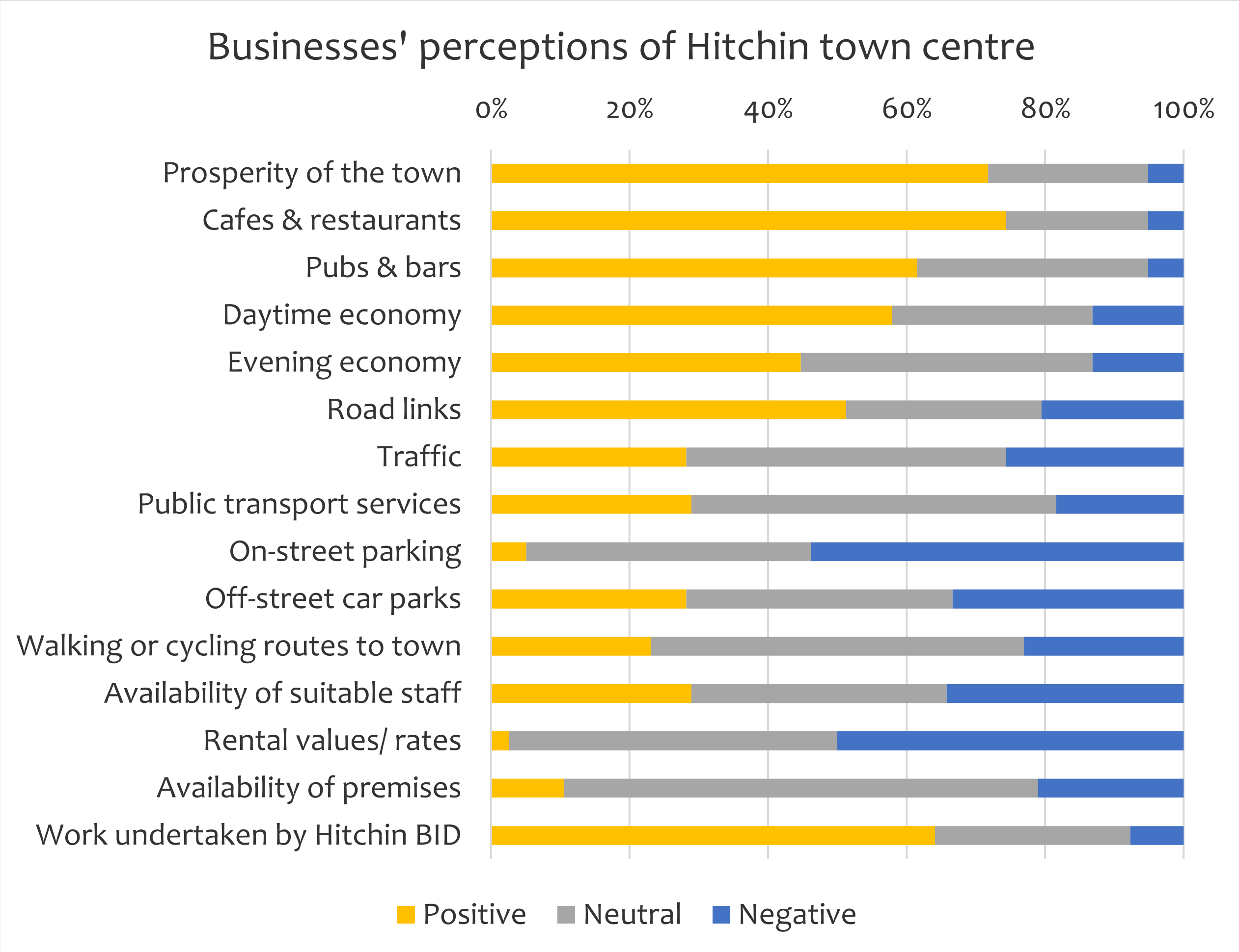
Subsequently businesses were asked about their perceptions of the town's trading environment. In this case businesses appeared to be positive about the town's cafes & restaurants (74%), the prosperity of the town (72%), the work undertaken by Hitchin BID (64%) and the town's pubs & bars (62%).

Responses showed that businesses are strongly indifferent to availability of premises (68%) and slightly less indifferent to walking and cycling routes leading into town (54%), public transport services (53%), rental values and rates (47%) and traffic (46%).

In terms of the most negative aspects of town trading environment, half of businesses selected on-street parking (54%), rental values and rates (50%), followed by availability of suitable staff (34%) and off-street car parks (33%).

Positive or negative aspects of the town's trading environment	National Large Towns %			Hitchin %		
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Prosperity of the town	43%	34%	23%	72%	23%	5%
Cafes & restaurants	64%	34%	2%	74%	21%	5%
Pubs & bars	-	-	-	62%	33%	5%
Daytime economy	-	-	-	58%	29%	13%
Evening economy	-	-	-	45%	42%	13%
Road links	55%	30%	14%	51%	28%	21%
Traffic	29%	36%	36%	28%	46%	26%
Public transport services	61%	25%	15%	29%	53%	18%
On-street parking	29%	17%	55%	5%	41%	54%
Off-street car parks				28%	38%	33%
Walking or cycling routes to town	24%-	42%	34%	23%	54%	23%
Availability of suitable staff	39%	50%	11%	29%	37%	34%
Rental values/ rates	33%	36%	31%	3%	47%	50%
Availability of premises	39%	48%	13%	11%	68%	21%
The work undertaken by Hitchin BID	-	-	-	64%	28%	8%

This second category of responses indicates that businesses view hospitality industry, prosperity of the town and work undertaken by Hitchin BID as the strongest aspects of Hitchin's trading environment. Businesses are mostly indifferent to the availability of premises and are negative about on-street parking.



Business' priorities for improving the town centre

When businesses in Hitchin were asked to propose two suggestions to improve the town centre, their top priorities related to various aspects of parking and travel (44%). Within this, sentiments regarding improved parking management (12) included increased availability, better signage, accessibility, increased stay and consistency across all car parks. This was followed by comments on reduction of parking costs (7), increased pedestrianisation (4) and conversely, a desire to remove all traffic restrictions (3). Individual comments were made in about the availability of public bus routes (1) and improved cycling connections between Hitchin and Baldock (1).

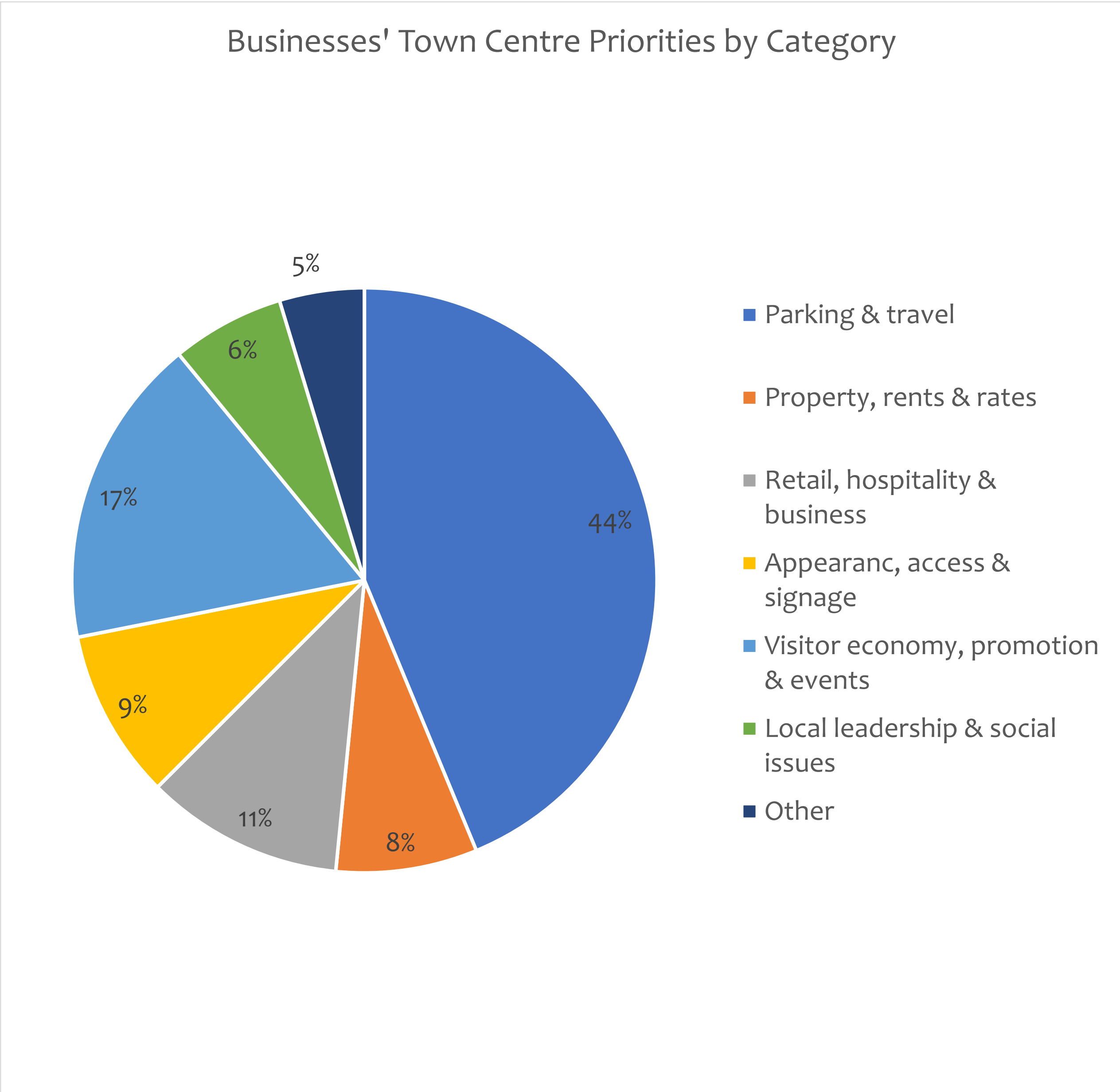
The second priority for businesses surveyed was improving the visitor economy, promotion and events (17%). Business expressed sentiments to enhance the promotion of the town centre (6) to attract visitors, with some comments highlighting a perceived need for better digital promotion (3). Businesses also suggested better management of events (3), specifically to distribute existing ones across the whole town centre.

A further 9% of suggestions fell within the category of appearance & signage of the town centre, with a focus on the churchyard (2), improved disability access (2), better maintenance of outdoor spaces (1) and cleanliness (1).

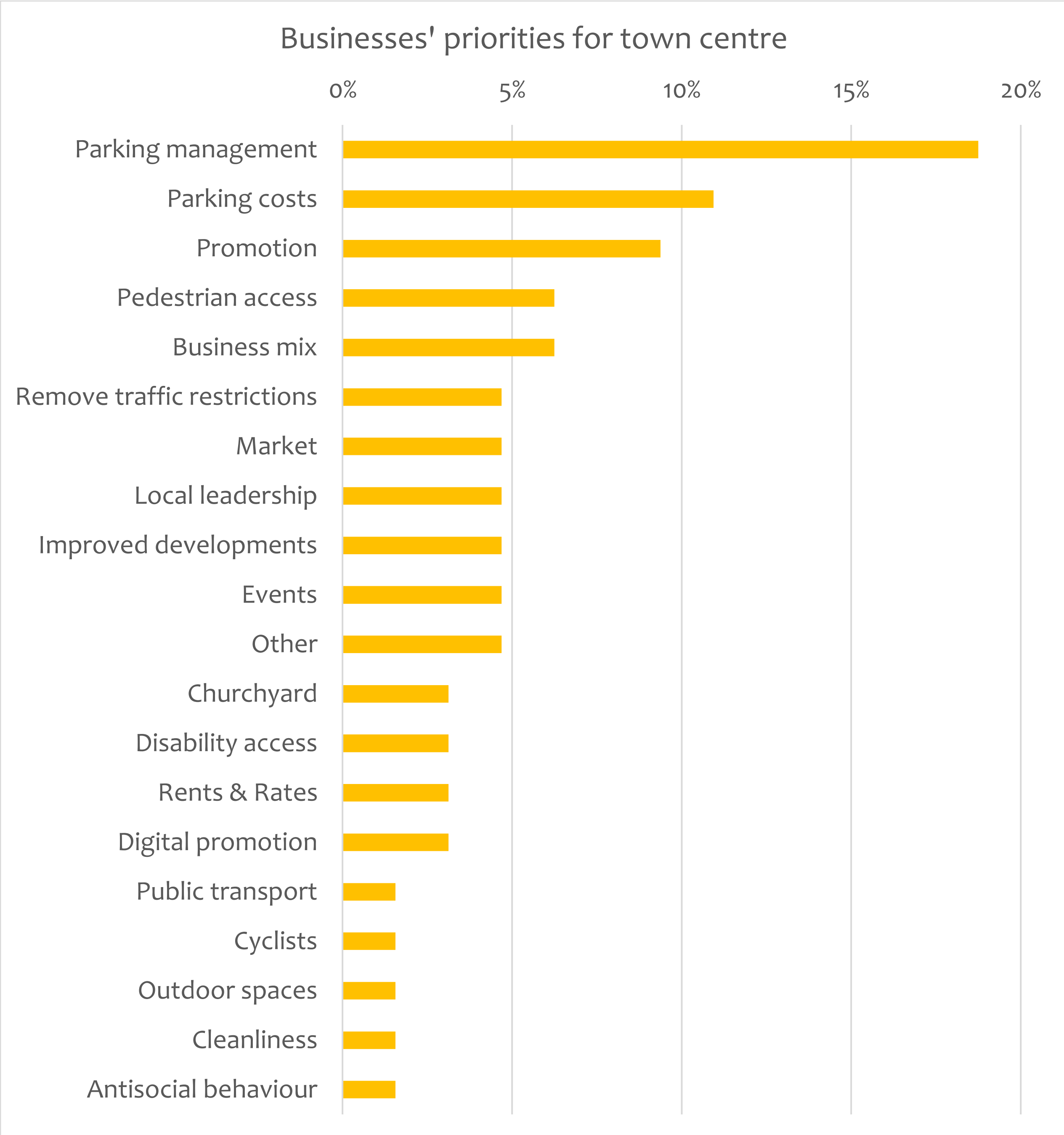
Property, rents and rates (8%) theme covered sentiments to improve and speed up ongoing developments (3), Churchgate in particular, and current property rents and rates (2).

Further, Local leadership and social issues theme (6%) gathered comments on local leadership (3) with appreciation of Hitchin Bid and suggestions to focus on existing businesses rather than attraction of the new ones, and a comment on antisocial behaviour (1).

Comments that didn't fall in any of the themes above expressed sentiments about local delivery services, access to street internet connection and electric car charging availability.



The chart above categorises all of the comments received from town centre businesses, whilst below is a selection of three key comments from the top ten categories. The figures in brackets are a reminder of the total number of comments received for each issue. A full list is available in a separate appendix to this report.



Parking management (12)

- Permit Parking for business owners
- Parking time extendable by phone
- Better signage for the Parking in Bancroft
- Better parking availability on Market days

Parking costs (6)

- Parking - Free parking for first 2 hours to help drive footfall into town
- Free or reduced price parking

- Free parking to main car parks to encourage more people
- Reduce parking charges

Promotion (6)

- Better promotion of the town outside of Hitchin
- To encourage more out of town shoppers
- Local digital marketing boards that easy and cost effective for business to utilise
- More promotion of business's in Bancroft

Pedestrian access (4)

- Pedestrianise town as a whole
- pedestrianise Bancroft and Hermitage Road
- greater pedestrianisation of town centre
- pedestrian high street

Business mix (4)

- Better mix of businesses
- no more coffee shops
- more independents
- Less cafes, coffee shops and hairdressers

Remove traffic restrictions (3)

- Stop blocking the traffic from driving through town
- Remove the access restriction to the high street through the day as this has caused a decline in elderly and disabled shoppers.
- Allow traffic in again as killing the town without it

Market (3)

- Sheltered/Covered market-more people would use if they wouldn't get wet.
- Farmers market every weekend
- Small pagoda in market square, cover when raining, cover when too hot

Local leadership (3)

- Great job done by Hitchin BID, we're lucky to have you!
- Spend more time actually engaging the businesses that the Council and BID are supposed to be supporting. There is no actual dialogue and initiatives are launched without input. Business breakfast meetings are not the way to do this as they tend to be BID talking about fait a complete. BID claims that "conversations are had" but this is not the case having actually conversed with a significant number of the other businesses in town. There is a wealth of experience that can be tapped into in the local

businesses owners but input is actively discouraged. Appreciate this is not a specific change to the town centre but more how it is managed.

- Stop events that invite external equivalents of existing Hitchin Businesses into town to trade. All it does is swap Hitchin business earning to others that take that turnover away with them. e.g. French market where a cheese van is parked outside Halsey's and ensures loss of income for all businesses in town that sell cheese (3 small independent businesses and all supermarkets). Ditto for the bread van that takes trade from the 2 bakers in town. Chatting with consumers at those events, most were not aware the event was on so they are not footfall drivers. There is no logic to this. Other versions of the same that impact other businesses. Very important to note that this is not sour grapes and a reflection of the frustration/confusion of both local shoppers and businesses.

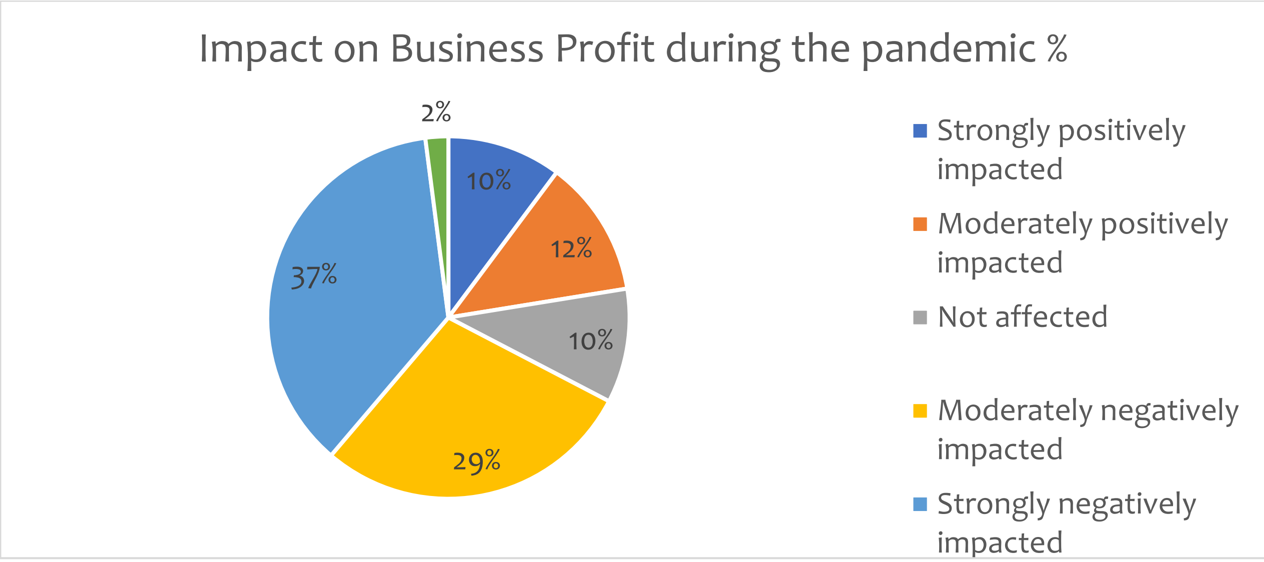
Business impacts

Town centre businesses in Hitchin were asked about the impact of COVID-19 & its economic implications on recent and future projected trading. These questions were included to provide insights about the performance of different types of businesses; the impact of differently targeted restrictions on trading and the influence of changing customer behaviour including working more locally from home. They were asked two specific questions and asked to rank the impact on profits between strongly positively and negatively impacted:

- Compared to pre-pandemic levels, over the 12 months to December 2021, how was your business' profit impacted by COVID-19 and other issues?
- Over the 12 months from March 2022, how do you think your business' profits will be compared to 'normal', pre-pandemic trading?

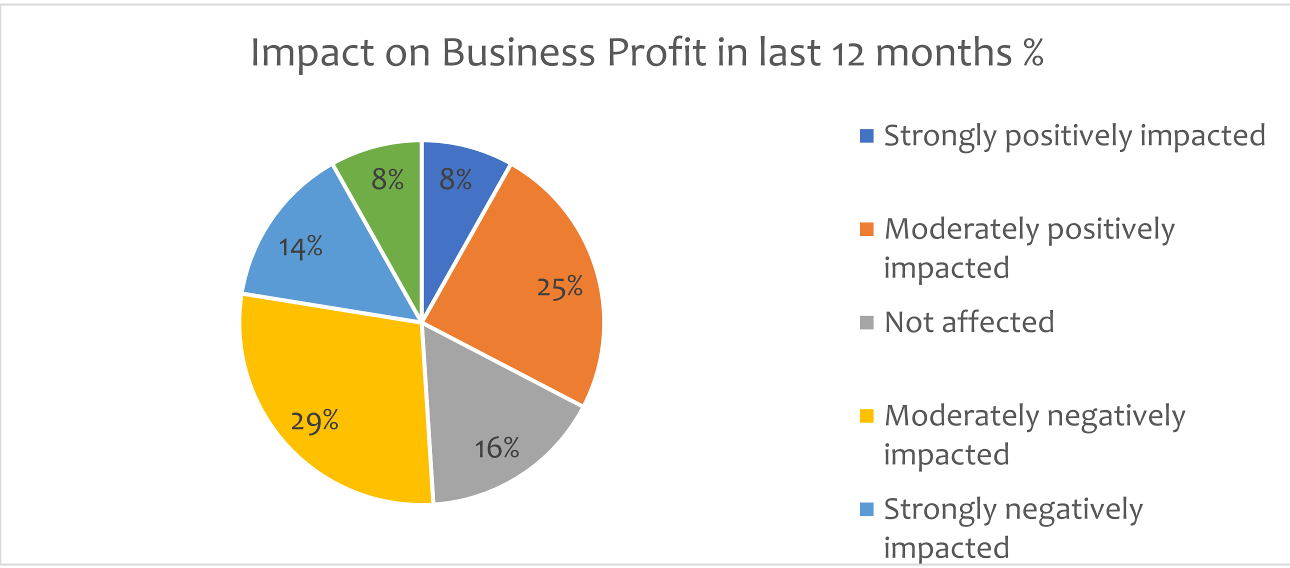
As the tables and charts demonstrate, different businesses were impacted in different ways. Small amount (12%) of businesses who responded said that the year of pandemic before the December 2021 had a positive impact on profits with 10% reporting this was "strongly positive", resulting in one fifth of businesses highlighting that pandemic had a generally positive impact on profitability. In contrast, 29% of businesses reported that profits were negatively impacted with 37% saying that impact was "strongly negative" which indicates that more than a half of business' trading was negatively affected by the pandemic.

Compared to pre-pandemic levels, over the 12 months to December 2021, how was your business' profit impacted by COVID-19 and other issues?	National Large Towns %	Responses no.	Responses %
Strongly positively impacted	-	5	10%
Moderately positively impacted	29%	6	12%
Not affected	28%	5	10%
Moderately negatively impacted	42%	14	29%
Strongly negatively impacted	-	18	37%
Not appropriate	-	1	2%



When asked about prognosed impact on business profits over the next 12 months from March 2022 when compared to pre-pandemic trading, one fourth of businesses (24%) are positive about potential impact. Only 8% of businesses are claiming that the next year will bring a strongly positive impact. 29% of businesses still expect a moderately negative impact on profit compared to pre-pandemic levels, and 14% see this impact as strongly negative.

Over the 12 months from March 2022, how do you think your business' profits will be compared to 'normal', pre-pandemic trading?	**National Large Towns %**	**Responses no.**	**Responses %**
Strongly positively impacted	-	4	8%
Moderately positively impacted	37%	12	24%
Not affected	38%	8	16%
Moderately negatively impacted	28%	14	29%
Strongly negatively impacted	-	7	14%
Unsure	-	4	8%



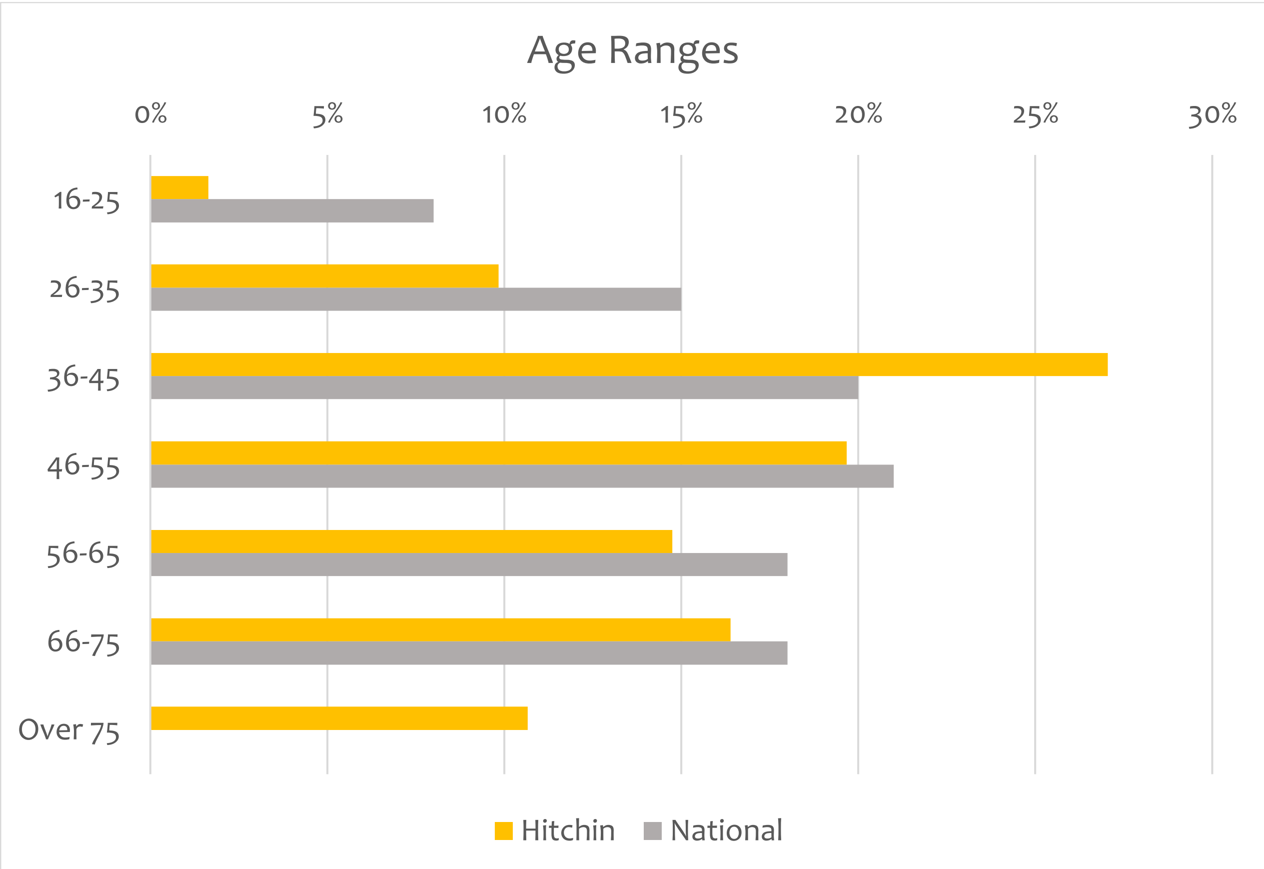
KPI 8: Town Centre User's Survey

The aim of the town centre users' survey is to establish how a town is seen by those people who use it. It provides a wealth of data from a range of different types of local and visiting town centre users.

Characteristics of customers surveyed

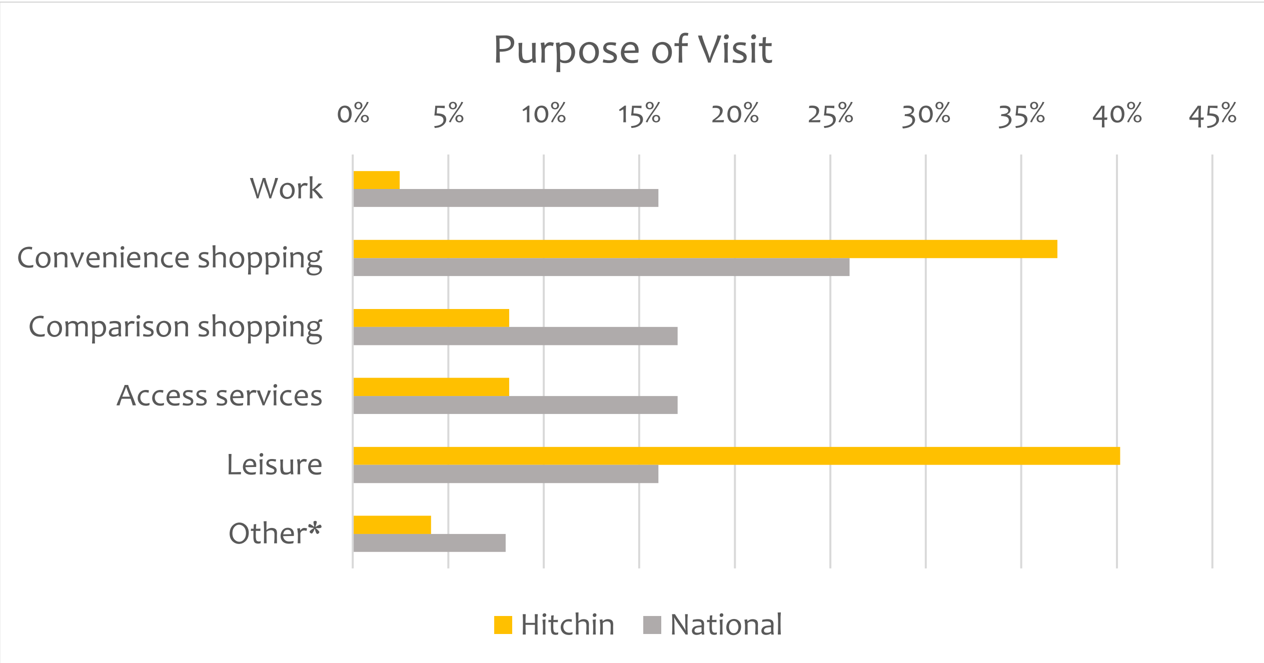
A sample of 122 Hitchin town centre users were surveyed online through social media using the help of local community partners. Slightly less than two thirds of respondents were female, and that is only a slightly lower proportion than typical when compared to surveys conducted in towns nationally. There was healthy participation amongst all age groups, with 36-45s providing the highest number of responses, followed by the high level of responses across 46-55s and 66-75s. Significantly, there was some response level across users in the over 75 age group. Overall, the higher response rate amongst older age groups highlights that online survey work can be effective in capturing all demographics and not only the younger age groups.

It is evident from the responses that most customers surveyed (40%) typically visit Hitchin for leisure, which is likely to include socialising as well as visiting the many pubs and cafes located in the town centre. The second most popular purpose of a visit (37%) is for everyday convenience shopping. Only 8% of respondents visit town centre to access services, with the same proportion (8%) coming to town for comparison shopping. Only 2% of surveyed customers said that are coming to the town centre for work. Comments listed as 'other' mostly included a blend of all the included activities and commuting.



Customer background and nature of visit to town centre	National Large Towns %	Hitchin (number)	Hitchin %
Gender			
Male	36%	41	34%
Female	64%	78	64%
Other	-	0	0%
Prefer not to say	-	2	2%
Age			
16-25	8%	2	2%
26-35	15%	12	10%
36-45	20%	33	27%
46-55	21%	24	20%
56-65	18%	18	15%
66-75	18%	20	16%
Over 75	-	13	11%
What is the main purpose of a typical visit to the town centre?			
Work	16%	3	2%
Convenience shopping	26%	45	37%
Comparison shopping	17%	10	8%
Access services	17%	10	8%
Leisure	16%	49	40%
Other[1]	8%	5	4%

[1]Popular 'other' responses for purpose of visit included a combination of the above activities, living in the centre, passing through and going for walks



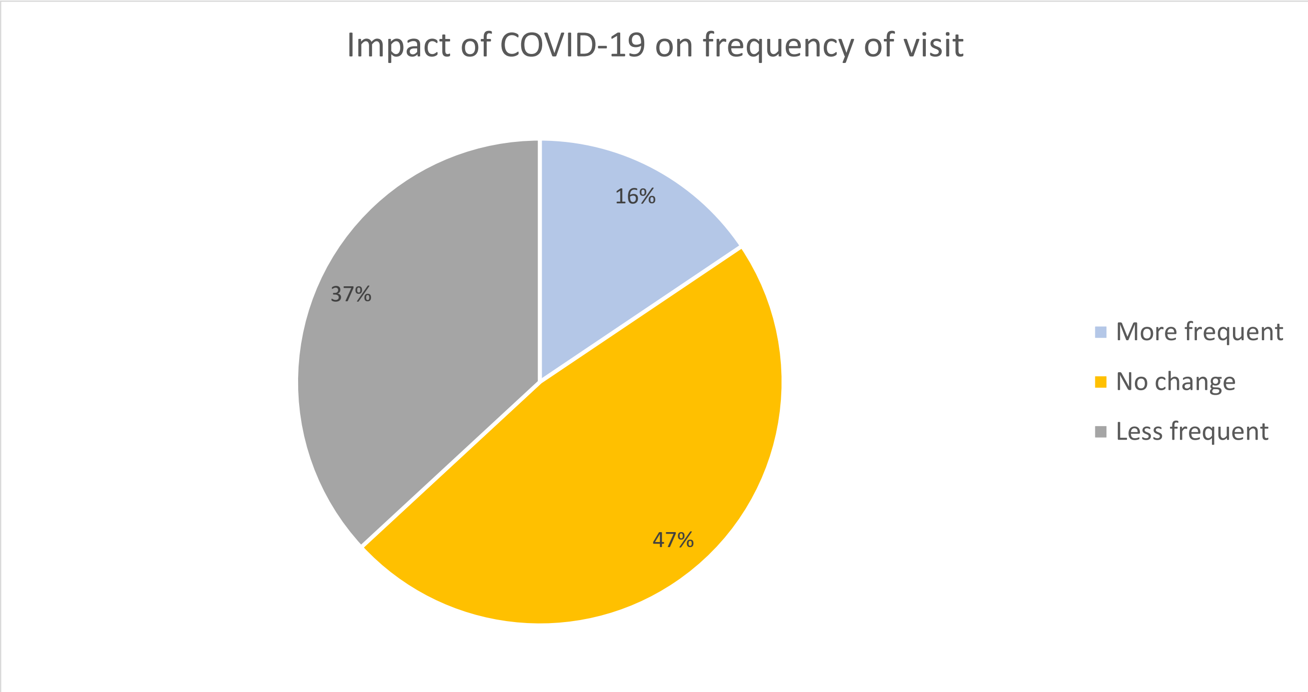
Analysis of the 122 responses received from town centre users reveals that impact of COVID-19 pandemic was varied, and only 37% of town centre customers have decreased their frequency of visits to Hitchin due to the pandemic. For 48% of respondents, there was no change in frequency of town centre visits and 16% of users said that they have been visiting the town centre more frequently.

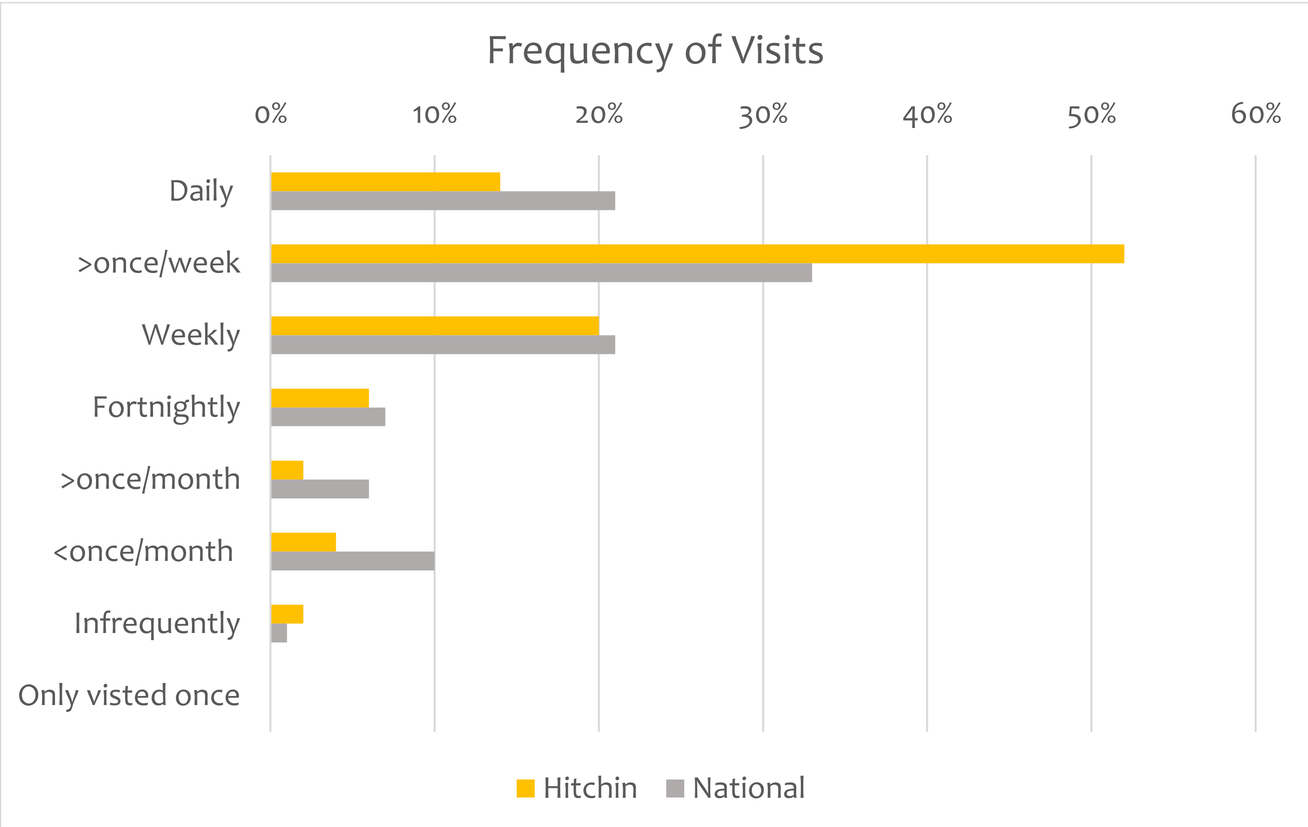
When asked how often users visit town centre now with the pandemic restrictions being lifted, 52% of users responded that are visiting town centre more than once a week, only 14% are in the town centre daily and 20% are visiting Hitchin weekly. Only 6% of respondents visited the town centre fortnightly and 8% visited less frequently than that. 2% of the respondents had visited Hitchin only once.

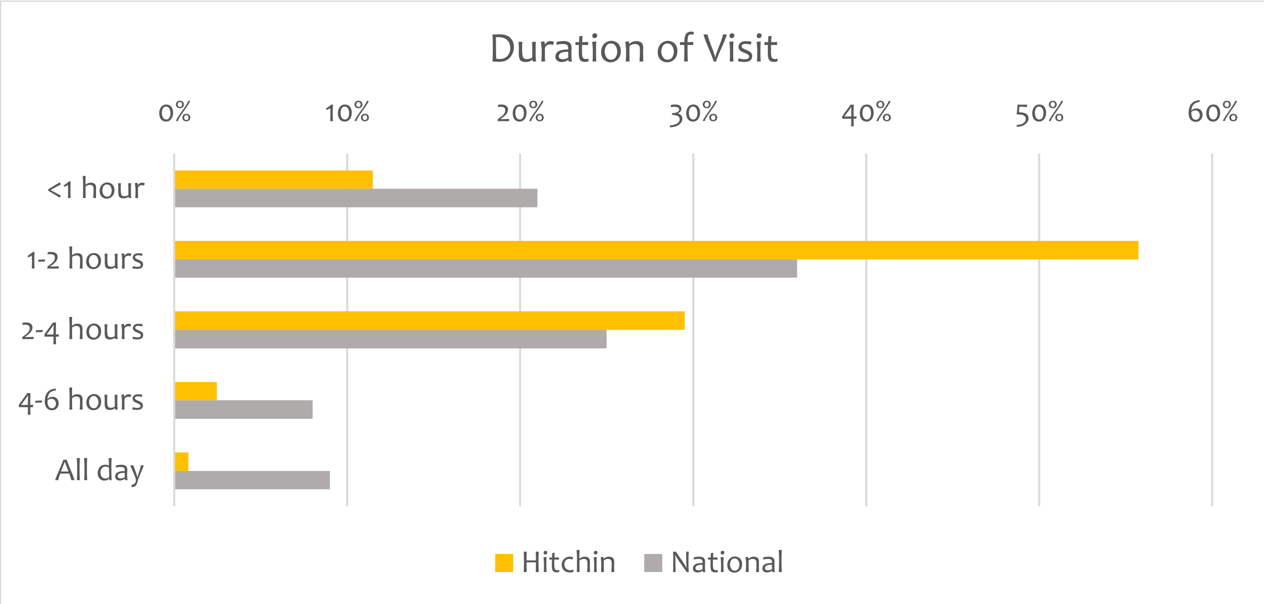
Answering question on duration of their visit, more than a half of users (56%) said that they are spending one to two hours in town, while another third (30%) of shoppers are staying in the town centre for up to 4 hours. A further 11% are and out of the town centre within one hour, 2% dwell up to 6 hours, and 1% are staying in the town centre for the whole day.

How do you think the frequency of your visits to the town centre will have changed because of the COVID-19 pandemic?	**Hitchin (number)**	**Hitchin %**
More frequent	19	16%
No change	58	48%
Less frequent	45	37%

Frequency and duration of visits to town centre	**National Large Towns %**	**Hitchin (number)**	**Hitchin %**
How often do you currently visit town centre?			
Daily	21%	17	14%
>once/week	33%	63	52%
Weekly	21%	25	20%
Fortnightly	7%	7	6%
>once/month	6%	3	2%
<once/month	10%	5	4%
First visit	1%	2	2%
Infrequently	-	0	0%
How long do you normally stay during a visit to the town centre?			
<1 hour	21%	14	11%
1-2 hours	36%	68	56%
2-4 hours	25%	36	30%
4-6 hours	8%	3	2%
All day	9%	1	1%
Other	-	14	11%


Impact of COVID-19 on frequency of visit
16%
47%
37%
More frequent
No change
Less frequent


Frequency of Visits
0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%
60%
Daily
>once/week
Weekly
Fortnightly
>once/month
<once/month
Infrequently
Only visted once
Hitchin
National



Customers' origins

The customers' origin element of the town centre users' survey tracks the general area that town centre visitors originate from. The data can be used to target local marketing or promotional literature. It can also be used as evidence of the success of such campaigns by gauging the penetration into the population.

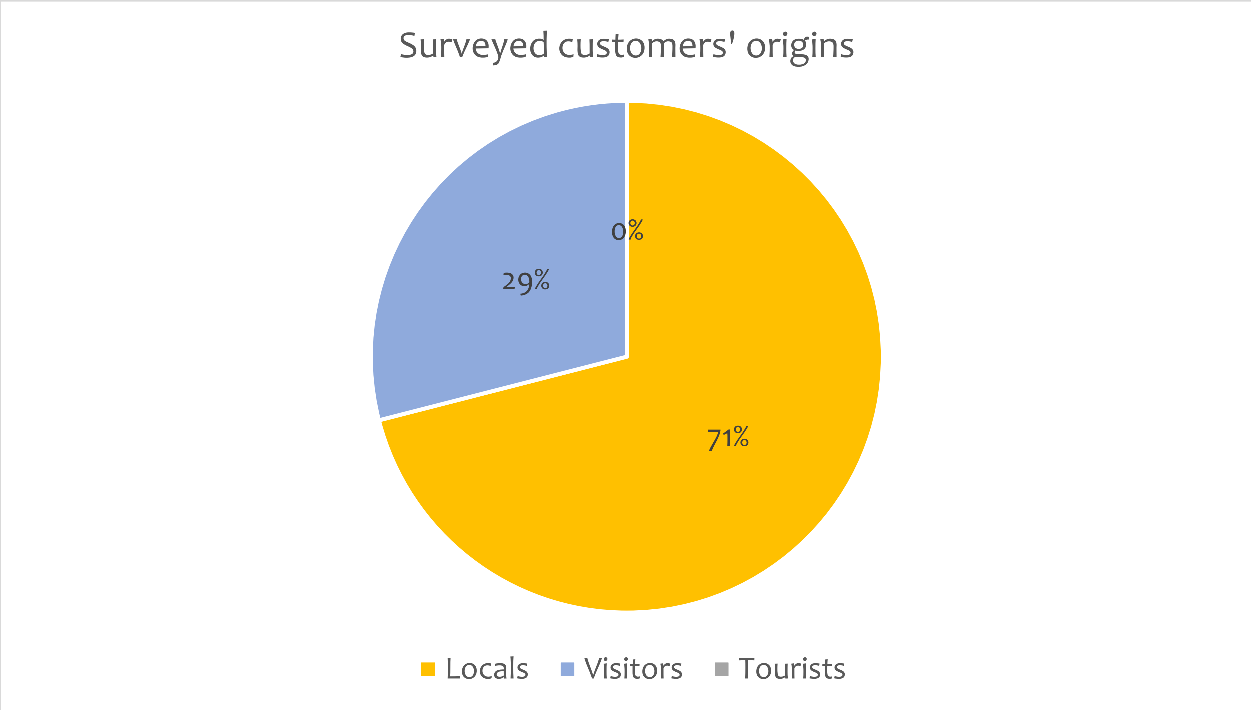
The postcodes gathered in the survey are split into 3 categories to be able to compare with other towns. The categories are:

- Locals: those who live within a Post Code covering the town
- Visitors: those who live within a Post Code less than a 30 minute drive away
- Tourists: those who live within a Post Code further than a 30 minute drive away

	National Large Towns %	Hitchin (number)	Hitchin %
Locals	57%	77	71%
Visitors	27%	32	29%
Tourists	16%	0	0%

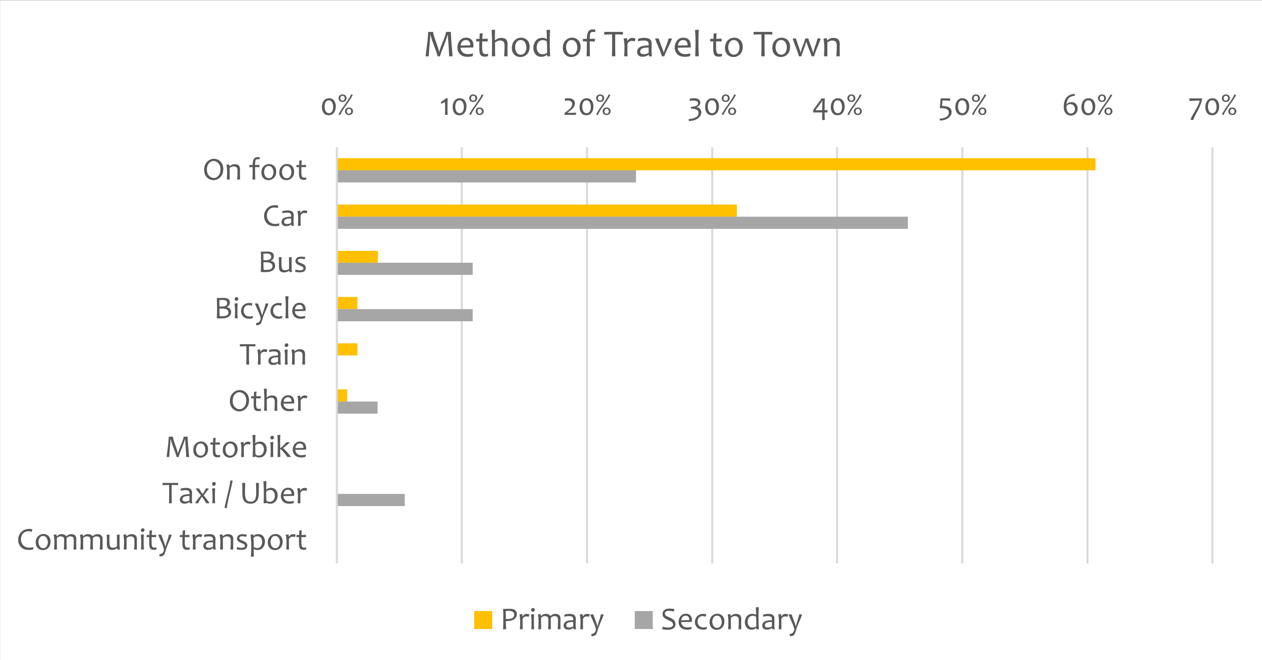
The figures for shoppers' origin for Hitchin from this survey indicate that currently 71% of town centre users live locally and that 29% visit from within 30-minute drive distance. A significant proportion of these visitors live in nearby towns like Stevenage and Baldock.

Travel to town



As part of the Hitchin survey, town centre users were asked about their preferred primary and secondary methods of travelling into town.

	National Large Towns %	Primary (number)	Primary %	Secondary (number)	Secondary %
How do you currently travel into the town centre? (Please choose one main option and one secondary option that you might also sometimes use)					
On foot	28%	74	61%	22	24%
Bicycle	2%	2	2%	10	11%
Motorbike	-	-	-	-	-
Car	58%	39	32%	42	46%
Bus	9%	4	3%	10	11%
Train	-	2	2%	-	0%
Taxi / Uber	1%	-	-	5	5%
Community transport	-	-	-	-	0%
Other	2%	1	1%	3	3.3%



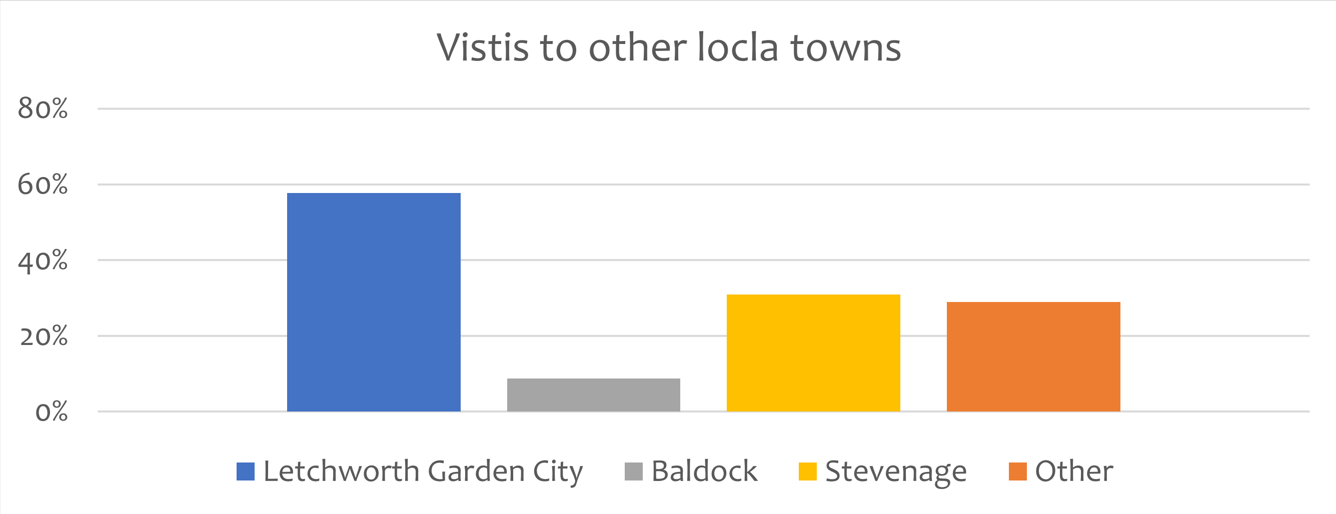
The survey also asked town centre users about their preferred primary and secondary methods of travelling into town. The responses on travel to town show that on foot (61%) and car (32%) are the preferred primary methods of travel to town. This is different to trends for large towns nationally, where travel by car dominates on foot. Only 3% of customers chose cycling as their primary travel method, 2% are travelling by train, and 2% picked bicycle as their primary travel method.

Travelling to town by car (46%) and on foot (24%) are also the most popular secondary choices, followed by moderately high responses for cycling (11%), bus (11%) and taxi (5%).The high response for walking, suggests that Hitchin town centre is well connected to nearby residential areas.

Surrounding towns

As part of the survey, users were asked which other local towns they visit regularly, making at least one trip per month. Letchworth Garden City appeared to be visited by 58% of respondents, Stevenage is visited by 31% and Baldock by 9%. Within the category of 'other' (17%), Luton and Welwyn Garden City appeared as the most popular options, with significant number of respondents saying that are not visiting any of the local towns at all.

	Visitors (number)	Visitors %
Letchworth Garden City	60	58%
Baldock	9	9%
Stevenage	32	31%
Other	30	29%



Customers' perceptions of the town centre

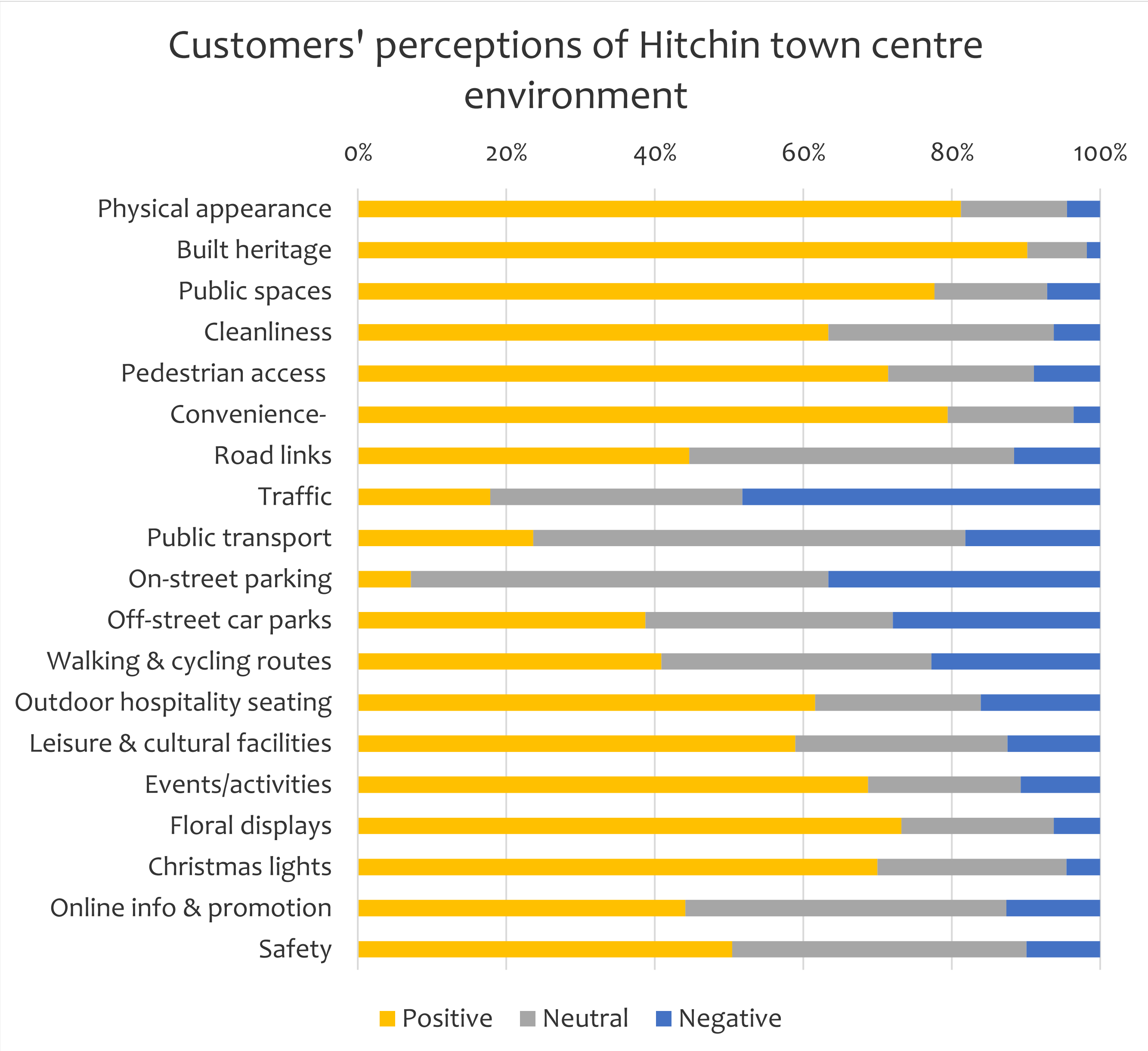
Positive or negative aspects of the town centre environment	National Large Towns %			Hitchin %		
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Physical appearance	38%	19%	43%	81%	14%	4%
Built heritage	-	-	-	90%	8%	2%
Public spaces	-	-	-	78%	15%	7%
Cleanliness	39%	26%	35%	63%	30%	6%
Pedestrian access	62%	29%	9%	71%	20%	9%
Convenience	66%	29%	5%	79%	17%	4%
Road links	54%	28%	18%	45%	44%	12%
Traffic	35%	30%	35%	18%	34%	48%
Public transport	44%	38%	18%	24%	58%	18%
On-street parking	31%	34%	35%	7%	56%	37%
Off-street car parks	31%	34%	35%	39%	33%	28%
Walking or cycling routes	32%	25%	43%	41%	36%	23%
Outdoor hospitality seating	-	-	-	62%	22%	16%
Leisure & cultural facilities	23%	56%	21%	59%	29%	13%
Events/activities	25%	51%	24%	69%	21%	11%
Floral displays	-	-	-	73%	21%	6%
Christmas lights	-	-	-	70%	25%	5%
Online info & promotion	-	-	-	44%	43%	13%
Safety	33%	56%	11%	50%	40%	10%

Customers were asked to indicate what are the positive, neutral, or negative aspects of the current condition of the town centre environment for a list of town centre qualities.

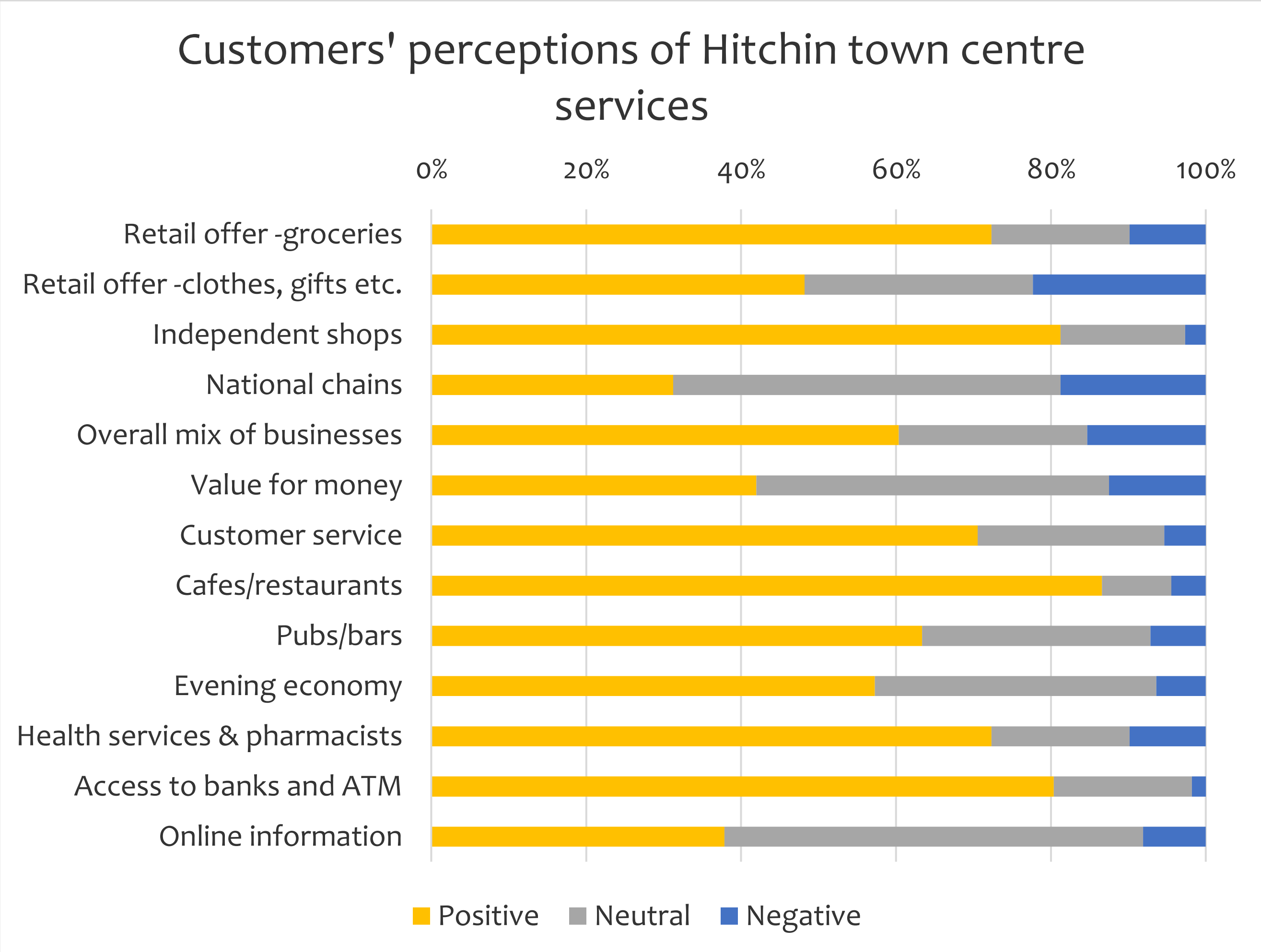
Users were very positive about built heritage (90%), physical appearance (81%) convenience (79%) and public spaces (78%). They were also positive about floral displays (73%), pedestrian access (71%) Christmas lights (70%), events and activities (69%), cleanliness (63%), outdoor seating for hospitality (62%) and leisure and cultural facilities (59%).

Majority of town centre users felt indifferent about public transport (58%) and on-street parking (56%).

In terms of negative aspects of Hitchin's town centre's environment, traffic (48%) received the higher number of responses, followed by on-street (37%) and off-street (28%) parking. Generally, though responses appeared to be strikingly more positive than those expressed nationally.

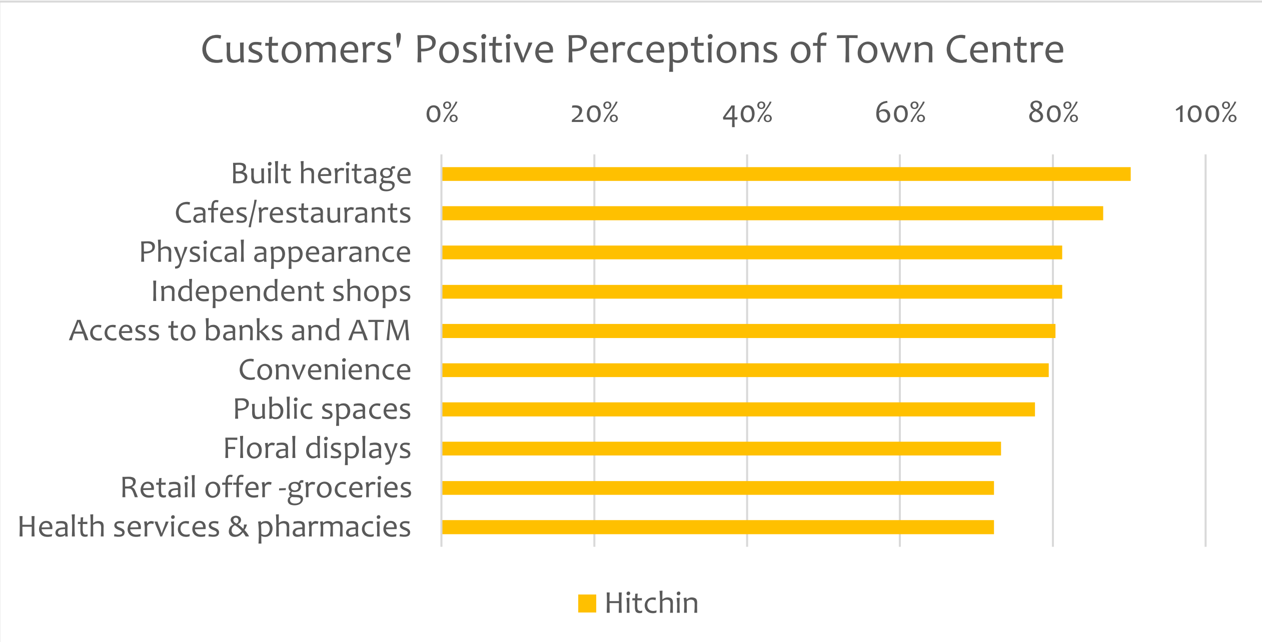


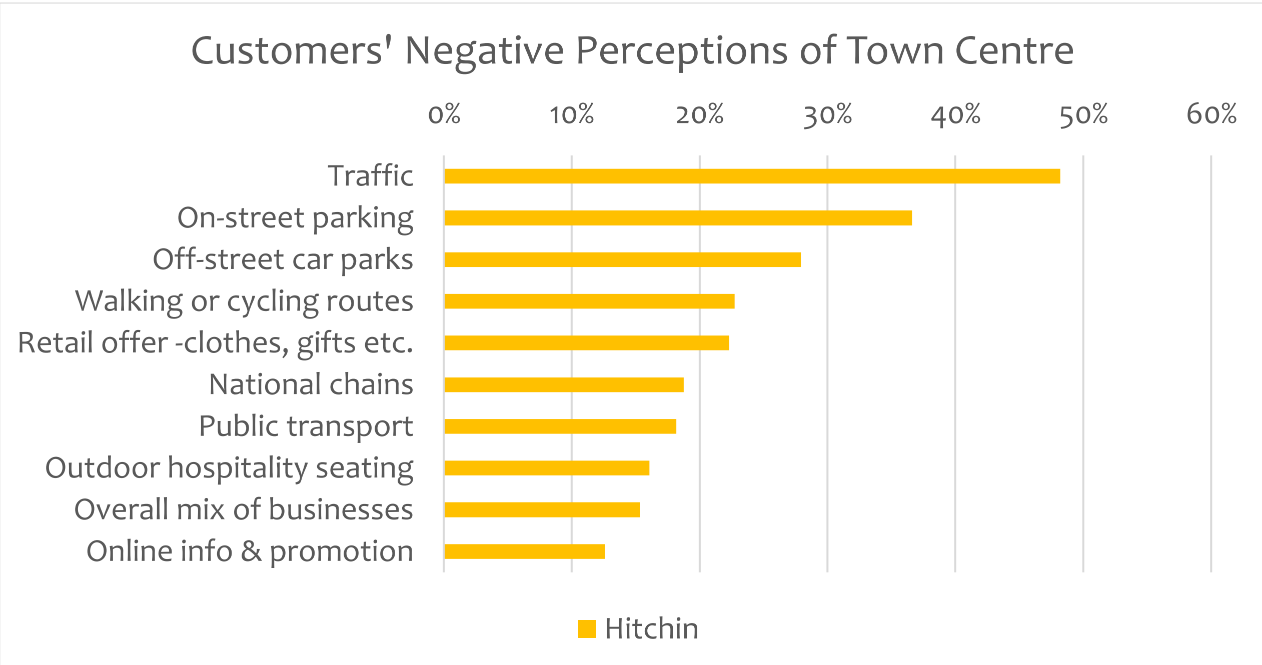
Positive or negative aspects of the town centre services	National Large Towns %			Hitchin %		
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Retail offer -groceries	9%	44%	47%	72%	18%	10%
Retail offer -clothes, gifts etc.	10%	53%	37%	48%	29%	22%
Independent shops	49%	19%	32%	81%	16%	3%
National chains	22%	37%	41%	31%	50%	19%
Overall mix of businesses	-	-	-	60%	24%	15%
Value for money	51%	37%	12%	42%	46%	13%
Customer service	33%	57%	10%	71%	24%	5%
Cafes/restaurants	58%	30%	12%	87%	9%	4%
Pubs/bars	32%	49%	19%	63%	29%	7%
Evening economy	-	-	-	57%	36%	6%
Health services & pharmacies	-	-	-	72%	18%	10%
Access to banks and ATM	-	-	-	80%	18%	2%
Online information	-	-	-	38%	54%	8%



Subsequently, customers were asked to indicate what are the positives and negatives of the current provision of town centre services and businesses. Aspect that received the most positive response were Hitchin's hospitality offer with cafes and restaurants (87%) ranked highest and pubs and bars with slightly smaller positive response (63%). Customers were very also positive about number of independent shops (81%), access to banks and ATM's (80%), provision of health services and pharmacists (72%), grocery retail offer (72%), customer service (71%), and overall mix businesses (60%). Customers were majorly indifferent towards provision of national chains (50%) and value for money retail (46%).

When asked about Hitchin town centre's services, the highest negative response received were about fashion retail offer (22%) and national chains (19%), though even these were countered by higher positive responses of 48% and 31% respectively.



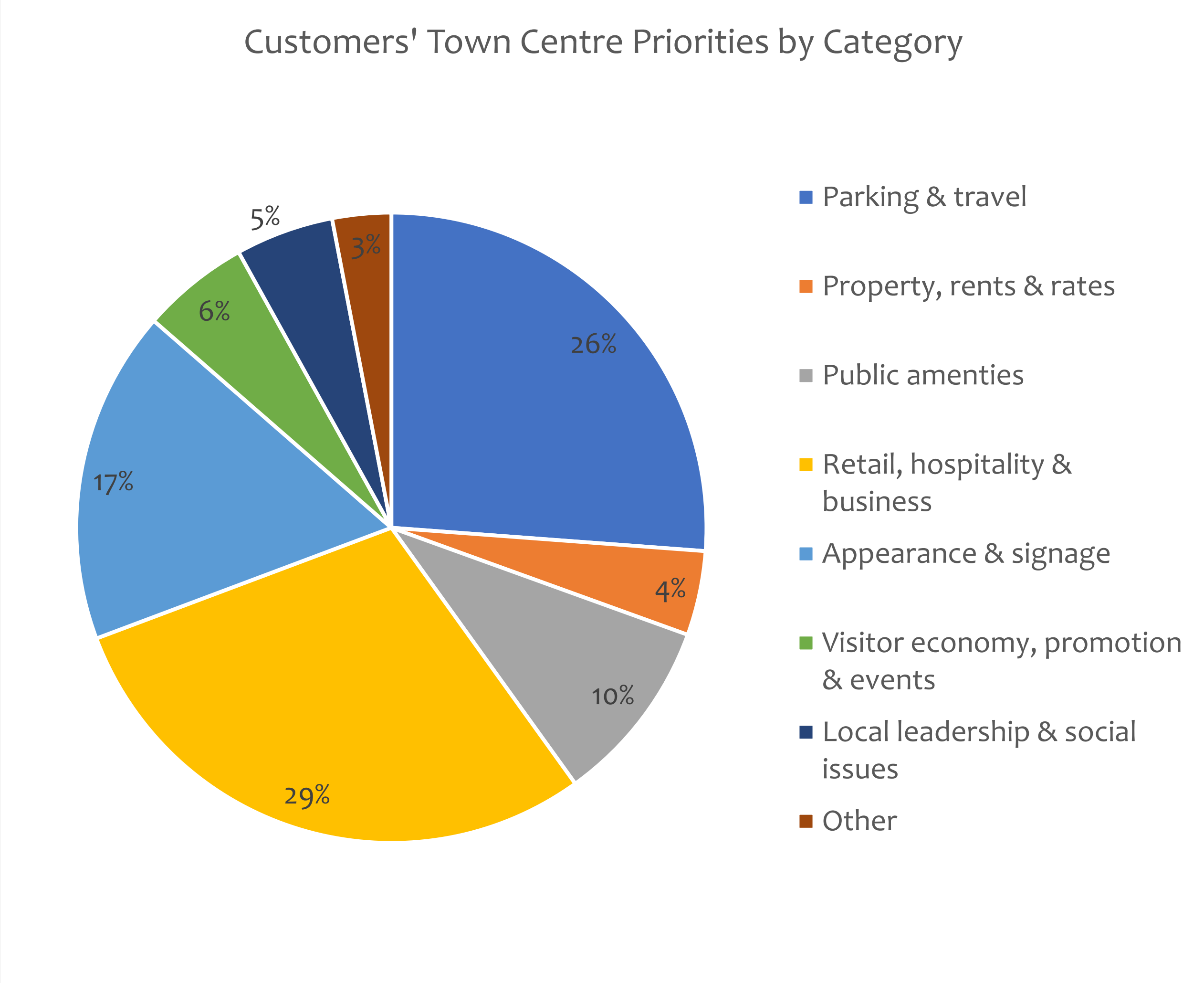


Charts above combine users' responses on town centre's environment and service provision and indicate that customers are the most positive about built heritage, cafes and restaurants, physical appearance and access to independent shops and banks and ATM's.

The most negative aspects are traffic, on-street and off-street parking, walking and cycling routes, retail offer for clothes and gifts and access to national chains.

Customer suggestions to improve the town centre

When customers of Hitchin were asked what two things would improve the town centre, there was a high volume of comments generated. These were classified into broad themes and a more detailed breakdown of issues.



When customers were asked to suggest two priorities for improving the town centre, the theme receiving the most comments was the one related to the town's retail, hospitality & general business mix (58). Within this theme, general sentiments about the lack of retail and business diversity (15) received the highest number of comments, followed by similar sentiments regarding the fashion retail mix (11) and independent shops (11). Other comments indicated that the current management of the market (7) and provision of high street brands (7) is prioritised by the customers. Furthermore, there were sentiments expressed in relation to increase of outdoor hospitality provision (5) and longer opening hours for existing businesses (2).

Theme on parking and travel (52) gathered only slightly lower number of comments when compared to the first theme. Pedestrianisation (20) has received the greatest number of comments across all topics within all themes, indicating high priorities to retain and improve existing car free zones within the town centre. Further, sentiments were expressed in relation to traffic management (10) with comments made pointing out need to minimise existing traffic flows, parking costs (9) and parking management (5) requesting some improvements to the current parking systems. Comments were made in relation to cycling facilities (7) with customers asking for better bike parking and better cycling lanes. Finally, a comment was made to improve public bus services (1).

The appearance and signage theme received 34 comments in total. Within these, sentiments were expressed in regard to accessibility (7), pointing out issues with disabled and pram access. The same number of comments were received in relation to cleanliness (7) and general appearance (7, with sentiments indicating requests for a better maintenance of the town centre. A further 5 comments were made in relation to the area around Churchgate in particular, and the same number of comments expressed about improving maintenance and use of the market square (5) on non-market days.

The public amenities theme received 19 comments in total. Out of these comments, 11 were made about better public outdoor seating and spaces, whilst a further 6 expressed requests to have a cinema in the town centre.

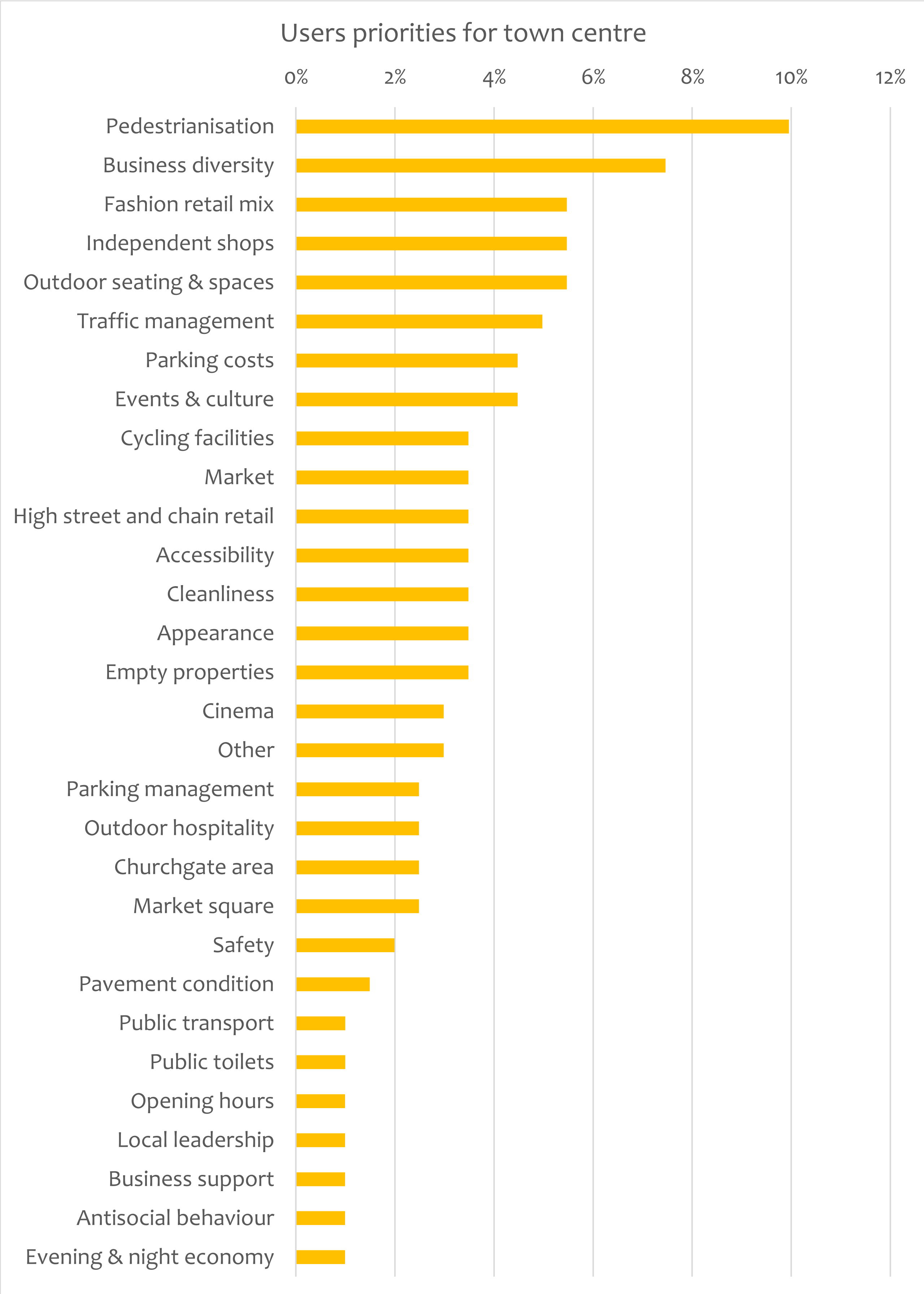
Property rents and rates theme (11) covered comments on empty properties (7) and rents and rate prices (4).

Visitor economy, promotion and events (11) received 9 comments with sentiments wishing for more public events in town and 2 comments regarding improved evening and night economy.

Finally, local leadership and social issues theme (10) covered comments on safety (4) with sentiments made in regards improved policing, local leadership (2), business support (2), and antisocial behaviour (2).

Comments that didn't fit in any of the themes above, were about loyalty scheme for customers across the all town shops, heaters on the main square, minimising the area that town centre overtakes and stopping developments where old buildings are being replaced with new ones.

Below is a selection of five comments for issues that received 6 or more amongst over 200 responses received. The figures in brackets are a reminder of the total number of comments received for each issue.


Users priorities for town centre
0%
2%
4%
6%
8%
10%
12%
Pedestrianisation
Business diversity
Fashion retail mix
Independent shops
Outdoor seating & spaces
Traffic management
Parking costs
Events & culture
Cycling facilities
Market
High street and chain retail
Accessibility
Cleanliness
Appearance
Empty properties
Cinema
Other
Parking management
Outdoor hospitality
Churchgate area
Market square
Safety
Pavement condition
Public transport
Public toilets
Opening hours
Local leadership
Business support
Antisocial behaviour
Evening & night economy

Categories of Issue	Hitchin Responses (no.)	Hitchin Responses (%)
Retail, hospitality & business	**58**	**28.9%**
Business diversity	15	7.5%
Fashion retail mix	11	5.5%
Independent shops	11	5.5%
Market	7	3.5%
High street & chain retail	7	3.5%
Outdoor hospitality	5	2.5%
Opening hours	2	1%
Parking & Travel	**52**	**25.9%**
Pedestrianisation	20	10%
Traffic management	10	5%
Parking costs	9	4.5%
Cycling facilities	7	3.5%
Parking management	5	2.5%
Public transport	1	0.5%
Appearance & Signage	**34**	**16.9%**
Accessibility	7	3.5%
Cleanliness	7	3.5%
Appearance	7	3.5%
Market square	5	2.5%
Churchgate area	5	2.5%
Pavement condition	3	1.5%
Public amenities	**19**	**10.1%**
Outdoor seating & spaces	11	5.5%
Cinema	9	3.0%
Family & leisure	8	0.5%
Public toilets	7	0.5%
Visitor economy, promotion & events	**11**	**5.5%**
Events & culture	9	4.5%
Evening & night economy	2	1%
Local leadership & Social issues	**30**	**10%**

Safety	4	2%
Local leadership	2	1%
Antisocial behaviour	2	1%
Business support	2	1%
Property, Rents & Rates	**11**	**4.3%**
Empty properties	7	3.5%
Rents & rates	4	0.8%
Other	**6**	**3%**

Pedestrianisation (20)

- Pedestrianise the High Street
- Increase pedestrian areas e.g.: Bucklersbury & Sun Street
- Fully pedestrianise the town square and only allow deliveries
- Enlarge pedestrianisation
- Pedestrianising the High Street during the daytime every day

Business diversity (15)

- Organic/vegetarian/vegan restaurants/pubs
- No more café or hair dressers
- Less coffee shops and expensive shops -nobody can afford to buy from them
- More retail shops
- Better mix of shops

Independent shops (11)

- Encourage more independent businesses
- Encouraging/supporting independent retailers
- Improving access for independent traders
- Support independent shops - they are the heart of Hitchin
- Support for independent businesses - these are what make Hitchin a destination

Outdoor seating and spaces (11)

- More benches by St Mary's church
- Provide more seating in the Market Place
- Gardens instead of market car park
- More outside seating & places to play
- More outside space for seating, stopping, resting

Fashion retail mix (10)

- More affordable, cool clothes shops
- Clothing shops for teens
- Bring back New Look, get H&M - cheaper fashion stores
- Needs more clothes shops and a cinema
- More useful shops i.e. clothes for everyone at a reasonable price, a toy shop, shoe shop etc.

Traffic management (10)

- Only allow essential traffic
- Less HGV traffic!!!
- Less thorough traffic
- Ban parking and traffic
- An extra crossing on Walsworth Road near the theatre

Parking costs (9)

- Cheaper/free parking
- Free Parking
- Have car park charges end at 17:45 so you don't have to buy a ticket when attending events in town that start at 6pm!
- Extend cheap long-stay parking from 3 to 4 hours
- Reduce parking charges

Events & culture (9)

- More arts and cultural activities
- More music/ buskers
- More evening events
- More street musicians / artists
- Continued programme of great events in the town

Cycling facilities (7)

- Better cycle routes
- More provision for bikes
- Cycle Paths
- Clearer cycle parking provision
- Cycle lanes

Market (7)

- Invest in the market
- More stalls in market square
- Encourage more market traders
- Improve appearance, and offer, of market (and bring back the duck race!)
- Make more of the market with stalls that appeal to younger generations

High street and chain retail (7)

- More high street favourites
- We need places to shop like B&M or a Primark, not everyone can travel to the towns over
- A few more national brands if possible
- More chain stores
- Bring back Poundland

Accessibility (7)

- Access to all the Disabled Parking bays (8) in High St. & Market Square
- Less A boards everywhere… nightmare for prams
- Make the town centre wheelchair accessible, prioritise parking for disabled visitors - out of centre parking for everyone else
- More pedestrian friendly/disability access
- Better management of pavement space. Some outlets, eg Pitcher & Piano are very obstructive.

Cleanliness (7)

- Clean pigeon droppings from pavements
- Prominent bins for used face masks
- Litter/rubbish - generally clean but can always be improved
- Spruce & clean the centre
- Improve litter collection

Appearance (7)

- Improve the arcade/regenerate
- Locally produced art commissioned and installed on some of the 1960s buildings (e.g. front of Wilkos, Churchgate)
- Brighten up dull areas with flowers/murals
- Update the dated 1970s eyesores
- Paint

Empty properties (7)

- Less empty units
- Working with landlords to reduce retail rents to minimize vacant shops.
- Use one of the big vacant shops as a mini market
- find a use for large empty premises
- Better use of empty units

Cinema (6)

- A cinema
- Open a cinema
- Needs more clothes shops and a cinema
- Cinema
- Cinema

What word would you use to sum-up the town centre?

The word cloud below gives an indication of the most popular words used by town centre users to sum-up Hitchin.

Such a word cloud, whilst only indicative, is useful in understanding how the town centre is perceived by current users who are familiar with it. It gives a visual representation of sentiments and can be helpful in determining how the town can be honestly promoted to potential new users in a way that creates achievable expectations.

Many of the most prominent words used for Hitchin are positive, such as lovely, lively, welcoming and vibrant. This indicates users' appreciation of the existing town qualities and its unique character. There were more moderate volumes of negative sentiments expressed such as congested, disappointing, tired and expensive. This highlights some aspects that users are dissatisfied with and points out areas for the improvement.

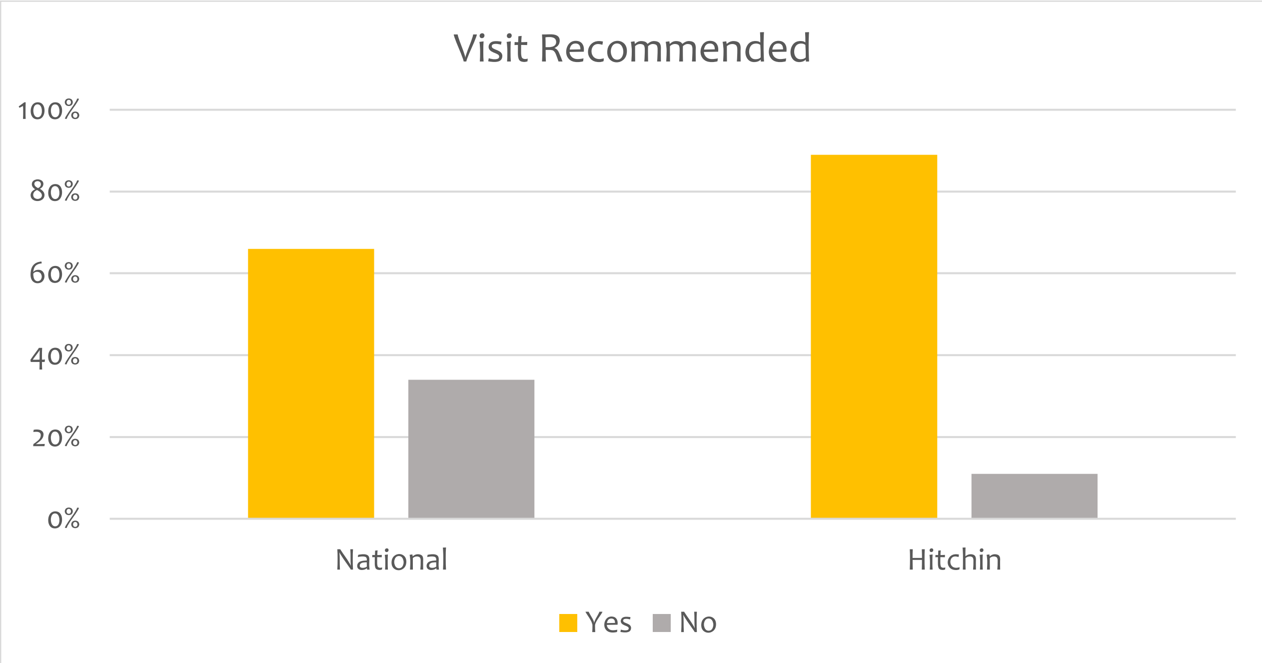
How has your experience of the town centre changed?

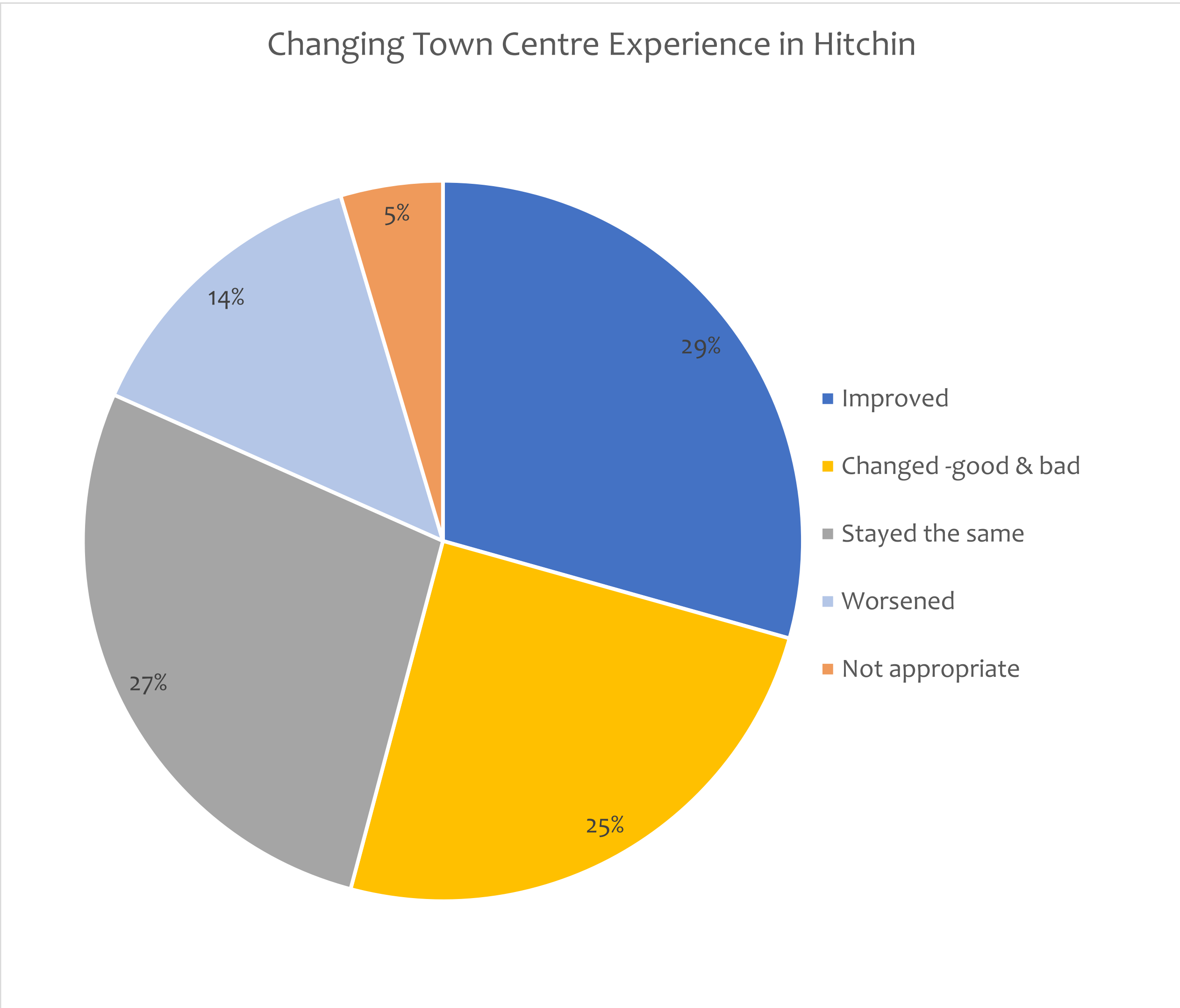
When asked how their experience of Hitchin town centre had changed in recent years, 29% of town users said it had improved and a further 28% stated that it has remained the same. This was followed by 25% saying that their experience had changed in a mixture of good and bad ways. Only 14% of respondents said that their experience had worsened, and this is a significantly smaller proportion than that for benchmarked towns. This indicates that there are some opportunities for further improvement in the already positive opinions about the town centre.

Recommending a town centre visit

When users were asked if they would recommend a visit to Hitchin town centre, 97 out of 109 of users said 'yes', which indicates that the town centre offers an appealing experience for visitors. Such response is significantly higher of the one expressed nationally, confirming that the town centre is highly appreciated by local users.

	National Large Towns %	Hitchin (number)	Hitchin %
How has your experience of the town centre changed in recent years?			
Improved	17%	32	29%
Changed -good & bad	18%	27	25%
Stayed the same	18%	30	28%
Worsened	45%	15	14%
Not appropriate	2%	5	5%
Would you recommend a visit to the town centre?			
Yes	66%	97	89%
No	34%	12	11%


Visit Recommended
100%
80%
60%
40%
20%
0%
National
Hitchin
Yes
No


Changing Town Centre Experience in Hitchin
29%
25%
27%
14%
5%
Improved
Changed -good & bad
Stayed the same
Worsened
Not appropriate

KPI 9: Digital Development

As part of this baseline survey of the town centre, an initial 'digital diagnosis' was undertaken to understand development challenges and priorities.

The diagnostic approach taken draws on the findings of Digital High Street 2020 Report and Digital High Street Index. This gives an appropriate framework for a broad perspective and to initially provide indicative and comparable information to help determine more in-depth research needs.

Digital Business Skills and Infrastructure

As an adjunct to the business survey, preliminary questions were asked using a simple scoring system, in order to assess the current level of digital take-up and the priority given to its different aspects:

What priority does your business currently give to:

a. Creation and management of business web site
b. Regular use of social media to promote business and engage with customers, e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram
c. Generation and provision of on-line sales
d. Collection and analysis of customer data to help target marketing

A second question was asked about the priority for investment in digital infrastructure:

How important are the following to the future operation of your business?

a. Fast broadband connection
b. Digital phone network coverage
c. Town centre Wi-Fi coverage

Customers' Digital Engagement

In the town centre users' survey, a corresponding set of questions was asked to give an indicative understanding of the level of digital uptake by customers and how they have engaged digitally as part of their visit and their strength of feeling around infrastructure provision:

As part of your visits to the town, how useful do you find:

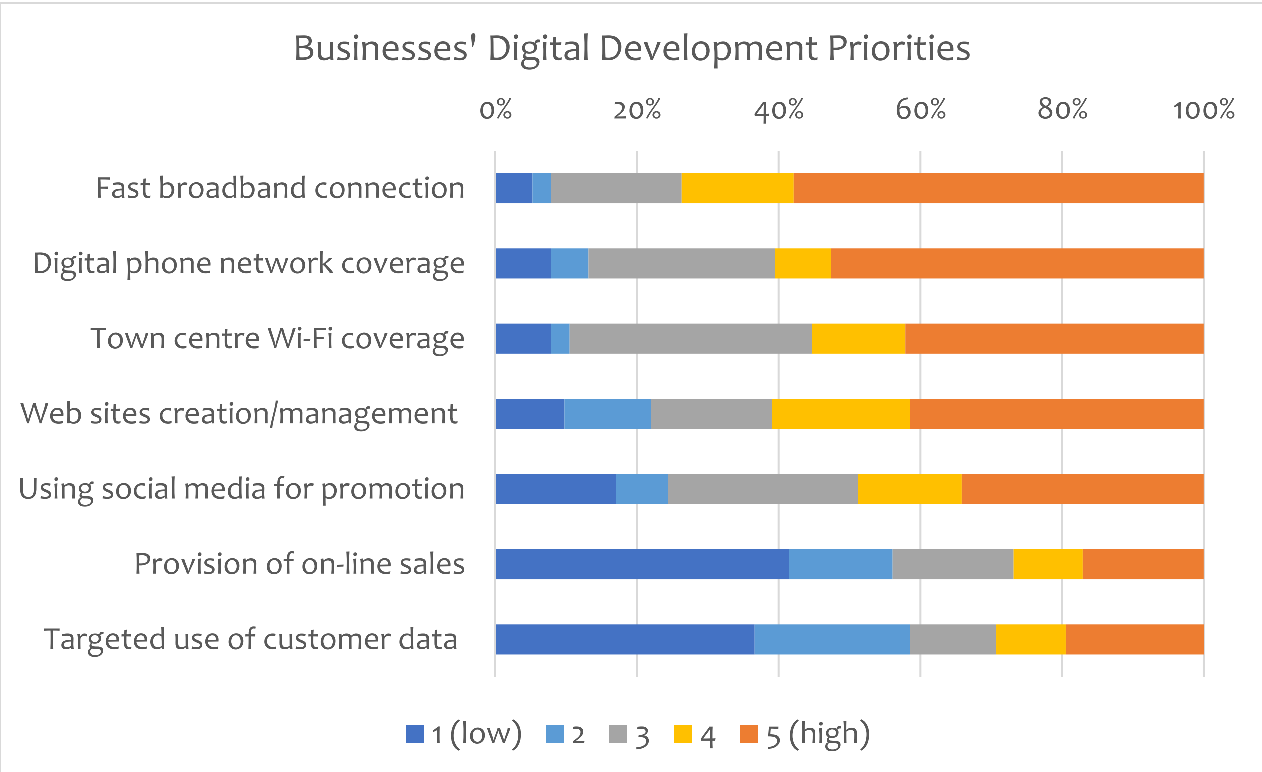
a. Web sites about the town or businesses to help plan your visit in advance
b. Insights through social media about businesses, products, places to eat, things to do
c. 'Click and collect' or the ability to browse products as part of your visit
d. Updates from businesses about special offers, things to-do etc.
e. Digital phone network coverage
f. Town centre Wi-Fi coverage

Analysis

Businesses

The table and charts below show the current priority given by businesses to the take-up of digital skills and the priority given to town-wide investment in digital infrastructure. The data is presented as the per centage of businesses given to the different levels of priority between 1 (low) and 5 (high). A weighted average gives a single figure performance indicator that can be compared with other places.

Businesses' digital priorities	No. of responses	1	2	3	4	5	Hitchin average	National average
Fast broadband connection	38	5%	3%	18%	16%	58%	4.18	3.95
Digital phone network coverage	38	8%	5%	26%	8%	53%	3.92	3.67
Town centre Wi-Fi coverage	38	8%	3%	34%	13%	42%	3.79	3.6
Web sites creation/management	41	10%	12%	17%	20%	41%	3.71	2.91
Using social media for promotion	41	17%	7%	27%	15%	34%	3.41	3.24
Provision of on-line sales	41	41%	15%	17%	10%	17%	2.46	2.25
Targeted use of customer data	41	37%	22%	12%	10%	20%	2.54	2.35

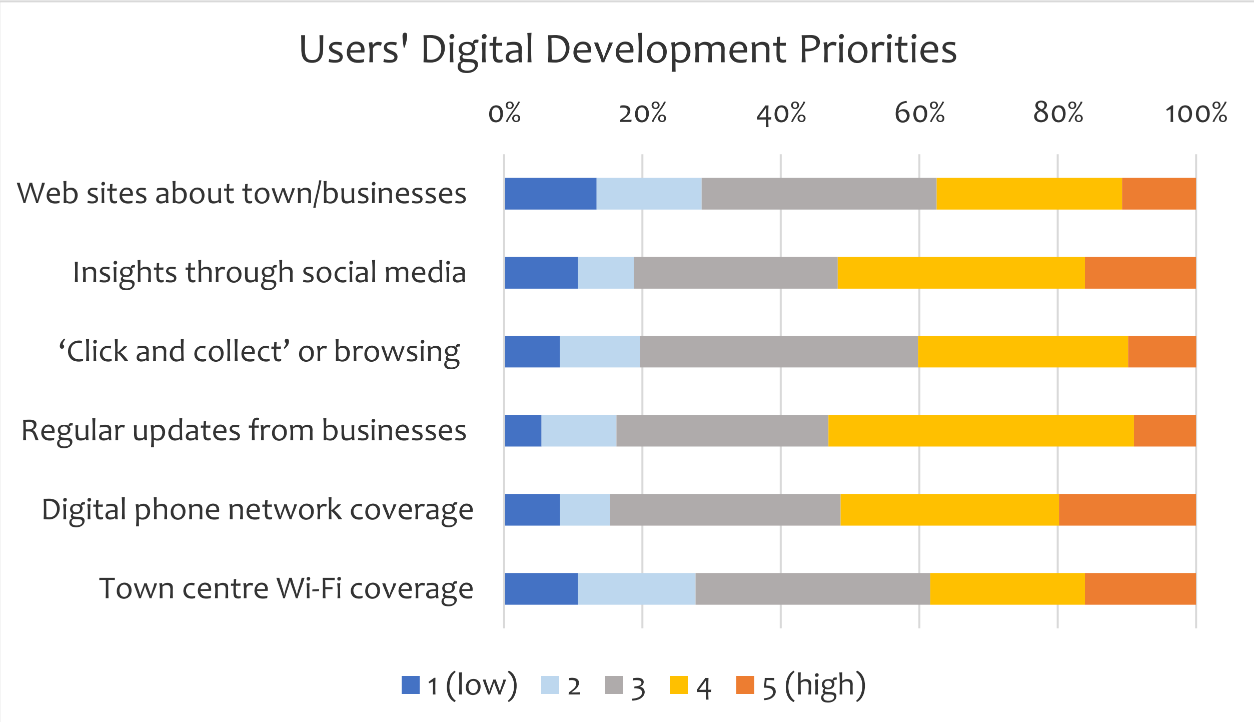


In terms of digital priorities, businesses gave investment in infrastructure such as a fast broadband connection across the town centre, as the greatest number of priority and high priority responses (74%), followed by digital phone network coverage (61%). In terms of digital services, businesses prioritised the creation and management of business websites (61%), town centre Wi-Fi coverage (55%), and the regular use of social media (49%). The provision of on-line sales and targeted use of customer data were given a lower priority.

Town centre users

The tables and charts below give the corresponding priorities for town centre users surveys for the use of businesses' digital services and the convenience of town-wide digital infrastructure.

Users' digital priorities	**No. of responses**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**Hitchin average**	**National average**
Web sites about town/businesses	112	13%	15%	34%	27%	11%	3.06	3.75
Insights through social media	112	11%	8%	29%	36%	16%	3.38	3.89
'Click and collect' or browsing	112	8%	12%	40%	30%	10%	3.22	3.09
Regular updates from businesses	111	5%	11%	31%	44%	9%	3.41	2.98
Digital phone network coverage	111	8%	7%	33%	32%	20%	3.48	3.59
Town centre Wi-Fi coverage	112	11%	17%	34%	22%	16%	3.16	3.11



Customers ranked receiving regular updates from businesses (53%) as a priority or high priority amongst digital development options. This was followed by improving the digital phone network coverage (52%) and insights through social media (52%). Provision of click and collect services was prioritised in 40% of responses.

Local Leadership: Creating a Forward Framework

For a partnership to evolve in its effectiveness, it is important to plan for constant progress through regular review and writing things down! This can be achieved by annually reviewing the checklist and updating a 'Forward Framework' comprising an over-arching strategy and two component plans:

Business planning: Partnerships & people

Revitalising a town centre is a complex and long-term venture and experience shows that it requires resources and leadership that should not be left to chance.

The form of an organisation refers to its set-up, structure, governance, partnerships and legal status. The form of a partnership should follow its function. Key determinants of this organisational form to consider include: the balance sought between being a consultative partner or can-do delivery body; available financial support and the need for independent fund raising; and close alignment with council policy verses the capacity to reach-out, engage with and empower sectors of the community.

An organisational business plan covering the foundations, form, folk and organisational finances will determine whether there is an effective and sustainable partnership able to deliver improvements. This organisational plan should define the inter-relationship and respective roles of partners such as the local authority, town council, business partners, Chamber of Commerce or a BID. At the heart of any such a partnership should be a core group of committed representatives able to take responsibility for coordination and communication as key activities that will drive success.

A summary of the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches to partnership development is shown in the table overleaf and available in more detail in the case study on creating talented town teams prepared by the People & Places Partnership for the LGA revitalising town centres toolkit.

Hitchin already has key potential town centre partnership members with the BID and other organisations such as the Hitchin Initiative working alongside the District and County Council. Now is a time to consider how and if these working relationships need to be formalised in some way.

Action planning: A timetable for change

A town centre action plan is necessary to determine and define objectives, projects, responsibilities, budgets, timescales, outcomes and impact measures as the building blocks of the coordinated delivery of improvements on the ground. The annual review of such an action plan should begin and end with an assessment of available evidence and the monitoring of impacts and changes.

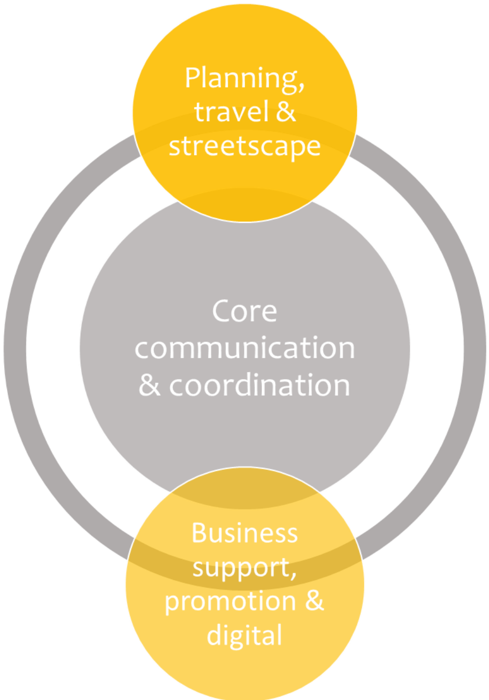
A second table overleaf summarises "Hitchin priorities on a page" as a prompt for action planning.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Different Approaches to Partnership Development		
Approach	Advantages	Disadvantages
Council-led partnership	Close connection to other council departments; budget provided	Vulnerable to budgetary pressures; can be difficult to fully engage with community & businesses
Council-coordinated partnership	Good connections to council departments; brings stakeholders together if clear purpose and/or delegated budget	Vulnerable to changing priorities; can create imbalance between action & strategic influence if role unclear
Town centre manager & forum	Partly arms-length though probable budget contribution from council	Vulnerable to cuts; important to get balance between strategic influence and engaging with business & community
Town council hosted partnership	Close local links; arms-length though conduit between authorities; modest budget need and ability to access some external funds	The 'can do' attitude can be stifled if too formal; can be difficult to fully engage with businesses without suitable sub-group or link to a Chamber of Trade, for example
Business-led town team	Business-like approach with understanding of economy and collective marketing	No assured funding stream; can have narrow business focus & lack strategic influence
Neighbourhood Plan group	Considers wider economic and community planning; exerts long-term influence	Long-term and strategic process; can lack tangible, short-term impacts or town centre focus
Development trust	Capital asset base generates revenue income; strong community focus	Requires available property and large capital investment; can have narrow focus & lack strategic influence
Business Improvement District	Income stream from rates levy; strong business focus and contacts	Can have narrow business focus & lack strategic influence if not part of wider strategy alongside council
Public-private partnership	Combines council and commercial expertise and investment with strong development focus to deliver key sites	Likely to have a narrow, site-based focus and limited life though should sit within wider strategy

Issue	HITCHIN PRIORITIES ON A PAGE: Headline evidence	Outcomes sought
Planning for the evolving role of the town centre	• Opportunity to review progress & scope for replacement of 2004 town centre strategy • Customers positive about business mix though gave priority to increasing diversity • Businesses positive about the town's hospitality offer & negative about rents/rates • Vacancy rate for Hitchin is only 6% compared to 13% for benchmarked towns • Acquisition of Churchgate Shopping Centre offers chance to enhance wider town centre	Clear vision & priorities leading to physical change, enhanced business mix & strengthened identity, valued by stakeholders.
Easing the journey into town	• Businesses rated parking as top concerns and top priority alongside parking • Customers' top negative perceptions & second highest priority were traffic & parking • Businesses & customers very positive about pedestrian access around the town centre • Customers' travel switches between on foot & car with 11% using bus or bike as back-up • Extended traffic regulation on High Street offers opportunity to develop long-term scheme	Development & delivery of travel & parking strategies that enable easier access & address businesses and customers' concerns.
Conserving an attractive & authentic streetscape to draw people around town	• Opportunity to review urban design & conservation policies in joined-up town centre strategy • Customers very positive about built heritage, physical appearance & public spaces • Businesses were most positive about physical appearance & pedestrian access • Appearance & access were a high customer priority including the area around Churchgate • Proposed Churchgate redevelopment can include public realm enhancement	Creation of policies and plans to enhance key public spaces in deliverable ways that improve foot-flow & meet stakeholder expectations.
Maintaining a variety of thriving businesses (& services)	• Two-thirds of businesses reported profits negatively impacted by the pandemic • More than 4-in-10 businesses expect profits to be negatively impacted over next year • Boosting the retail, hospitality & business mix was a top priority for nearly half of customers • Businesses were positive the town's local appeal including relative to neighbouring towns • Businesses were positive about Hitchin BID's work	Increasingly confident & diverse business mix reflected in improved stakeholder perceptions.
Boosting the town's appeal & animating through events	• Over a third of customers said the frequency of their visits has reduced post-pandemic • Nearly a third of customers said their experience of the town centre had improved recently • Asked if they would recommend a visit to Hitchin town centre, 9-out-of 10 said 'yes' • Only 4-in-10 businesses were positive about the potential for tourist customers • The second highest priority for businesses was the visitor economy, promotion & events	Increased local 'pride in place' with increased visits by residents & tourists shown by footfall & increased business confidence.
Growing the digital 'footprint' to track pride in place & footfall	• Over 4-in-10 customers were positive about existing online information and promotion • Over half of customers gave a priority to direct marketing from businesses & social media • A quarter of businesses had positive perceptions about Hitchin's online identity • Three-quarters of businesses prioritised town-wide investment in digital infrastructure • 6-in-10 businesses prioritised the creation & management of town/business websites	Enhanced digital activity & profile along with sentiment monitoring & increased foot-flow as ongoing evidence of change.
Putting partnership in place to deliver joined-up progress	• Existing & proposed revitalisation activity necessitates engagement & can boost civic pride • Communication and engagement about the Churchgate redevelopment will be key • Hitchin already benefits from the BID & groups such as the Hitchin Initiative • There is a track-record of policy and & practice focused on enhancing the town centre • Strengthened communication & coordination can maximise benefits of increased ambitions	Positive community & business perceptions of progress shown in re-survey and indicators of pride in place.

Getting organised: Partnership and governance

Hitchin's Recovery Themes



This review of existing strategy, town centre metrics and stakeholder perceptions, points to potential themes for the 'how' and the 'what' of revitalising Hitchin town centre. These themes could translate into working groups that bring relevant stakeholder organisations together and have a small coordinating group at the core.

THEME 1: Planning, travel and streetscape enhancement to transform use

This theme could consider on the long-term, strategic issues facing Hitchin town centre including the potential redevelopment of Churchgate, the development and delivery of the Hitchin Transport Strategy incorporating extended traffic regulation trials on the High Street, and a recommended parking review. It can cover the following project areas:

- Planning & property
- Parking, travel & access
- Streetscape & public realm

THEME 2: Business support, place promotion and digital development to boost appeal

A second potential theme for an integrated approach to town centre revitalisation in Hitchin, could include support for 'softer' business development and promotion. This would incorporate much of the work of the Hitchin BID with the potential to reach out to community groups for the development of annual events programme, for example. It can cover the following project areas:

- Place branding & marketing
- Business support
- Digital technology & data

THEME 3: Partnership development driven by effective communication and coordination

An overarching third theme focuses on how town centre recovery and revitalisation is delivered through partnership development between key stakeholders. This can cover:

- Communications & engagement
- Coordination & monitoring

Agreeing a Forward Framework

The table below provides a template for agreeing a town centre forward framework for Hitchin using the checklist of issues from the LGA Handbook on revitalising town centres and the evidence identified through the survey work. It provides a basis for developing a detailed action plan by partners with budgets, responsibilities, defined outcomes and measurable indicators of success.

Issue & potential project/initiative	Outcome sought (years 2 & 5)	Timetable
THEME 1: PLANNING & TRAVEL		
Planning & property: Are there robust town-centre-first policies, master-planning, priorities within and between towns and has work been coordinated with town centre businesses and landlords?		
Addressing the planning and property theme in Hitchin town centre will initially involve maintaining its current business mix and planning for modest streetscape enhancements. In the medium-term, the combination of the potential Churchgate redevelopment with enhancements encompassing the market and River Hiz walk, the opportunity to improve St Mary's and Portmill car parks as gateways, and the prospect of permanent traffic restrictions and the chance to enhance public realm along the High Street, offer an opportunity to create a well-defined and distinctive historic core that can set Hitchin apart from other places. The North Herts Local Plan aims to promote, protect and enhance the provision of shops, financial and professional services, café or restaurants, pubs or and hospitality businesses in the District's town centres. The main planning tool proposed to achieve this is the protection of primary and secondary retail frontages within the town centre. At the time of the Local Plan, there was a projected need for 11,100 gross m^2 of additional retail floorspace in Hitchin by 2031. It was proposed that this could partly be delivered by the redevelopment of Churchgate and its surroundings (4,000 m^2) for a mixed-use redevelopment that would bring additional benefits including providing a long-term location for Hitchin Market and creating high quality public realm. The most recent Hitchin Town Centre Strategy was developed by North Herts Council as a supplementary planning document in 2004. The Strategy was divided into five key themes with supporting policies: Built environment and public spaces; land use activities; community facilities; accessibility; community safety; promotion and marketing. In considering the scope for an updated town centre strategy, it will be important to review these themes and consider any necessary additions. Analysis of the current business mix in Hitchin town centre, indicates that the current retail offer focuses on provision of goods for home, luxury and personal care. There is an adequate provision of fashion related comparison retail meeting demand from most age and gender combinations. While the proportion of convenience retail outlets is relatively low (5%), with supermarkets located in the town centre it meets most existing needs. The proportion of hospitality businesses is representative of large town centre's data benchmarked nationally.		

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">When users were asked which other local towns they visit regularly, Letchworth Garden City appeared to be visited by 58% of respondents, Stevenage is visited by 31% and Baldock by 9%. Within the category of ‘other’ (17%), Luton and Welwyn Garden City appeared as the most popular options.

Customers were positive about Hitchin’s business mix including its cafes and restaurants (87%), independent shops (81%), access to banks and ATM’s (80%), provision of health services and pharmacists (72%), grocery retail offer (72%), pubs and bars (63%) and overall mix businesses (60%). When customers were asked to suggest two priorities for improving the town centre though, the theme receiving the most comments boosting the town’s retail, hospitality & general business mix (48%), including general sentiments about the lack of diversity (12%) and a desire for more fashion retailers (9%) and independent shops (9%).

Businesses appeared to be especially positive about the town’s hospitality offer, with cafes & restaurants (74%) and the town’s pubs & bars (62%) rated highly. They were also positive about the potential local customers (63%) and the appeal compared to nearby towns (70%) and out-of-town shopping.

The vacancy data for Hitchin indicates there are only 6% unoccupied units in the town centre, and this is much lower than the level for benchmarked large towns nationally (13%). Businesses were negative about rental/rates costs (50%).</td></tr>
<tr><td>Town centre planning and development strategy: Review existing Local Plan town centre strategy and supplementary guidance including consideration of additional themes such as parking and travel; business engagement and support; digital development and the partnership and governance structure necessary for delivery. The new strategy could also review policies for the retention of primary/secondary retail areas and change of use in the light of recent government guidance.</td><td rowspan="2">Reaffirmation of vision and priorities leading to modest continued investment and maintenance of the business mix, whilst future redevelopment of Churchgate and surroundings is agreed.

Balance of business uses and function to best serve resident and visitor needs.

Positive business and customer perceptions in biennial resurvey.</td><td>2023</td></tr>
<tr><td>Redevelopment of Churchgate: Pursue the appropriately, phased redevelopment of Churchgate and its surrounding area as a mixed-use redevelopment that brings wider benefits as per Local Plan policy including a suitable, long-term location for Hitchin Market, provision of high-quality public realm including strengthened pedestrian links with the Market Place and along the River Hiz.</td><td>2026</td></tr>
</table>

Parking, travel & access: Is an integrated and customer-focused parking, travel, and access strategy in place?		
One of the main barriers to advancement of Hitchin as a town centre with wider appeal, is the perception that it is challenging to travel to and that traffic levels lessen the experience. The extension of experimental traffic restrictions along the High Street, medium-term sustainable travel plans and the opportunity to review parking provision, present the opportunity to change these perceptions by creating a calm, accessible and welcome town centre environment. The Hitchin transport strategy pulls together opportunities for enhancing the sustainability and ease if accessing the town centre including enhancing walking and cycling, improved bus services, better traffic management and the overarching concept of a "sustainable spine" running north to south. Hertfordshire County Councils' High Street Recovery plan offers the short-term prospect of delivering aspects of this sustainable spine by continuing to keep the High Street closed to traffic between 10am to 4pm and introducing additional restrictions to on-street parking on the High Street and Market Place. There is also a focus on supporting compatible parking and traffic management in proposals in the Hitchin BID business plan. Survey respondents indicated that currently their primary mode of travelling to the town centre was on foot (61%) and car (32%) as their primary modes. Travelling to town by car (46%) and on foot (24%) are also the most popular secondary choices, followed by moderately high responses for cycling (11%), bus (11%) and taxi (5%). When Hitchin town centre users were asked which other local towns they visit regularly, Letchworth Garden City appeared to be visited by 58% of respondents, Stevenage is visited by 31% and Baldock by 9%. In terms of the most negative aspects of town trading environment, half of businesses selected on-street parking (54%), followed by off-street car parks (33%) as top concerns. Customers' few negative perceptions of Hitchin's town centre's environment were traffic (48%), followed by on-street (37%) and off-street (28%) parking. Both businesses (73%), and customers (71%), were very positive about pedestrian access around the town centre. When businesses in Hitchin were asked to propose two suggestions to improve the town centre, their top priorities related to various aspects of parking and travel (44%). Within this, sentiments regarding improved parking management (27%), were followed by comments on reduction of parking costs (16%). For customers, the broad theme of parking and travel was the second highest priority (26%), with pedestrianisation (10%), traffic management (5%), parking costs and management (7.5%) and cycling facilities (4%), prominent within this.		
Hitchin Transport Strategy including High Street Recovery plan: Development and delivery of town-wide Transport Strategy including project management and monitoring by Hertfordshire County Council of extended traffic regulation along High Street, followed by medium term investment in behavioural change, active travel and bus provision including along a 'sustainable spine'.	Increased use of active travel and public transport to access the town centre.	2022-26
Parking provision & perceptions: Customer-focused parking review covering quality, quantity and cost of provision as part of wider town centre access using People, Places & Parking process or similar approach.	Positive stakeholder perceptions shown by re-survey of impact of parking.	2023

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">Streetscape & public realm: Has a funding strategy and ongoing, prioritised streetscape and public realm improvement plan been agreed with an understanding of ‘connected value’?</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">The stakeholder survey data broadly indicates good satisfaction with the town centre environment by existing users, although there remains scope for well-targeted interventions to boost the appeal and footfall across various areas of the town centre, prior to potential redevelopment of Churchgate and additional opportunities this could bring.

The 2007 North Hertfordshire Urban Design Assessment addressed a selection of issues that are relevant to this Town Centre Recovery and Development Plan and merit further review and possible policy revisions to safeguard and enhance the town centre streetscape including redeveloping buildings to match the majority typology and rationalising parking to make room for new public space and riverside walk along the banks of the river. The 2011 Conservation Area Statement similarly suggested a set of overarching improvements to be addressed in the town centre, including: improvements to main entries or ‘gateways’; improvements to the public realm; maintenance of historic shopfronts; and improvements to key areas identified for improvement that include the Churchgate shopping centre, market & car parks.

In addition, Hitchin BID has proposed activities in relation to public realm with more immediate impacts including encouraging additional planting, improvements to decorations, funding of floral displays, as well as for the longer-term encouraging Churchgate’s refurbishment and improvements to riverside waterfront and riverside walkway.

Customers were very positive about built heritage (90%), physical appearance (81%) convenience (79%) and public spaces (78%). They were also positive about floral displays (73%), pedestrian access (71%) Christmas lights (70%), events and activities (69%), cleanliness (63%), outdoor seating for hospitality. Likewise, businesses appear most positive about the town’s physical appearance (78%) and pedestrian access around town (73%).

The broad theme of appearance and signage received a significant number of customer comments in terms of future priorities (28%), with within this, sentiments expressed about improving accessibility (6%), cleanliness (6%) and general appearance (6%), the area around Churchgate (4%) and the and use of the market site (4%) on non-market days. The public amenities’ theme received 16% comments in total, with a significant proportion of these being about better public spaces and outdoor seating (9%).

Analysis of the customer responses received in Spring 2022, revealed that a significant proportion (37%) have decreased their frequency of visits to Hitchin town centre following the pandemic, whilst 16% said that they have been visiting more frequently. The new town centre footfall and foot-flow monitoring system will be very useful in understanding, influencing and monitoring how users move around the and changing patterns.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Public realm enhancement feasibility and planning: Investigation of the feasibility of targeted public realm enhancements that will help enable improved appeal and movement between different parts of the town centre, based on a review of previous the Urban Design Assessment and Conservation Area Statement. This could cover open spaces; circulation, demand and linkages; streetscape elements; enhancing main entries or ‘gateways’; improvements to the public realm; restoring historic shopfronts.</td><td>Increased footfall and foot-flow across the town centre between public spaces; improved customer perceptions and business performance in biennial resurvey.</td><td>2024-25</td></tr>
</table>

Deliver 'vibrant' programmes: Hitchin BID will continue to deliver the aspects of its 'vibrant' programme that help enhance the public realm including by funding of floral displays, encouraging additional planting, and improvements to decorations, as well as undertaking deep cleaning and graffiti removal as part of its 'safe and clean' programme.	Evidence of impacts through BID's own reporting system; positive customer and business perceptions in biennial resurvey	2022-24
THEME 2: BUSINESS SUPPORT, PROMOTION & DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT		
Business support: Is there tailored training/mentoring and a strategy to enhance the quality and distinctiveness of retail, services, hospitality and leisure businesses based on current provision, trends and knowledge of competing centres?		
In challenging times, it will continue to be important to engage with, understand and address businesses' needs through work with Hitchin BID in ways that that offers practical support and makes the town more appealing in both the short and long-term. Hitchin BID's Business Plan allocates budget for projects across four objectives which will benefit businesses. The BID will work to ensure that Hitchin is vibrant (improved public realm and major events); promoted (consistent promotion and marketing); clean and safe (night time rangers and waste disposal). The BID will also "save and support" businesses by retaining its function as their voice and representative. The business data for Hitchin indicates that that the current retail offer focuses on provision of goods for home, luxury and personal care. Importantly, there is an adequate provision of fashion retail that can serve the needs of most residents. The location of supermarkets in the town centre, ensures it serve can everyday existing demand and helps boost footfall. The proportion of hospitality businesses is representative of towns of its size, whilst the comparatively high proportion of Sui Generis uses (12%) indicate the diversity of services available within the town centre. A significant number of businesses (22%) reported that the pandemic had had a positive impact on profits, whilst a much bigger proportion (66%) reported that it had had a negative impacted on performance. For the year ahead, 29% of businesses expect a moderately negative impact on profit compared to pre-pandemic levels, and 14% see this impact as strongly negative. Customers were positive about Hitchin's business mix including its cafes and restaurants (87%), independent shops (81%), access to banks and ATM's (80%), provision of health services and pharmacists (72%), grocery retail offer (72%), pubs and bars (63%) and overall mix businesses (60%). When customers were asked to suggest two priorities for improving the town centre though, the theme receiving the most comments boosting the town's retail, hospitality & general business mix (48%), including general sentiments about the lack of diversity (12%) and a desire for more fashion retailers (9%) and independent shops (9%). Businesses were especially positive about the town's hospitality offer, with cafes & restaurants (74%) and the town's pubs & bars (62%) rated highly. They were also positive about the work undertaken by Hitchin BID, the potential for local customers (63%) and the town's appeal compared to nearby towns (70%) and out-of-town shopping (59%). They were more modestly positive about the potential for tourist customers (41%). When asked to suggest two priorities for improving the town centre, the second priority for businesses surveyed was a continued focus on the visitor economy, promotion and events (17%).		

Business engagement and support: Working through Hitchin BID to understand businesses' needs across sectors, engage with and provide appropriate, long-term, tailored support for their development and engagement in ensuring the town is vibrant, promoted, safe and clean. The BID will retain its function as a voice of local businesses to deliver and support their views, and work strategically with partners to contribute to townscape regeneration projects, traffic and parking management programmes.	Evidence of impacts through BID's own reporting system for measuring its success in delivering benefits across its objectives and different town centre business sectors. Improved customer perceptions and business performance in biennial resurvey.	2022-24
Deliver 'clean and safe' and 'save and support' programmes: Hitchin BID will continue to deliver its clean and safe' and 'save and support' programmes that offer direct support to businesses and serve the function as their voice and representative.	Evidence of impacts through BID's own reporting system; improved business performance in biennial resurvey.	2022-24
Marketing and digital support: Add to free/discounted marketing, media training available through the BID to help upskill individual businesses and enable their participation in Hitchin's digital development and promotion.	Increased digital activity and profile of businesses and town in-line with vision & brand.	2022-26
Place branding & marketing: Is there a clear understanding of the town brand with pooled budgets and a creative, collective marketing campaign?		
One of the Hitchin BID Business Plan core objectives is to enhance promotion of the town centre amongst locals and visitors. Its Business Plan proposes activities aimed at marketing, promotion and collective branding for the town and includes proposals for promoting the town as a tourist destination, along with a commitment to organising major town centre events, independent shopping days and promotions. Most customers surveyed (40%) typically visit Hitchin for leisure, and the second most popular purpose of a visit (37%) is for everyday convenience shopping. When asked how often they visit town centre post-pandemic, 52% of users sampled said that they are visiting at least once a week. Over a third (37%) said the frequency of their visits has reduced because of the pandemic, whilst only 16% said it had increased. More than a half of users (56%) said that they are spending one to two hours in town, while another third (30%) are staying in the town centre for up to 4 hours. When users were asked which other local towns they visit regularly, Letchworth Garden City appeared to be visited by 58% of respondents, Stevenage is visited by 31% and Baldock by 9%. When asked how their experience of Hitchin town centre had changed in recent years, 29% of town users said it had improved, 28% stated that it has remained the same, 25% reported that their experience had changed in a mixture of good and bad ways, and only 14% of respondents said that their experience had worsened. Similarly, when users were asked if they would recommend a visit to Hitchin town centre, 89% said 'yes'. When a word cloud was created from the single words most popularly used by customers to sum-up Hitchin town centre, many of the most prominent words used		

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">were positive, such as lovely, lively, welcoming and vibrant. There was a more moderate volumes of negative sentiments expressed such as congested, disappointing, tired and expensive. Customers were very positive about cafes and restaurants (87%), the range of independent shops (81%), Christmas lights (70%), events and activities (69%) and leisure and cultural facilities (59%).

Businesses were positive about the potential of local customers (63%), though a little less so for tourist customers (41%). Furthermore, businesses appeared very positive about the town's cafes & restaurants (74%), events and activities (73%), the prosperity of the town (72%), the offer relative to nearby towns (70%), the work undertaken by Hitchin BID (64%) and town marketing and promotion (59%). When asked about their top two future priorities for the town, the second priority for businesses surveyed was continuing to improve the visitor economy, promotion and events (17%).</td></tr>
<tr><td>Promoting Hitchin as a visitor destination: Hitchin BID takes a lead in promoting the town centre to visitors by developing a robust tourism strategy, producing a quality tourism guide, promoting the town through a media campaign.

In time, as wider Churchgate redevelopment proceeds, it will be appropriate review the town centre's identity, appeal and create new place branding guidance.</td><td rowspan="2">Increased footfall and foot-flow across town centre, including evidence of new and return visitors for events.

Improved customer perceptions and business performance in biennial resurvey.

An increased sense of civic identity and pride in place consistent with the national levelling up agenda.</td><td>2022-24</td></tr>
<tr><td>Annual events programme: Developing, coordinating & delivering an annual events programme including community-led events, cultural activities, festivals and sports activities that help boost the town's identity and attract foot-flow around town at different times of the year. Hitchin BID is already committed to organising major town centre events, independent shopping days and promotions, such as Food Fest and the Christmas lights switch-on.</td><td>2022-24</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Digital technology & data: Is there an ongoing assessment of digital infrastructure and skills with an investment plan and approach for the collective use of data in marketing and monitoring the town centre?</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Digital development in Hitchin provides an opportunity to showcase the town's qualities to a wider for local and visitor audience.

Whilst there is no comprehensive social media or digital strategy for Hitchin, a recognised part of Hitchin BID's Business Plan aims specifically to improve existing town-centre website and other social media.

A variety of social media platforms exist to promote different aspects of the town including Our Hitchin on Instagram (@ourhitchin) ran by Hitchin BID and https://www.hitchinherts.com; Hitchingram Instagram (@hitchingram) linked to Hitchin BID and participating local business directory https://www.hitchinbasket.com. Whilst each of these sites serves slightly different audiences and organisational roles, it is important to coordinate and clarify the town's digital footprint.</td></tr>
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<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">North Herts Council has recently adopted a new mobile phone-based footfall monitoring system for Hitchin as part of a wider scheme with towns. This system will potentially give very useful baseline data as well as routine updates to understand the changing use of the Hitchin town centre post-pandemic with benchmarking possible with neighbouring towns.

Customers had moderately positive perceptions about the existing online information and promotion of the town centre (43%) and more limited negative (13%) sentiments. Customers ranked receiving regular updates from businesses (53%), improving the digital phone network coverage (52%) and insights through social media (52%) as a priority or high priority amongst digital development options. Provision of click and collect services was prioritised in 40% of responses.

Businesses had mildly positive perceptions about the existing online identity of the town centre (25%) with limited negative responses (13%), whilst the majority were neutral (63) about current performance. Amongst the priority given by businesses to improving the visitor economy, promotion and events (17%), a small number of comments related specifically to the need for better digital promotion (3). Businesses also suggested better management of events (2%). Businesses gave the highest priority to investment in infrastructure such as a fast broadband connection across the town centre (74%), followed by the digital phone network coverage (61%). In terms of digital services, businesses prioritised the creation and management of business websites (61%), town centre Wi-Fi coverage (55%), and the regular use of social media (49%).</td></tr>
<tr><td>Enhancing and delivery of digital promotion: Partner engagement with businesses, community groups and existing, established social media channels to deliver an enhanced social media profile for Hitchin, businesses, attractions and events boosted by using a platform such as Maybe* and its curated Town Rewards platform.</td><td rowspan="2">Improved customer perceptions and business performance in biennial resurvey.

Increased digital activity and profile of businesses and town.</td><td>2022-24</td></tr>
<tr><td>Assessment, feasibility and planning of digital infrastructure investment: An assessment of current digital infrastructure capacity and potential future provision in terms of Wi-Fi, digital phone network and broadband to better serve business and community needs.</td><td>2022-23</td></tr>
<tr><td>Regular footfall monitoring and review: Adopt a template for quarterly footfall and foot-flow monitoring including assessment of impact of interventions with partner organisations.</td><td>Improved evidence-based understanding of customer activity/profile and impact of interventions.</td><td>2022-26</td></tr>
</table>

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">THEME 3: PARTNERSHIP WORKING: COORDINATION & COMMUNICATIONS</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & COORDINATION: Is there strong public, private and community engagement with active and coordinated involvement in planning and delivery that extends to community assets development and is backed by a clear communications plan?</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">COMMUNICATIONS & ENGAGEMENT</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Proposed activity as part of Hitchin town centre recovery and revitalisation includes numerous opportunities to boost the town’s identity and sense of progress through ongoing and proposed new activity. The acquisition and proposed redevelopment of the Churchgate Shopping Centre and adjoining areas, adds to the necessity to communicate and engage with stakeholders.

Research promoted as part of the UK Levelling Up shows the importance of vibrant town centres and community participation in boosting pride in place. Effective coordination between organisations and clear communication of proposals and achievements to the wider community will be important in creating such positive sentiments. It will be important to engage businesses as part of this and reach out especially to younger generations including families.

Communications planning should cover the delivery of internal communications between partners and external engagement and marketing with wider stakeholders. Elements of the roll-out of communications and engagement can include:
mechanisms for internal coordination between key partners around key themes
involvement of wider business community including upskilling in digital activity to deliver demonstrable benefits
engagement of wider stakeholder groups and community organisations activities and events.
working with established social media and press to promote positive storis and evolving town identity/brand</td></tr>
<tr><td>Communications planning: Preparation and delivery of internal communications between partners and external engagement with wider, local stakeholders.</td><td rowspan="2">Positive community & business perceptions shown in re-survey including improved experience of town centre.

Tracking of positive social media activity.</td><td>2022></td></tr>
<tr><td>Stakeholder engagement: Proposed, new digital platforms can convey informative and positive updates for stakeholder groups and wider community, incl. promoting heritage, cultural offer, activities and events.</td><td>2022></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">COORDINATION & MONITORING</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">There is the opportunity to use this initial forward framework for evolving the already increasing joined-up delivery to create measurable, town-wide change. Part of this can involve improving various aspects of the ‘how’ of delivering town centre revitalisation through enhanced partnership working to achieve increasing ambitions.

Hitchin already benefits from the BID, established groups such as the Hitchin Initiative and a history of policy and practice focused on enhancing the role of the town centre as an economic and social hub for the wider community as well as a destination for visitors. The effective development,</td></tr>
</table>

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">delivery and coordination of this Forward Framework and such key stakeholders and strategies, can benefit from an overall partnership structure to bring interests together on a regular basis.

Elements of this partnership working and coordination that may need active strengthening in future are:
• capacity & partnership mapping including resourcing needs; involvement of volunteers; employment of necessary staff; and joint working between stakeholder groups.
• finances & investment including expertise to identify and bid for external funding; financial accountability; diverse and sustainable funding mechanisms.
• governance & influence including coordinating stakeholder activity across themes; influencing strategic partners; and options for evolution of a formalised partnerships.
• strategy & plans including an evolving forward framework with a rolling partnership development and action plans that coordinate and monitor delivery on the ground using a suite of monitoring indicators.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Facilitating partnership working groups/themes: Organisation, involvement, evolution and reporting of two theme-based working groups and coordinating ‘hub’ as part of District-wide local and strategic partnership development.</td><td rowspan="4">Evidence of effective partnership working with evolving plans to deliver projects and achieve strategic influence.

Additional fundraising and investment achieved.

Suite of monitoring indicators that demonstrate success & inform revised plans.</td><td>2022-26</td></tr>
<tr><td>Quarterly footfall and foot-flow analysis: Regular analysis and stakeholder engagement during recovery and beyond using quarterly footfall monitoring reporting.</td><td>2022-26</td></tr>
<tr><td>Digital impact monitoring: Investigation & installation of affordable, digital impact monitoring systems such as Maybe* social media benchmarking sentiment analysis</td><td>2022-26</td></tr>
<tr><td>Biennial town centre survey: Repeat of town centre business and customer survey to monitor progress and perceptions of town centre recovery and revitalisation.</td><td>2023 & 25</td></tr>
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Next Steps

This research reveals that Hitchin town centre is host to a wide range of retail and other services that establish it as a well-regarded economic and social hub for the wider community. The key questions posed in this recovery and development strategy is what the depth of ambition of key partner organisations is to further come together to work to not only sustain Hitchin's existing qualities but to plan for transformational infrastructural investment and showcase the town centre's appeal more widely.

This report is a detailed piece of work that necessarily pulls together existing policies/proposals and a stakeholder perspective of issues in a systematic way. Its aim is to provide an action-orientated approach that can be delivered by a coming together of key local partners and a realistic appraisal of priorities and resourcing needs. In this way it is possible to set about making a meaningful difference to the long-term vitality and viability of Hitchin's town centre. This needs to be achieved in a coordinated way and not as a cherry-picked list of projects championed by individual organisations. Realistically, this should be viewed as a 5-10 year programme that will need extra resources including organisationally to coordinate delivery.

Below are the proposed next steps that partners will need to consider and undertake in the process of developing and delivering a robust partnership and action plan able to aid the town centre's recovery and revitalisation.

1. *Finalise development plan and 'forward framework'*: This draft development plan and forward framework needs to be presented to North Herts Council and other key partner organisations such as Hitchin BID, so they can review and comment on it to enable People & Places to finalise the detailed document.
2. *Publish stakeholder summary*: Publish a suite of supporting information for stakeholders including survey report; priorities on a page; draft forward framework and video version of overview presentation on dedicated web page.
3. *Meetings of theme-based sub-groups*: Initial meetings need to be organised of theme-based sub-groups to discuss the development of proposals for the two thematic areas and partnership working/governance. People & Places can help assist in determining the membership and format of these groups, as required.
4. *Partnership development and governance*: The key partners and stakeholders need to determine the partnership development and governance arrangements for revitalising Hitchin's town centre. This includes focusing on the representation and roles for a core group responsible and equipped to manage the coordination of activity, including identifying resources, communication and engagement with wider stakeholders.
5. *Determine initial delivery priorities*: The evolving partnership needs to determine initial delivery priorities that underpin long-term strategy and capacity, as well demonstrate 'quick wins' to stakeholders and the wider community. The Shared Prosperity Fund may provide an initial and flexible injection of funds to help achieve this.

District-wide strategy and sharing

Separate to considerations of organisational development at the local level, consideration needs to be given to the development of district-wide governance that will enable Hitchin and other North Hertfordshire towns to achieve strategic influence and sharing of good practice. The creation of such a district-wide governance structure will need to consider the roles of strategic bodies such as the District and County Councils and the LEP, including the distinction between elected members and officers' roles. It will also have to consider how the individual towns are represented and engaged in this governance structure in a way that helps enable collective, strategic influence and the advancement of good practice.