

Hertfordshire High Street Recovery

Briefing note for Royston Town Council

DATE: February 2023

REPORT TITLE: Royston: High Street Recovery Project Evaluation

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This briefing note provides background and further information on the Royston 'High Street Recovery project'. It should be read in conjunction with the proposed drawing layout.
- 1.2. This report will ask the committee to comment upon and agree a position with regards to whether the project as set out in the overview section of this paper, should be progressed with a recommendation to make the arrangement permanent.

2. Background Information

- 2.1. As part of Hertfordshire County Council's and North Herts Council's Covid-19 social distancing response, measures were implemented in Royston to make social distancing easier, cater for safe queuing and outside trading when permitted. The need to continue the measures for social distancing no longer applies; however, the measures also have potential benefits in supporting the economic recovery of the High Street, improving air quality and encouraging sustainable travel.
- 2.2. In January 2022 It was decided that a trial of the project as set out in the overview section of this paper should commence and be reviewed at a later date following data collection activities to assess the impacts of the project against its objectives.
- 2.3. On 2nd February 2023, the High Street Recovery Project Board met and agreed that a recommendation should be made to Royston Town Council to make the trialled changes in the Royston High Street area permanent and for the Project Team to begin to develop proposals and seek funding to deliver longer-term potential improvements.

3. Project Overview and Rationale

- 3.1. The Royston High Street Recovery Project Board (hereafter the Project Board) was set up in July 2021 to enable Hertfordshire County Council, North Herts Council, Royston Town Council and 'Royston First' Business Improvement District to consider the impacts of the changes implemented in response to Covid-19. This included, reviewing feedback and engagement outcomes and make recommendations on the future of the High Street Recovery project.
- 3.2. The Project Board recommended that a formal trial to include modifications to the road layout of High Street, John Street and Kings Street was taken forward.
- 3.3. The formal trial was proposed for a maximum 18-month period trialling a different highway arrangement as outlined in the indicative plan in Appendix 1.

The trial consisted of:

- Retention of disabled bays in their existing locations outside the Jollie Postie PH, Boots and Savers.
- Retention of planters between 20-28 High Street to maintain the extra safe footway space.
- Additional 'any vehicle' loading bay outside 34 High Street.

- Maintaining the closure of the loading bay opposite George Lane and creating a new loading bay next to George Lane.
 - Fully re-opening the loading bay to the rear of the Old Bull PH and addition of planters to pavement to prevent pavement parking.
- 3.4. The trial was enabled by Experimental Traffic Regulation Orders (ETRO), using physical infrastructure which is currently in place (black planters and signage). As part of the trial there was an opportunity for stakeholders and the public to provide feedback and to give an overall view as part of a consultation. This feedback has informed the decision-making process.
- 3.5. Monitoring has taken place throughout the trial period – including monitoring of traffic, footfall/dwell time and user perceptions analysis.

Project Rationale

- 3.6. The purpose of the trial was to further test and monitor the impact of the measures in place to deliver the defined objectives of the projects as agreed by the Project Board, which are broadly:
- To support economic recovery by providing flexible outdoor space for street trading and dining where possible
 - To support economic recovery by increasing footfall and dwell time
 - To support journeys by sustainable modes to and around the town/city centres
 - To support environmental, sustainability and climate change objectives by reducing motor vehicle movements and traffic levels.
- 3.7. This project works towards and aligns with the goals of the following policies:
- North Hertfordshire Local Plan (2011-2031) - To promote, protect and enhance local businesses.
 - North Herts Council Climate Change strategy (2021-2026) - To reduce carbon emissions.
 - Royston Town Centre Strategy (2008) - Indicates that the town centre area are ones with heavy traffic levels which interrupt and detract from the appearance and amenity of the town centre and make it more difficult for pedestrians.
 - Hertfordshire's Local Transport Plan (2018-2031)
 - Sustainable Hertfordshire Strategy
- 3.8. The project aims to support an increasing number of journeys to be made by sustainable and active modes of transport, such as by bus, walking or cycling, align the goals of Hertfordshire's Local Transport Plan, and more widely to addressing the climate change emergency which both HCC and NHDC have declared.

4. Related Projects

Sustainable Travel Town Programme

- 4.1. The Sustainable Travel Town (STT) programme forms part of the county council's Local Transport Plan (adopted May 2018), and aims to increase the number of people walking, cycling and using public transport.
- 4.2. The STT programme will require a balanced package of revenue and capital schemes delivered over a period of four to five years. There will be a greater emphasis on behaviour change schemes which encourage people to switch their mode of transport and/or reduce the number of journeys they make.
- 4.3. Royston Town Council's bid to join the Sustainable Travel Town programme was accepted into the county council's provisional programme in December 2020. The Royston STT Outline Plan was supported by Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) Highways and Transport

Cabinet Panel 4th November 2022 enabling the proposal to enter the next stage of the programme: the development of an Implementation Plan.

- 4.4. The STT implementation plan will consist of a comprehensive package of schemes and behaviour change initiatives aimed at achieving a significant modal shift to non-car modes and reduction and single car use. The aim is for this modal shift to provide wider benefits, which include:
- Improving public health through better air quality and more physical activity
 - Enhancing the local economy
 - Promoting social interaction
 - Generating a sense of place.
- 4.5. The proposed High Street Recovery scheme will help support the aspirations of a Sustainable Travel Town.

People and Places Report

- 4.6. The People and Places Report, currently in draft, states that the business mix in Royston is suited to meet the basic everyday shopping needs of residents and there is an indication that the town's business is directed towards its local customers rather than external visitors. The report also indicates that the proportion of unoccupied retail units is far below the national average.
- 4.7. These comments could indicate that the town centre is economically healthy and provides opportunity for local people to actively travel to the town centre to engage in economic activity. All areas of Royston with the A505 to the north and east are approximately within 1 mile of the town centre and a 20-30 minute walk at average walking speeds.

5. Stakeholder Engagement – Summer 2021

- 5.1. Through summer and autumn 2021, public and stakeholder engagement took place to seek feedback on the temporary Covid-19 measures and gauge opinion for a possible trial. Below is a summary of the feedback received. The feedback outlined below was shared with the project board for its consideration in autumn 2021.
- 5.2. During Summer 2021 an online survey was used to seek feedback from residents and businesses. 411 responses were received, of these responses 89% were from local residents, 4% from business owners and 1% from visitors to Royston.
- 5.3. The principle of a trial was supported by 44% of respondents.
- 5.4. Royston First (Business Improvement District – BID) is a member of the project board, representing the interests of local businesses. The BID indicated they would be supportive of proceeding to the formal trial on the basis of feedback from the businesses they represent.
- 5.5. In recognition of the relatively low number of business responses from the 2021 survey, HCC officers conducted a business survey on the High Street. The results gathered indicated that 19 businesses supported the scheme moving to a trial, 7 did not support a trial and 5 were unsure. Issues and opportunities were also recorded during the visit.
- 5.6. Most of the businesses visited were supportive of the trial, and others were supportive with some adaptations to the current scheme. As a result of these conversations, we adapted the project proposal in the following ways:
- Added an additional loading bay near Costa Coffee to allow for customers to click and collect to the nearby shops.
 - The planters around the junction with John Street are to be re-orientated to decrease the likelihood of collision.
 - The planters were changed from green to black.

- A new loading bay was created near to the junction with George Lane at the request of adjacent business with comments from traders that they enjoy their windows being visible and not obscured by delivery vehicles.
- The disabled bays were observed to be very well utilised and as such remained as part of the trial, as were the widened footway spaces from 20-28 High Street which provide a much-needed improvement upon the existing exceptionally narrow, substandard footway areas in regards to accessibility of less mobile people.

6. ETRO Engagement and Consultation – February to December 2022

- 6.1. A formal consultation on the Experimental TRO took place from the end of December 2021 into January 2022 as part of the legal process for an ETRO. This gave consultees an opportunity to comment on the proposal. Following on from the successful consultation, the Experimental TRO came into effect on Thursday 17 February 2022
- 6.2. From 17 February 2022 to 17 August 2022, an official 6-month objection period took place during which the project team received 0 (zero) objections. However, an objection was received from one of the businesses by email prior to the ETRO coming into effect, which has been recorded and will be considered as a formal objection.
- 6.3. From 17 February 2022 to 23 December 2022 the project's online feedback survey was active online and 522 responses were received – more than the initial 2021 engagement. As with the 2021 engagement, we would regard this sample size as statistically insignificant to produce accurate opinion results. Of these 522 people, 494 were from the SG8 Royston area.
- 6.4. From this engagement, 38% of respondents were in favour of making the changes permanent with 59% wishing for a return to pre-covid conditions. 3% of people were unsure. Further information from the engagement survey can be found below
- 6.5. Chart 1 below shows that our primary source of engagement for the survey was through respondents linking from social media groups and emails to the community.

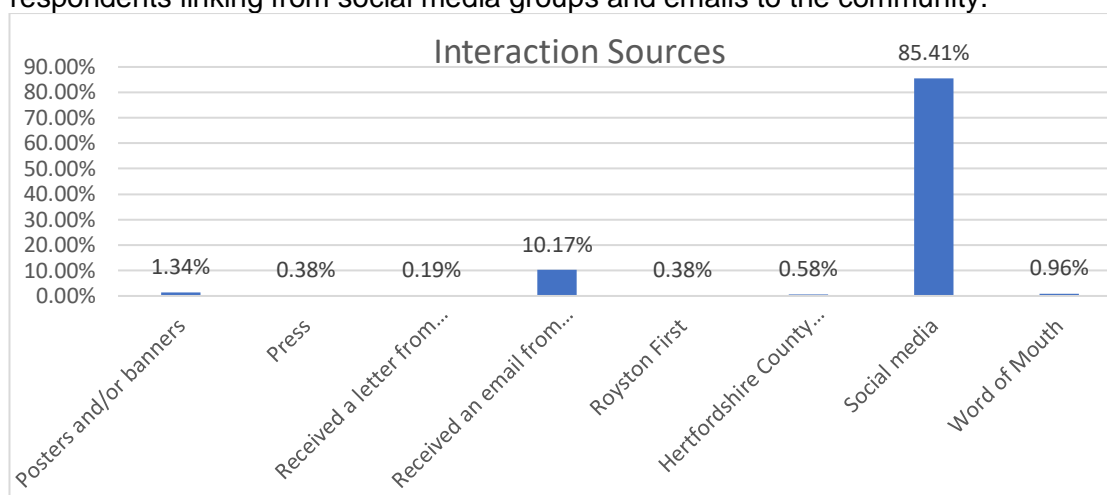


Chart 1 – Sources of engagement

- 6.6. Of people responding to the survey, the main age groups featured fall between 30 - 69 year-olds. The chart below shows the overall opinion of each age group with a clear preference for removal of the scheme between the 40 - 69 year-olds. The views towards keeping the changes (and keeping with some amendments) were more common in the 30-39 age bracket and with the 70+ age group.

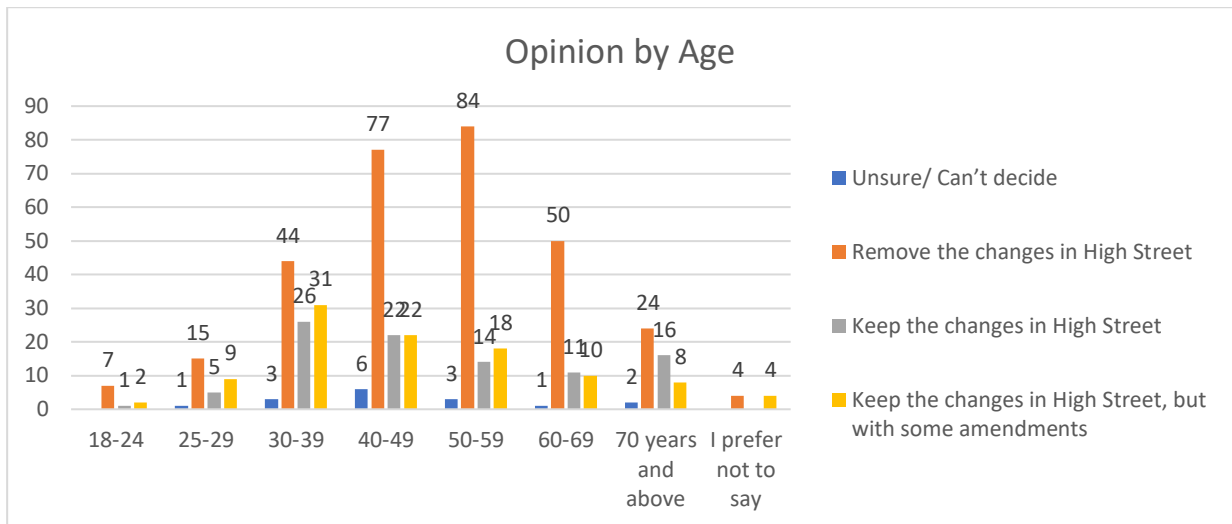


Chart 2 – Opinions by age

- 6.7. As can be seen by the below chart, of those responding to the survey, the perception of the scheme is that it has had a neutral/positive impact on people travelling by foot with people driving experiencing a negative impact overall. Although a very small sample size of respondents commenting on cycling, those using cycles have been affected positively.

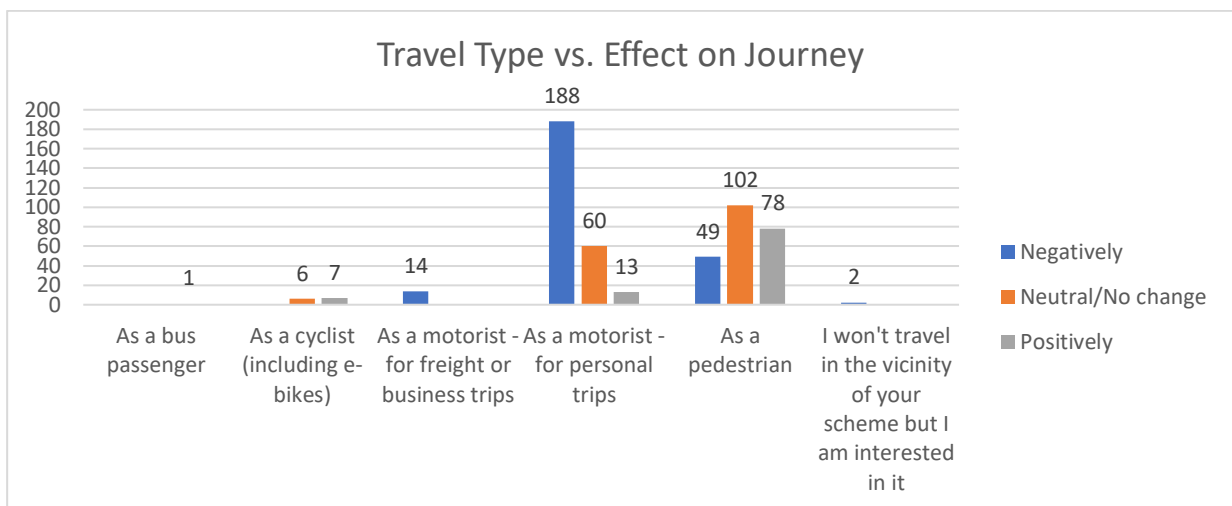


Chart 3 – Effect of scheme by travel type

- 6.8. A breakdown of the comments made through the survey shows:
- 117 respondents believed that there was not enough 'short-term, pop-in parking' in the town centre.
 - 21 people believed that the project made the situation worse for business.
 - 47 respondents wished for an increase in disabled parking in the town.
 - 70 people wished for an increase in pedestrianisation, footway widths and walkability.
 - 132 respondents commented negatively regarding the planters overall and 104 of those comments wished for the scheme to be removed.

Emergency Services

- 6.9. The emergency services have been engaged in this project since the initial deployment of emergency measures. Representatives have provided feedback in relation to the current measures and confirmed that they have not been made aware of any specific issues or breaches in expected levels of service. As part of the 2022 ETRO engagement process, Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue commented in support of the project indicating that the removal of parking in the vicinity of John Street at the junction of High Street would provide

much safer access for fire engines trying to access all areas of the High Street/town centre and avoids delays in attending emergency incidents which have been problematic in the past.

Parking Services

- 6.10. Parking Services have reported that the project is working well. There are some bays which are mis-used as people park in a loading bay to visit the shops, however no significant challenges have been raised by the Parking team. It was raised that a due to the type of order i.e. being a zonal order; members of the public could find the lack of double yellow lines on street confusing.

Waste Services

- 6.11. Waste collection and Street Cleansing have also fed back into the project reporting that since the introduction of the Experimental Order, they have not experienced any access issues turning right from John Street onto High Street. A quote from the contract supervisor states, *"The planters have helped us no end, stopping cars parking on the corner to go to Barclays bank."*
- 6.12. Street Cleansing state that there have been issues following weekend activity on High Street whereby planters have been pushed over however with a lack of cars present, they are able to sweep the full width of the road with no vehicles blocking any parts.
- 6.13. Finally, Waste Services state *"It is all positive feedback, generally from a refuse perspective the scheme has helped us to carry out a full service to the town centre."*

7. Project Monitoring

- 7.1. Monitoring took place throughout the trial period – including monitoring of traffic, footfall, and user perceptions. Air quality was not measured due to the substantial costs involved with measuring and the expectation that a reduction in overall traffic would lead to a betterment of air quality. The objectives of the monitoring were linked to the project objectives set out in table 1 below.

Table 1 Project Objectives

Objective Theme	Objective
A. Economy	A.1. To support a recovery of the retail and hospitality businesses in Royston Town Centre by creating an environment that encourages more people to visit.
	A.2. To support a recovery of the retail and hospitality businesses in Royston Town Centre by creating an environment that encourages people to stay longer.
	A.3. To support a recovery of the retail and hospitality businesses in Royston Town Centre by creating space for outdoor trading and dining where possible.
B. Sustainable Transport	B.1. To encourage more journeys to be made to the High Street using active and sustainable modes of transport.
	B.2. To encourage more journeys to be made to and across the town centre using active and sustainable modes of transport.

C. Health, Wellbeing & Environment	C.1. To create an environment which feels safe.
	C.2. To create an environment which feels more welcoming.
	C.3. To create an environment where people choose to walk and cycle.
	C.4. To create an environment where people feel relaxed.

7.2. **A. Economic Analysis**

- 7.3. Chart 4 overleaf shows average footfall from November 2019 to December 2022. The data was collected using information supplied by HUQ to North Herts Council. HUQ are an organisation that collects mobile phone data from people visiting Royston Town Centre. As can be seen from the graph, footfall has been steadily rising in Royston since the pandemic. It is evident that there is a distinct dip in footfall in March 2022, it is suspected that this low level of footfall is potentially linked to rapid fuel price increases. The recovery from this dip has been substantial and the upward trend in footfall remains.
- 7.4. Further information supplied by HUQ with regards to how long people stay in Royston town centre (dwell time) shows that overall, between 2019 and 2022 people are spending longer in the town (Chart 5). Sunday shows a very positive leap for 2022 on the previous years since the pandemic and is reaching the 2019 dwell time average. This Sunday success may be due to the re-construction of St John the Baptist Church nearby or Sunday dining.
- 7.5. A High Street cafe continues to trade on street with tables and chairs to their frontage. There are few other food retailers on High Street and if considered possible, the project and our licencing team would support any applications for street trading that fall within the relevant guidelines.

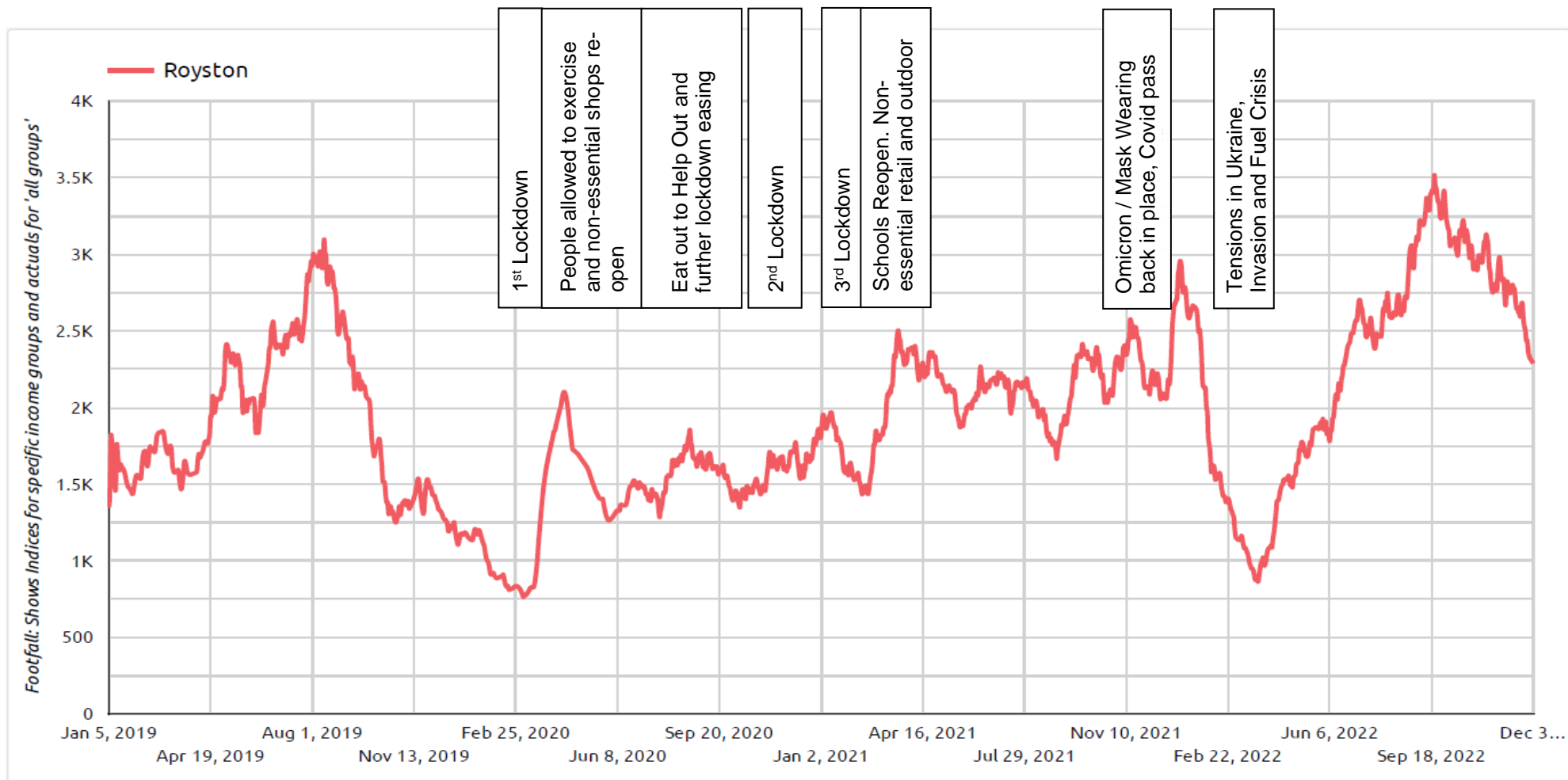


Chart 4 – Average footfall 2019-2022 Royston

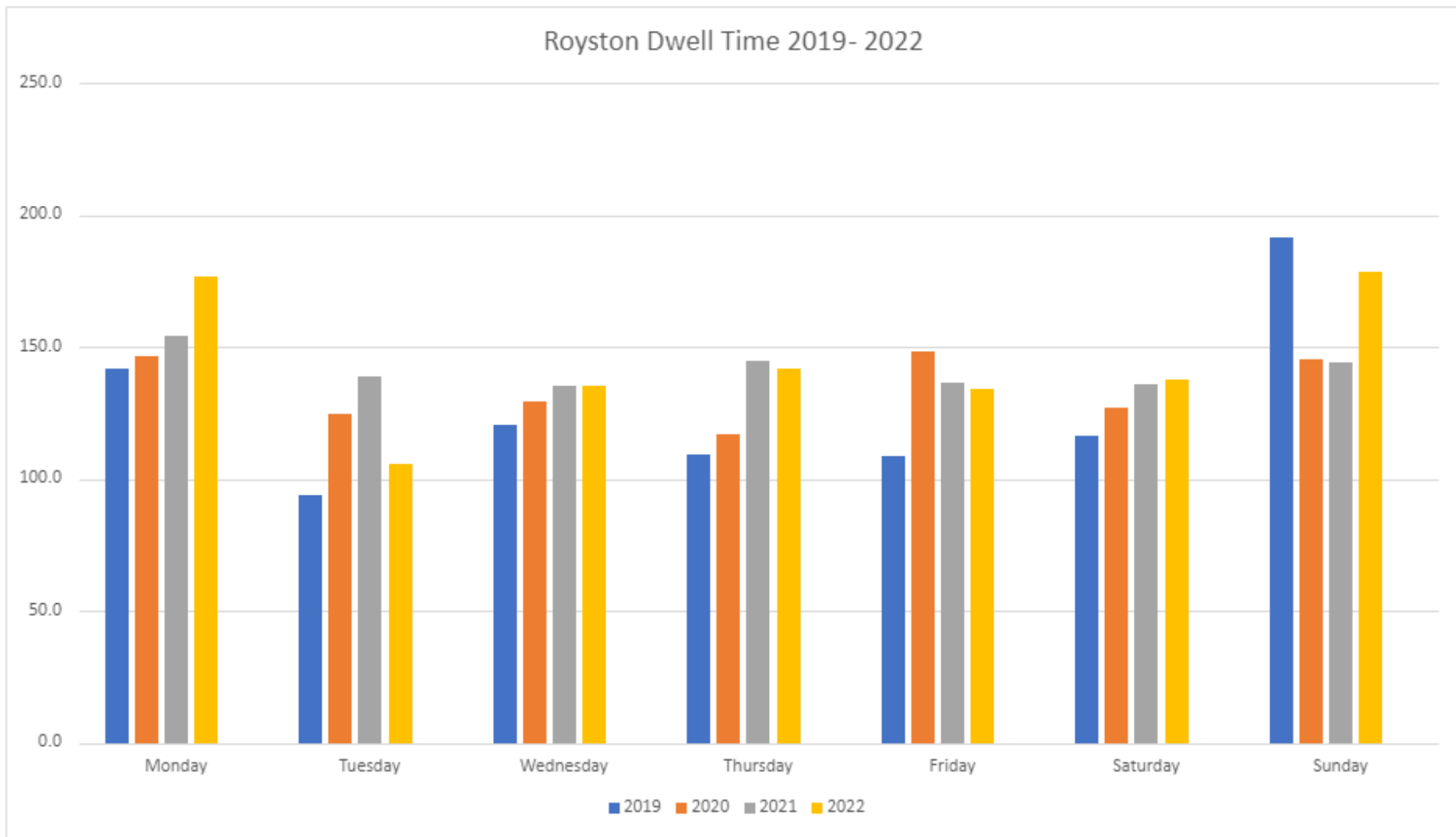


Chart 5 – Average dwell time by day of week by year

B. Sustainable Transport Analysis

- 7.7. Aims B.1. and B.2. above have been assessed visually in the High Street. Cycle hoops installed as part of the Emergency Active Travel Fund response seem well used indicating that demand is being met for cycle use in the town at present.
- 7.8. Royston has a large quantity of car parking available between 7 public and 2 private car parks in the town centre (these statistics do not include the out-of-town Tesco car park containing an extra 480 spaces). There are a total of 920 spaces available overall with 355 spaces available for long and short stay parking.
- 7.9 The parking arrangement in High Street has been re-arranged to make it safer and easier for people walking, wheeling and cycling in the area by reducing the amount of rotating traffic looking for parking spaces. The changes have reallocated the 16 full sized parking spaces as follows:
- Increased disabled parking provision from 2 spaces to 9 spaces.
 - Loading capacity has been increased from 3 spaces to 10 spaces
 - After 6pm each day, the restrictions allow for 10 parking spaces and 9 disabled parking spaces in High Street
 - 6 sub-standard parking spaces have been removed due to their narrow width to allow for accessible pedestrian footways.
- 7.10. Pay and display parking data provided by North Herts Council for before and after the pandemic indicate that ticket sales in car parks have reduced. This could mean:
- Less people are choosing to drive into town and park in local authority car parks
 - People are parking and using the bays for longer periods of time
 - Less people are parking in town daily as working from home is more prevalent
- 7.11. Chart 6 below shows the sales of tickets, per month, over three years of data collection.

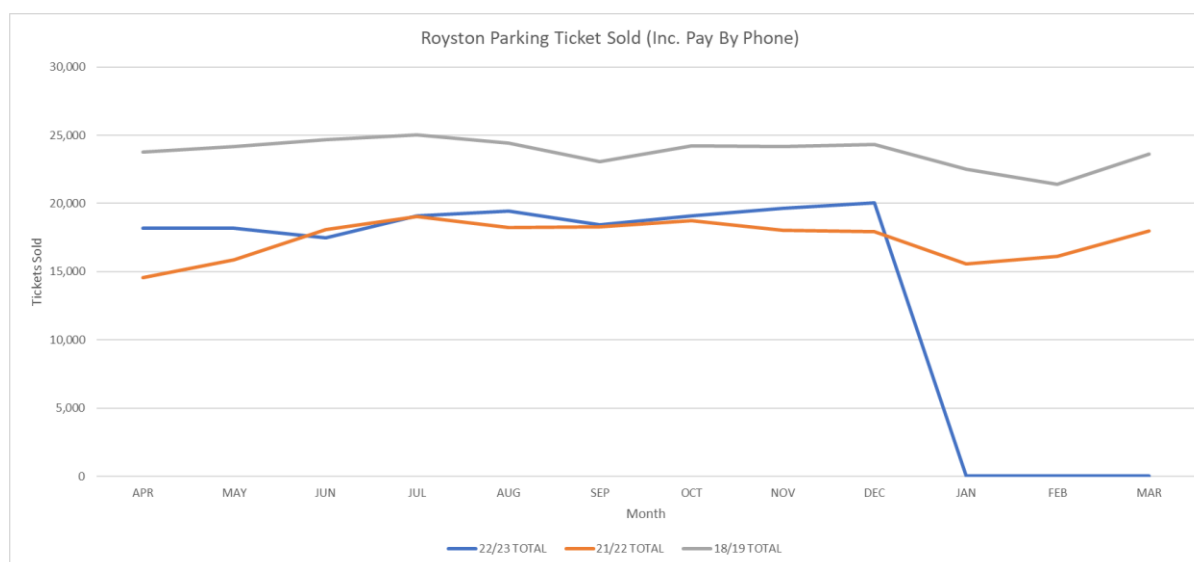


Chart 6 – Parking Tickets sold by year

- 7.12. The reduced quantity of pay and display tickets purchased, and the consistent increase in footfall/dwell time shown above, could indicate that people visiting the town are now more likely now to travel by walking and other active methods, instead of driving. These statistics could also show that people may be visiting the town actively on a lunch break when working from home.

- 7.13. The COVID-19 pandemic had significant impacts on journeys across the county. Initially, there was a significant reduction in traffic as a result of nationwide lockdown and limitation of people's movement. As lock downs were eased, traffic returned to the roads, more recently returning to near pre-pandemic levels albeit with very different patterns and flows.
- 7.14. The lasting impact that both increased working from home and discouragement from using public transport during the pandemic, amongst other factors, are undoubtedly still being felt. Understanding these impacts and our 'new normal' traffic patterns and behaviours continues to take place. This continues to limit the ability for assessing the impact any highway related projects implemented in the last 18 months have had or may have in the future.
- 7.15. Information received from the Passenger Transport Unit at Hertfordshire County Council indicates an overall reduction in bus patronage between October to December 2019 and 2022 as can be seen in Chart 7 below. The figures show that Service 18, whilst slightly lower, is a fairly resilient service with only a minor reduction in patronage. This service brings customers from Buntingford to Royston and return via the villages. The pandemic has however reduced Service 16 by 65% to 75% on 2019 levels. This service links the north and east of the town to the railway station and this reduction could potentially be a result of more people working from home and travelling on one or two days per week. It should also be noted that Service 16 changed from a 30-minute service to a 45-minute service (in November 2019), and that because of this change, some passengers might not be able to travel according to the new timetable. The HertsLynx, a new on-demand bus service, may also have impacted Service 16 patronage. Information regarding HertsLynx patronage around Royston has been requested but was not available for this briefing note.

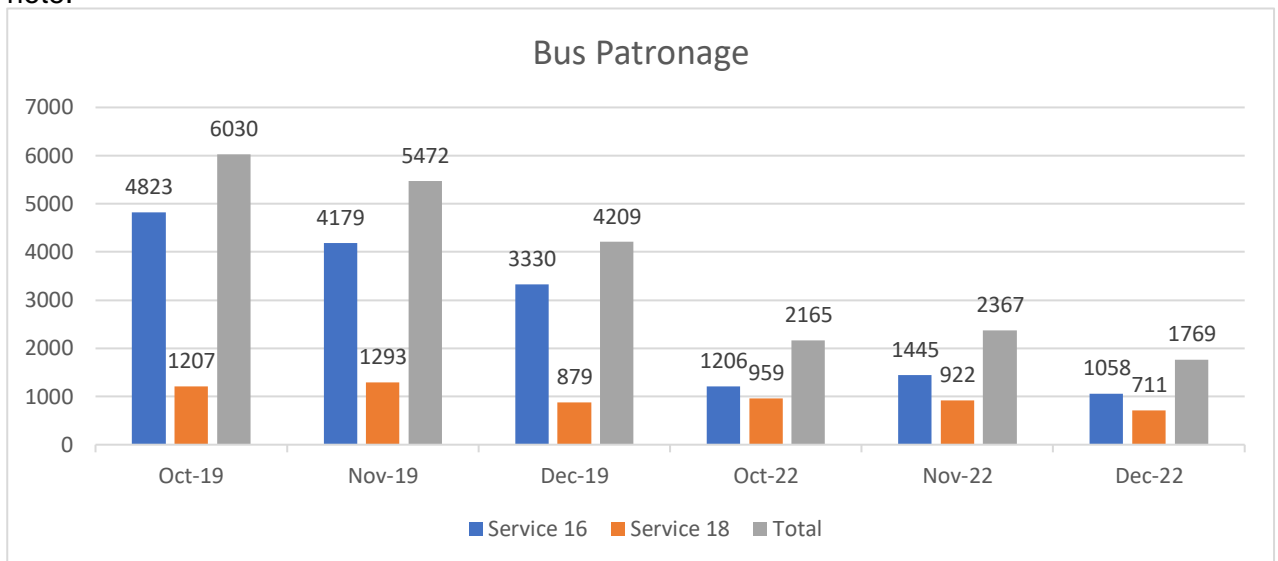


Chart 7 – Bus patronage – 2019 and 2022

- 7.16. Speed and Volume data was collected in December 2022 and compared with data collected in July 2017. The graph below shows the difference in the number of vehicles travelling through the High Street between the two dates. Whilst these raw figures show the direct average comparison, there are other factors that influence the data. These factors include and are not limited to:
- Changing building type from commercial to residential
 - Employment and housing developments completed after the 2017 data was collected
 - Increase in supermarket home delivery services, driven by the pandemic
 - Fast food delivery services becoming more popular
 - The travelling public are more likely to use a vehicle in the winter-time

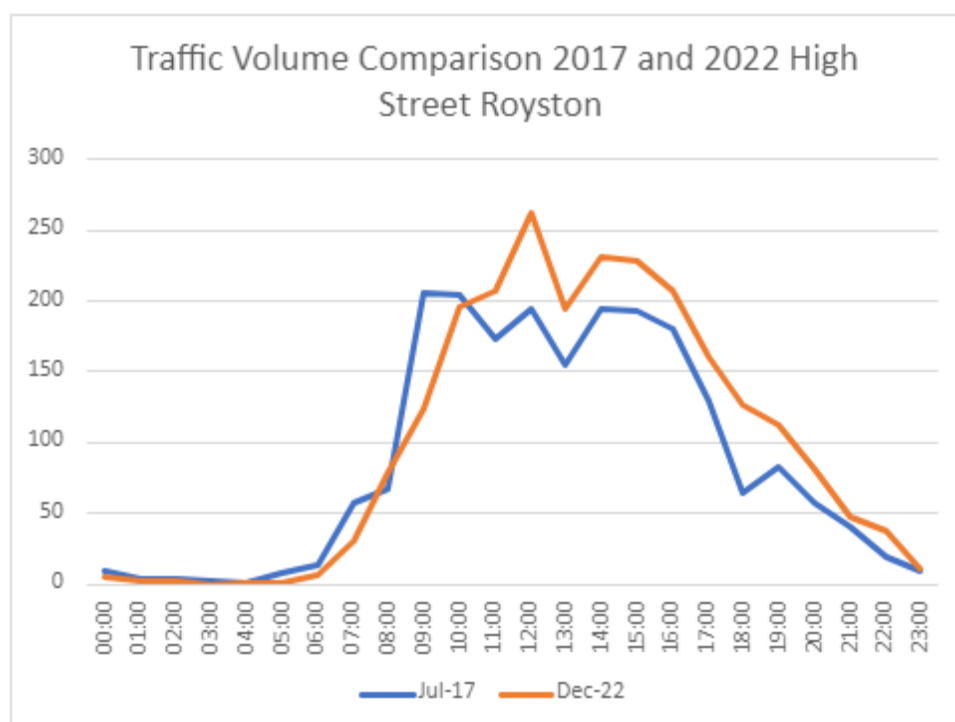


Chart 8 – Traffic volume comparison (week in July 2017 and week in December 2022)

- 7.17. It is of distinct interest that there seems to be a reduction in the 7am and 9am time periods, usually when people travel away from the area to get to work. This is consistent with Hertfordshire County Council's wider traffic monitoring program which has shown a decrease in volume of traffic at peak times, across the county. There is now a lunchtime and a 6pm peak, and it is suspected that more people are travelling to town at lunchtime and High Street residents either return home or have evening deliveries (i.e. shopping and take aways) from 5pm onwards.
- 7.18. The Project Team are hoping to run a speed-volume study during a week in July 2023 to allow for a better comparison with the July 2017 data.

C. Health, Wellbeing and Environment Analysis

- 7.19. For aims C.1. to C.4. above, we undertook a Healthy Streets Analysis. Healthy streets (<https://www.healthystreets.com>) is a tool designed to assess and uncover opportunities to deliver better places for people to live in resulting in a healthier, more inclusive town. The Healthy Streets approach is adopted worldwide but more locally by Transport for London (and many other county councils in the UK).
- 7.20. The results for this assessment can be seen in Appendix 2 below and show a significant increase in the Healthy Street score from pre-trial to during trial. Should any longer term, more permanent changes be made (detailed in section 8 below), the scores on the Healthy Streets Index can be increased further.
- 7.21. As stated earlier in the report, air quality was not measured as part of the Royston project. Certain assumptions have been made that a reduction in traffic volume in High Street, and more people walking and cycling to the area, air quality will naturally be better overall. This assumption is included within the Healthy Streets assessment.

8.0. Longer Term Potential

- 8.1. Should a decision be taken to make the project permanent, further design work may be undertaken. The project team would look for funding opportunities to complete the following:
- Replace the planters with suitable bollards matching the aesthetic of the area and allay negative sentiment from the public engagement
 - Install new tactile paving to the junction of John Street / High Street to bring this area to current standards
 - Install street seating to the front of the Wood Green Animal Charity shop
 - Replace the temporary loading bay near George Lane with a permanent facility
 - The footways to the northern end of the project and opposite George Lane in the southern section would be widened to provide a facility that meets current standards.
- 8.2. Section 106 Money may be available to fund part of these works, subject to the usual approval process.

9.0. Conclusion

Section 7 of this report indicates that, post-pandemic, there has been a clear and steady increase in footfall and dwell time within the town as more people visit and stay for longer than before. Whilst traffic levels have increased within the High Street area in the afternoons and evenings, it is believed that traffic is kept at lower levels by the restrictions on parking during the daytime. Subject to funding, retaining the measures will also allow for the sub-standard footway widths to be addressed and accessibility features to be built enabling easier movement to and through town for all.

- 9.1. Whilst in section 6 the engagement process yielded a limited sample which may not be representative of the general population, a negative opinion towards the project overall was expressed. The majority of negative comments were directed towards the temporary planters and a lack of 'pop-in' parking. The planters can be addressed at relatively low cost by some engineering works. With regards to the reduction in parking, this is an objective of the project to reduce circulating traffic by removing some on street parking, knowing that the town has a large quantity of spaces available in car parks. Encouragingly, most pedestrian respondents believe that the measures either had no impact or improved their journey.
- 9.2. During a meeting on Thursday 2nd February, the Project Team presented evidence collected and detailed in this report to the Project Board. The Project Team recommend proceeding with making the trialled changes to High Street and the surrounding areas in Royston permanent. The Project Board agreed to this recommendation. The Project Board would also like the Project Team to develop proposals and seek funding to deliver longer-term potential improvements as laid out in Section 8 of this report.
- 9.3. Royston First, on behalf of the businesses, is in support of the proposed plans to improve paving, footways, and seating within Royston Town Centre. Royston First also support the removal of parking on the corners of John Street which obstructs traffic and emergency vehicle access, and turning these into wider footways. However, Royston First do not support the planters or a similar replacement, and would recommend reinstatement of short-stay parking and loading bays for non-liveried business-owner vehicles, in order to support the businesses within the town centre and encourage quick pop-in shopping.
- 9.4. It is the project team's belief that pop-in parking will dilute the effectiveness of the scheme and promote vehicles circulating in the town centre, increasing congestion, pollution and

risk to pedestrians using the space.¹ It is also believed that vehicles looking to park will use the loading bays should a parking space not be available, leading to an increase in Penalty Charge Notices being issued and loading being unavailable to businesses. Should the decision be made to continue the project to a permanent solution, the project team will work with North Herts Council's Parking Team, designers and the BID to establish if any extra loading only space could be made available for non-goods vehicles.

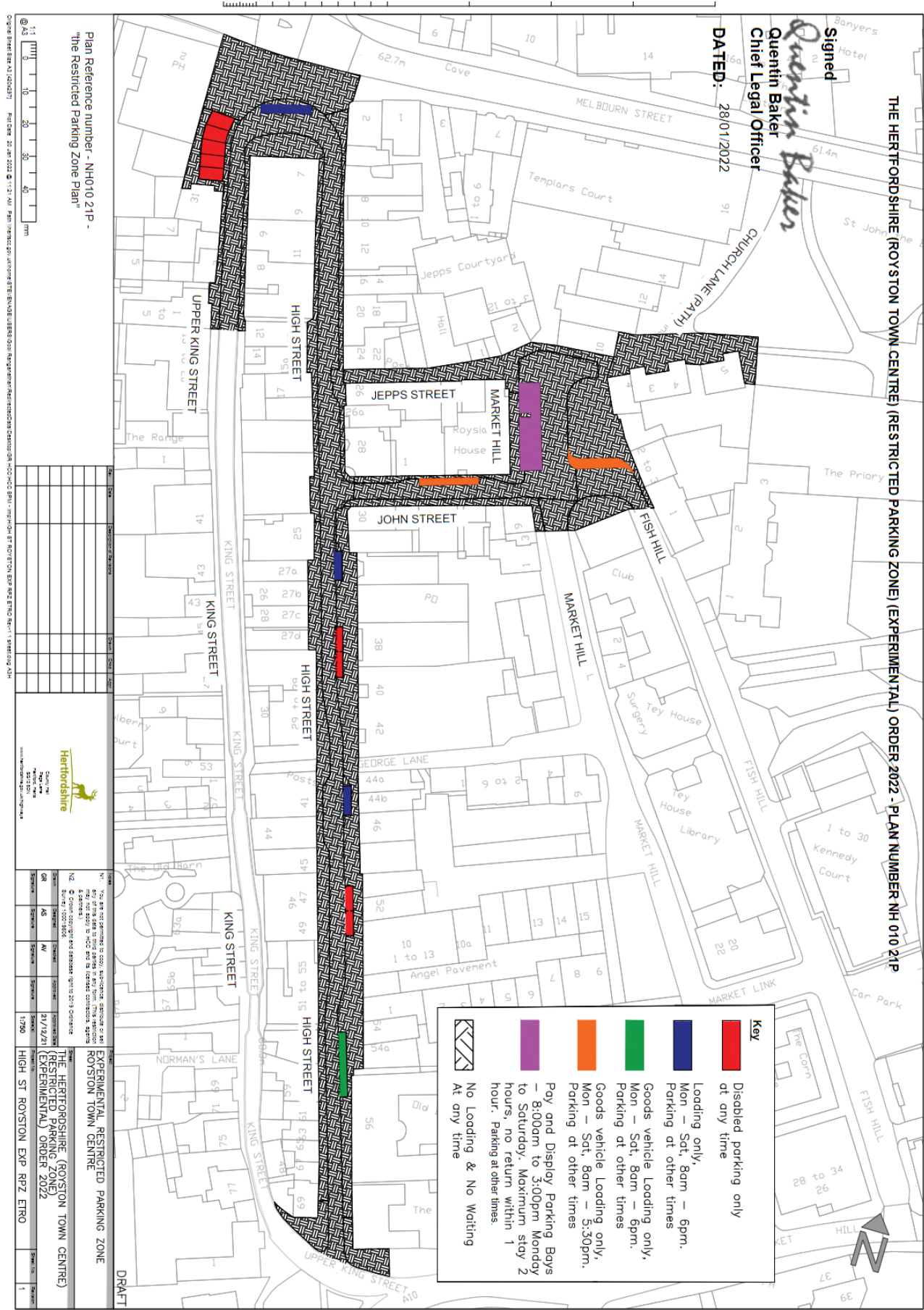
10.0. Recommendation

The Committee is asked to consider the following two recommendations and come to a decision on the project:

1. Based on the finding of this report, having considered the following:
 - a. Potential benefits and challenges of the scheme
 - b. Alignment with transport and sustainability objectives and policies
 - c. Collected data, feedback from stakeholders and the publicThe Committee supports the decision of the Project Board in agreeing to make the trialled changes in the Royston High Street area permanent.
2. The Committee agree with the Project Board in encouraging the Project Team to develop proposals and seek funding to deliver longer-term potential improvements (see section 8 of this report).

¹ Collected evidence to support this can be accessed here [What are the economic impacts of making more space for walking and cycling? - Sustrans.org.uk](#). Hertfordshire's Local Transport Plan and associated strategies, which prioritises sustainable travel, can be viewed here [Transport Planning | Hertfordshire County Council](#)

Appendix 1 – ETRO plan



Appendix 2 - Healthy Streets

Our assessment of Royston High Street can be found in the table below. As can be seen from the Healthy Streets Score, the trial layout provides a marked increase in the score, and with a few alterations as described in section 8 above, the score could increase further.

Healthy Streets Indicator	Previous Layout Score	Trial Layout Score	Potential Layout Score
Everyone feels welcome	48	63	76
Easy to cross	58	71	79
Shade and shelter	33	33	33
Places to stop and rest	17	42	75
Not too noisy	53	60	60
People choose to walk and cycle	48	63	76
People feel safe	51	64	72
Things to see and do	44	67	78
People feel relaxed	48	63	76
Clean air	50	58	58
Healthy Streets Score	45	58	68

