

Churchgate: a new opportunity?

Summary of Churchgate Resurgence PB's Public Survey

(Undertaken in November 2018)

Analysis and summary by Laura Hawker BA MSc MRTPI.

1. Churchgate Shopping Centre

The Churchgate Shopping Centre is located in Hitchin town centre and provides a block of shops leading off the historic Market Place to the current site of the Market adjacent to St Mary's Church. Built in 1971, the shopping centre is now outmoded and reaching the end of its life. The emerging North Hertfordshire Local Plan (2011-2031) states that the entire Churchgate area (covering the shops, car parks and riverside) should be redeveloped. However, proposals over the last 20 years have failed to proceed, showing how difficult this is.

2. Churchgate Resurgence PB

Churchgate Resurgence PB have produced a concept plan and an illustrative opportunities map exploring the potential opportunities for revitalising the Churchgate Development Area, the Market and the riverside areas of Hitchin.

North Hertfordshire District Council (NHDC) has considered a retail-led proposal for regenerating the Churchgate shops by refurbishing the old buildings, creating a large open plaza between the shops and a new covered market. A 3-screen cinema was also added – but no extra car parking.

During November 2018 Churchgate Resurgence PB presented their ideas to the public along with a survey seeking views on Churchgate Centre and the Market and options for the redevelopment of the Churchgate area.

The plans were available on the Churchgate Resurgence PB website (www.newchurchgate.org) and to view at the public exhibitions in the town centre (5 Brand Street, Hitchin) on the following dates:

- Saturday 17th November 2018, 10am-3.30pm,
- Sunday 18th November 2018, 11am-3.30pm, and
- Saturday 24th November 2018, 11am-3.30pm.

3. Survey Results Overview

A total of 731 people responded to the Churchgate Resurgence PB survey, either online or in hard copy at drop ins, more than 80% of whom lived in Hitchin.

Whilst the majority of survey respondents visit Hitchin regularly, visits to the market were much more infrequent: over 90% of respondents visit Hitchin twice a week or more, while only 25% visit the market as frequently.

However, 95% of respondents agreed with the statement '*the Market could be a great asset at the heart of Hitchin if it were revitalised in a creative and forward-thinking way,*' of which nearly 70% strongly agreed with the statement.

Survey respondents were predominantly pessimistic about the future of high street retail in the UK and thought that Hitchin is suffering from a spate of high street closures.

More than 80% of respondents favoured the redevelopment of Churchgate with built-in flexibility to adapt to future retail trends, over refurbishment of the existing buildings. Just over 10% favoured refurbishment, with the remainder being unsure.

Almost 50% of people who completed the survey did not think refurbishing the existing Churchgate buildings would attract high quality shops, like White Stuff, Monsoon and M&S Food. Compared with 25% who did.

The majority of those surveyed consider a strategy reliant on shop rents to recoup investment a risky strategy (more than 75%).

Just over 85% of those surveyed thought that '*the Council should pause and explore other options before proceeding with the current proposal for a conventional shopping area and separated market.*'

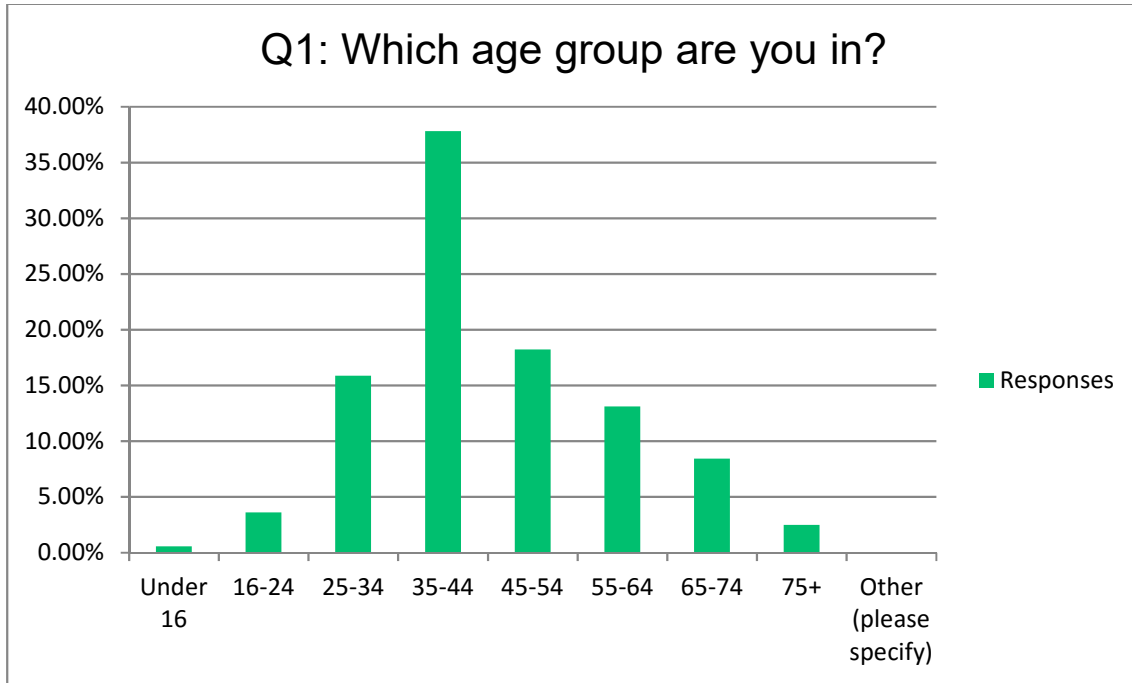
4. Survey results

A total of 731 people responded to the survey: 665 people completed the online survey and 66 people completed the paper survey. The online survey was available from 14th November 2018 to the 18th November. Paper copies of the survey were available for completion at the public exhibitions.

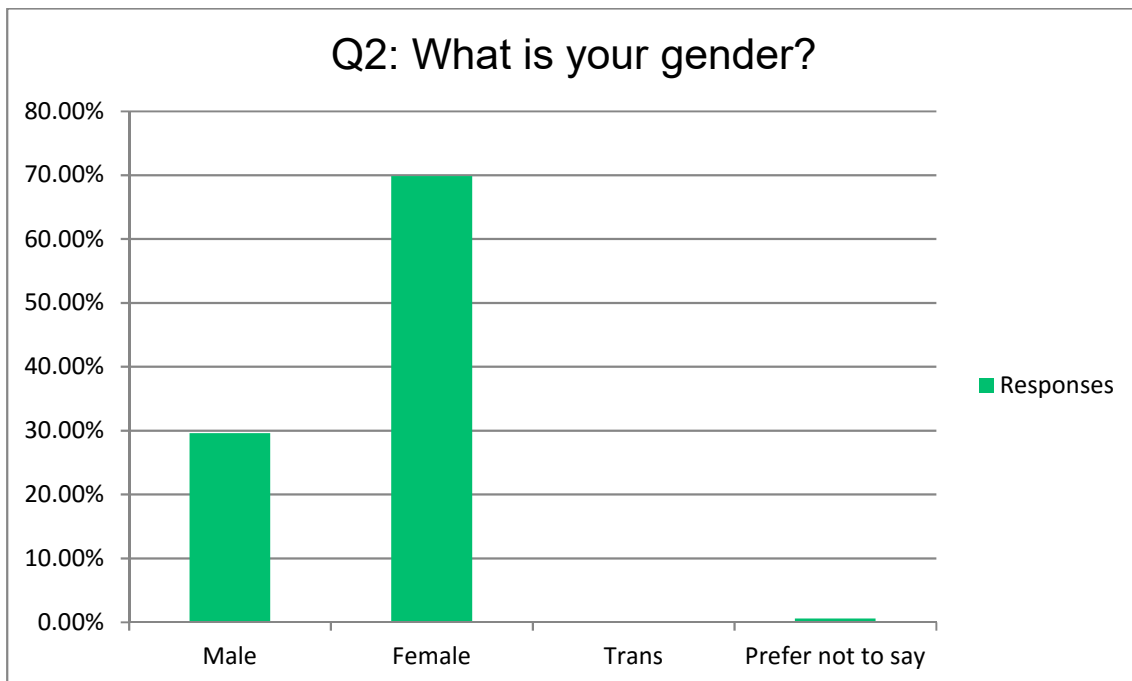
The results of the online and paper surveys have been combined.

4.1 The Demographics

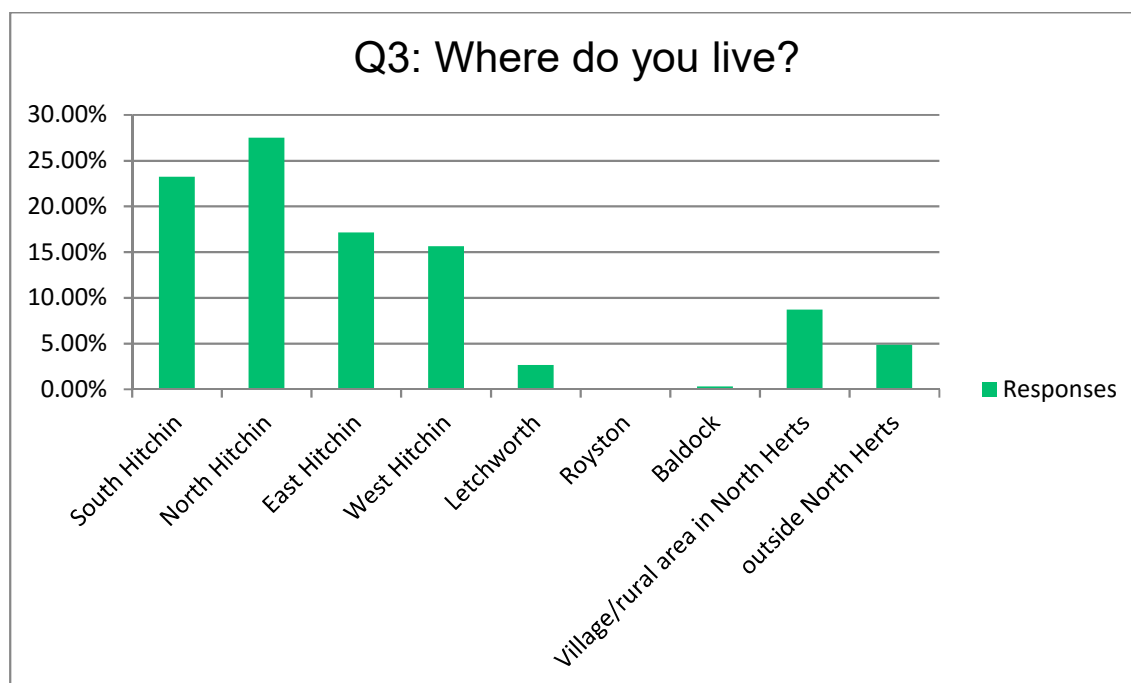
People of a range of ages responded to the survey. A third of respondents were aged between 35 and 44 years old. The next largest age group were aged 45 to 54, followed by the 25 to 34 age group. See Q1 below:



Approximately 70% of respondents were female, and 30% were male. See Q2:

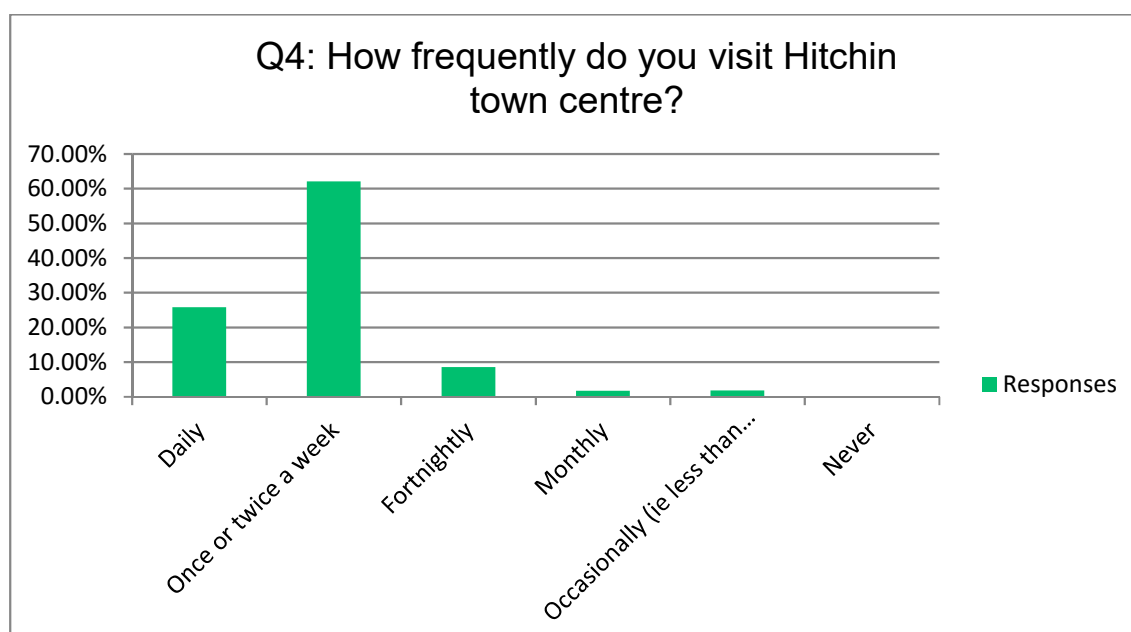


More than 80% of the survey respondents live in Hitchin, of which most live in North and South Hitchin. Respondents from outside Hitchin came from Letchworth, Baldock, a village/rural area in North Herts or outside North Herts. See Q3 below:

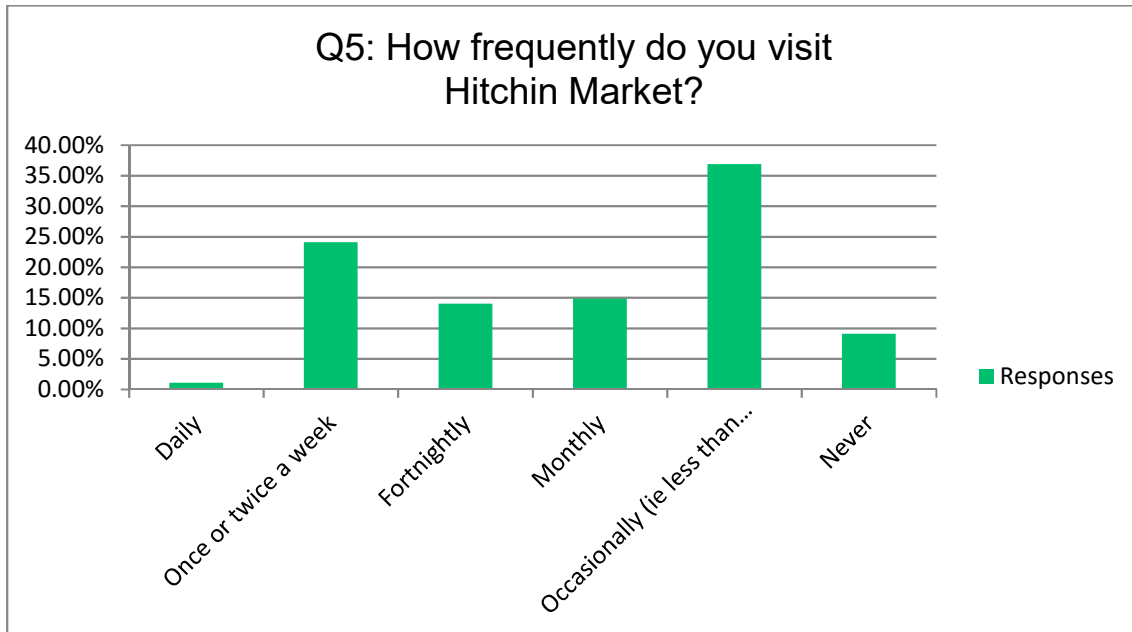


4.2 Current visiting habits (and thoughts on) Hitchin

More than 90% of survey respondents said they visit Hitchin either once or twice a week, or daily. Only 12% of respondents visit Hitchin once a fortnight or less. Only one person that completed a paper survey reported that they never visit Hitchin.

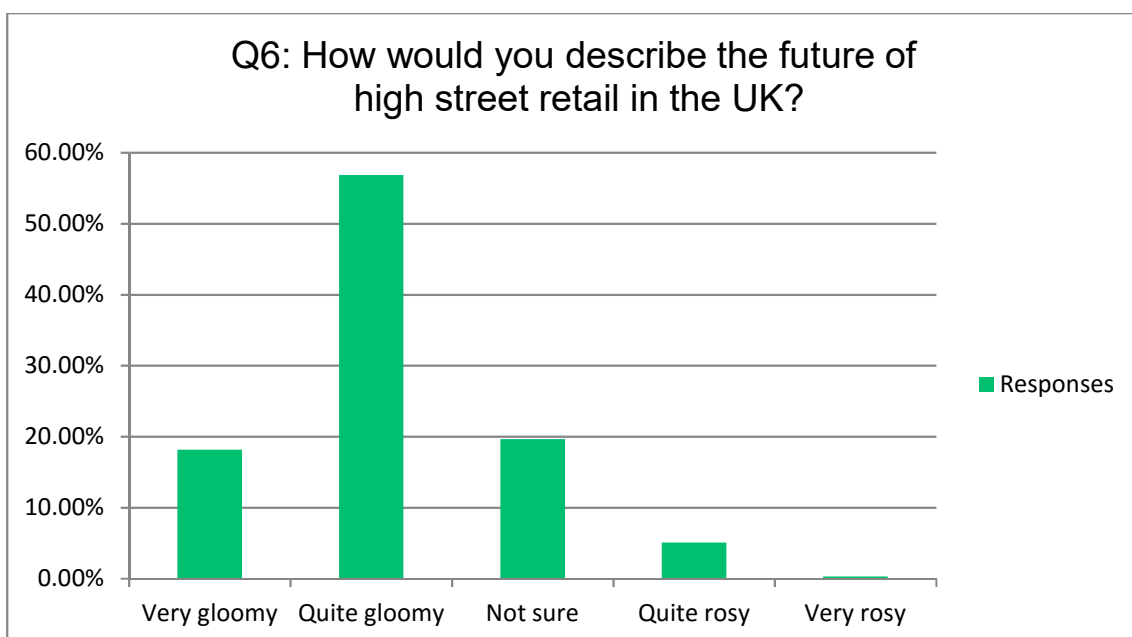


The frequency of respondents' visits to Hitchin Market was more mixed. Almost 25% of respondents visit the market once or twice a week. Nearly 40% of respondents reported only occasionally visiting the Market. Whilst nearly 10% said they never visit the market. See Q5 below:

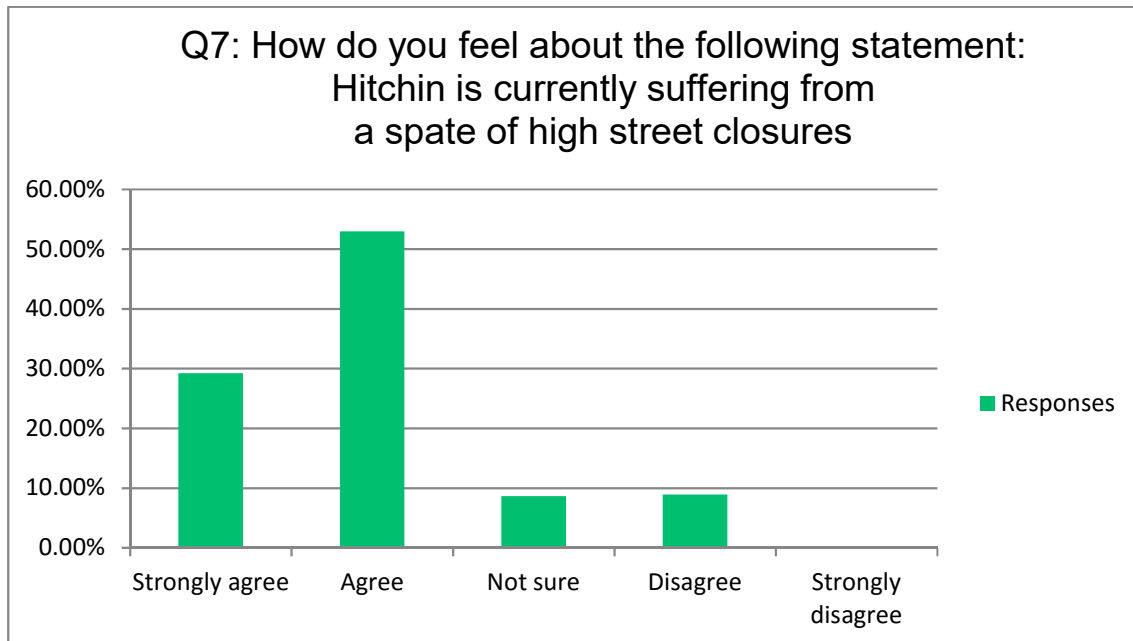


4.3 Retail in the UK and Hitchin

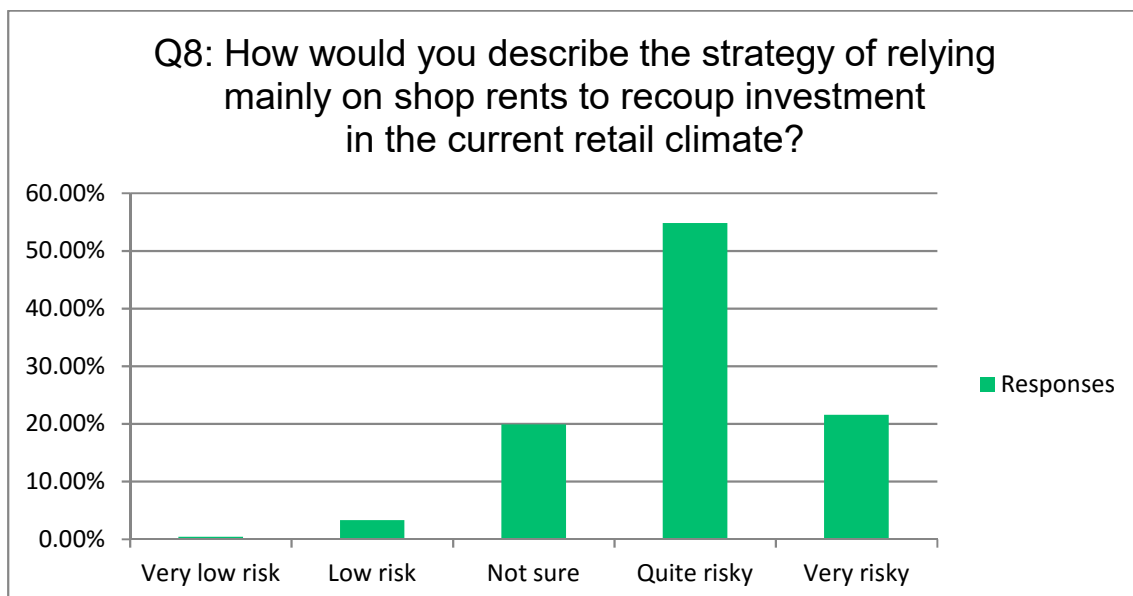
The majority of respondents thought that the future of high street retail in the UK looks bleak: with 75% saying that the future looks quite gloomy or very gloomy. Less than 10% of respondents thought the future was rosy or quite rosy. See Q6 below:



When asked about whether they thought Hitchin was suffering from a spate of high street closures, more than 80% agreed it was, and of those that agreed nearly 30% strongly agreed. Around 10% were not sure and around 10% disagreed. See Q7:

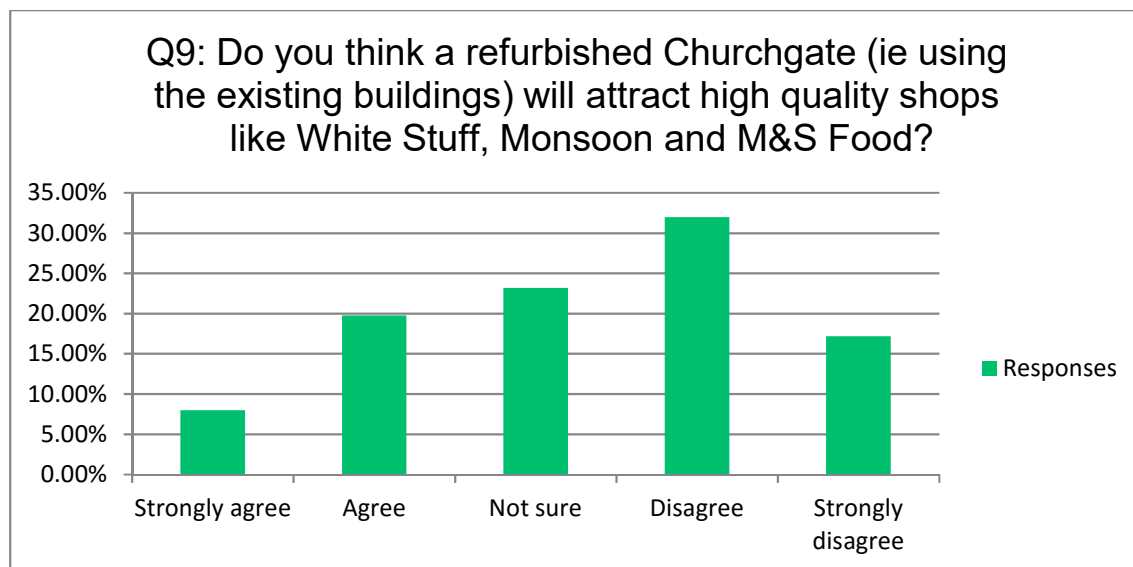


The survey asked how people would describe the strategy of relying mainly on shop rents to recoup investment in the current retail climate, with 55% of survey respondents saying this is quite risky and a further 22% consider it very risky. Less than 5% considered it to be a low or very low risk, 20% were unsure. See Q8 below:



4.4 Churchgate potential

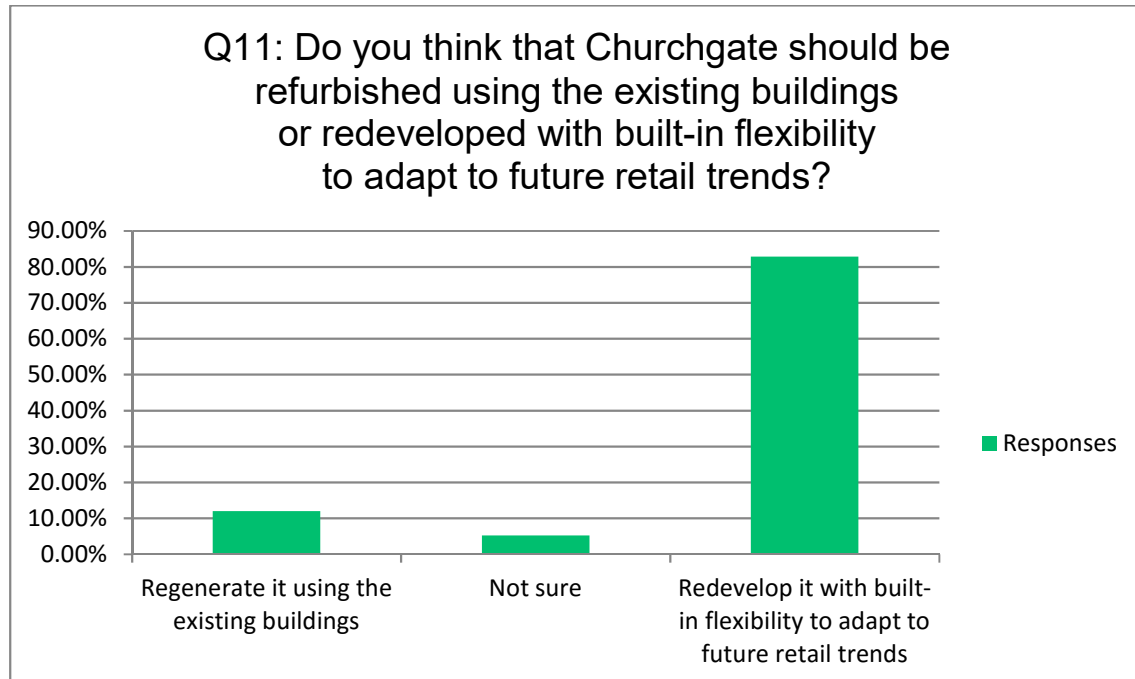
Responses were mixed regarding the ability of a refurbished Churchgate (using existing buildings) to attract high quality shops like White Stuff, Monsoon and M&S Food. Nearly 50% of respondents disagreed that refurbishment would attract high quality shops, of which just over 15% strongly disagreed. Just over 25% agreed it would succeed in attracting such shops. While almost 25% were not sure. See Q9:



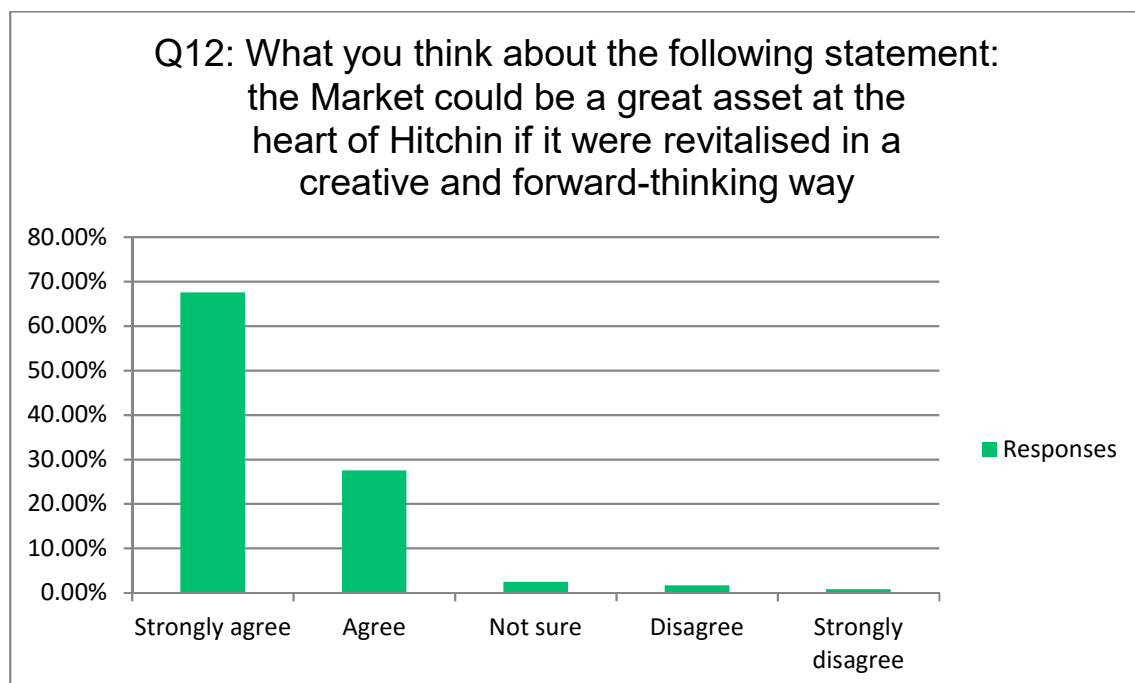
When asked how likely it is that high quality shops would relocate to a refurbished Churchgate, leaving gaps in the high street, around 40% thought this unlikely. Just over 35% were unsure. Whilst the remainder thought it likely, although only 5% thought it very likely. See Q10 below:



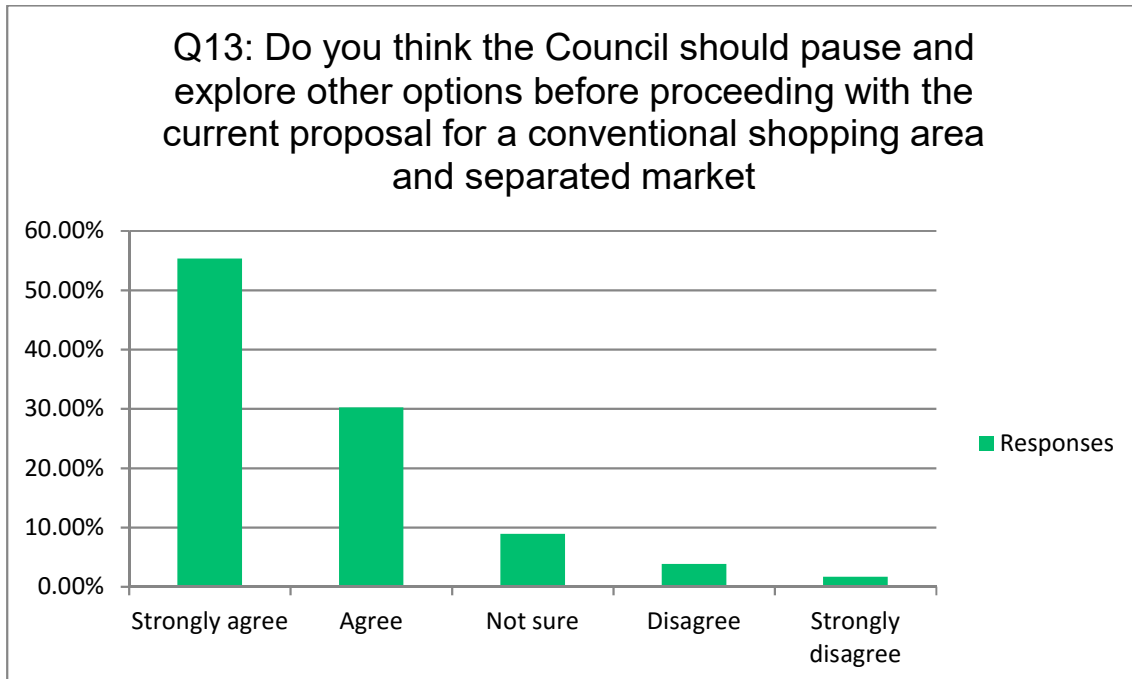
More than 80% of respondents favoured the redevelopment of Churchgate with built-in flexibility to adapt to future retail trends, over refurbishment of the existing buildings. Just over 10% favoured refurbishment, with the remainder being unsure. See Q11 below:



95% of respondents agreed with the statement '*the Market could be a great asset at the heart of Hitchin if it were revitalised in a creative and forward-thinking way,*' of which nearly 70% strongly agreed with the statement. See Q12 below:



Just over 85% of those surveyed thought that 'the Council should pause and explore other options before proceeding with the current proposal for a conventional shopping area and separated market.' 5% disagreed with this statement and around 10% were unsure. See Q13 below:



Note: Q14 asked respondents to add their own comments and suggestions. These are being collated into common themes and will be added as an appendix to this summary in due course.

