

Introduction

The Civic Society circulated the George Street Enhancement proposals for consultation on 20th October 2020. It was emailed to some two dozen individuals, Councillors, organisations and local traders, plus with a few hard copies delivered to the latter. A similar circular was emailed to members in early November. Responses were requested to be received by 30th November 2020, but because of the Covid-19 situation this was later extended to 31st December 2020. That enabled the article, with map and illustration, to appear in the Winter newsletter published on the 16th December 2020 which was either emailed to members or posted, thus giving a further opportunity to all members to comment. An article with illustration appeared in the 5th November 2020 edition of the Herts Advertiser as the Society's monthly column.

By 31st December 2020 there were 37 responses, 28 in favour, some with ideas, 1 against and 8 expressing concerns. There was also one detailed response on design suggestions which could be considered in support and, although not asked for at this stage, along with other comments and concerns, could be useful and made available at a later date. Some of the responses were from non members arising from the 20th October 2020 circulation and the Herts Advertiser readers article.

Comment and Clarification

It would appear that some respondents either misread or misinterpreted the proposals. The prime focus was on George Street and (to quote) 'concern expressed on the future of shops in this part of the Cathedral Quarter.' This was evident even before Covid-19 with some premises converting to residential, others standing empty. As the circular went on to state: 'The Covid-19 situation has brought emergency powers that closed George Street to traffic in order to enable social distancing. It has been pedestrianised.' There was, therefore, no time for any pre-consultation, comment on layout or design nor planning permission application.

It is understood that the present installations are temporary and will be reviewed/removed in March 2021 depending on the Covid-19 situation. The Society's proposals therefore seek to look beyond this date and draw on the experience of the emergency arrangements. If George Street is to continue to offer an attractive retail and hospitality experience, something needs to be done to improve its appeal and ambiance. Hence the proposals.

The map and illustration, produced for us by member Angela Mellen, were possible suggestions and not agreed features. The 'O' at the top of George Street was not a roundabout but an indication of a possible turning circle for cars, as is currently the case. As stated, larger vehicles (ie coaches) would not be able to so manoeuvre hence the reference to the role and status of High Street and the accessibility to traffic, especially in a West to East direction for at least certain times of the day. As the circular stressed 'nothing has been decided as the decision will be for the Local and County Councils and elected representatives to make.' The intention was for the Civic Society to start a discussion on the subject. This has happened!

Summary

There is support for an ENHANCED, pedestrianised George Street. However, as some respondents pointed out, further consideration is needed of how the retail and hospitality facilities function, which includes the so-called night time economy. These in themselves are important subjects.

Several respondents, not unsurprisingly, commented on traffic flows. As the circular highlighted: 'there are various options in respect of traffic flow, particularly for large vehicles using this part of the historic Conservation Area. Such options could affect nearby narrow streets, Romeland and the status of High Street.' Perhaps inevitably, reference was made about the movement of St Albans School coaches in and out of the area and the cause of long standing complaint. There is reference to this in using the top end of a pedestrianised George Street in the Verulam Road/High Street area to set down/pick up. Whilst this deviates from the main focus on George Street it does present a possible solution to the problem existing for many years of coaches invading this part of the Conservation Area in the Cathedral Quarter. Another subject that has concerned the Society.

Recommendations

1. That the respondents be thanked for their comments and suggestions.
2. That it be noted that this has been a worthwhile and successful exercise in the Society's aim to consult with its members and the community over important issues. The proposals have drawn responses from individuals, some Residents' Associations and brought the subject into the spotlight. An e-petition has been set up to ensure Herts County Council (HCC) holds a consultation on the permanent (post Covid-19) pedestrianisation of parts of the city centre, which includes George Street, that closed to signatures on 15th January 2021.
3. That the Society continues to support the petition initiative to HCC to hold a consultation on pedestrianisation
4. That the Society continues to support and publicise any Consultation held by HCC, inviting members to consider participating in the exercise.
5. If the decision to permanently pedestrianise George Street is taken by HCC the Society should ask that there should be further consultation on design aspects prior to any planning application. The comments, concerns and suggestions this exercise has received should be made available and taken into consideration.
6. The Society seek to bring together the various parties to formulate a plan for the next steps.

Conclusion

It is clear that there are various options, suggestions and concerns from certain quarters. These come from individual residents, Residents' Associations, St Albans School and the Society itself. There will need to be co-operation, compromise and consensus if any progress is to be made, and that could prove difficult. However, the focus needs to remain on George Street and how it can continue to be a retail and amenity magnet attracting people to this part of the Cathedral Quarter.