



Belfast
City Council

Sunday Openings 2026

Public Consultation Feedback Report



May 2026

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Introduction

At its meeting on 01 July 2025, the Council agreed, in-principle, to progress the Holiday Resort designation citywide under paragraph (9) of [The Shops \(Sunday Trading &c.\) \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1997](#), to be introduced on an ongoing basis commencing March 2026, following further consultation and engagement with relevant stakeholders, including trade unions.

Designation as a holiday resort

Under paragraph (9) of the above legislation, a council may designate “any area in its district as a holiday resort”. This means that for 18 Sundays between 1 March and 30 September in any calendar year (apart from Easter Sunday) a large shop which has a relevant floor area exceeding 280 square metres) may open on Sundays in accordance with notice given to council. Before making any designation, the Order is clear that a council should consult those likely to be affected by the proposed designation.

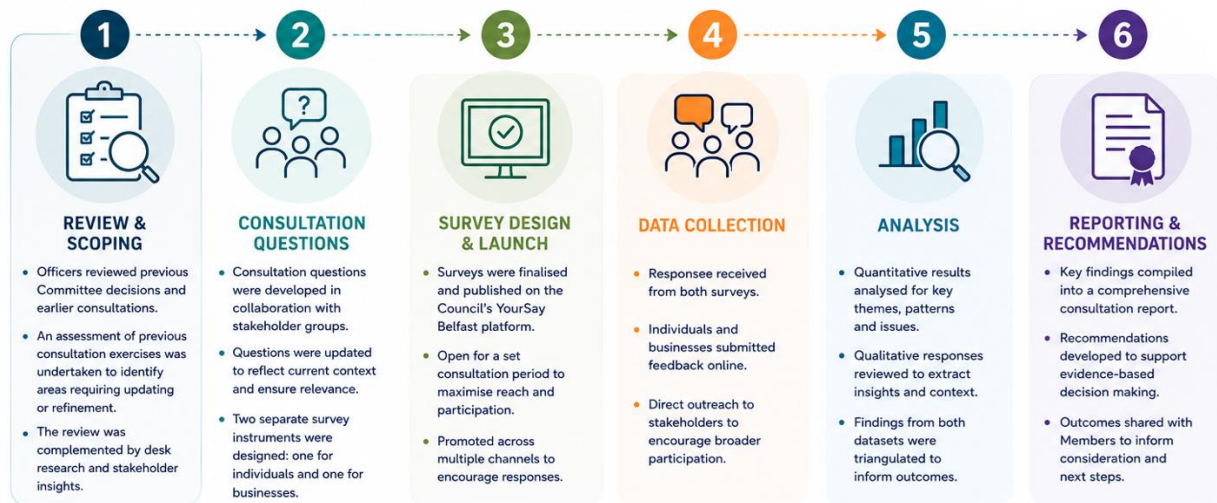
The council has consulted on the designation of the *city centre* as a holiday destination under the legislation on several previous occasions, most recently in 2019-20 but also in 2018 and 2017. On the previous occasions, there was engagement with a broad range of stakeholders including retailers (small and large); trades unions; statutory bodies; cultural sector; families; young people; tourism and hospitality representatives and transport providers.

The issues behind the proposals to designate the city centre as a holiday resort were similar to the current position: ongoing challenges to city centre viability; a desire to accommodate a growing tourism audience and a recognition that there was limited retail and hospitality provision in the city centre on a Sunday morning, compared to other days of the week.

The 1997 Order sets out in paragraph 10 that any resolution to designate a holiday resort can only take effect from a specified date, which must be at least one month after the date on which the resolution is passed. Should a decision be taken at this Committee, following due process the specified date on which the decision could take effect would be Sunday 5 July 2026. The extension of Sunday trading hours would therefore run for 13 weeks until Sunday 27 September 2026. The council will also have to publish a notice of the designation in such a manner as it considers appropriate.

The most recent engagement commenced in April 2025 linked to a Notice of Motion from September 2024 to deliver a Pilot Sunday City Animation Project. Council officers held a number of discussions with key stakeholders including management at Victoria Square, Castle Court and the Kennedy Centre, Belfast One, Cathedral Quarter and Linen Quarter BIDs, Belfast Chamber, Retail NI, NI Hotel Federation, Visit Belfast, Translink, USDAW and the Department for Communities. At that time, Shopping Centre management teams were generally supportive of any proposal to extend hours of opening on Sundays, suggesting that retailer buy-in to the proposal shouldn't be an issue. Views were expressed that flexibility was key for retailers and their workers, and that most would probably want to open from 11am onwards rather than anything earlier. The recent engagement and public consultation exercise has confirmed that the positions taken, and views expressed in previous consultations remain relevant.

Methodology



The methodology for the 2026 public consultation was developed to ensure that the engagement approach was proportionate, transparent and informed by previous council decisions and consultation activity.

In advance of launching the consultation, officers undertook a review of the most recent Committee decision to progress consideration of a holiday resort designation across the wider Belfast City Council area, rather than the city centre only, which had been the focus of earlier consultations. This review was complemented by an assessment of the questions used in previous consultation exercises to identify areas that required updating or refinement.

In light of the revised geographic scope and the need to capture views from different stakeholder groups, the consultation questions were updated accordingly. A decision was taken to develop two separate survey instruments: one aimed at individual respondents (residents, visitors and workers) and one designed specifically for business respondents (all sectors including retailers, business representatives, unions and community organisations), recognising the distinct perspectives and potential impacts for each group.

The individual survey comprised 15 questions and the business survey comprised 18 questions. Both surveys included a combination of closed questions and a series of open-ended questions, allowing respondents to provide qualitative feedback and elaborate on their views. Both the individual and business surveys included routing logic so that participants were only asked questions relevant to them. This helped streamline the respondent experience and ensured that the data collected was more focused, comparable and meaningful for subsequent analysis.

Both surveys were published on the council's engagement platform, YourSay Belfast, supported by accompanying background information, explanatory text, Frequently Asked Questions and relevant documentation to assist respondents in understanding the context and scope of the consultation. The consultation remained open for seven and a half weeks, from Monday 23 March 2026 until Wednesday 13 May 2026.

There were over 11,100 visits to the Sunday Openings 2026 webpage on Your Say Belfast. Almost half of these visits were directed via social media, over 80% of these visits came from Facebook, with the remainder coming from other platforms including Instagram, LinkedIn and Reddit. In addition, visitors to the page were also directed from the Belfast City Council website, search engines and from media outlets such as Belfast Live, the Irish News and the Newsletter.

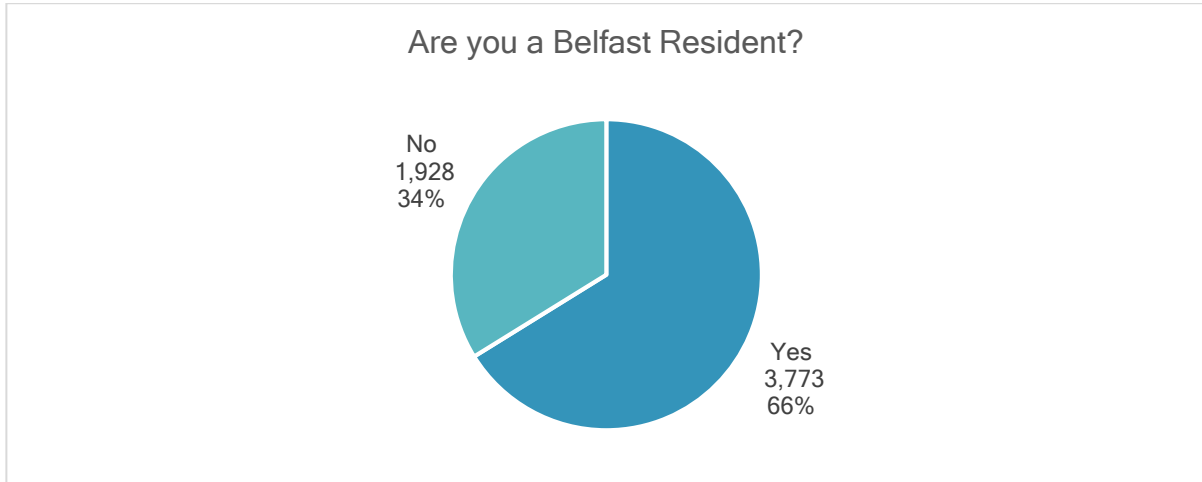
A total of 5,802 online responses were received during the consultation period. Of these, 5,701 responses were submitted by individuals, and 101 responses were submitted by businesses. In addition, 5 written submissions were received directly from stakeholders, including Translink, USDAW, Northern Ireland Hotel Federation, Belfast Chamber and the Association of Convenience Shops which were considered alongside the survey responses. Belfast Chamber conducted its own survey in which 94 businesses participated. USDAW also used the individual survey instrument to obtain the views of their members, receiving 220 responses. It is unknown whether respondents to these separate surveys also provided a response via Your Say Belfast and therefore they are reported separately. Officers also engaged the Chief Executive of Retail NI.

Quantitative results were extracted using the analytical tools available within YourSay Belfast, while qualitative responses were exported and subjected to tailored analysis using Microsoft Excel to identify key themes, patterns and issues raised by respondents. Findings from both datasets were then synthesised to inform this feedback report, which has been prepared to support Elected Members' consideration of the consultation outcomes and any subsequent decisions.

Individual Survey Results

Who Responded?

There were 5,701 responses to the individual survey. 3,773 responses identified themselves as residents of Belfast, representing two thirds of total responses.

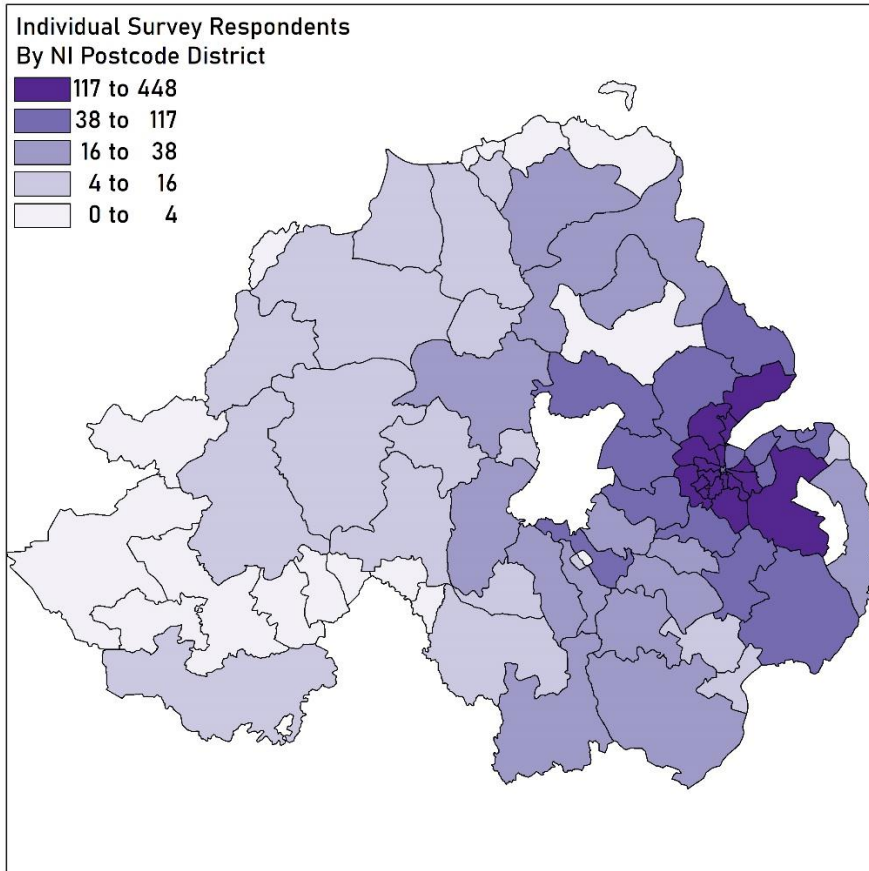


Recognising the obvious impact for affected workers, respondents were asked whether they worked in the retail sector in Belfast. In total, 10% of all respondents stated that they were retail workers in the city, representing 557 respondents.

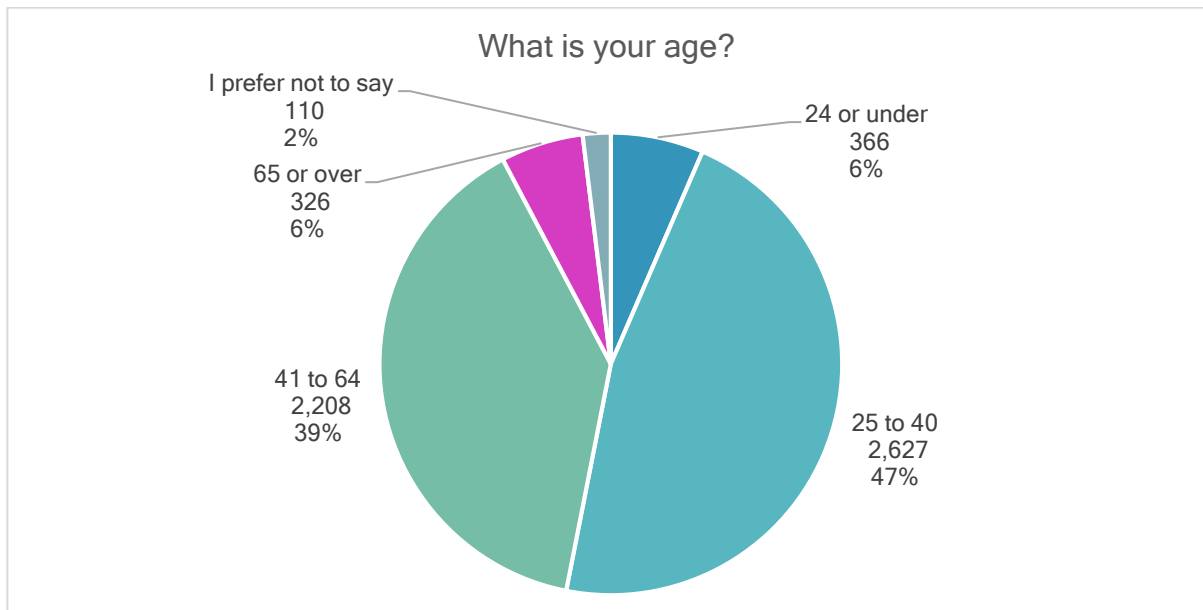


The consultation was however not limited to solely Belfast residents and retail workers. Visitors and tourists were also encouraged to respond and asked to provide their postcode district for analysis. A significant majority of responses came from individuals living in Postcodes in the greater Belfast area. The thematic map below shows the quantity of

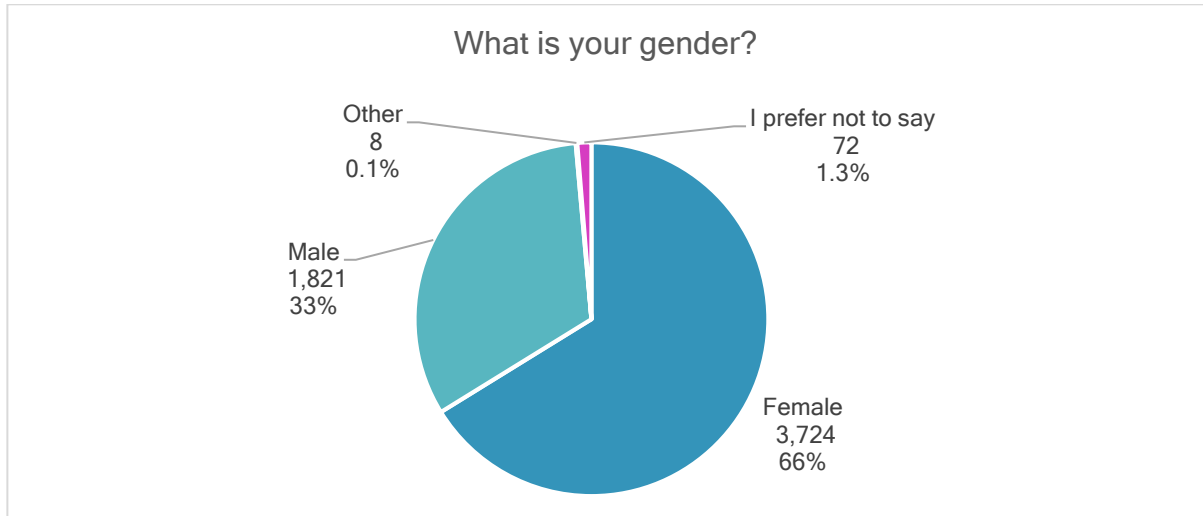
respondents from each postcode district in Northern Ireland. There were 11 responses received from individuals who lived outside Northern Ireland (GB & Ireland).



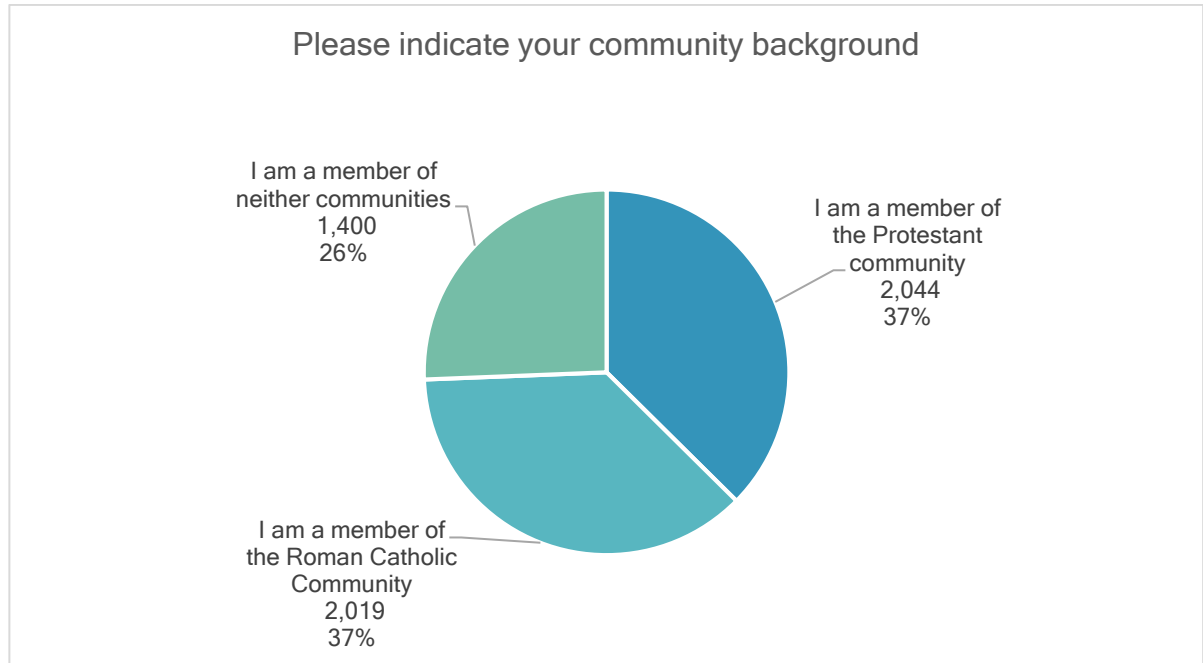
The survey attracted responses from all age groups. The age group most likely to respond was that aged *25 to 40 years old*. This age category comprised close to half of all responses.



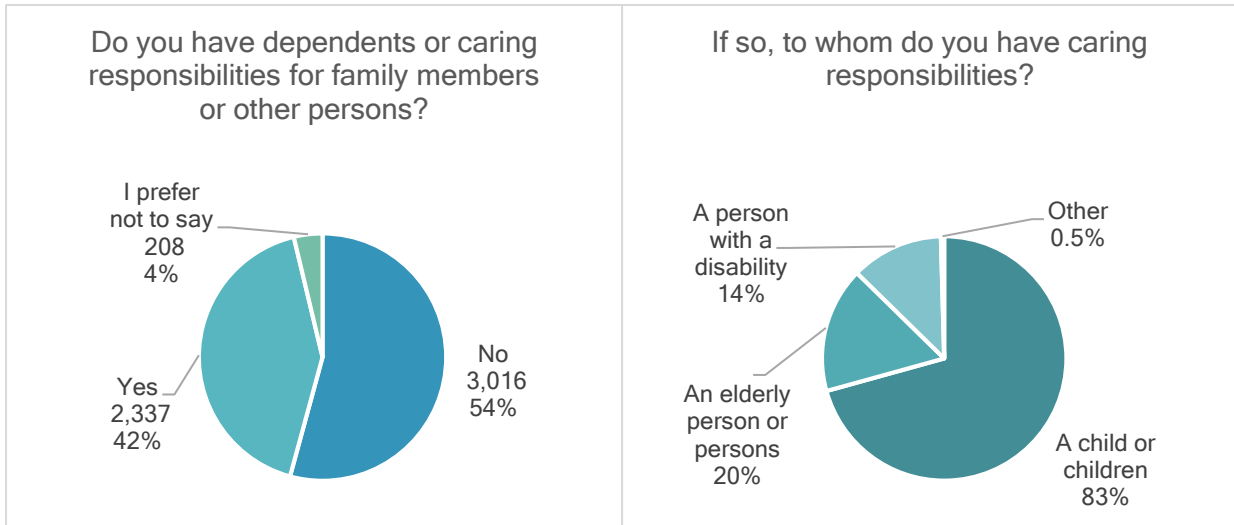
Those identifying as *Female* were most likely to respond to the survey, providing around two thirds of responses.



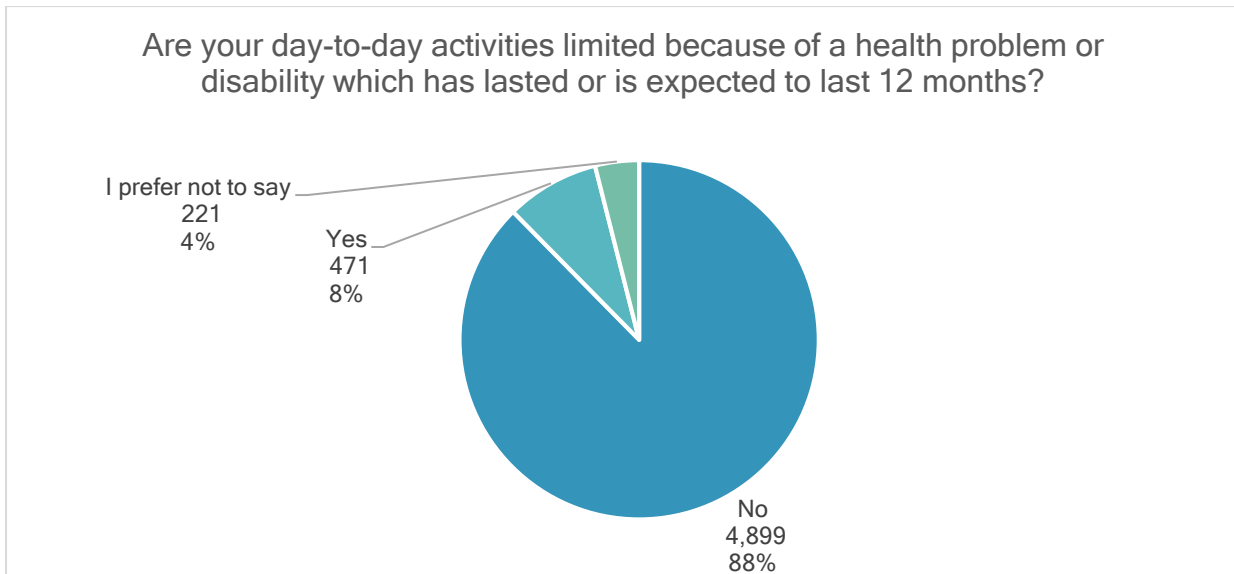
The consultation attracted responses from all community backgrounds (n=5463), with an equal proportion of responses coming from either the *Protestant or Roman Catholic communities*, with the remaining minority coming from those who identified as *belonging to neither community background*.



Respondents were asked whether they had dependents or caring responsibilities for family members, or other persons, and if so, to whom do they have caring responsibilities.



Respondents were asked whether they had a disability or long-term condition (n=5,591). A large majority (88%) indicated that they *did not have a disability*. On the other hand 8% indicated they *had a disability*, whilst 4% *preferred not to say*.

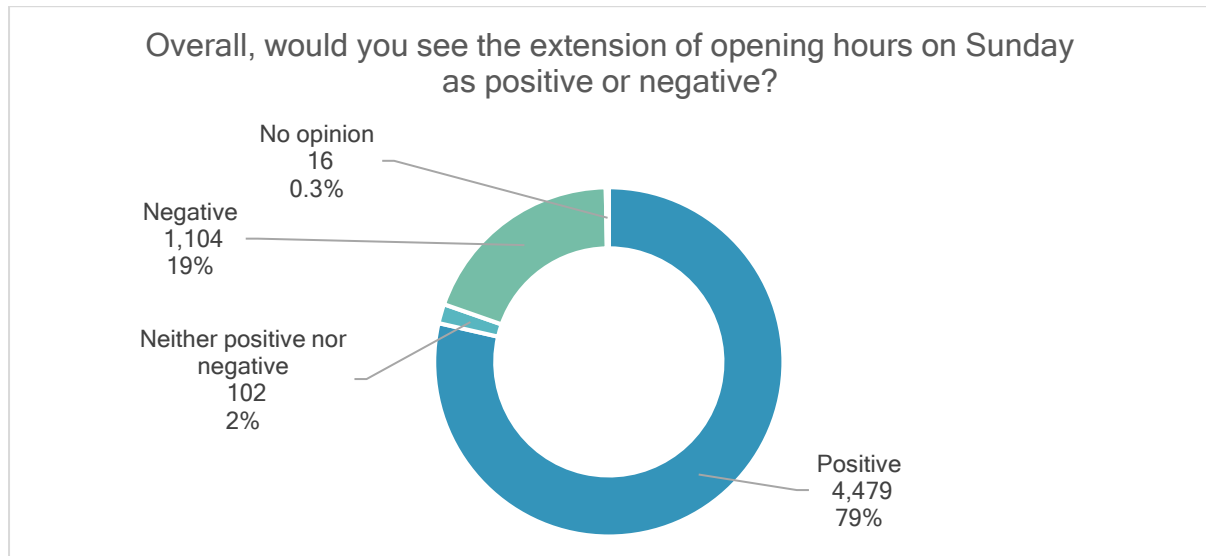


Furthermore, respondents were asked to indicate their ethnic group (n=5,423). Over 97% of respondents indicated that they were *white*.

Finally, respondents were also asked to indicate their marital status (n=5,512). The status with the largest number of responses was *married* with 51% of respondents. 28% indicated that they were *single*.

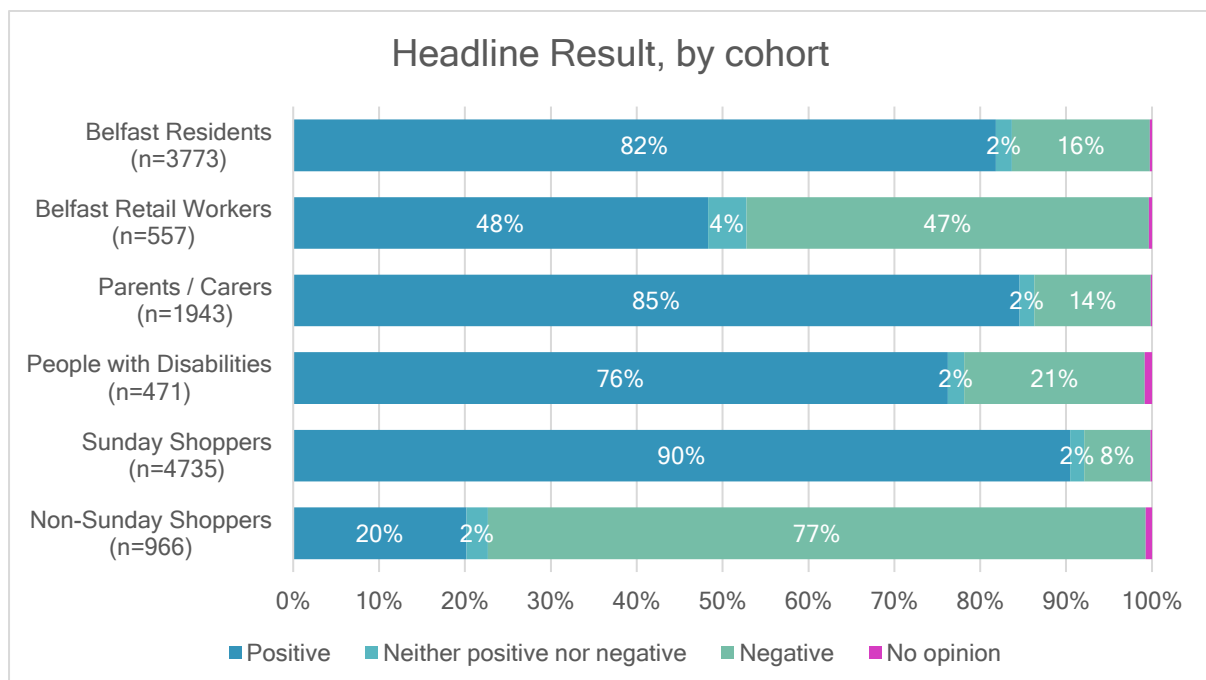
Headline Result – Positive or Negative (Individuals)

Overall, respondents expressed that the extension of Sunday opening hours would be *positive*, with almost 4 in 5 respondents (79%) expressing this view.

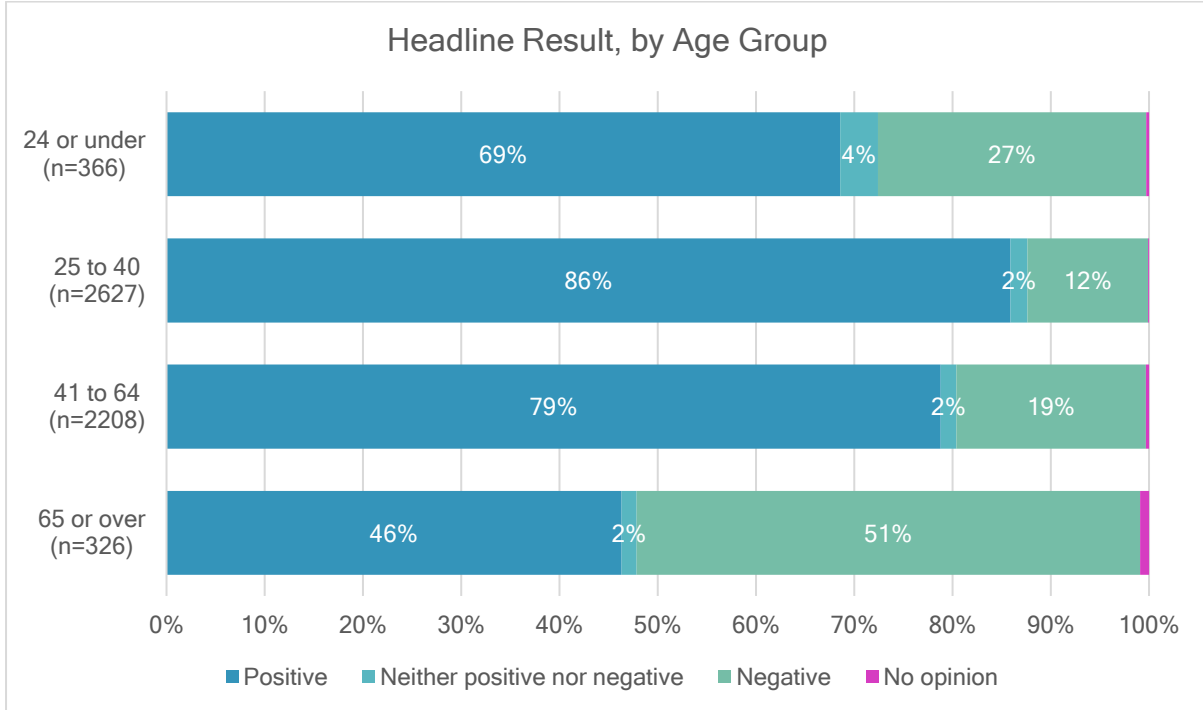


Disaggregation by specific cohorts of interest shows a range of perspectives:

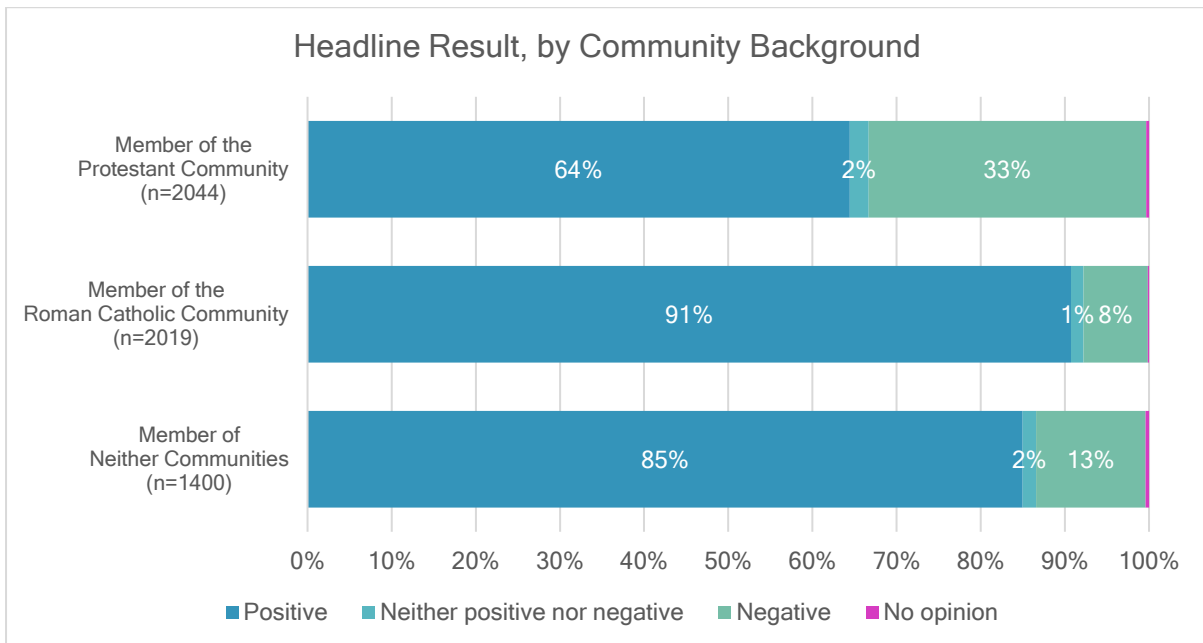
- Belfast residents are in favour (82%) of extending Sunday trading hours, by a slightly larger proportion than respondents overall
- Belfast retail workers are divided on the issue, with almost identical numbers of respondents expressing a *positive* (48%) or *negative* (47%) view.
- Those who stated they care for children (parents/carers) (85%) and people with disabilities (76%) are both heavily in favour of the proposal.
- There is a clear divide in views on the proposal based on whether the respondent currently shops on a Sunday. Those who currently shop on Sundays are 90% positive; whereas those who don't shop on Sundays are 77% negative.



Views on the proposal varied by age group. Those aged over 65 were the only cohort to express a majority negative opinion (51% negative) on extending Sunday trading hours. While it is notably that those aged 24 or under were less positive (69% positive) about the proposal than those aged 25 to 64 (86% positive).



Respondents from all three community backgrounds expressed majority positive opinions on the proposal. Those identifying as a member of the *Protestant community* were the least favourable, with 64% expressing a positive view compared with those from a *Roman Catholic background* who were 91% in favour.



support in-store retail recovery, reduce reliance on online shopping, and generate additional working hours for part-time staff and students.

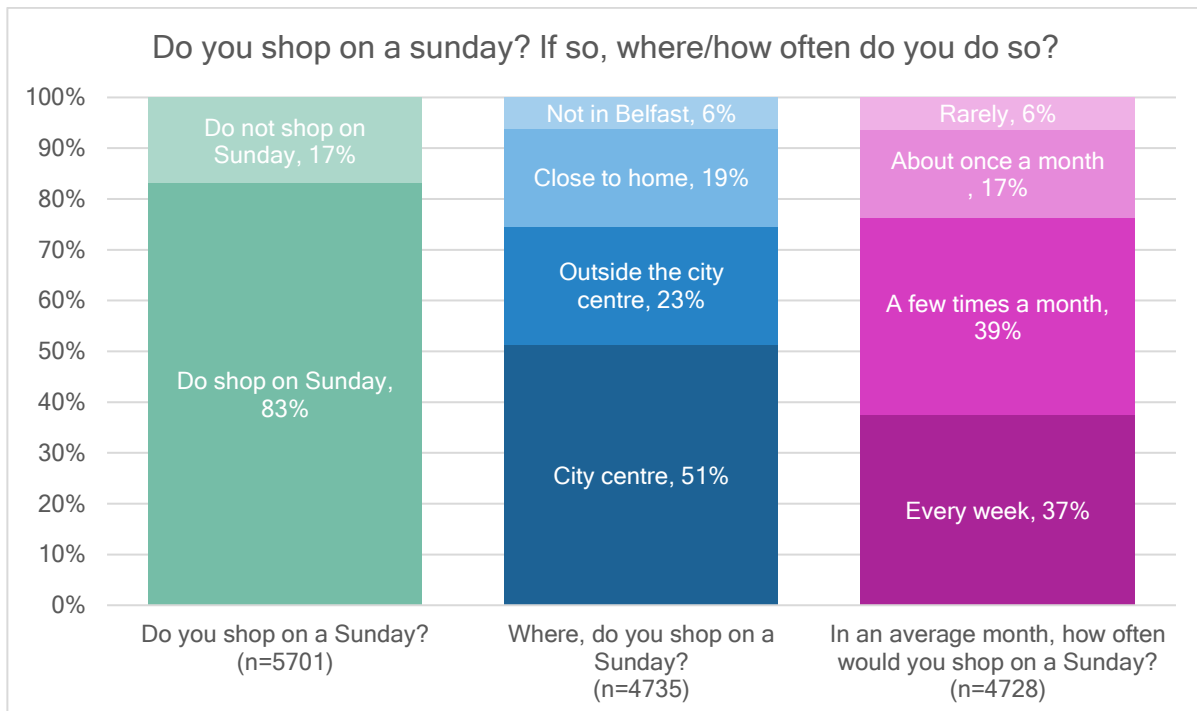
The theme of workers (4.5%) appeared across both supportive and opposing responses. While some respondents noted that extended hours could create more employment opportunities and greater flexibility in working patterns, others expressed concern regarding the potential negative impact on retail staff. These concerns were often linked to broader themes of work-life balance (2.0%) and family time (1.7%), with respondents highlighting the importance of maintaining a guaranteed period of rest and the potential for increased pressure to work additional hours.

Similarly, several respondents raised concerns grounded in religious or cultural considerations (2.2%), emphasising the significance of Sunday as a day of rest or worship. Others expressed concern that extended trading could result in Sunday becoming “like any other day,” with implications for community cohesion and personal wellbeing.

Additional themes included atmosphere (3.4%), with many respondents suggesting that extended hours could contribute to a more vibrant and active city centre environment, particularly during Sunday mornings, which were often described as currently “quiet” or “inactive.” References to other countries (2.4%) and historic context (2.7%) further indicate that respondents frequently framed their views in comparison to other cities and regions, with many describing current arrangements as outdated.

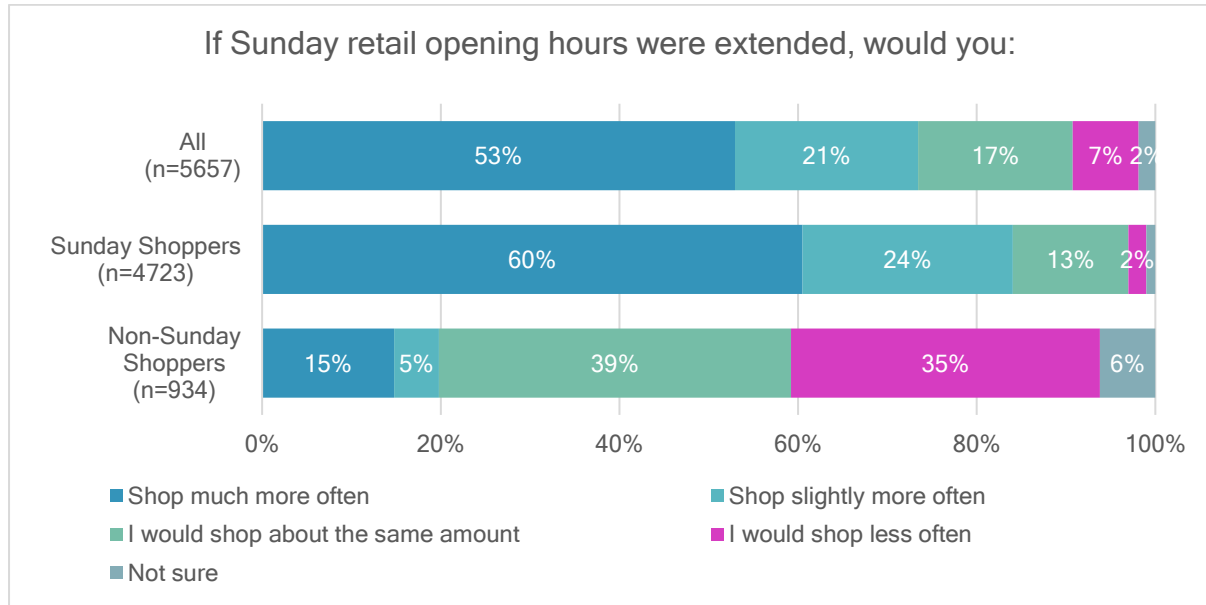
Current and Future Sunday Shopping Patterns

Respondents were asked where they most frequently shop on a Sunday, and how often they do so. There were 966 respondents (16.9%) who indicated that they do not currently shop on a Sunday. A slight majority (51%) of those who frequently shop on a Sunday indicated that they shop in Belfast City Centre.



Respondents were asked to indicate whether their shopping patterns would change if Sunday openings were extended. A majority of respondents (74%) indicated that they would *shop much more often* or *shop slightly more often*, if trading hours were extended. This proportion

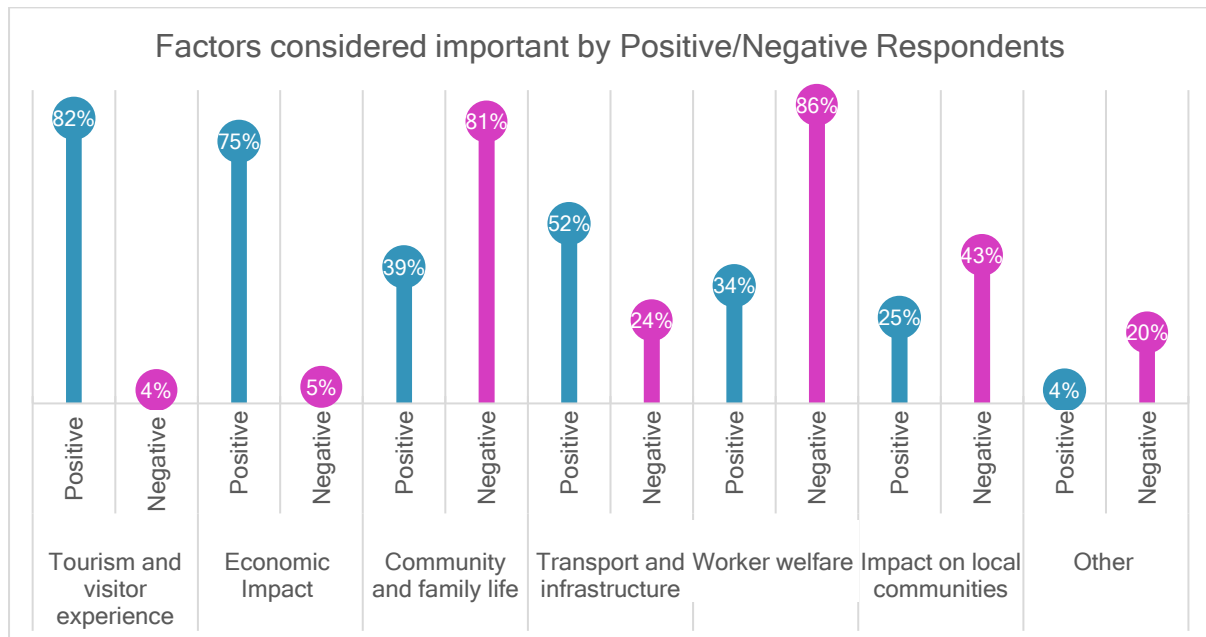
rises to 84% when considering those who indicate they currently shop on a Sunday. Conversely, 20% of those who don't currently shop on a Sunday stated they would shop *much more or slightly more often*.



What factors should be considered in relation to extending Sunday trading hours

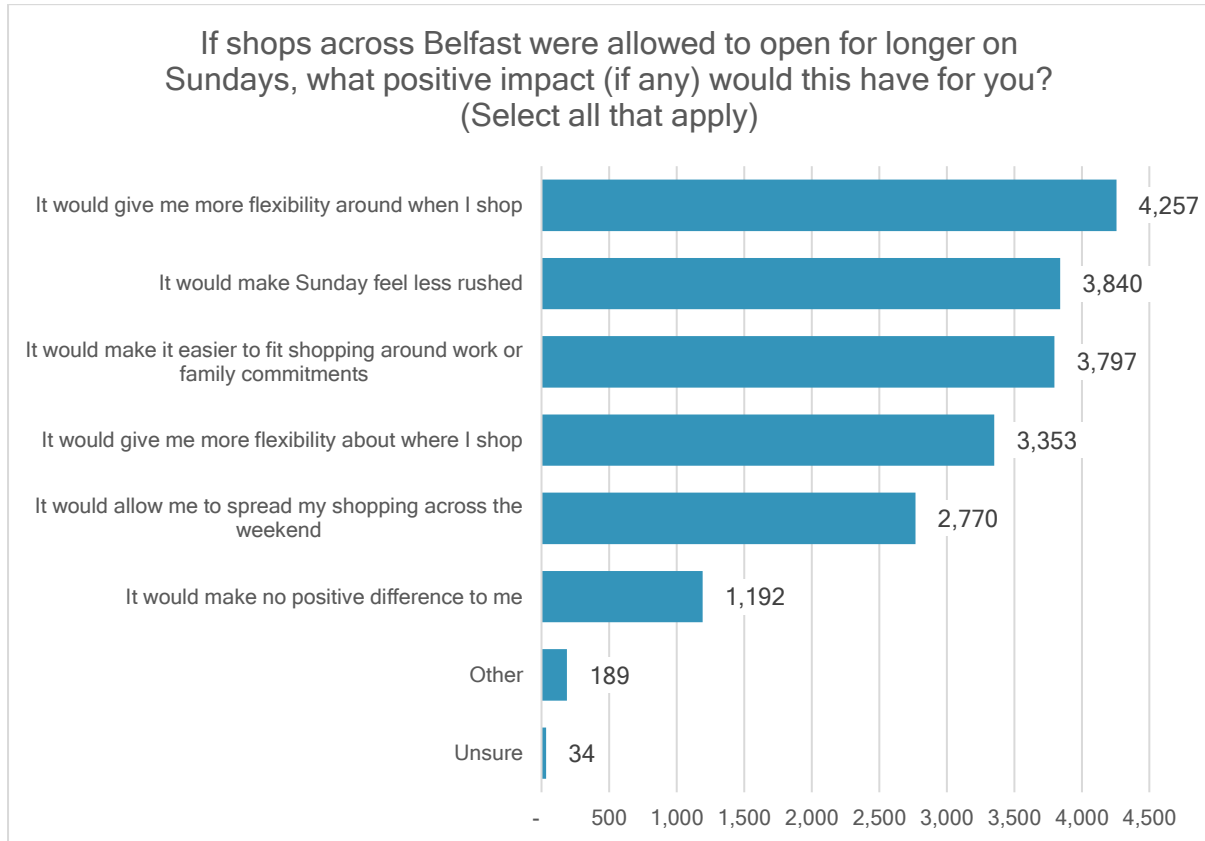
Respondents were asked to identify the factors that the council should consider most, when assessing the proposal to extend Sunday trading hours. They were allowed to pick more than one factor, and most respondents chose to do so. Responses varied depending on whether respondents saw the overall proposal as positive or negative.

Tourism and Visitor Experience (82%) and *Economic Impact* (75%) were the most selected factors by respondents who see the proposal as positive. Conversely, *Worker Welfare* (86%) and *Community and Family Life* (81%) were the most selected factors by respondents who view the proposal as negative.



Negative respondents were most likely to specify *Other* factors, with 20% doing so. Additional factors covered a range of issues including religious observance, comparison of Belfast to other cities, sentiment that existing arrangements were archaic and concern about rest for workers.

Positive and Negative Impacts for Individuals





What respondents had to say about the impact of extending Sunday trading hours.

A selection of responses from individuals who were positive about the proposal, are shown below.

Responses from Individuals who see Extended Sunday Openings as Positive

It would make life so much easier for me as a disabled person as I could take my time and not be having to rush which impacts on my chronic pain level

It would make Sundays more flexible and less rushed. I also used to work in retail, and Sunday was the worst as a full day of shopping was condensed into 5 hours. It was always ridiculously busy which made it more stressful for workers and consumers. Additionally, it is really inconvenient for people with life events or other places to attend on a Sunday. I can't recall how many times I've needed something last minute on a Sunday and been unable to get it because of trading hours. Business is being lost to the South or smaller market retailers that be open.

It would enable a better balance for working families as the traditional non-fri working pattern isn't the norm any more. There is additional stress placed on families to have everything done either on a Saturday or waiting until the 'rush' at 1pm. Having the ability to shop spread across a weekend makes sense. It also allows for parents to attend children's activities rather than 1 parent having to choose the shopping on a Saturday. Also given we live in a much more secular society, with also a variety of religions, Sunday doesn't equate to everyone's 'day of rest'.

It would boost tourism as if you go to other countries they rarely have restrictions on Sunday trading hours so tourists are coming over here for a weekend and are restricted to what they can do on a Sunday.

It makes Sunday less rushed and allows families to spend more time together later on in Sunday afternoon. It also stops a peak traffic and rush at 1pm

Tourism will benefit and there will be positive impact on the economy. It will be up to the shop to decide whether they would open- it shouldn't be mandatory.

Greater choice, potential for retail staff to have a wider choice of hours that could fit work-life balance better.

Extending the Sunday opening hours provides a great opportunity for the city to increase economic activity, improve individuals' freedom regarding when shopping can be carried out, and removed the stigma of Sunday opening restrictions being associated with religious or conservative regulations (this is often how people see them even if it is not the main motivation for retaining Sunday trading restrictions currently).

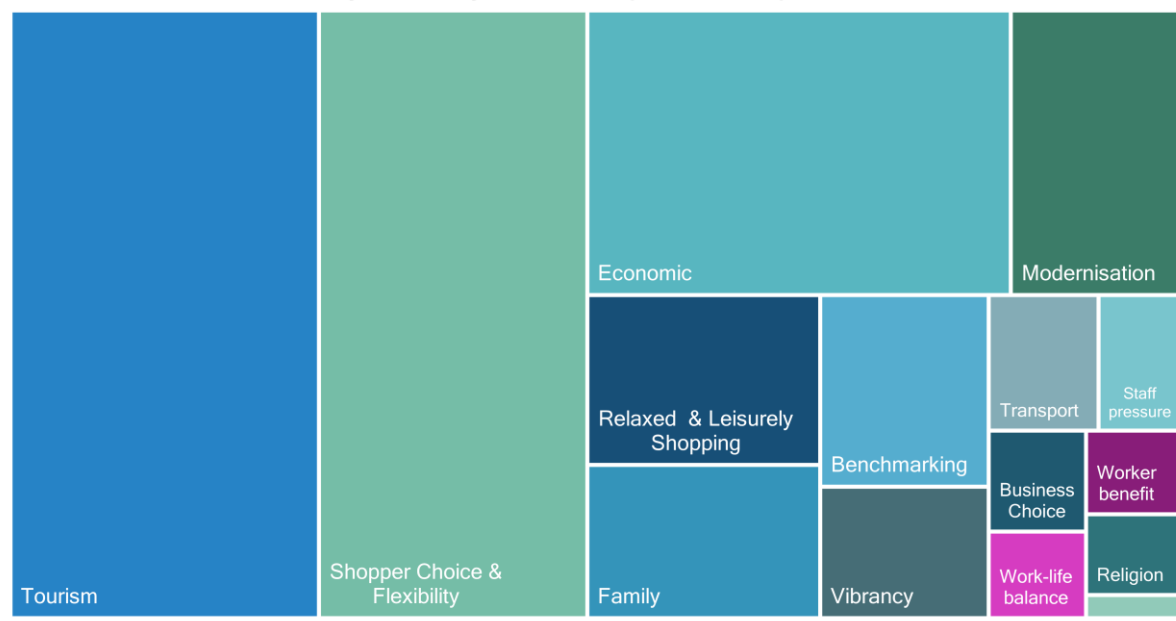
The fact that a capital city in the UK has such antiquated rules about when a shop can open, to serve the people that live here on one of the two days that the majority of people are off work is beyond belief in 2026

The shop owners should be able to pick their own opening hours on a Sunday

Better for tourism. Northern Ireland would fall more in line with UK

Extended Sunday trading hours will bring Belfast in line with other modern Cities and increase trading, footfall, and vibrancy around the city. As Belfast expands in the tourism market, extended opening hours will encourage more visitors to explore Belfast during the weekend and allow local businesses to benefit from increased footfall.

Qualitative analysis of key themes of positive respondents' comments



Individuals were invited to explain their answer, after they had stated that extended Sunday trading was either *positive* or *negative*. Qualitative responses to this open-ended question were subjected to tailored analysis to identify key themes, patterns and issues raised by respondents. These themes are presented in the above treemap chart. *Tourism*, *Shopper Choice & Flexibility*, *Economic impact*, *Modernisation* and *Relaxed & Leisurely Shopping* were the top 5 themes for respondents who seen the extension of Sunday trading as positive. There were also a considerable number of responses that referenced the positive impact *on family life*, *benchmarking with other cities/ countries* and *likely increase to footfall and city vibrancy*.

A selection of responses from individuals who saw the proposal as negative are highlighted in the table below.

Responses from Individuals who see Extended Sunday Openings as Negative

Would have a negative impact on smaller business. Would have a negative impact on retail staff work life balance.

This takes our province further from God and moral values. It doesn't take too much intelligence to figure out how rapidly moral standards are slipping and even more extended opening of businesses would only further deepen the wound ... families need family time for bonding not split up by some, particularly parents working ... it surely sets the precedent for children to copy very poor examples .. what's bred in the bones eventually manifests in the flesh!

The current Sunday trading laws are archaic and extremist. Businesses should be allowed to trade when they like, people should be allowed to shop and work when they like

Staff would get no down time. Everyone should have the one day of rest in week

The current arrangement is a holdover from another era. Giving shops the option of opening earlier on Sundays benefits all, potentially-- though no one should be required to work on Sunday morning or at any time if to do so would prevent them from practicing their faith.

5 hours is plenty of time to shop. Workers are burnt out as it is.

Added trading hours will lead to increased mental health issues, anxiety and exhaustion for the workforce - it will also add pressure in families and even help in the break down of the family unit. The Sabbath is a day for worship -that opportunity ought not to be taken away from families and for individuals.

It will make Sunday just like any other day and not special the way it currently is

I am a retail worker and I find this idea very unfair. Us retail workers work every day except 2 days of the year, most of us work long hours with little appreciation from customers and we work everyday public holiday. A Sunday is the only day that these working hours are slightly lessened for us and I think that extending opening hours on a Sunday would be very negative for retail staff.

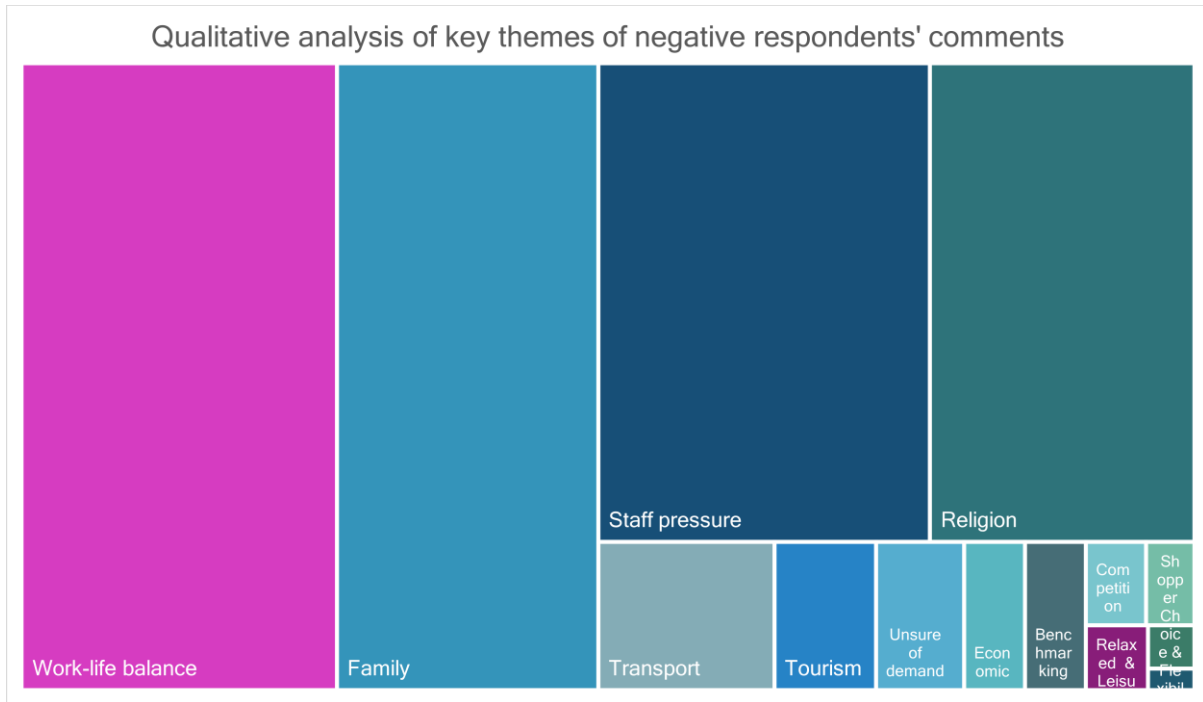
I hate the line of how backward this makes NI. We're holidaying in Europe this summer and in France, Italy, Austria and Germany where we're going I have to plan carefully for Sunday arrivals as supermarkets and general retail is not open. It's perfectly normal and we still open for 5 hours in the pm. We need to direct tourists to things that are open on Sunday am, St George's market, Titanic, local coffee shops etc. Belfast isn't London or Paris, it doesn't need 24/7 buzz. It's perfectly normal to have things closed all day on Sunday so the fact our shops open for five hours is plenty.

It would make Sunday like any other day of the week, whereas we need one day in seven to rest and keep special.

It would negatively effect (sic) my work life balance.

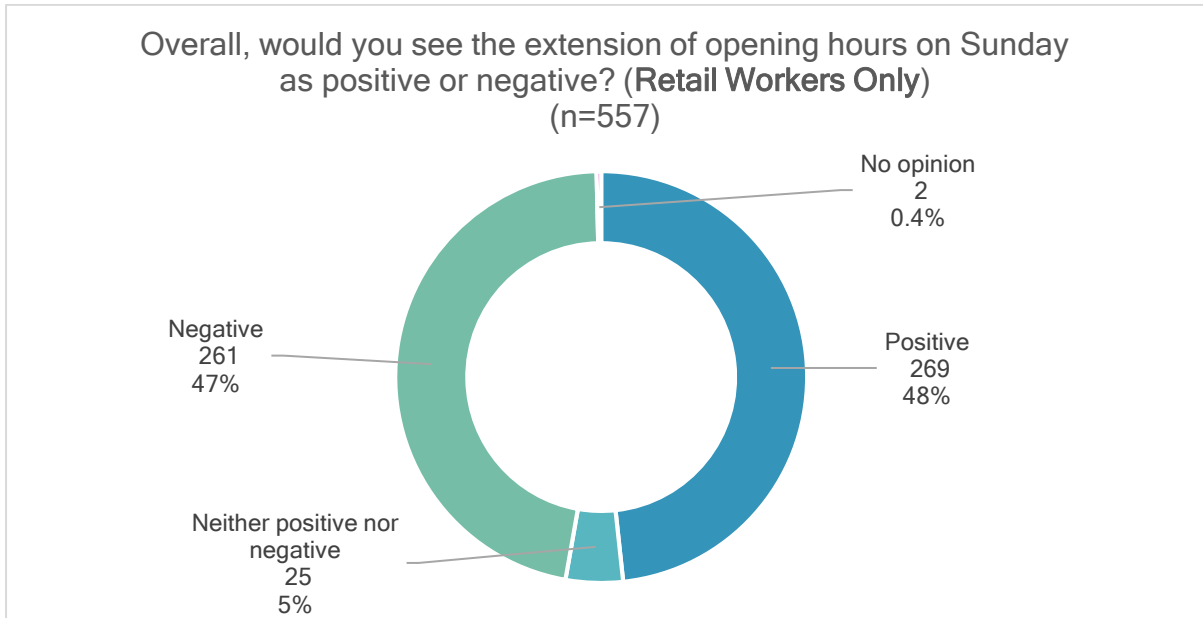
I just think there's no need for it. I think that people's social life is already constrained by a hard work life balance & opening on Sunday will make it worse, especially for young people.

The below treemap chart presents the main themes and issues raised by respondents following a qualitative analysis of the answers provided by individuals who see the extension of Sunday opening hours as *negative*. *Work-life balance, Family life, Staff pressure, Religion and Transport challenges* were the top 5 themes. It is noteworthy that '*Family life*' was raised by both positive and negative respondents perhaps identifying the impact on shoppers and workers respectively.

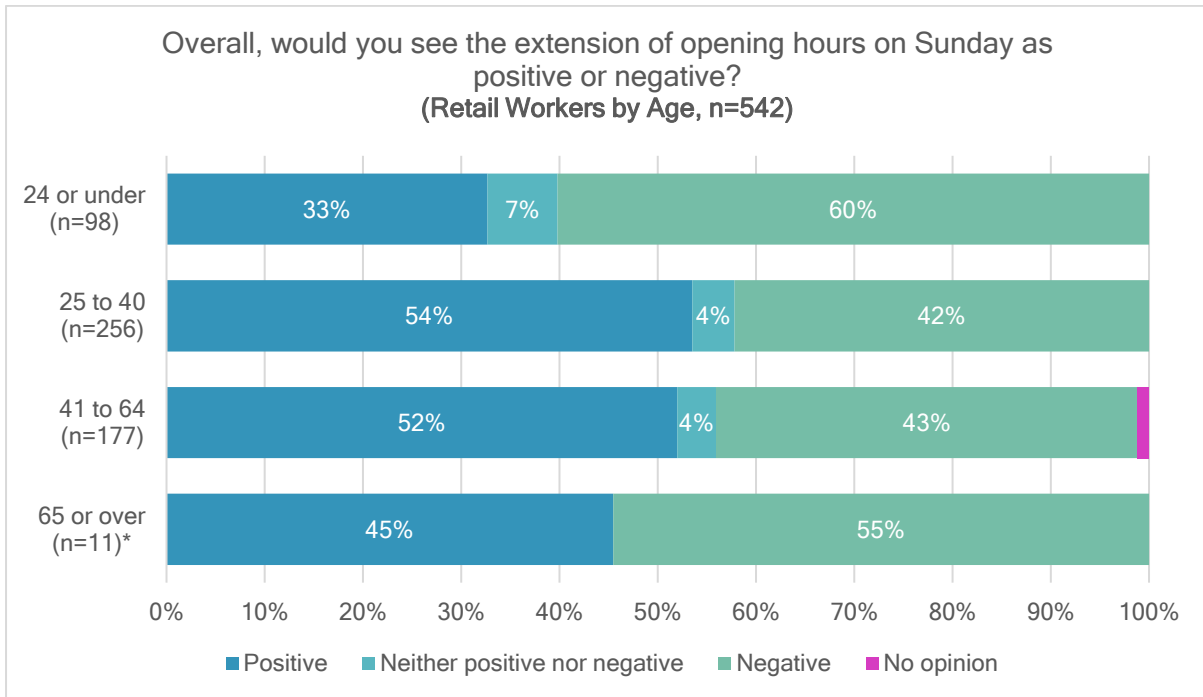


Retail workers' view on extending Sunday trading hours

There were 557 responses from Belfast retail workers expressing their views on extending Sunday Trading opening hours. An almost equal proportion of retail workers reported the extension of opening hours on Sunday as positive (48%) as those who reported it as negative (47%).

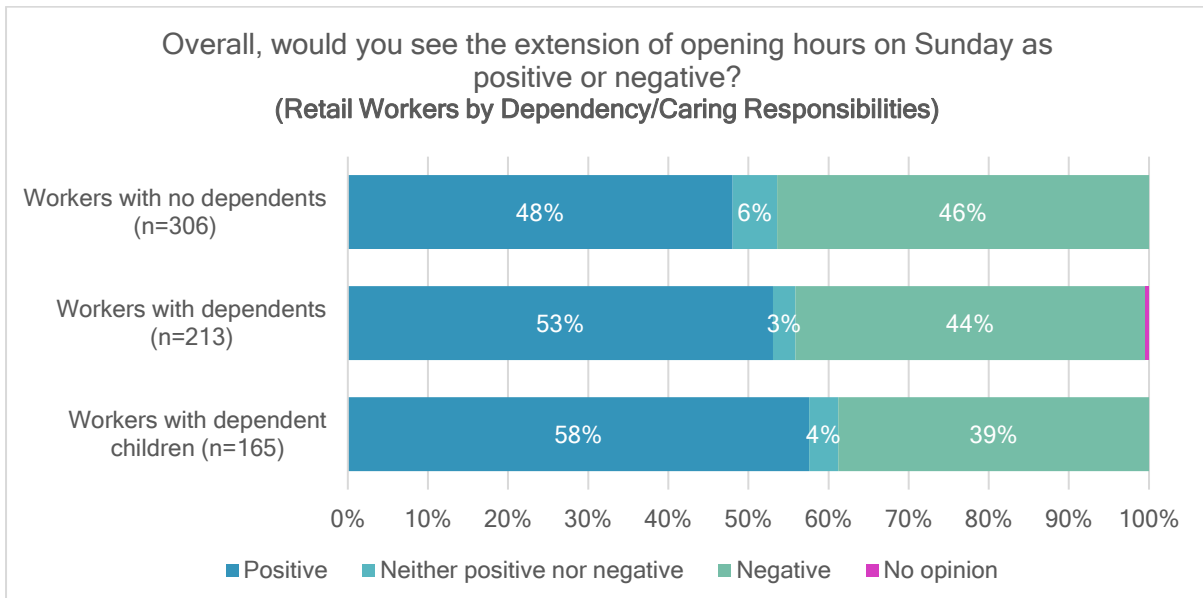


Views on the proposal varied by age. Younger workers (aged 24 or below) expressed a majority negative opinion on the proposal, while workers aged from 25 to 64 were in favour. Those aged over 65* were also against the proposal.

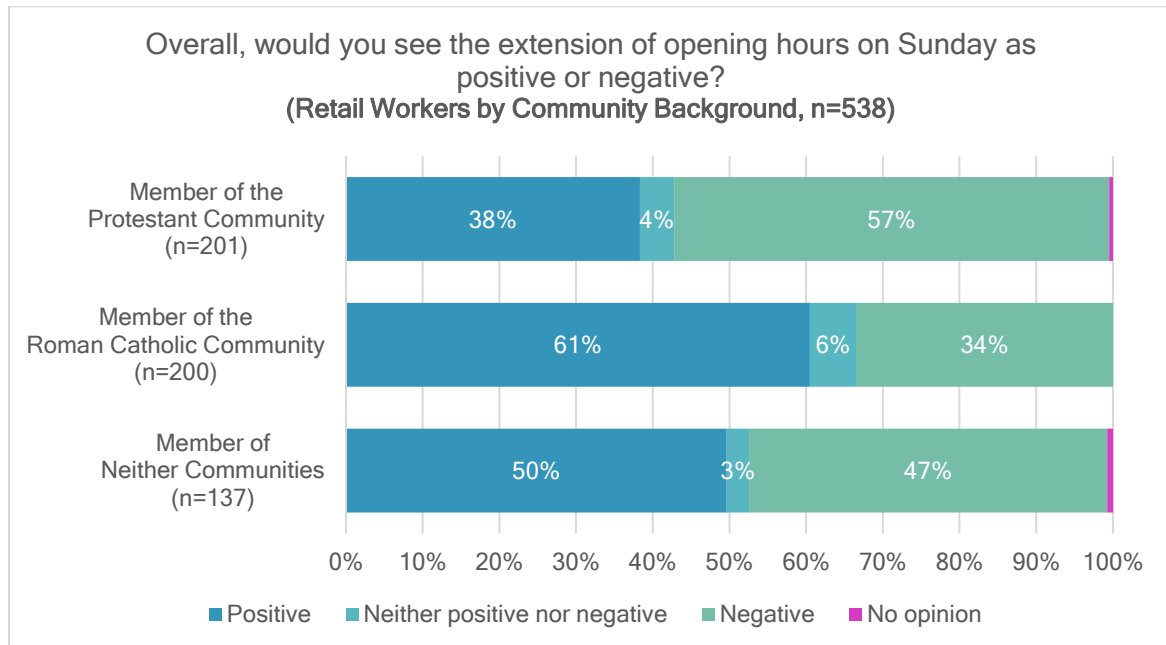


* Note: Small sample size

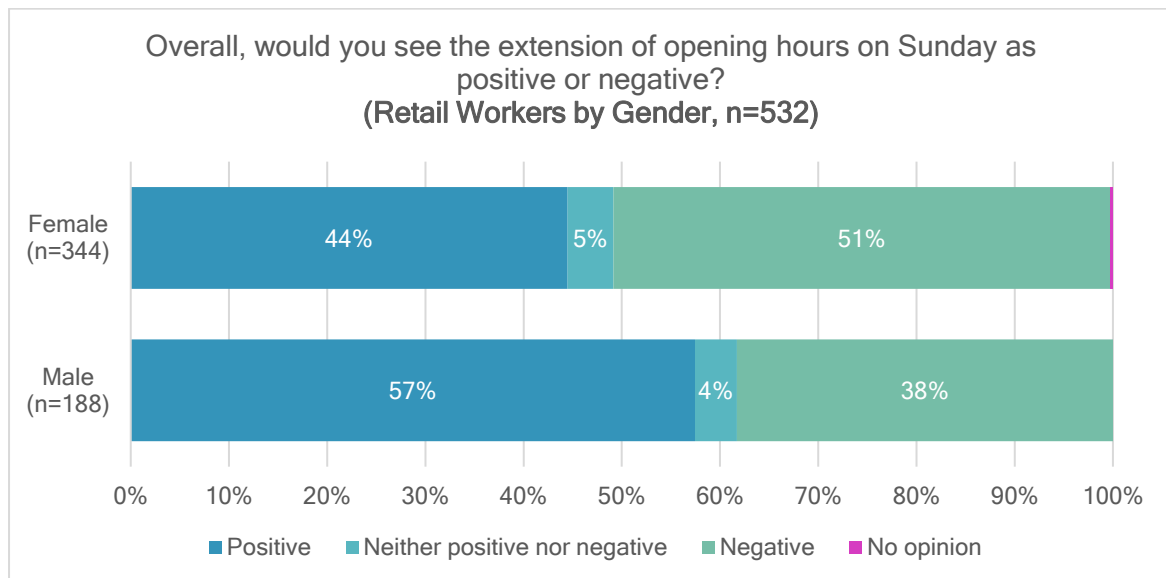
The majority of respondents who work in retail indicated that they have *no dependants or caring responsibilities* (306 responses). This cohort of workers expressed views roughly in line with that of all workers. *Workers with dependents*, and those who indicated they had *caring responsibilities for children* were both more in favour of the proposal, with 53% and 58% of respondents, respectively indicating a positive view.



There was significant variance between workers of different community backgrounds, with a majority of retail workers from a *Protestant community background* expressing a negative view of the proposal (57%). Workers from a *Roman Catholic community background* were the most in favour with 61% stating a positive opinion. Workers identifying as from *neither community background* had a more mixed view.

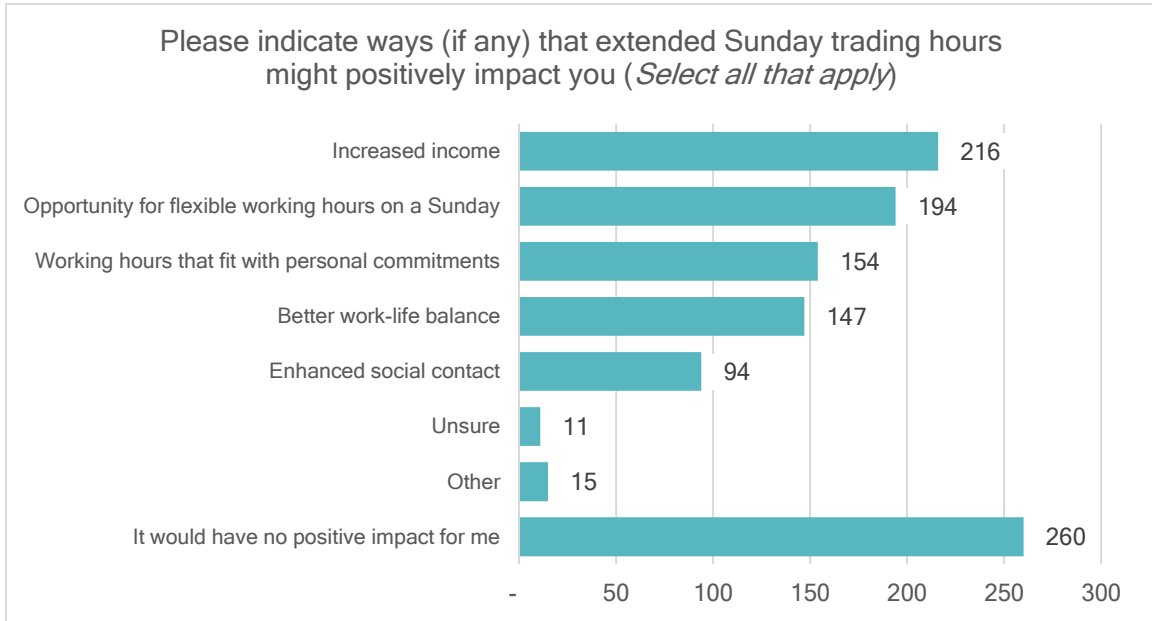


There was divergence in the views of *Male and Female* workers who responded to the consultation, with female workers showing a very slight majority against the proposal, whereas male workers were by a sizeable margin in favour of the proposal.

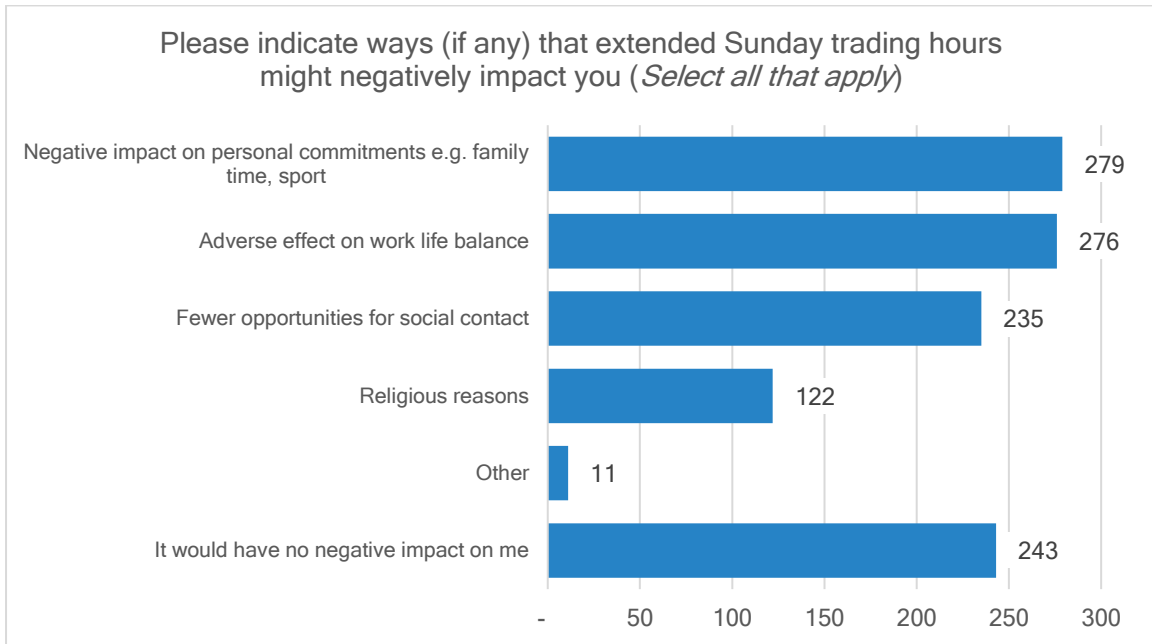


Perceived Impacts of Sunday Opening on Workers

Retail workers were provided with a list of potential positive and negative impacts and asked to identify any they thought would apply to them. Firstly, on positive impacts, 216 respondents (39%) thought they could *increase their income* and 194 (35%) thought it could *provide opportunity for flexible working hours* on a Sunday. 260 respondents (47%) thought it would have *no positive impact*.



On the other hand, regarding negative impacts, 279 respondents (50%) thought the proposal would have a *negative impact on personal commitments*. In addition, 276 (50%) thought it would have an *adverse effect on work-life balance*. On the contrary, 243 thought it would have *no negative impact*.



What retail workers had to say about the impact of extending Sunday trading hours

A selection of responses from workers who were positive about the proposal, are shown below.

Responses from Workers who see Extended Sunday Openings as Positive
<i>"I work in a gift shop in town, and it has such a bad impact on the business on a Sunday as it's a ghost town until 1pm so opening the shops earlier as we open at 9am it would bring a lot more footfall"</i>
<i>"It would allow me to work more hours, and I can easily get my child minded on the weekend but not the weekdays so it would benefit me greatly"</i>
<i>"It will make Sunday less of a rush day, it will give more time to do things with the family, rather than having to wait to shops open, we can get the shops out of the way early, it means Sunday afternoons can be left for family activities/meals etc. It will help businesses generate more income to make them more sustainable in climates when it is hard to make a profit, it will increase opportunity for new shifts, new employment and more hours to staff."</i>
<i>"Working Monday to Friday limits my ability to shop. I usually have to be very busy on a Saturday to get everything done whereas if it were on a Sunday to have wider availability on shops opening hours, I would have more freedom "</i>
<i>"We have an ever-increasing reliance on tourism. Sunday opening has nothing to do with protecting workers rights; it is a religious artifact that we need to leave behind. "</i>
<i>"There are a lot of tourists around Belfast on a Sunday, and they would avail from earlier hours. As a retail worker I would love to work a Sunday morning and take a weekend evening off instead to be with my kids after school. It would also be great to be able to go to Tesco etc on a Sunday morning when I'm off."</i>
<i>"People will [have] greater flexibility, Sunday shopping hours are very limited currently and it is difficult for those who are travelling from beyond Belfast as for a lot of people a Sunday may be the only day that suits them to travel to Belfast and what for? Only a few hours in the shops. Bottom line is that it needs to be increased as it will encourage spending and visiting and enable us to have more flexibility of when we shop on a Sunday."</i>
<i>"It would allow tourists to go shopping on Sunday mornings, I work in grand central hotel and everyone who comes wants to shop on Sundays but simply can't! They think it's ridiculous and i agree too - needs to be looked at."</i>
<i>"Life should not stop on a Sunday, if an individual worker does not want to work on Sundays for religious reasons that is their right however people are not that focused on religion anymore and would actually like to work on a Sunday. For myself I would rather work a Sunday than any other day."</i>
<i>"More options, better flexibility. City centre can be like a ghost town in mornings with tourists nowhere to go or young families. Embarrassed as a city that's shut!"</i>

A selection of responses from workers who saw the proposal as negative are highlighted in the table below.

Responses from Workers who see Extended Sunday Openings as Negative
<i>"Staff get burn out doing extra hours, and decide to look for a new role, which doesn't have these punishing hours. Then colleagues are left to work even harder till a replacement is found and trained up. Maybe not so bad for retailers where staff only work a few hours, but please remember there are retailers where staff already work full time"</i>
<i>"I work 45 hours a week in retail and often have to do more as I am a manager, as it stands working a Sunday for me means 10am-7pm. We do not open till 1pm which allows time for a reset of the store after the weekend. If we opened earlier my shift may have to start at 7am, which is what time I start the rest of the week, taking away the only lie in and time with my partner in the morning I get, and I know many other people working in retail would be in the same boat"</i>
<i>"I have no desire to work longer Sunday hours. The shorter day is all the respite I get from working the whole weekend, every weekend."</i>
<i>"I would have less time with my family who I see little enough of due to late night openings. I already can't book holidays during times schools are off to be with my kids as it doesn't fit "the needs of the business". And now you want to take away the few hours that I do have to spend with them so the bosses can make big money while the rest of us struggle on minimum wage?"</i>
<i>"It would be negative! Little enough time with my family, less Saturday nights out, more tax being paid & National Insurance, a day missed when the whole family can sit down & share a Sunday roast. Many families rush around on Saturdays doing weekly shop, being a taxi driver for their kids & getting caught up on housework. With new employment laws arriving in April many shops won't be able to afford to employ more staff!! "</i>
<i>"I am a retail worker, and I find this idea very unfair. Us retail workers work every day except 2 days of the year, most of us work long hours with little appreciation from customers and we work everyday public holiday. A Sunday is the only day that these working hours are slightly lessened for us, and I think that extending opening hours on a Sunday would be very negative for retail staff. "</i>
<i>"I feel for workers welfare and as a practicing religious person, shorter hours of 1-6 are beneficial to allow those who work to be able to attend other commitments over the weekend, especially as I work most Saturdays and I am based in community healthcare. I still have a very busy and challenging workday despite these shortened hours"</i>
<i>"I think yes it would create more profits but why change something that has worked so well. Everyone deserves a shorter shift and fair working hours. It's unfair to all workers and business as it creates more pressure on scheduling. As well as workers not being able to use public transport as there isn't enough to accommodate the difference in hours"</i>
<i>"It is unfair to ask those in a Christian country to work on a Sunday morning. Bringing retail staff in earlier on a Sunday decreases their work life balance. Retail staff are overworked and underpaid as it is. I do think if businesses wish to open earlier such as small, local companies then they should be allowed to do so, but it is unfair to change the entire dynamic of a Sunday for the sake of tourists."</i>
<i>"Keep one morning a week for family and social cohesion. The shops are open long enough. Online shopping is already available day and night!"</i>

Where should extended Sunday Openings apply?

Respondents were asked where they thought the holiday resort designation should apply. A large majority of respondents thought that should the designation occur, it should apply *across the district*, rather than solely for the city centre.

limiting advantages to the city centre. Respondents also expressed an appetite for extension of Sunday opening hours across Northern Ireland (5.9%). Whilst this is beyond the scope of this report, the results highlight the desire for a unified approach to Sunday trading which supports retailers across the region.

Many respondents indicated that extending trading hours across the wider council area would also support greater flexibility and convenience in daily routines, particularly enabling individuals to better manage their time and plan activities. This was reflected in recurring references to time efficiency, convenience, and proximity to home, with respondents highlighting the benefits of being able to shop locally rather than travel into the city centre. These views were frequently linked to concerns about transport challenges, including limitations in Sunday public transport, which were cited as a barrier to accessing the city centre.

There was also a perception that a wider geographic approach would contribute to increased vibrancy across neighbourhoods, rather than concentrating activity solely in the city centre. Respondents suggested that this could help to distribute footfall more evenly and reduce congestion associated with current opening patterns. At the same time, tourism was identified as an important consideration, with some participants highlighting the potential for a stronger and more consistent Sunday offer to enhance the city's appeal to visitors. Many participants also noted that several tourist attractions and retail offerings are outside of the city centre boundary and it would not be logical to exclude access to these based on the geography of the holiday designation zoning.

In other findings, respondents emphasised the importance of maintaining choice and flexibility for businesses, with options for business featuring prominently in responses. Many supported a model whereby individual retailers could determine whether to extend their opening hours, reflecting a preference for a voluntary rather than mandatory approach which is consistent with legislation around Sunday trading.

Several concerns were also raised. Some respondents highlighted the potential risk of displacement of economic activity, noting that extended trading could redistribute rather than increase overall footfall and spend. There were also concerns that benefits may disproportionately favour larger or national retailers, with potential implications for smaller, independent businesses and local shopping areas.

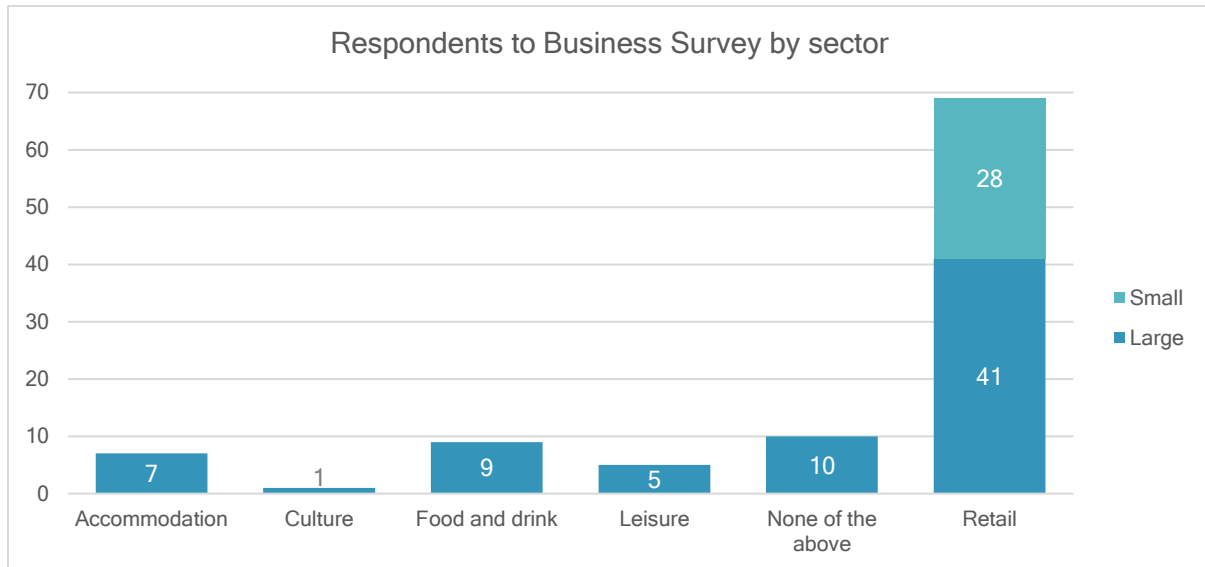
In terms of the broader Sunday offering, while existing attractions such as St George's Market were recognised as important contributors to footfall, respondents noted that the current early Sunday provision remains limited. Several participants suggested that a more diverse and coordinated offer which combine retail, hospitality and cultural activity would be required to meet expectations, particularly for visitors and tourists.

atmosphere/vibrancy (10.0%) and *options to choose* (9.3%). Economic considerations were also prominent, with *economic impact* and *tourism* referenced widely. Social considerations were also evident, with *workers' rights*, *family life* and *displacement* of activity from local areas to city centre frequently raised. It should be noted that respondents often referenced multiple themes within a single response.

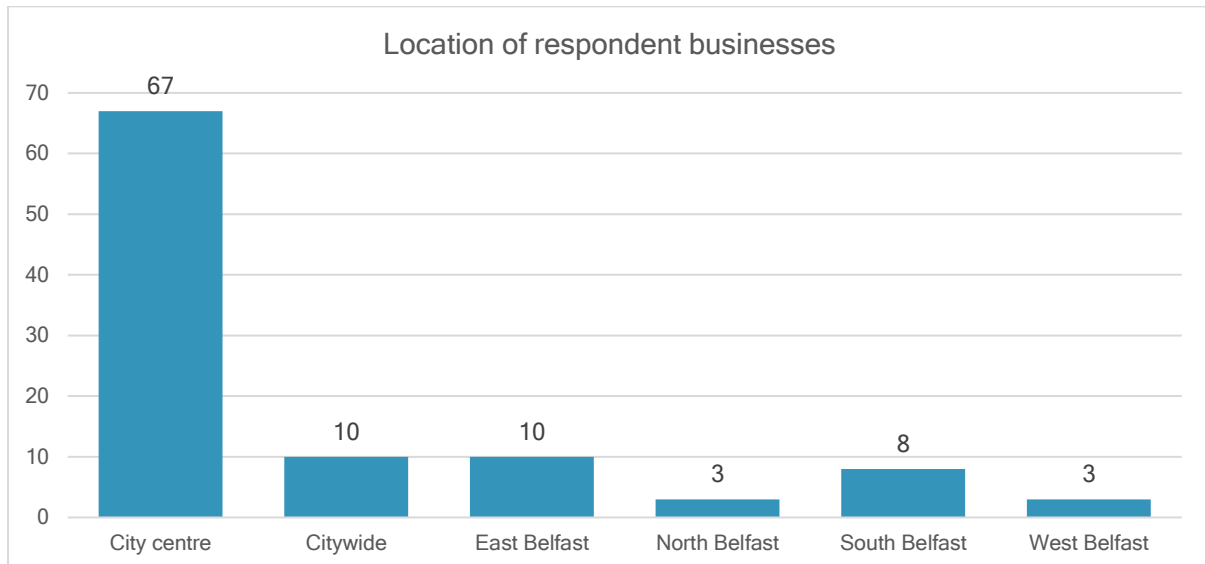
Business Survey Results

Who Responded?

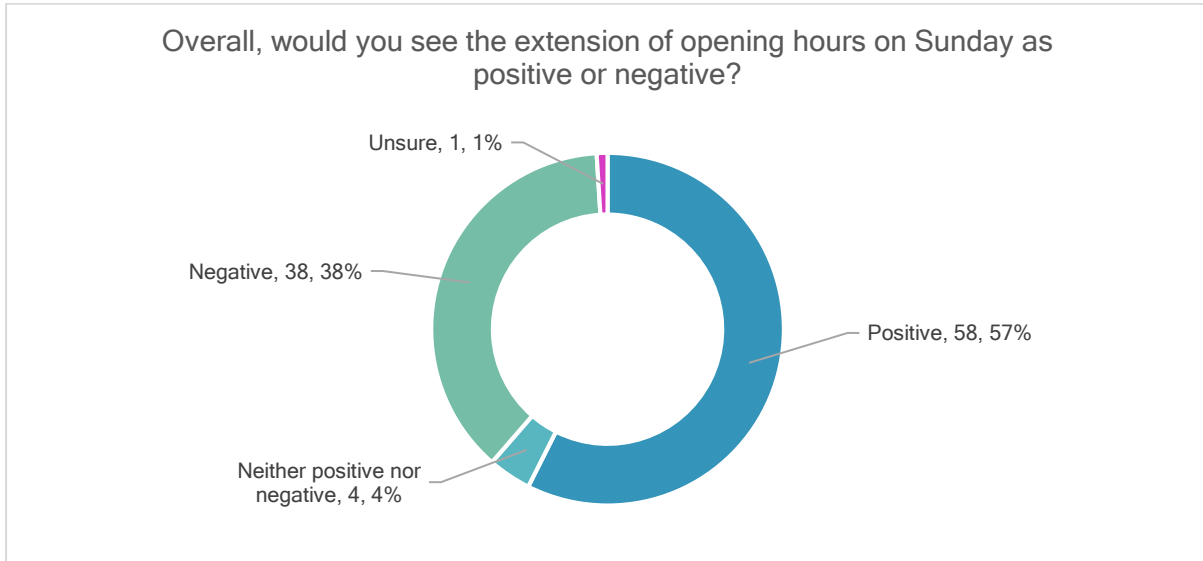
There were 101 responses to the business survey. Over two-thirds (68%) of the responding businesses were from the *retail sector*, including 41 large retailers and 28 smaller retailers.



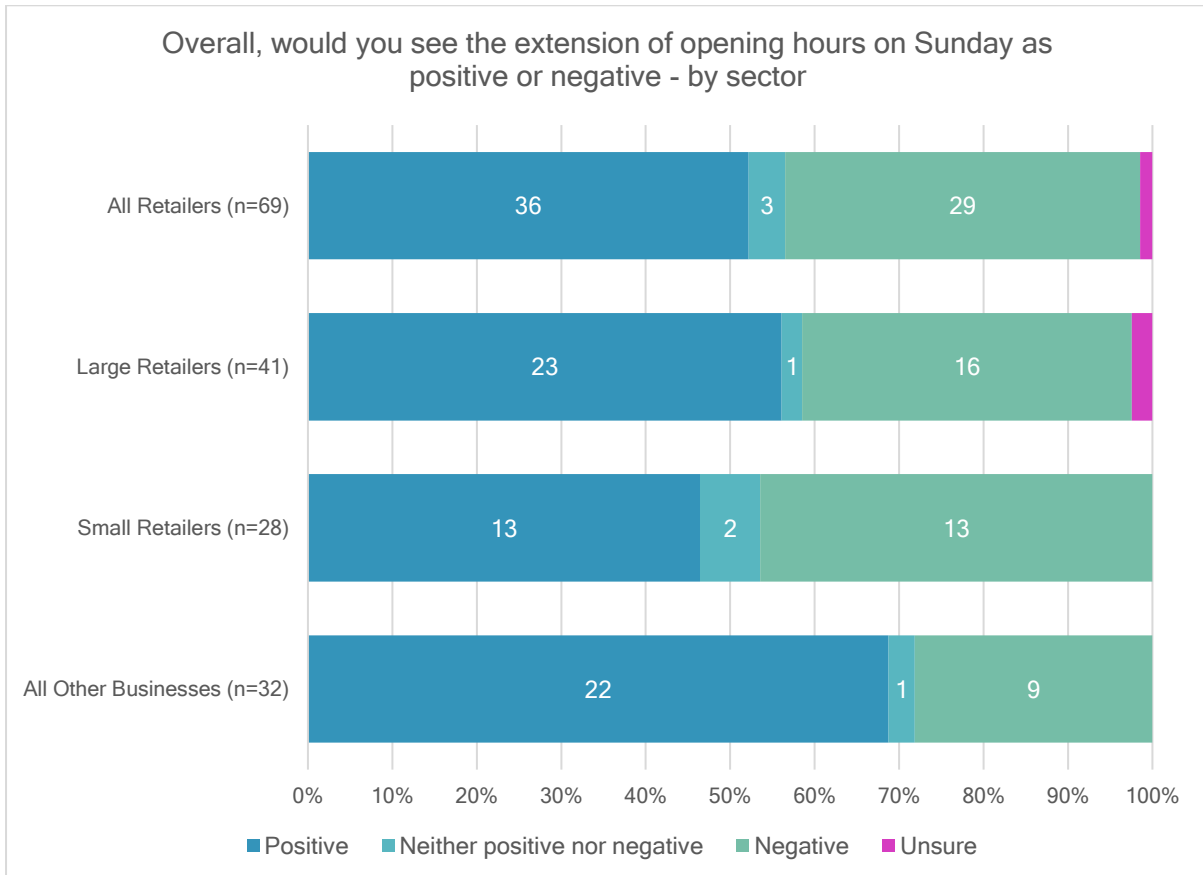
The majority (66%) of responding businesses were located in the city centre. Responses were received from businesses located in all areas of the city.

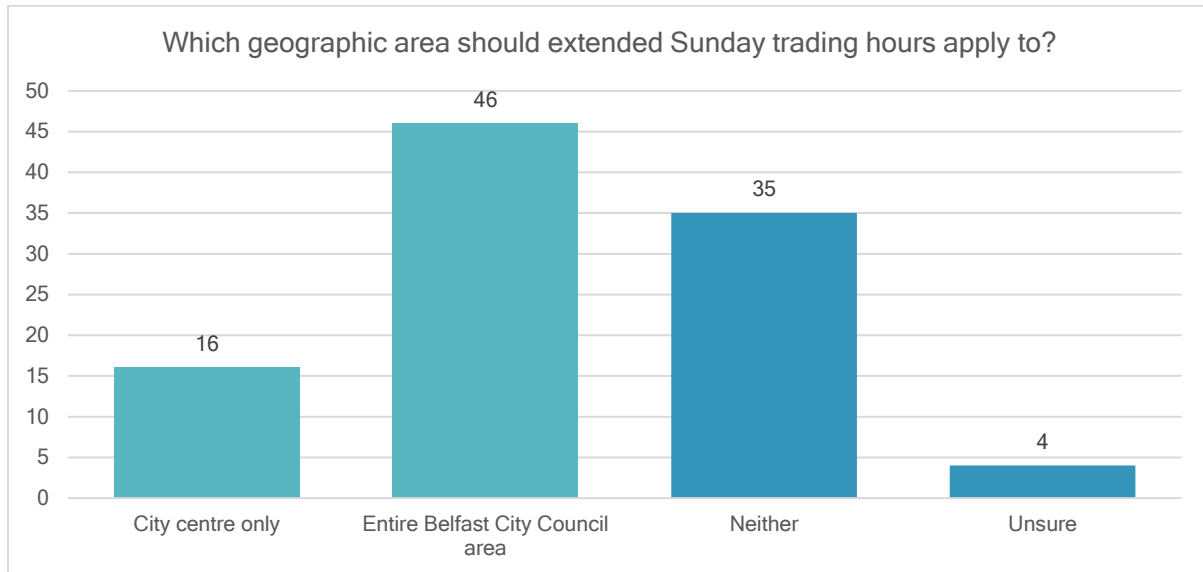


Headline Result – Positive or Negative (Businesses)



A majority of responding businesses (57%) reported the extension of Sunday opening hours as *positive*. Most retailers (53%) also seen the move as positive - this included a majority of larger retailers (23 of 41 responding businesses). There was an equal number of smaller retailers who reported the move as positive (13 of 28 responding businesses) as there was negative (13).



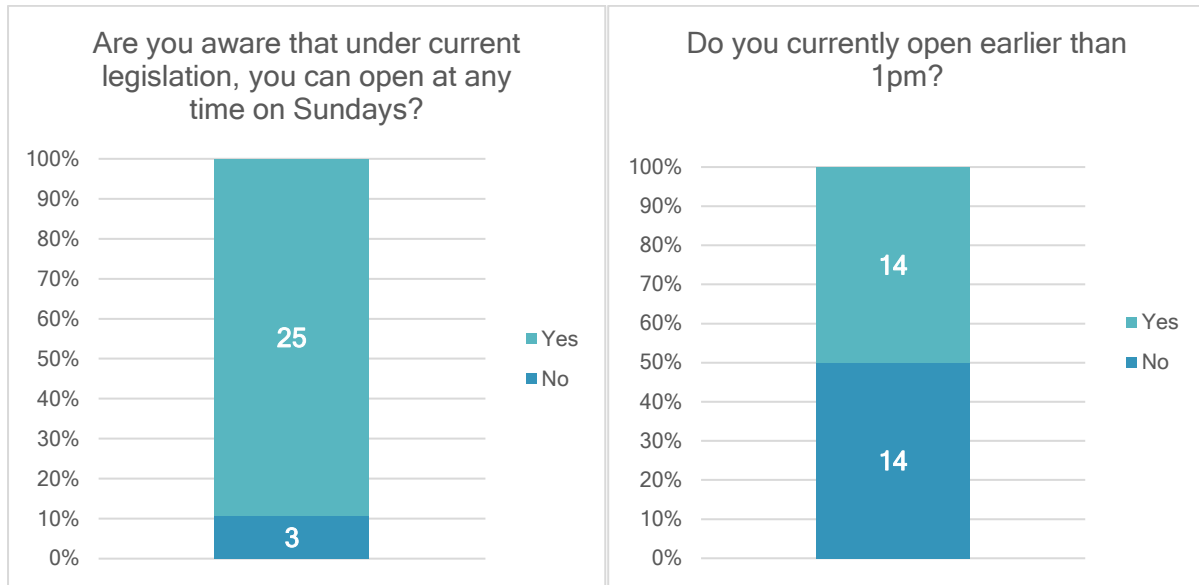


Businesses were asked which geographic area extended Sunday trading hours should apply to. The entire Belfast City Council area was the most frequent option of responding businesses (46). Businesses were asked to explain their answer and a selection of responses are listed below:

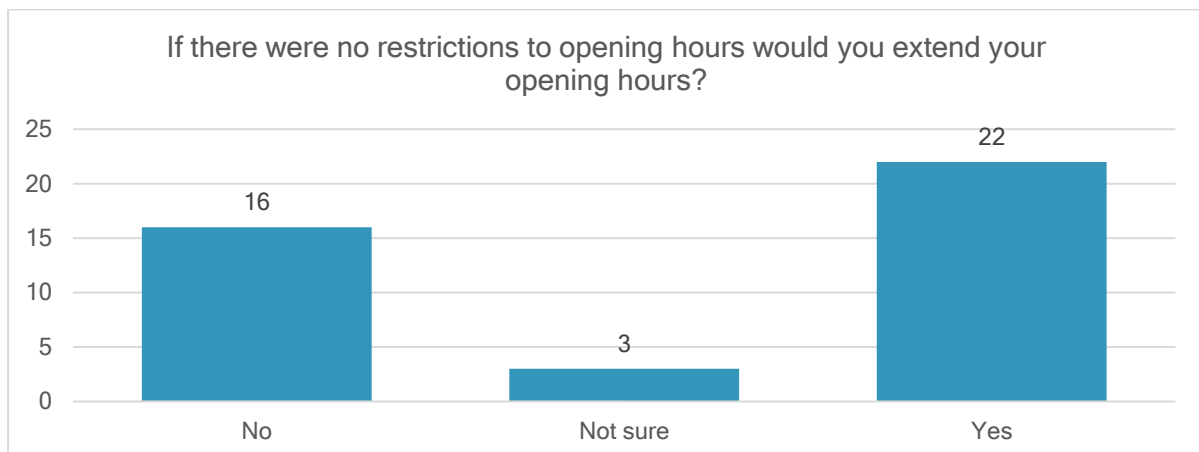
- *“Having one rule for city centre and another for surrounding areas seems unnecessary and could be confusing to local patrons and tourists who increasingly stay in and visit wider areas of the city and surrounding countryside.”*
- *“We have premises in North, East, South, West and city centre.”*
- *“There should be a unified approach across all areas of Northern Ireland not just Belfast”*
- *“I feel to align with the rest of Europe with retail opening hours is the way forward.”*
- *“Visitors want to explore whole city”*
- *“As this is related to holiday resort status, the city centre is where the highest % of tourists will be, it is logical, as with other towns throughout NI who have had their councils designate them HRS.”*
- *“Trial this area [city centre] first and measure impact”*

The Views of Retailers

There were 69 responses to the Business Survey from the retail sector, including 41 from large retailers and 28 from smaller retailers. Depending on the organisation’s size, they were presented with a series of routed questions based on their awareness of the legislation, current processes and impact of any policy change.



Most smaller retailers (25 of 28 respondents) were aware that the current legislation, currently affords them the opportunity to open at any time on Sunday without restrictions. Half of all responding small retailers reported that they *currently open before 1pm*. Of the 14 retailers who don't open earlier, 4 reported that they would *consider opening* before 1pm if larger retailers were also allowed to open earlier on Sundays. The remaining 10 stated that they would *not consider opening*.



Larger retailers were informed that retail businesses with a floor space exceeding 280 square meters cannot open outside of 1pm-6pm on a Sunday. They were questioned whether they would extend their opening hours if there were no restrictions. Half of respondents (22 of 41) reported that they would open, 16 reported that they would not open and 3 were unsure. Availability of staff and additional utility costs were the most popular reasons reported by businesses who stated they would not open. Other reasons included *colleagues need down time, staff enjoy the shorter shift, low footfall and prefer that the community rests*.

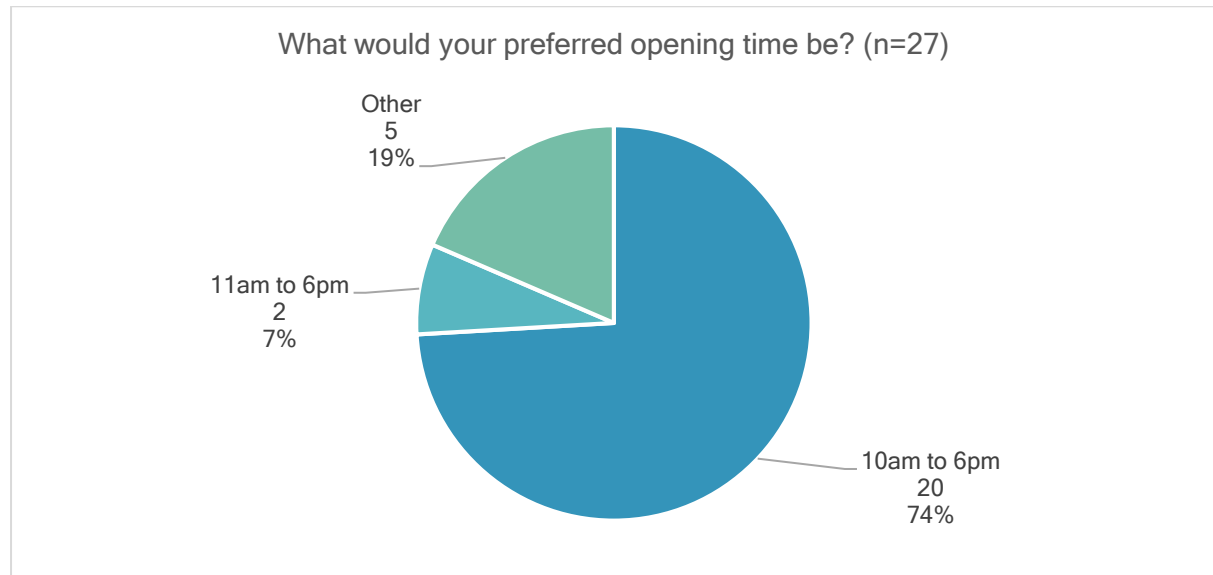
Given the limited sample size, more detailed analyses lack statistical robustness necessary for reliable interpretation and have therefore not been included within the report.

Most respondents (24 of 25 retailers) reported that they expect extended Sunday trading hours to increase their total weekly revenue, with most (17) expecting it to significantly increase. The remaining respondent was unsure.

Research from other cities suggests that opening earlier on a Sunday may provide a number of positive opportunities. Businesses were presented with a range of factors and asked to indicate how important they were to their business. There was unanimous agreement that all factors (opportunities to generate new sales; target new customers; enable staff to access

more flexible working hours on a Sunday; and target visitors or tourists during the summer months) were important.

Conversely, respondents were also presented with a list of negative factors and asked to select all factors that they think would cause negative impacts and discourage them from opening. *Staff related issues and staff costs* were the most frequently identified negative factors.



Those businesses who reported that they were considering the opportunity to extend Sunday opening hours were questioned on their preferred opening and closing times. The chart below indicates that 10am to 6pm was the most popular response. Other suggestions included: 11am to 5pm; 9am to 10pm; 10am to 8pm (during the tourist season); and 8am to 8pm.

Additional Responses

There were written responses submitted on behalf of five organisations (USDAW, Belfast Chamber, Translink, NI Hotel Federation and Association of Convenience Shops). These are summarised below.

- **USDAW** - USDAW’s survey of 220 Belfast retail workers shows strong opposition to extending Sunday trading. 82% view it negatively, with 76% of working parents and carers saying it would negatively impact their family life. Respondents fear increased pressure to work Sundays without additional pay, reduced wellbeing, and harm to work-life balance. They report that their workers would rather be spending time with family and engaging in community, sports and leisure activities or attending church. USDAW also highlights concerns about negative impacts on smaller retailers (referencing in particular St. George’s Market traders) who can already open and argues there is no clear economic benefit, urging the council to retain existing arrangements.
- **Belfast Chamber** – A May 2026 Belfast Chamber member survey of 94 businesses found strong overall support for extending Sunday trading. 66% believe it would benefit business and/or the city, and 78.7% support opening before 1pm. Most (68.1%) do not anticipate staffing difficulties. Feedback highlights benefits for tourism, footfall, city activity and business flexibility, though a minority raised concerns around staffing pressures, employee wellbeing, and preserving Sunday as a day of rest.
- **Translink** - while recognising potential benefits of extended Sunday trading, Translink stresses severe funding constraints. Current resources do not allow for extended or

enhanced Sunday services across bus and rail networks, and any changes would require dedicated additional funding. Translink therefore takes no position on the proposal but confirms that it lacks capacity to support it operationally at present.

- NI Hotel Federation - the NIHF supports limited extension of Sunday trading hours via holiday resort designation, viewing it as a pragmatic step to boost Belfast's weekend economy. Current restrictions create a morning activity gap despite strong demand and high Saturday hotel occupancy. Extended hours would enhance the visitor experience, increase dwell time and spending, support hotels, and create a more vibrant, family-friendly city. The flexible, seasonal approach is welcomed as balanced and aligned with tourism needs.
- Association of Convenience Shops - ACS opposes extending Sunday trading hours, arguing there is no unmet consumer need as convenience stores already open freely. The proposal would mainly benefit large supermarkets, displacing trade from independent retailers without increasing overall spending. It also extends beyond the city centre rationale and lacks evidence for supporting high street regeneration. ACS urges the council to prioritise issues like rates, crime and accessibility instead of changes that could disadvantage small businesses and workers.

In addition, council officers also engaged the Chief Executive of Retail NI, who re-affirmed the organisation's opposition to any designation of holiday resort designation within the city (particularly at a citywide geography), mirroring previous representations on this issue.

Previous Consultation Results

Sunday trading in Belfast has been considered by the council on a number of occasions over the past decade, with decisions reflecting changing economic conditions, policy priorities and evidence available at the time.

2017 Consultation

In May 2017, the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee considered proposals to extend Sunday trading hours through designating Belfast as a holiday resort under the Shops (Sunday Trading &c.) (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. The initial proposal was made in response to a strong lobby within the city to improve the tourism offering in Belfast (particularly on a Sunday morning), to boost the local economy and to support the overall regeneration of the city centre. The consultation included the priority question: “Should Belfast be designated as a holiday resort in order to provide large shops with the option to extend Sunday trading hours?”

A total 2,471 people and organisations responded to the consultation; 1,531 answered Yes (62%); 934 answered No (38%); and 5 did not answer. Respondents were also asked, “What area should the designation apply to?” Of the total 1,858 people and organisations who responded via the Citizen Space online tool, 1,398 (75.2%) indicated all of the Belfast City Council area; 291 (15.7%) indicated Belfast City Centre only; and 169 did not answer (9.1%).

Following consideration of public consultation feedback and stakeholder evidence, including a number of deputations to the Committee, members voted against the proposal and it was declared lost. This position was subsequently accepted by the full Council.

2018 Consultation

At its meeting on 16 February 2018 the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee agreed that the council undertake an additional 6-week consultation between 19 February and 02 April 2018 on the key questions. The purpose of this supplementary consultation was to allow consultees to further contribute to the existing evidence base and to provide members with up-to-date information upon which to make any decision to designate Belfast as a holiday resort or otherwise. The consultation survey repeated similar questions included in the 2017 edition.

In total, 5,196 people and organisations responded to the supplementary consultation. Some 2,092 responses were collected via Citizen Space (the council’s online consultation tool), with the remaining 3,104 responses being comprised mainly of hard copy surveys (1,695), survey postcards (1,369) written correspondence (22) and emails (18).

In response to the question, “Should Belfast be designated as a holiday resort in order to provide large shops with the option to extend Sunday trading hours?” a total of 2,528 answered Yes (48.7%); 2,635 answered No (50.7%); and 33 did not answer. Responding to the second question, “What area should the designation apply to?”, 2,344 respondents (87.7%) answered “all of the Belfast City Council area”; and 330 (12.3%) indicated Belfast City Centre only.

Following a series of deputations, the Committee agreed to defer consideration of the matter. In May 2018, members of the SP&R Committee agreed not to designate the Belfast district (or the city centre) as a holiday resort and that a report on animating the city on Sundays be submitted to a future meeting.

2019/20 Consultation

Following the fire at the Bank Buildings in August 2018, the council as well as a range of public and private partner organisations invested in a programme of activities to support city centre development. Following on from an initial response focusing on “City Centre Recovery”, the programme moved on to focus on “City Centre Revitalisation”. This reflected a need for a longer-term approach to investment, taking account of all the possible functions of the city centre. At the City Growth and Regeneration Committee meeting on 11 September 2019, members agreed to undertake a focused research, engagement and consultation exercise to inform a future approach to specific proposals for investment in the city centre on a Sunday.

At its meeting on 12 February 2020, the CG&R Committee were presented with the findings of the “Sundays in the City” engagement programme which took place between October 2019 and January 2020 and included the following elements:

- Online public consultation – using the council’s online engagement portal (Citizenspace). The consultation was opened for eight weeks and closed on 17 January 2020. It received 1,440 responses, more than 70% of which came from Belfast residents. In total, 78% of respondents reported the extension of opening hours on a Sunday as positive; 20% seen it as negative and 6% had no opinion.
- Market research – engagement with a series of survey-based market research exercises targeting users of the city (including workers), NI residents and out-of-state visitors.
- Focus groups – held with several key demographic and target groups including old people, young people, disabled individuals, family groups and city centre businesses
- One-to-one meetings: senior officers held a series of one-to-one meetings with key statutory partners (DfC; Tourism NI; PSNI), business organisations (including Retail NI; NI Retail Consortium; Belfast Chamber; Hospitality Ulster; NI Hotels Federation), trades unions (USDAW and Prospect) and other interested partners including the Interfaith Forum

In March 2020, the City Growth and Regeneration Committee reaffirmed the earlier position of the SP&R Committee by deciding not to extend Sunday trading hours. Instead, the Committee supported an alternative approach focused on cultural animation, family-friendly activity and improving the Sunday morning experience in the city centre without extending retail opening hours.

Concluding Remarks

The 2026 public consultation demonstrated broad support for the extension of Sunday trading hours. A significant majority of individual respondents (79%) were positive about the proposal, while business responses were more divided but still showed a net positive position (57% positive). This indicates that the majority of those who participated in the consultation are supportive of holiday resort designation, thereby enabling an extension to Sunday trading hours.

Summary and comparison of results from previous consultations

Unlike the most recent public consultation, previous engagements were undertaken on the basis of designating the Belfast City Centre area. Furthermore, the priority question changed between 2018 and 2019/20 from, “Should Belfast be designated as a holiday resort in order to provide large shops with the option to extend Sunday trading hours?” to “Would you see the extension of opening hours on a Sunday as positive or negative?”.

Nevertheless, it can be suggested that public opinion regarding the extension of Sunday trading hours is growing more favourable. A total of 4,537 responses (individuals and businesses) in the 2026 consultation viewed the proposal positively. This represents the highest number of positive responses received across all consultations to date, indicating increasing public support for reform.

Q: Should Belfast be designated as a holiday resort in order to provide large shops with the option to extend Sunday trading hours?

	YES	NO	Sample Size
2017	1,531 (62%)	934 (38%)	2,471
2018	2,528 (49%)	2,635 (51%)	5,196

Q: Would you see the extension of opening hours on a Sunday as positive or negative?

	Positive	Negative	Sample Size
2019/20	97 (78%)	20 (16%)	1,440*
2026 (Individuals)	4,479 (79%)	1,104 (19%)	5,701
2026 (Businesses)	58 (57%)	38 (38%)	101

* Note: This question was **Not** Answered by 1316 respondents.