

The Future of Southport



Planning Application:
App/M4320/V/15/3002637

THE FUTURE OF SOUTHPORT

There are two clear aspects of my objection to the application

1- the catastrophic effect of the development on the retail vitality of the town centre

2- the dire effect it is likely to have on traffic movements on the edge of town

The current depressed state of the retail sector in Southport and the phenomenon of empty shops in the town centre is far and away the most commonly raised issue by my constituents.

PROCESS

I would wish to add too an underlying concern about the process followed by the planning department of Sefton in determining the application and the capacities and performance of that body.

In the last case at which Sefton appeared before the inspectorate in August their efforts were described by a barrister as “lamentable” and the worst he had seen in his entire career.

Specifically I would like to point out Sefton's almost total reliance on the applicant's consultants in the assessment of traffic movements and in the case of retail impact dependence on White Young Green -a firm whose biggest customer is Sainsbury.

The planning committee meeting was perfunctory with agents for the developer allowed to speak on behalf of residents. Last minute papers presented included an attempted negative critique of counter-proposals without any discussion whatsoever with the proposer.

The inspectorate will struggle to find a line in the evidence submitted by White Young Green that the developer would have trouble with or seek to contest.

The WYG assessment of unmet demand help makes the case for Sainsbury's , their systematic dismissal of all alternatives shores that case up, their argued disregard of UDP policies gives further comfort to the developer and their speculation about retail impacts softens criticism.

Their views on the health of the town centre retail environment are based on either the 2006 study or more recent audits that ignore the proliferation of charity shops and short temporary leases.

A study that ignores the impact of the resurgence of grocery delivery, under-estimates the recent expansion in smaller express/local stores and bizarrely argues for an out-of-town store with extensive, comparison goods while acknowledging that Southport town centre over-provides relatively in that field has to be questioned.

However, one could put aside the forensic manner of the case made by WYG were it done on behalf of Sainsbury's. However, their submissions are taxpayer-funded and independent advice to the council. What is surprising though throughout in an application of such enormous importance is the absence of any real differences between applicant and planners.

Much of this concern would be allayed if the council published even in draft form the Nexus report and retail assessment commissioned at the cost of 30K for publication last spring. This is may likely paint a picture of retail health **and potential alternative opportunities** at variance with that produced by White Young Green. Interestingly we find an attempt at pre-emptive dismissal in WYG evidence.

There are significant, viable alternatives. Some are featured in the reports before the Inspectorate. **Developers cannot be allowed to set parameters for the sequential test that can only ever be met by the very out- of- town development they propose.**

I simply note that it is remarkable that in a town with a large, ex-supermarket building with a car park in the centre of town and an owner desperate to market it, that this isn't fairly acknowledged but actively debunked.

Instead the retail viability of the town centre is put at risk. Struggling firms like BHS who own a large building in Chapel St yards away from the old Waitrose/Morrison site are far more likely to stay were this or alternative town centre sites progressed. That whole area alongside Southport station has huge development potential that councils elsewhere would not let slip.

For all these reasons and for the better briefing of the Inspectorate, I have written to the council urging them to publish the Nexus report before this hearing.

I am now informed that the consultants who worked on the Nexus report are both on holiday and will not be able to find time to finalize the report in the light of further post-completion requests made by Sefton. Nexus helpfully unlike WYG does not have Sainsbury's as a major client

The non-appearance of such a crucial report (even if not deliberately contrived) calls into question the council's ability to make any important strategic decision on an evidence-led basis.

The Southport council tax payer is clearly entitled to have the benefit of the report commissioned at not inconsiderable cost at this critical juncture.

RETAIL IMPACT

The core of Southport's economy is its leisure and retail offer. The retail offer hinges upon the town centre- but more specifically Lord St.

Lord St with its tradition of smaller, quality shops IS Southport's usp.

Southport cannot compete with huge retail malls as found in the Trafford Centre and Liverpool One on a head to head basis. Instead the boulevard like pavements and canopies create a unique shopping environment of arcades and bespoke stores - a perfect environment for browsing and perambulation. No one designs retail space like this any more with one side of the street populated almost exclusively by hotels, civic buildings and quality residential dwellings (*see figure 1*)

Whether or not the story that the French used it as a model for the Champs Elysee is apocryphal or not, **it cannot be underestimated how important the vitality of Lord St is to the economy and the community of Southport**

A clear consequence of the opening of a huge out-of-town Sainsbury's is that fewer people will visit the branch in town which will perforce offer less choice.

Current customers to the Sainsbury's (Lord St) take advantage of the free car parking and visit other destinations in town after a food shop.

There will thus necessarily be a sizeable fall in footfall in the town centre. The out-of-town store, given the size of its offer in comparison goods, will also offer out of town competition to town centre traders in non-food goods.

The impact has been significantly under-played by WYG and no data on the current vacancy and void rates was presented to the planning committee. I enclose my own audit of Lord St from earlier this year.

(see figure 2 & 3)

The anticipated impact on other out-of-town stores has been unsurprisingly but implausibly exaggerated. Aldi do not suffer from proximity to big supermarkets as is abundantly clear from all current retail analyses and the Southport Aldi is not only helping to meet any deficiency in any assumed under-supply of food retail but expanding rapidly (currently in the top 5 of their UK stores). Clustering food retail at Meols Cop can only be to their further advantage.

Equally as Tesco themselves make clear impact on their trade has been misrepresented to the Planning Committee. *(Paradoxically the worse it is for Tesco the more traffic problems are compounded- see below)*

It is worth noting that in the past Sefton obliged Asda to trade within the curtilage of the town centre as a condition for planning consent and that Tesco a few years back under significant pressure withdrew an application for a major increase in floorspace to extend their comparison goods range at Meols Cop.

For the council to support the Sainsbury application either conflicts with previous strategy or indicates the utter absence of a retail strategy. It is difficult to see if the Sainsbury application is supported, how other major retailers could be discouraged from considering vacating the town centre and there is evidence that some of them are. Some like Debenhams and BHS if they withdrew would leave huge gaps.

The analysis from WYG offered to the Inspectors not only fudges the issue of short leases and charity shops but fails to recognize that currently some significant big brand players are not trading well in the town centre. The fragility of the retail ecology in the town centre is not a matter any reasonable person can have doubt about.

This development is not only damaging in itself to the town centre but heralds ,if allowed, a mass evacuation and hollowing out of the town centre. What restraints could there be on Tesco as they formerly intended massively extending comparison floorspace and other nationals re-siting outside the town centre ?

Figure 1.

Central Attraction: Lord Street



As illustrated in these pictures, Lord Street has always been a central attraction in the town's appeal.

These pictures show Lord Street circa. 1913 and 1960.



Figure 2.

The vacant units of Lord Street

The below image illustrates the location of vacant units across Lord Street.

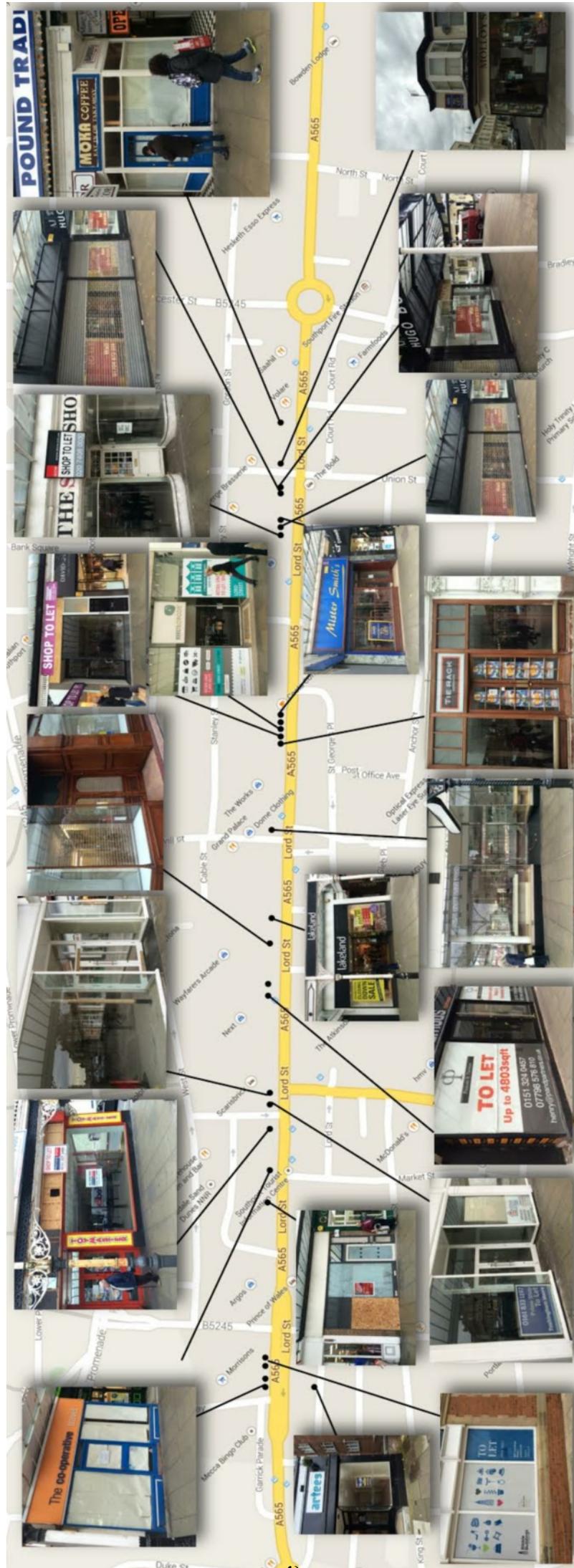


Figure 3.

Lord Street Retail Audit

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
1	Lord Street by Sector/Vacancy										
2											
3	Hospitality	45		Hospitality Breakdown			Retail Breakdown			Service Breakdown	
4	Retail	73		Restaurant	12		Fashion/Accessories	5		Salon	4
5	Services	20		Café	18		Clothes	13		Opticians	2
6	Vacant	29		Pubs	3		Charity Shops	11		Barbers'	2
7	Total	167		Sweet shops	3		Jewellers	13		Bank	4
8				Bakery	2		Gifts	3		Estate agent	2
9	% vacant	17.4%		Hotels	2		Health Food	2		Recruitment agency	2
10	% retail	43.7%		Misc.	1		Shoe	5		Solicitors	2
11							Home/interior	2		Travel agency	1
12							Book	4		Misc.	4
13							Department	2			
14							Card	2			
15							Off licence	2			
16							Supermarket	3			
17							Misc.	5			

TRAFFIC

Regardless of the retail impact, there are sound planning reasons for refusal based on anticipated traffic movements.

It is unusual for a planning department, even a resource-light planning department to accept in such a supine way the traffic modeling and analysis done by the developers consultants. Outside the Elephant and Castle I know of few roundabouts more hazardous than that at Meols Cop and at least the former has the benefit of traffic signals. (see figure 4)

In recent years Tesco in improving slip road access to their store without having to enter the roundabout itself have mitigated the peril.

If the applicants are right in their view of the developments impact on Tesco, a significant amount of new traffic will enter the roundabout that previously accessed Tesco from Birkdale, Kew and beyond.

It has been justifiably pointed out by other parties at this enquiry that Sefton and the developers use different numbers when assessing retail impact than they do when assessing traffic movements. Figures in reports are demonstrably just plain wrong. These errors they have subsequent to the Planning Committees decision sought to correct but the decision by members was clearly made on incorrect figures. As will be made clear by other objectors this is fatal flaw in the applicants case.

Matters though are worse than this. The Kew estate immediately behind Tesco is currently about to almost double in size with an additional 700 dwellings- all of whose inhabitants can only visit a Sainsbury hypermarket through that roundabout. New housing development in West Lancs yards away from the Tesco site is significant too and similarly constrained in accessing the retail park via the roundabout.

The traffic nightmare of Meols Cop is said by the applicant to be softened by the expectation that much business may come via Norwood Road (i.e. out from the town centre). This route passes a

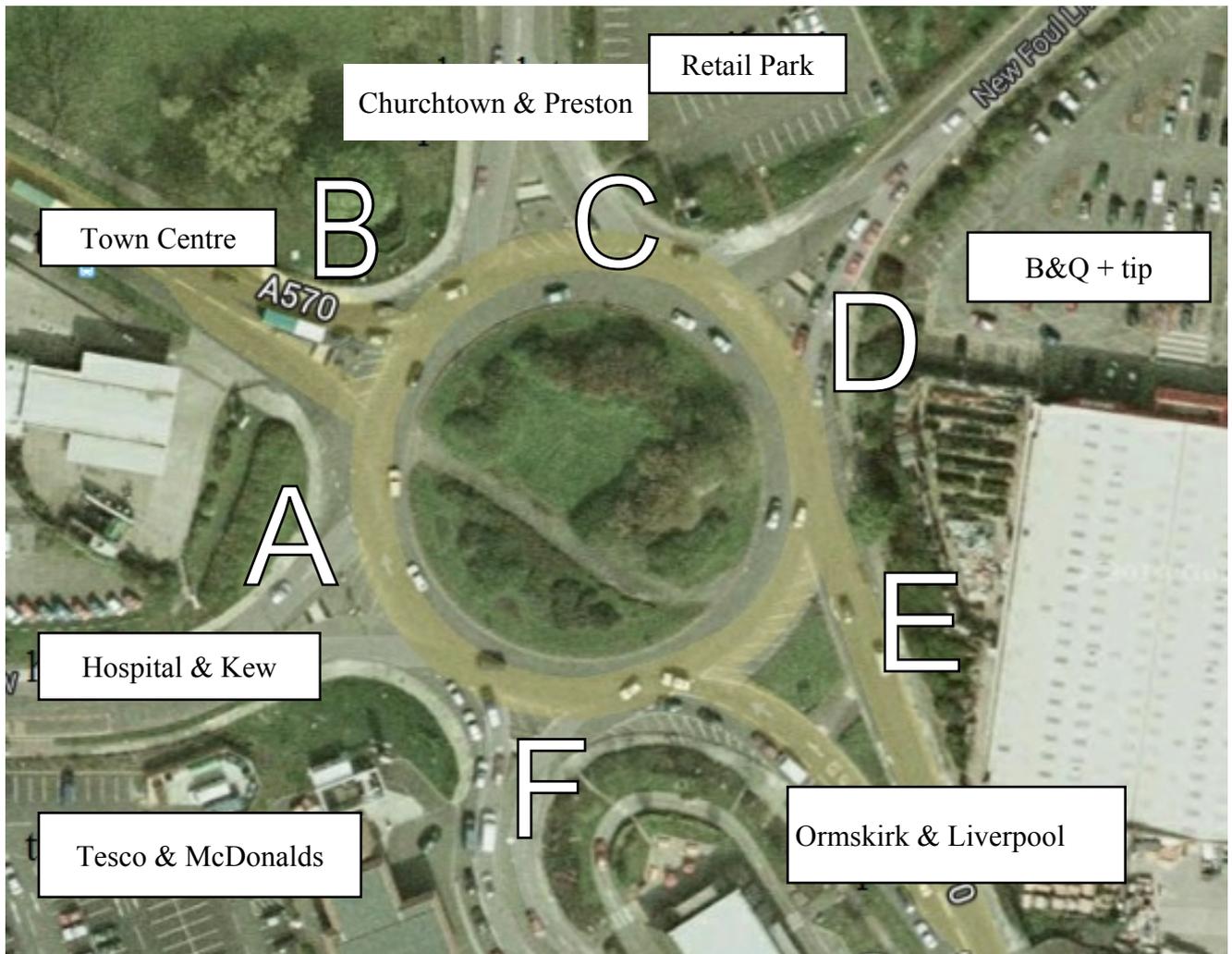
large secondary school, negotiates two narrow junctions and already at peak times during the day is seriously congested with stationary traffic backing for a quarter of a mile (*see figure 5*)

Developers cannot have it both ways. Either the roundabout will become ever more hazardous or access of traffic along Norwood Road from the town centre will become ever more congested. I suspect given the scale of the development we will get both outcomes (*see figure 6*)

It might have been expected that as a condition of planning consent the planning authority would have insisted on a traffic light system at the Meols Cop roundabout.

Figure 4.

Aerial View of Kew Roundabout



Traffic from Birkdale, Ainsdale and the Kew estate collectively travel onto Kew roundabout from entrance 'A'. The above diagram shows the volume of traffic and complexity of the road network.

Figure 5.

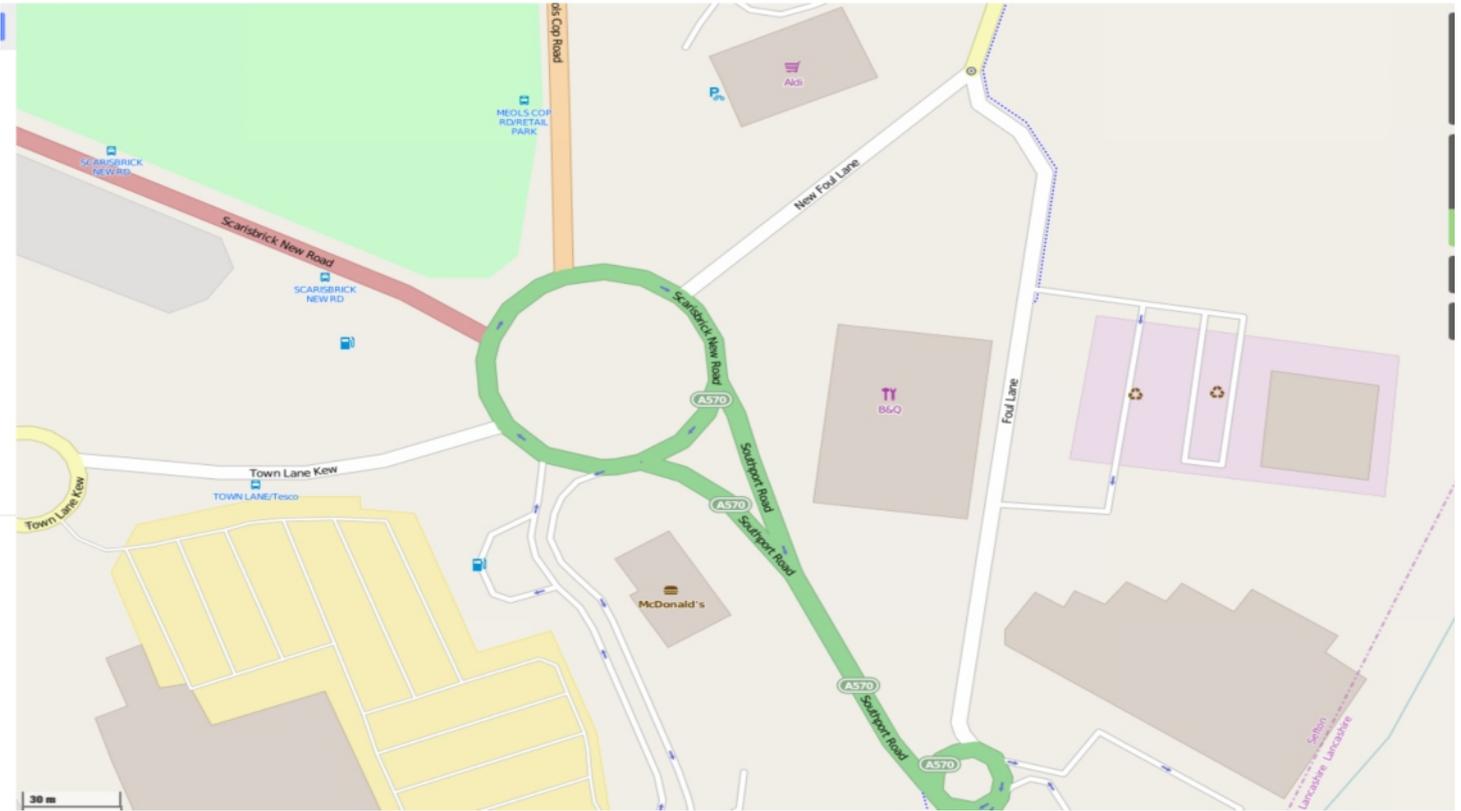
Norwood Road Congestion



Three major roads intersect Norwood Road at the above point with Meols Cop High School also adding to the pressure placed upon the road system.

Figure 6.

Road Map and Arrival View of Kew Roundabout



4 road intersection

New housing development (700 units)

Sainsburys

CONCLUSION

Behind the arguments I hope the Inspectors can detect a note of passion. I have as a former leader of Sefton Council worked through many key developments and infrastructure decisions and have given over much of my life to help ensure that Southport does not suffer the terminal decline that has affected other seaside towns.

This is a crucial decision for Southport and my view is not one which everyone, even in Southport, will agree with. There are many who believe you can have your cake and eat it - have out of town egress and expansion and a thriving town centre. The applicants will undoubtedly enlist them.

I am a regular Sainsbury's customer and one time owner of a web domain "NOGOTOTesco" when I successfully opposed Tesco's plans for a big expansion in comparison goods floorspace.

I have no axe to grind but I am deeply fearful about the consequences of this application for Southport. People come to Southport for a blend of quality retail and leisure- that blend has to be preserved. Any commitment by Sainsbury's to remain in the town centre offering their current range of goods is unenforceable- even given Sefton's current embarrassment with enforcement matters on Lord St (1)

Hypermarkets may not be the way forward now for the big supermarkets, but it is likely that Sainsbury's and UBS have contracted to take all reasonable steps to pursue the application. What is distressing is how cavalier the planning authority has been in bottoming out Southport's interest in this matter

Their supine approach, reliance on out-sourced advice, lack of clear data and inability to put into the public domain a report on the town centre that the council payer has funded is distressing. I can think of few other councils who would behave like this and I would look to the Inspectorate to take a more far-sighted view of what for Southport is a moment of real crisis.

Footnote

(1) Inspectors might wish to look at recent media coverage of the council's efforts in closing illegal arcades in Lord St or consult with Southport Civic Society about their forthcoming, extensive report on the enforcement of Conservation area rules on Lord St.