

VICTORIA ROAD, WIDNES

Regeneration and Delivery Strategy

August 2009



ARUP





August 2009

This document was commissioned by Halton Borough Council from URBED (Urbanism, Environment, Design).

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In the early 20th century, Victoria Road was at the heart of life in Widnes.



Today the street form is intact, but the area has lost much of its vitality as retail has shifted north.



It is hoped that a future role can be found to sustain investment in Victoria Road's urban form and economic function.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This study was commissioned by Halton Borough Council (HBC) in spring 2009. Its brief is to “assess the scope to improve and regenerate the Victoria Road area of Widnes”.

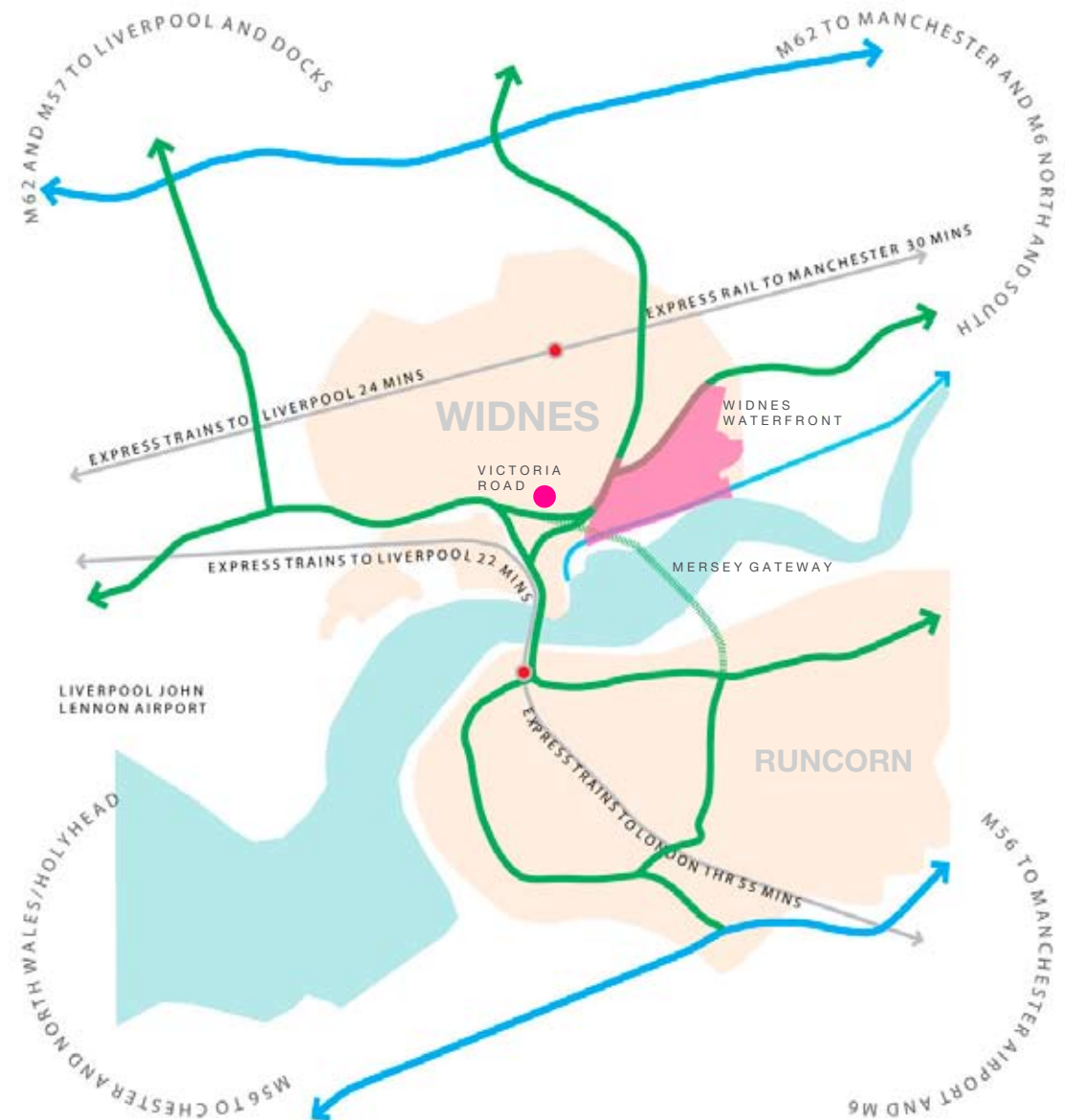
Regeneration cooperative URBED (Urbanism, Environment and Design) have acted as lead consultants, supported by transport planners ARUP on movement/access aspects. Agents Keppie Massie have advised on commercial and property issues.

A steering group with representatives from HBC Major Projects, Planning, Land and Property and Highways has overseen the study. Consultation has taken place with HBC's conservation officers, the managers of Moor Lane Business Centre, and various private sector interests.

Victoria Road was once at the heart of Widnes's civic life, containing an array of shops and well proportioned buildings. With the relocation of Widnes market and other functions in the 1990s, the town's 'centre of gravity' has shifted north, leaving Victoria Road increasingly tired and worn down.

Although the context still contains diverse public, private and residential uses, environmental quality has been steadily eroded, and there is now a need for co-ordinated help to maximise future regeneration.

The consultant team was asked to “investigate proposals and ideas which will lead to the improvement of the Victoria Road area. “ The plan will be expected to contribute to the definition



The area enjoys excellent strategic connections. It is situated 10 minutes drive time from both the M62 and M56, equidistant between Widnes and Runcorn mainline railway stations.



Victoria Road is in need of co-ordinated investment

of the area's identity and sense of place.

Brief to consultants:

The aim of the commission will be to:

- “Investigate proposals and ideas which will lead to the improvement of the Victoria Road area. A streetscape-led regeneration scheme which aims to enhance the local environs and provide an improved infrastructure along the length of Victoria Road is considered to be a starting point for the Regeneration Plan. The Plan will be expected to contribute to the definition of the area's identity and give it a sense of place.”



The formal study area boundary is marked in red. Its context has also been taken into account.

2. CONTEXT - STRATEGIC

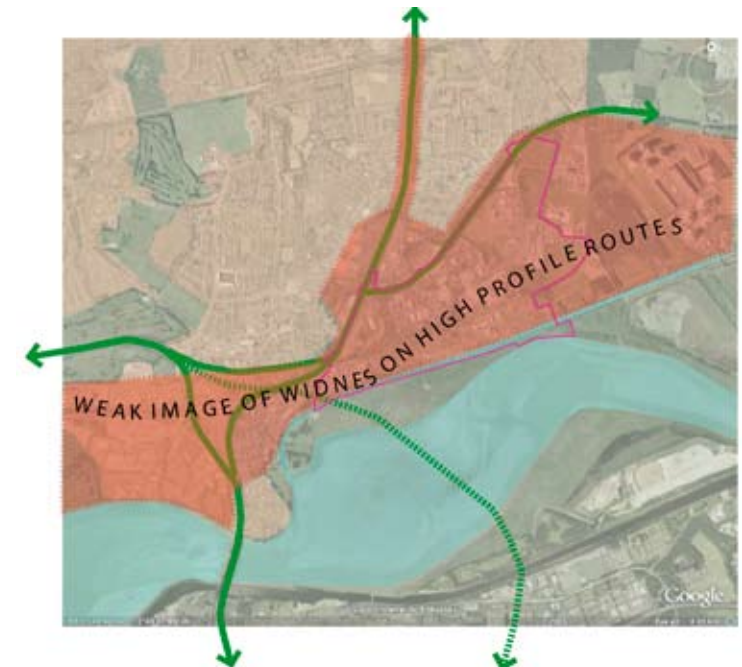
Widnes's advantage of strong connectivity to a wide regional catchment is undermined by the weak image presented on the high profile routes that traverse the study area (fig 2.1).

Although itself a street of good underlying townscape quality, in its current degraded condition Victoria Road makes little positive contribution to the town's image .

However, Halton Borough Council has for many years been delivering improvements in and around the area's context (fig 2.3). It remains a focus for key planning and investment policies.

Foremost among these strategic ambitions is the Mersey Gateway Project for a second Halton road crossing (fig 2.2), which would raise the area's long range accessibility and profile still further.

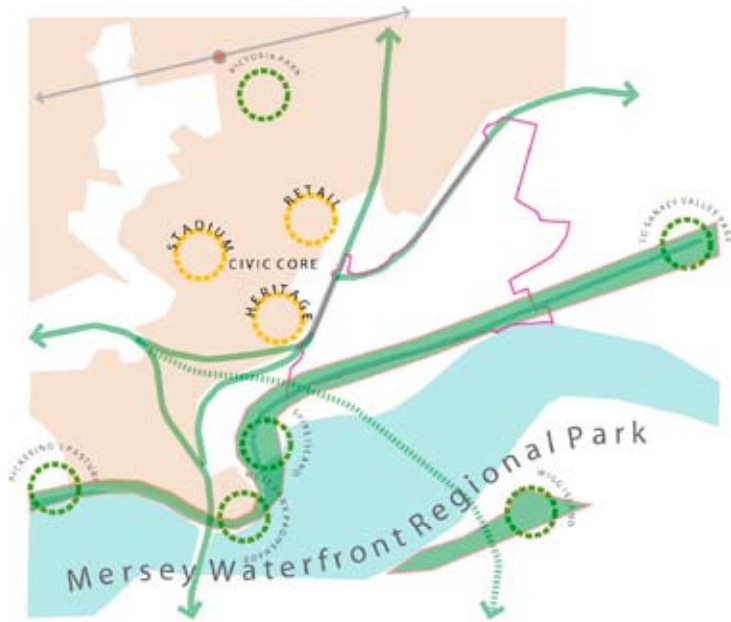
The second Halton road crossing project is accompanied by a regeneration strategy for parts of the borough directly affected by the proposed bridge. Victoria Road is included within the 'West Bank Area of Influence' (fig 2.4) in the Mersey Gateway Strategy.



2.1 Widnes offers an unfairly weak image of the town and borough alongside busy road routes



2.2 The proposed Mersey Gateway will boost the profile and economy of the Borough.

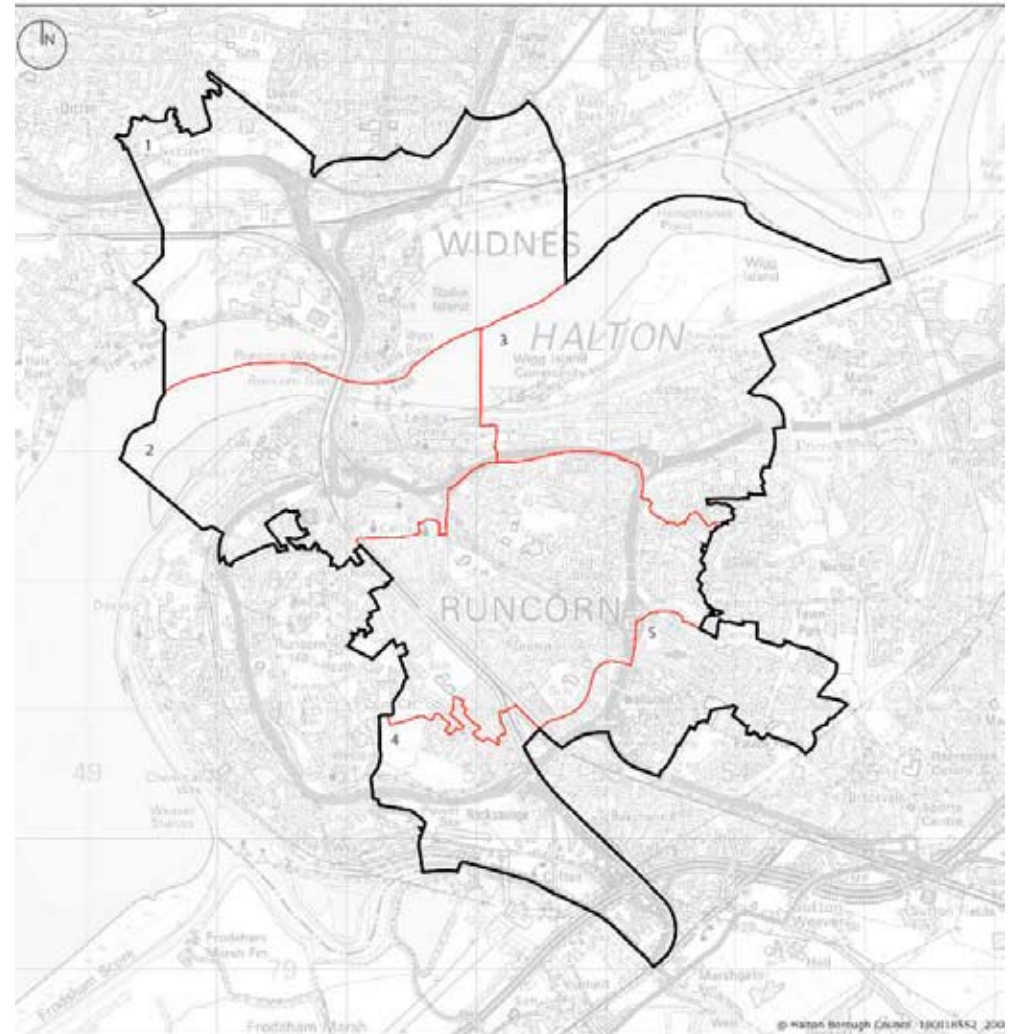


2.3 Numerous improvements are taking place in and around the area.

Strategic Context

Key policies include:

- Mersey Gateway Project and accompanying Strategy - Victoria Road is in the West Bank 'Area of Influence'.
- UDP Action Areas - Victoria Road is covered within regeneration policy RG2, Central Widnes. This is one of six area based regeneration priorities in Halton.



2.4 Mersey Gateway Strategy - Areas of Influence

2. CONTEXT - STRATEGIC

In Halton Borough Council's Revised Unitary Development Plan (UDP), Victoria Road forms part of the Central Widnes Action Area, one of six area-based regeneration priorities identified in the Borough (fig 2.5).

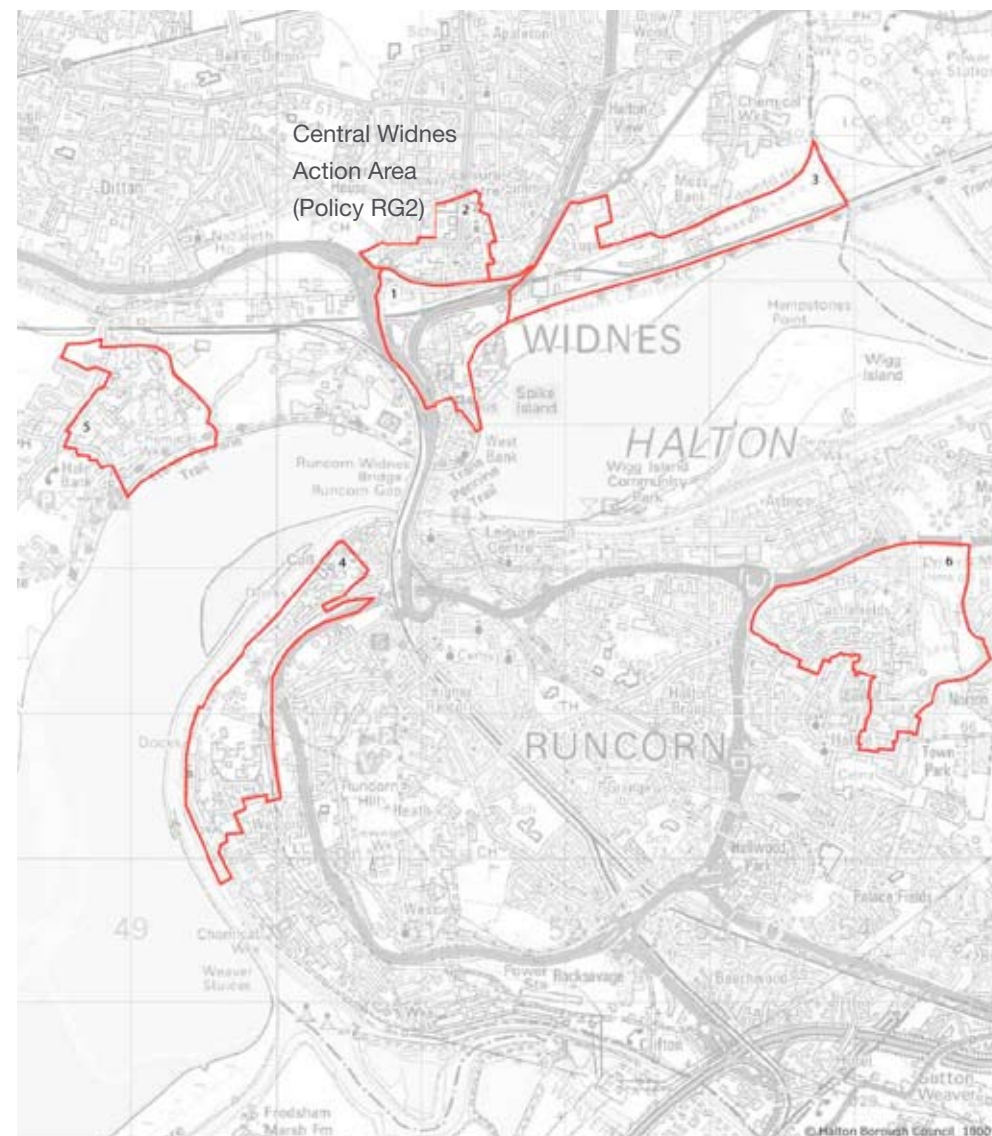
Regeneration policy RG2 applies to the Action Area. It sets out a mix of uses, including higher density residential, to build on the ongoing civic role around the Courts, Council offices, College, Library and Leisure Centre.

Victoria Road is identified as a secondary shopping area, where small retail, evening economy and other uses are acceptable provided they support rather than undermine the town's primary retail core. The policy also advocates good design and restricts environmentally blighting uses.

Two other Action Areas lie immediately adjacent, 'Southern Widnes and Widnes Waterfront'. A Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) for Southern Widnes has been prepared (fig 2.7), as has a masterplan for Widnes Waterfront, where office uses are to be concentrated.

The SPD for Southern Widnes expects future development to tackle the physical and functional severance of the West Bank area from the town centre, and seeks to establish well connected active streets.

In this context, Victoria Road has an important strategic role as a linkage and gateway between West Bank and the rest of Widnes.



2.5 Halton Borough Council has designated six 'Action Areas' in its UDP. Victoria Road forms part of the Central Widnes Action Area, addressed under Regeneration Policy RG2.

1. Southern Widnes; 2. Central Widnes; 3. Widnes Waterfront; 4. Runcorn and Weston Docklands; 5. Halebank; 6. Castlefield and Norton Priory

2.6 Halton's Revised Unitary Development Plan (UDP) Proposals Map shows Victoria Road 'washed over' by the Regeneration Action Area Policy RG2 (shown by the diagonal red hatchings).

The Victoria Square conservation boundary is shown, protected by Built Environment Policies BE 13, 14 - 16 (the area outlined in orange).

Moor Lane and the route into Victoria Square are shown as environmental priority areas (the dashed black line).

Two site allocations are shown nearby, both now built out with a Health Centre and residential development.

To the south of Ashley Way a potential railway station is shown, should the freight line be returned to passenger use.



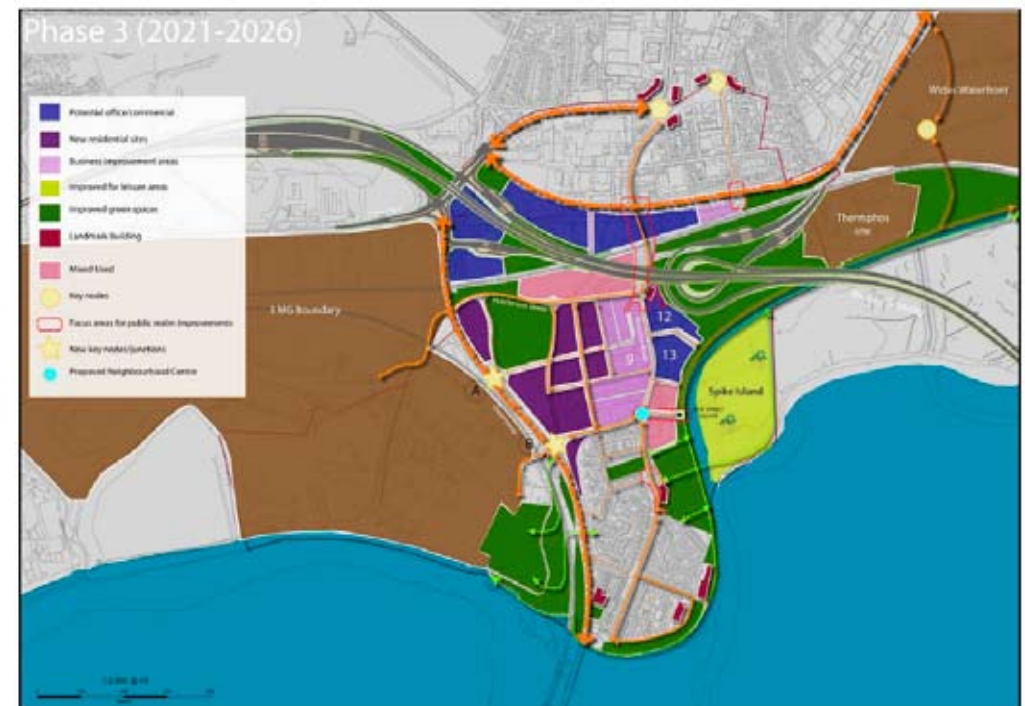
2.7 The Draft Southern Widnes Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) provides a long term planning framework for the area around the proposed new bridge infrastructure.

There is limited direct impact on Victoria Road, but the SPD is important policy context, as Victoria Road provides the key linkage from West Bank to the rest of the town.

The stretch of Victoria Road at the southern end of the study area across Ashley Way and under the new bridge approach is shown as a 'focus for public realm improvements' (bounded by a dotted red line).

The Kingsway Roundabout is acknowledged as a 'key node' surrounded by landmark buildings.

A new local centre for West Bank is proposed near the Catalyst Museum and Spike Island (marked on the plan by a blue circle).



3. CONTEXT - LOCAL

Victoria Road is a key part of Widnes's historic spine. It connects the communities above the Victoria Promenade at West Bank, where the old ferry and Transporter Bridge used to cross the Mersey, through the civic quarter to Albert Road, Widnes's main retail focus.

The civic quarter is adjacent to the study area. Part of it, the Victoria Square conservation area, is the finest architectural ensemble in the town; its red-brick character and civic scale extend along Victoria Road. The civic area comprises Halton's major cluster of public assets and employers, loosely arranged in a 'campus'. They generate and attract large amounts of activity and footfall, but could be better integrated with each other, the study area and wider town.

Having been 'double-by-passed' by the A562 and A568, the spine is now mostly defunct as a primary traffic route. Indeed, further north, it has for many years been fully pedestrianised at Albert Road, and is also blocked to traffic at the ASDA site.

The Victoria Road spine still has an important public transport role as a route from West Bank to the town centre, but through traffic can avoid the study area altogether by accessing Green Oaks via Ashley Way and Watkinson Way.

The configuration of parking and highways infrastructure in the study area has not changed to reflect Victoria Road's importance as a local rather than strategic traffic link. At present highways are set up for high traffic flows, with extensive parking restrictions to protect access to the former market. This format is now obsolete and the public environment needs to be re-balanced towards the needs of

local businesses, residents, public transport users, pedestrians and cyclists.

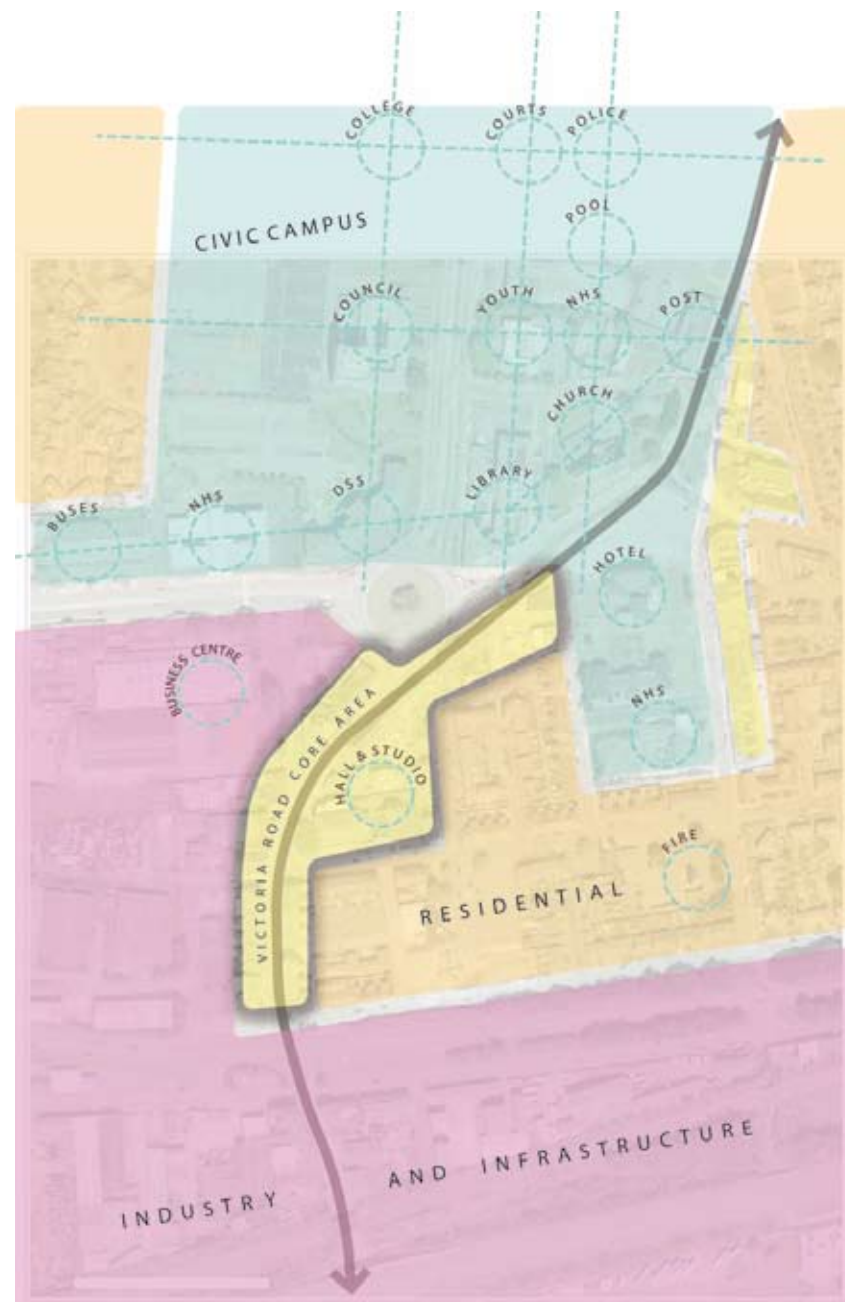
Footfall and Activity Generators:

- Riverside College - 500 staff and 2,000 students
- Pool and leisure centre - 92 staff and 320,000 visitors per annum
- Library - 26 staff and 216,000 visitors per annum
- Council office - 300 staff
- Kids Planet Nursery (Kingsway Centre) 26 staff, 80 places and 250 parents visiting per day
- Kingsway Learning Centre - 200 staff
- Police Station - 180
- Halton Transport Bus Station - 140 staff
- Fire Station - 70 staff and 200 visitors per annum
- Moor Lane Business Centre - 41 businesses

Totals - 1534 known staff
- 3700 known daily visitors on average

These may well underplay the true numbers. They do not include:

- HBC Children's Centre - Not known
- NHS Health Centre - Not known
- DWP/Job Centre - Not known
- Kingsway Hotel - Not known
- Post sorting office - Not known
- Ambulance station - Not known
- Buzz Youth Centre - Opening 2010
- Studio - Opening 2010
- Courts - Closed 2009



2.8 There are numerous important uses within a short walk of Victoria Road. These generate large volumes of movement and footfall, a potential source of trade and activity for the study area.

The socio-economic context of the study area is an important consideration. The 2007 Index of Multiple Deprivation shows the Kingsway Ward as within the 5% most deprived nationally (fig 2.8). In the domain of income, the southern part of the ward is within the 1% most deprived. For health the ward is also in the worst 5%.

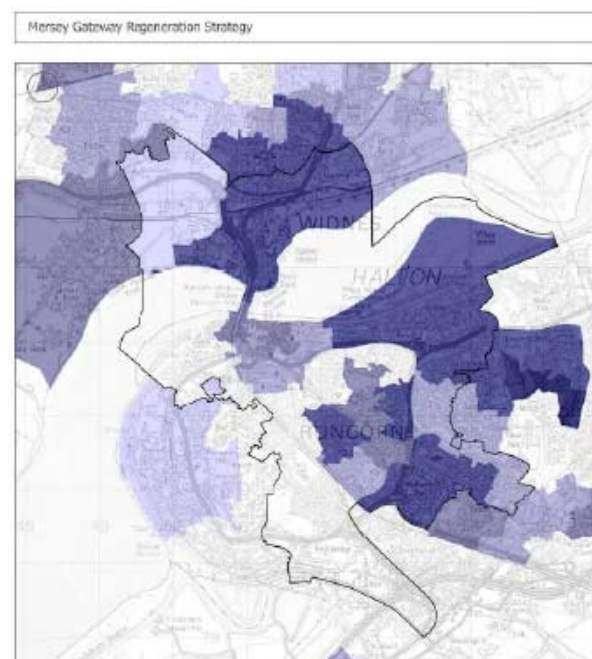
The 'Community Strategy for a Sustainable Halton 2006 - 11' sets out the Local Strategic Partnership's aims. We have picked out two with particular relevance to Victoria Road in the light of its small business sector and potentially memorable streetscape character.

"We want to see a strong business sector, to create new enterprises and new jobs to benefit local people."

"We need to retain a clear sense of place and retain features that make Halton distinctive."

Another key policy document is 'Halton: Gateway to Prosperity', the Borough's 'Economic and Tourism Development Strategy'. This document looks at ways to diversify and add value to the town's economy. Each of its four key aims is relevant to the study area:

1. Enterprise and Performance - "Fostering the development of enterprise culture and improving the performance of business".
2. Employment and Skills - "Increasing levels of employment and improving workforce skills to meet business need".
3. Property and Infrastructure - "Consistently improving infrastructure and enabling investment in land and property to create a supply of quality premises."
4. Environment and Image - "Improving the quality of the environment and the image of Halton."



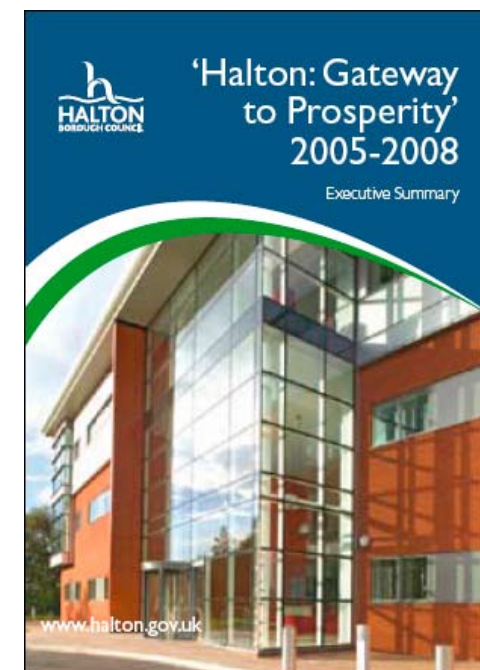
2.8 (Above) Whilst Halton has seen significant improvements in terms of quality of life over recent years, the 2007 Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) indicates that Halton remains one of the most deprived Boroughs in the country.

The above plan from the Mersey Gateway Regeneration Strategy shows significant spatial concentrations of deprivation.

Kingsway Ward in southern Widnes (which includes the study area) is ranked within the 5% most deprived nationally.

On the 'income' domain the southern part of the ward is within the 1% most deprived in the country.

2.9 and 2.10 (Above right and right). The social and economic ambitions of the Borough are set out in these two key documents.



4. HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Victoria Road's provenance as a highway probably goes back centuries, given the existence of a ferry service across the 'Runcorn Gap' since the 1100s. There has been a permanent settlement on the higher ground above the marshy riverbanks for a similar period, with Appleton mentioned in the 1086 Domesday book, and the church at Farnworth dating from around 1180. Victoria Road is likely the old route between the ferry and Farnworth and Appleton villages.

Urbanisation took off when the very early industrial railway between St. Helen's and the Runcorn Gap opened in 1830, the same year as George Stephenson's more famous Liverpool to Manchester line. To compete with the train an extension to the Sankey Canal was opened in 1833, and, with the building of Widnes Dock, the area now known as Spike Island became world's first interchange complex between a canal, a railway and a dock.

Cheshire salt was carried down the Weaver from Northwich on 'Mersey Flats' and off loaded for St. Helens glass-makers in return for Lancashire coal. Chemical industries were attracted to Widnes by coal and salt, but also because trustees of Runcorn's Bridgewater Canal refused sale or lease of their land to such noxious polluters. Financially if not environmentally one riverbank's loss was the others gain, and the second half of the 19th century saw Widnes develop into a burgeoning industrial town.

Victoria Road became the expression of a new municipal identity, containing the town's best buildings and traders.

Complete by c. 1880 (see fig 3.9)

Police Station
The Doctors Pub
St. John's Market
Volunteer ('Drill') Hall
Original Widnes Station
Wesleyan Chapel (Queen's Hall)
Street blocks of Lacey St, Croft St etc.

Complete by 1891

Town Hall (incl. first Library)
St. Paul's Church
Alexandra Theatre
Original Central Station
Hotel on the corner of Market St.
Queen's Arms Hotel

Completed later (see fig 3.10)

Library and Technical School
Market Extension
Conservative Club
Police Station demolished for Kingsway Roundabout
Lacey Street and Ollier Street



3.1 View south west along Victoria Road a century ago - note the Police Station and the industrial setting.

3.2 Victoria Road circa 1849, just before its rapid urbanisation.

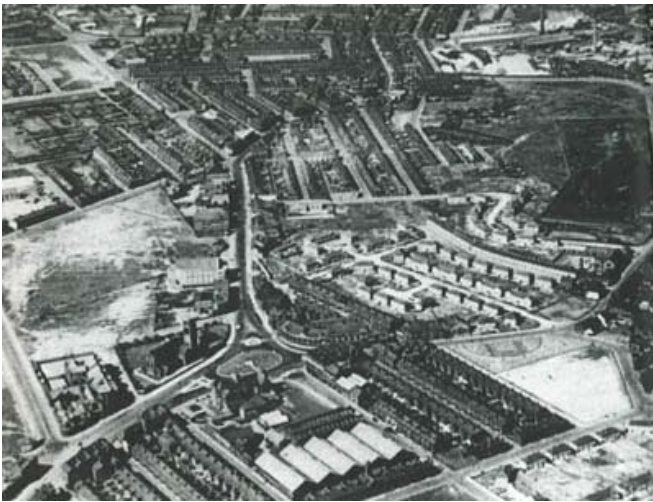
The junction with Moor Lane and the street's distinctive curve are clearly visible.



3.3 The Alexandra Theatre just off Victoria Road on Alexandra Street was the only purpose built playhouse ever in Widnes. It opened in 1887 and burned down in 1949.

In its life it hosted stage luminaries including a young Charlie Chaplin and Stan Laurel.





3.4 Inter-war aerial view showing the new Kingsway to the left.



3.5 The Queen's Hall was originally a 19th century Wesleyan Chapel



3.6 Victoria Road a century ago, looking towards the Conservative Club.

3.7 This 'figure ground' plan shows the area's pattern of buildings and spaces as it was in 1938.

The urban grain was quite 'tight' along Victoria Road, but much land either side of the spine remained undeveloped.



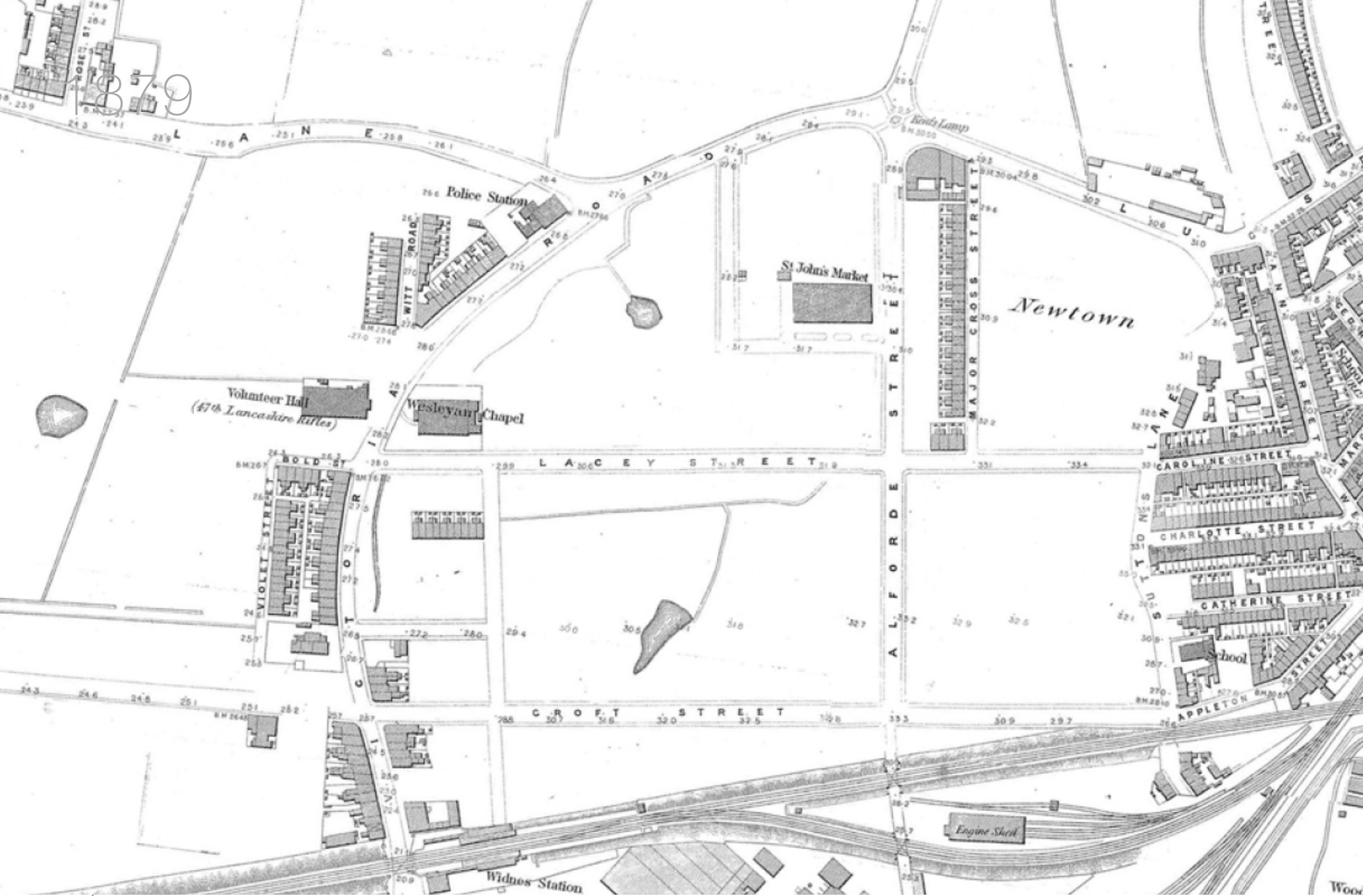
1938

3.8 This 'figure ground' from 2009 shows how Victoria Road's pattern has survived as the empty sites to the west, north and east have been developed.

Development in the second half of the 20th century has been quite piecemeal and only loosely structured, as shown by the varying building footprints and configuration.



2009



3.8 (above) Plan of the Victoria Road area circa. 1879

3.9 (right) Plan of the Victoria Road area fifty years later, in 1939



5. URBAN ANALYSIS

Victoria Road remains a fundamentally well defined street. It has a consistent building and roof line emphasising its continuous curve, giving a modest 'crescent' effect.

The street itself has a complex mix of uses, some inactive during the day, but with the majority of ground and upper floor frontages offering at least a degree of animation and overlooking.

Either side of Victoria Road the built form breaks down, especially to the west, which is an industrial area of sheds and yards. As can be seen from figures 5.1 and 5.2, whilst the built form of the original civic street is still intact, the sense of quality and pride has eroded.

This is largely a matter of detail and upkeep, with the decline being especially marked in the public realm.

High quality brick and stone materials have been obscured by cheaper renders and tarmac. Street furniture is more cluttered. Shopfronts and signage are of less coherent design than in the past. Pedestrian space has been given over to traffic infrastructure.



5.1 and 5.2, Victoria Road 'then and now' showing a decline in quality.



5.3 Building Use

Land Use:

Victoria Road is now home to a mix of shops and businesses associated with its designation as a 'secondary' retail street.

These include power tool sales, a bank and a motorcycle showroom. Specialist businesses including a piano showroom, commercial art gallery and fishing shop add further interest and diversity.

There are a number of uses associated with the evening economy, including hot-food takeaways, pubs, nightclubs and taxi-firms. These often detract from day-time vitality. The empty Queen's Hall theatre is a major 'hole' in this use pattern.

The Moor Lane area west of Victoria Road is dominated by light industrial and warehousing uses, including a scrap metal yard, whereas the east is residential.

Legend

- A1 Retail
- A2 Financial & Professional Services
- A3 Cafes/Restaurants/Food&Drink
- A4 Public House or Club
- A5 Takeaway/Fast Food
- B1 Business
- B2 General Industry
- B8 Storage & Distribution
- C1 Hotels
- C3 Residential
- D1 Non residential Institutions
- D2 Assembly & Leisure
- Sui Generis
- Unknown

Frontages:

The blue lines on the plan to the right show the high extent of ground floor frontages that offer some kind of 'active' interface with the street during the day-time.

This includes the key entrance points of all buildings open to the public during normal trading hours, and also the fronts of private dwelling houses, which collectively generate a sense of activity and thus 'natural surveillance' throughout the day.

The orange-brown lines show frontages that do not offer an active edge to the public realm during the day. This may be because they have a blank elevation, are empty properties or are only open to the public after hours.

There is a 'dead area' in the heart of the street around the Queen's Hall and the Conservative Club, which detracts from vibrancy and therefore wider vitality.

Inactive frontages dominate the industrial area west of Victoria Road.

- Active Frontage - Good surveillance
- Inactive Frontage - Poor surveillance



Building Heights:

The predominant building height along Victoria Road is of 2/3 'habitable storeys' plus roof space.

This harmonises the relation of height to street-width to create a good sense of enclosure.

Distinctive red-brick towers on the library and church to the north-east create well framed visual landmarks when moving from the south of Victoria Road.

Either side of Victoria Road the height drops. To the east the Victorian terraced houses create a consistent roof line of two habitable storeys plus roof space. Commercial premises to the west are a mix of single and double height buildings.

- 4 and over storeys
- 3
- 2
- 1 storey



Potential Townscape Contribution:

Figure 5.6 shows a plan ranking each building's potential contribution to overall townscape quality. It attempts to capture each building's relative urban design and architectural value without regard to current condition.

So the well proportioned and detailed run of buildings on the south side of the roundabout are shown as fundamentally very good townscape elements, ignoring for the moment crude alterations like shutters and signage (these are picked up in the condition plan, figure 5.8).

Victoria Road and the north and east parts of its setting still possesses a number of distinctive buildings that build a potentially strong townscape character.

Even modest shops and terraced houses are fundamentally strong in the basic principles of urban form - building line, massing, rhythm and so on.

Victoria Road's weakness in terms of potential townscape contribution is to the west side, where the townscape contribution of most buildings is poor.

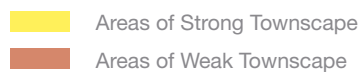
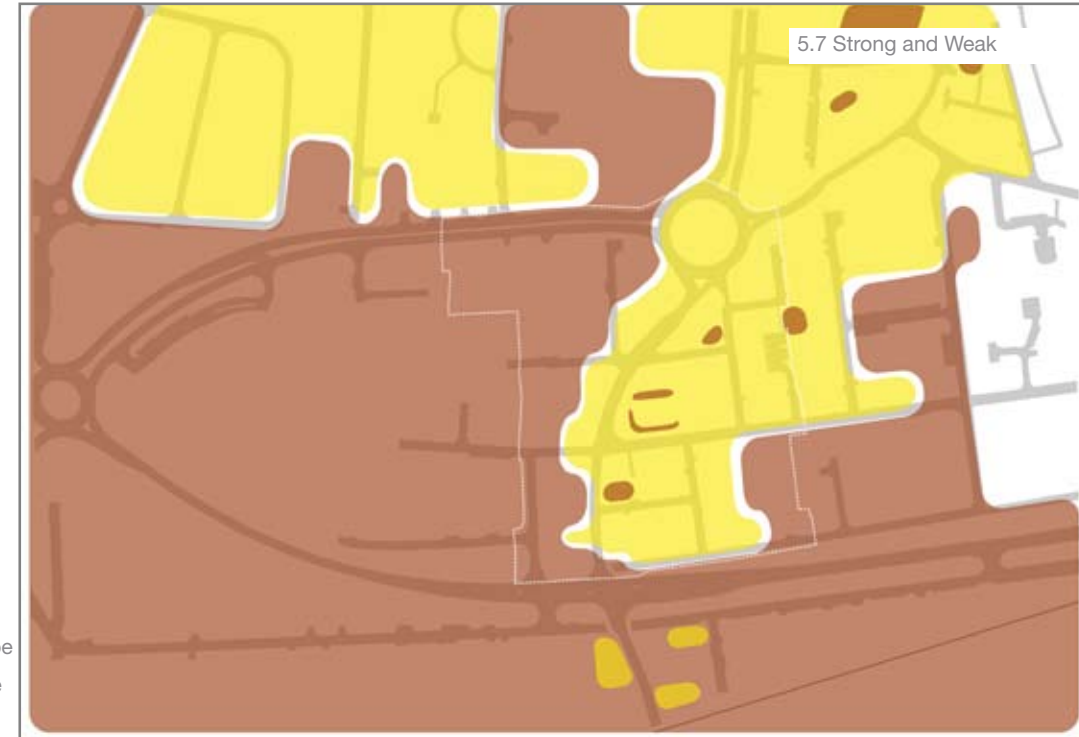
'Zones' of strong and weak townscape

Figure 5.7 simply illustrates the above more schematically.

It combines buildings ranked potentially good or above into one zone, 'areas of strong townscape', which can be seen to run for most of Victoria Road north from Ashley Way.

Similarly it combines any building deemed not to have a potentially strong townscape contribution, i.e. those ranked only 'fair' or below in fig 5.6, into an area of weak townscape., which wraps around much of the core study area, encroaching into Victoria Road at the south western end.

Legend



Building Condition:

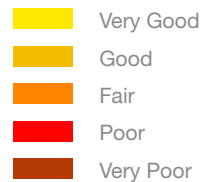
Figure 5.8 is based on a brief assessment of visual condition of frontages from the road. It is not a survey of structural integrity but of the impression given by existing materials and building management, especially at ground floor level. Thus a shabby or bricked up shop-front scores poorly, even on a building in fair overall repair.

Victoria Road suffers as a whole from poor building condition with few parts achieving a rating higher than fair. In particular the south west end of Victoria Road is in a tired state. Some buildings here exhibit external 'ties' associated with structural settlement.

Conditions around the Queen's Hall are a particular concern. In its current state the empty and semi-derelict building is a blight.

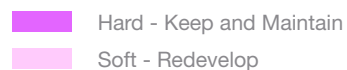
In general, condition is better nearer to the town centre. It may be that recent investments in the Library, former Town Hall etc. have underpinned confidence here.

Some fine buildings like the former Storey's nightclub are marred by crude additions and alterations.



'Hard and Soft':

Figure 5.9 is an assessment agreed between the council and consultant team as to where this study could consider future alterations to the built form (known as 'soft' areas, shown in light pink) and where is likely to remain fixed (the 'hard areas', shown in purple).



MAIN VICTORIA ROAD FRONTAGE



5.10 Former Storey's Nightclub

The massing and detailing of Victoria Road's frontages is well handled, giving a strong sense of continuity and enclosure to the street form. These qualities are let down by some crude contemporary alterations.



5.11 Shop fronts on the east side of Victoria Road

A variety of enterprises operate in the area. The council have been targetting small grants to improve signage and shop fronts; more such treatments may be needed to support the business environment along the corridor.



5.12 The Queen's Hall, no longer in use

The Queen's Hall is a converted Wesleyan Chapel, for many years famous as the town's main theatre and public hall. Replaced by the high quality Brindley centre in Runcorn, an alternative use has yet to be found.



5.13 Victoria Road at the south end of the study area

The pedestrian environment is tired, and short stay parking restricted by double yellow lines. Shop frontages are inconsistent and sometimes bricked up. The highway is configured as a main road. All of these factors restrict businesses' ability to capture passing trade.



5.14 Conservative Club and former Drill Hall

Victoria Road retains some 'local landmark' character buildings that hint at its former status at the heart of civic life. Some are still in use while others have fallen empty. All would benefit from facelifting and more sensitive treatment of signage and their public realm setting.



5.15 Victoria Road looking south from the Alexandra Street junction

The historic building line, which remains intact, is stepped back from the street in places. This gives the effect of a sequence of incidental spaces, with the area in front of the Queen's Hall and Conservative Club having the potential to form a sort of 'square', if traffic impacts can be reduced.

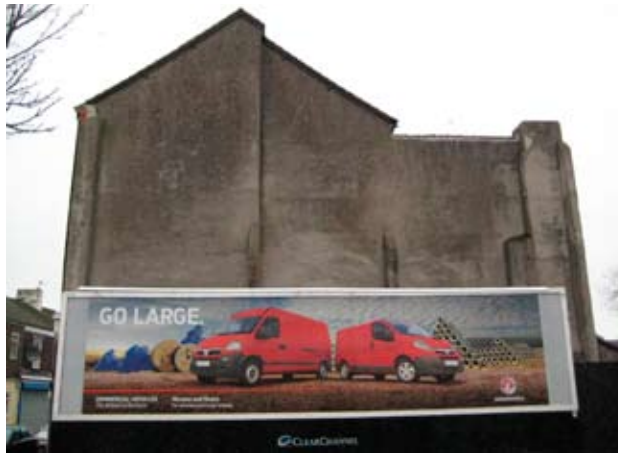
BOLD STREET AND LACEY STREET AREA



5.16 Bold Street, with the rear elevation of Victoria Road
Immediately behind the main road frontage environmental quality tends to fall away drastically, into a patchwork of gap sites, informal parking and ad-hoc development forms. However, many businesses are housed and supported here.



5.18 'The Studio' and Spiritualist Chapel on Lacey Street
The area off Victoria Road still has some character buildings including these old chapels, as well as some robust small terraced houses. Happily, Loose Music Collective secured £602k funding to restore the Studio in March 2009.



5.17 The gateway to Victoria Road from Ashley Way
The interface of Victoria Road as a gateway to the town centre was given little thought when Ashley Way was constructed. This blank gable end gives no sense of the local traders or heritage buildings to be found along the town centre spine.



5.19 Conservative Club and former Drill Hall
Ashley Way cuts through Victoria Road along the route of the old Central Railway. The pedestrian environment at the crossing is a major severance point between the town centre and West Bank, which contains key attractions in Spike Island, the Catalyst Museum and Victoria Promenade.



5.17 Catherine Street
Taken from the same position as the previous picture looking to the east, the 'placeless' nature of the Ashley Way interface is further emphasised. A higher quality landscape buffer, such as that along Speke Boulevard in Liverpool, may be possible here.



5.20 New build apartments on Guest Street
New apartment developments have sprung up around Lacey Street in recent years. Their massing and building line respects the established grid pattern. However, their design and the public realm treatment adjacent add little to local distinctiveness.

ADJACENT CONSERVATION AREA - VICTORIA SQUARE



The beautifully restored Technical School and Library complex Halton council have recaptured the spirit of public 'improvement' promoted by the town's forefathers in their splendid restoration of the listed library and Technical School as a 21st century Learning Centre.



Elaborate architectural and window detailing The high standards of craft and artistry shown in the town's finest buildings are now widely appreciated, and can inspire a contemporary response in investors, designers and prospective end users.



'The View' bar in the converted Co-Operative Building Heritage buildings are often robustly constructed, with built in flexibility that allows their conversion to new uses. The Co Op building in Victoria Square is now part of the town's evening economy, although its daytime vitality is limited.



Apartment conversion of former public house/hotel on Alford St

Above is another conversion of an historic building, protecting townscape quality and bringing new investment into the town centre (although the impact is lessened by white UVPC frames). However, the public realm still lacks animation and is not enhanced by street furniture items like standard railings.



The old Town Hall, built 1885, is being converted to a hotel

The old Widnes Town Hall is a magnificent centre-piece to the square, but has been under-used for many years. Its proposed conversion to a 'Boutique Hotel' will bring fresh life. The square itself lacks activity, enclosure or shelter, and needs further thought.



A combination of conversion and new build on Market Street.

A high density apartment development in new and converted buildings. Residential uses occupy upper floors above some of the buildings along Victoria Road, though not in this 'aspirational' apartment format.

ADJACENT KINGSWAY CIVIC AREA



Halton Borough Council's main offices on Kingsway

Several hundred staff are housed in Halton Borough council's main offices on Kingsway. Partner agencies also access the building to liaise with various council services. There is therefore quite a focus for activity on the building, a potential benefit to Victoria Road.



The 'Kingsway Campus' of Riverside College of F.E. Riverside is Halton's College of Further Education, with campus facilities at Runcorn, Kingsway and Cronton. It provides education for several thousand students, including night-classes, and employs several hundred staff. It is a great generator of footfall and activity just a short walk away.



The new NHS health centre on Moor Lane is well designed

The Health Care Resource centre is another focus for activity, with a high concentration of medical staff and service users. Again, it is an attraction that offers potential trade and vitality to Victoria Road, but the dual carriageway on Moor Lane and the weak sense of activity along Witt Road limit interaction.



The Magistrates Court and Police Station

Another focus for activity a short walk from Victoria Road is the town's Magistrates Court and Police Station. The courts are housed in a particularly elegant 1960s 'pavilion' building (though its condition is tired).



The former Kingsway Health Centre as it appeared while in use. The art-deco Health Centre, built by the council in 1939, is a distinctive example of a pre-NHS public health building. It is now vacant, but the subject of exciting plans for conversion to a dedicated youth facility. This could complement 'the Studio' performance venue proposed in



Kingsway Leisure Centre and Halton's Stobart Stadium.

The well-used Leisure Centre contains a swimming pool and large sports hall with various other sporting and spectator facilities. The Stadium has a capacity of over 13,000 and is used for conferencing as well as being home to Widnes Vikings Rugby League team and Everton F.C. reserve games.

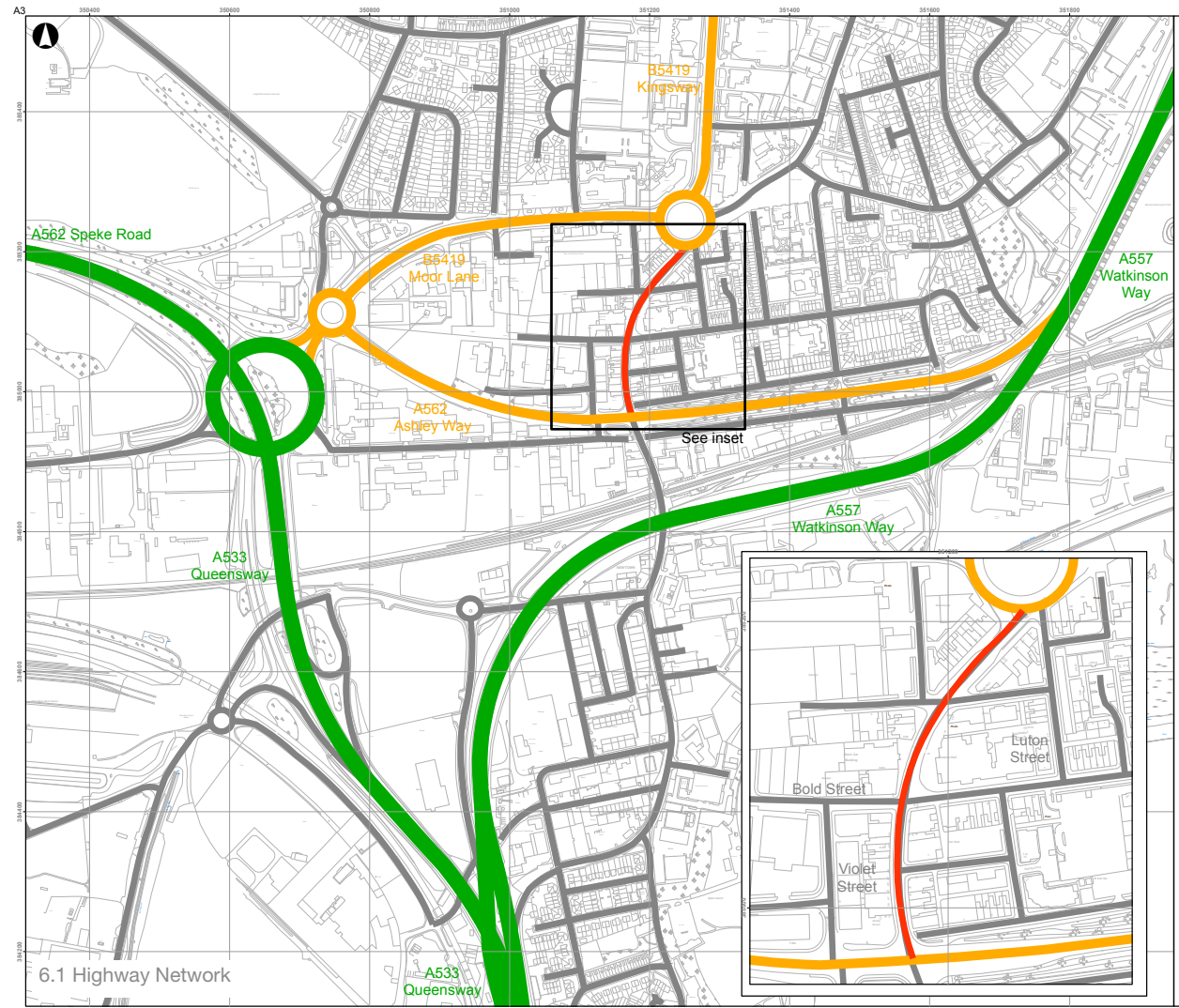
6. TRANSPORT

ARUP associates' review of movement and access issues is set out in a separate Appendix to this report. Overall they find the study area has adequate but not outstanding provision for public transport users, pedestrians and motorists.

However, they note that parking and highway infrastructure within the area is the legacy of a previous era, engineered for traffic flows and parking patterns that have changed substantially. This limits comfortable access to businesses and facilities. Lack of convenient on-street parking deters capture of passing trade, and pedestrian severance limits footfall between the area and major civic uses nearby.

The main spine is fundamentally pedestrian friendly, with wide footways in places. The provision of crossing facilities is adequate but could be improved to encourage more footfall. Weak spots for pedestrians are the Ashley Way crossings and the high traffic speeds encouraged by the roundabout. Moor lane is a barrier to comfortable movement from the civic and residential areas.

Cycling facilities could be significantly improved. There is a lack of coherent interconnected routes, limited cycle facilities on the ground and a lack of signage or dedicated parking.



Highway Network

- Primary Highway
- Secondary Highway
- Local Highway Network
- Victoria Road

Key to 6.2 Pedestrian Facilities

- ▲ Pedestrian Attractions
- Pedestrian Barriers
- Pedestrian Crossing
- Pedestrian Routes

Key to 6.3 Cycling

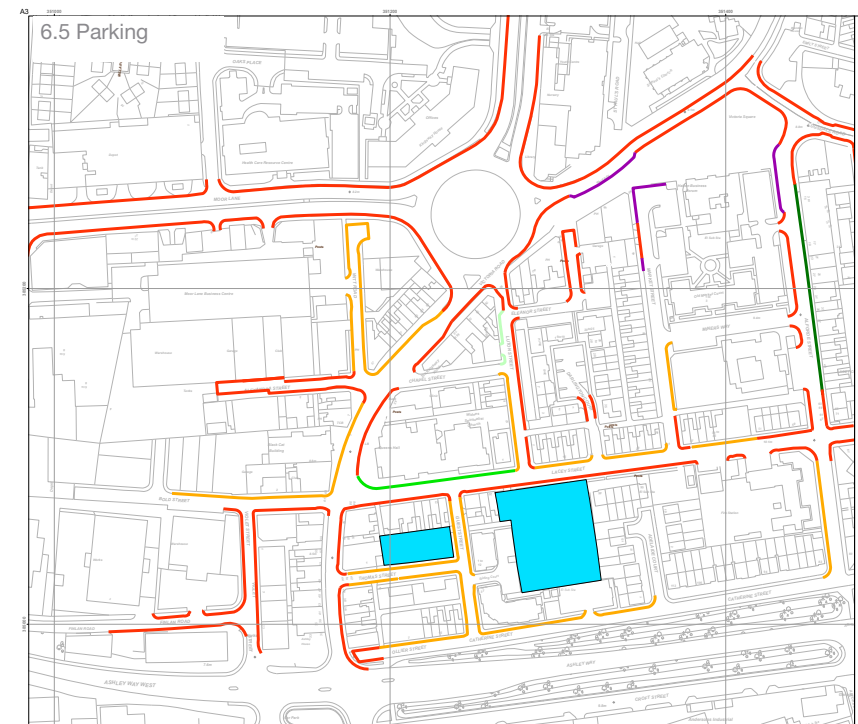
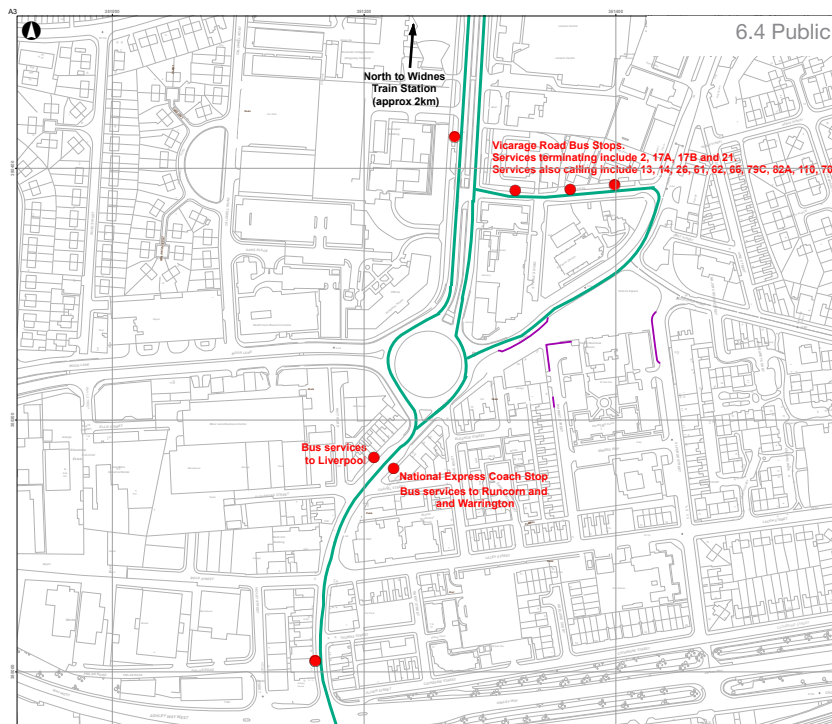
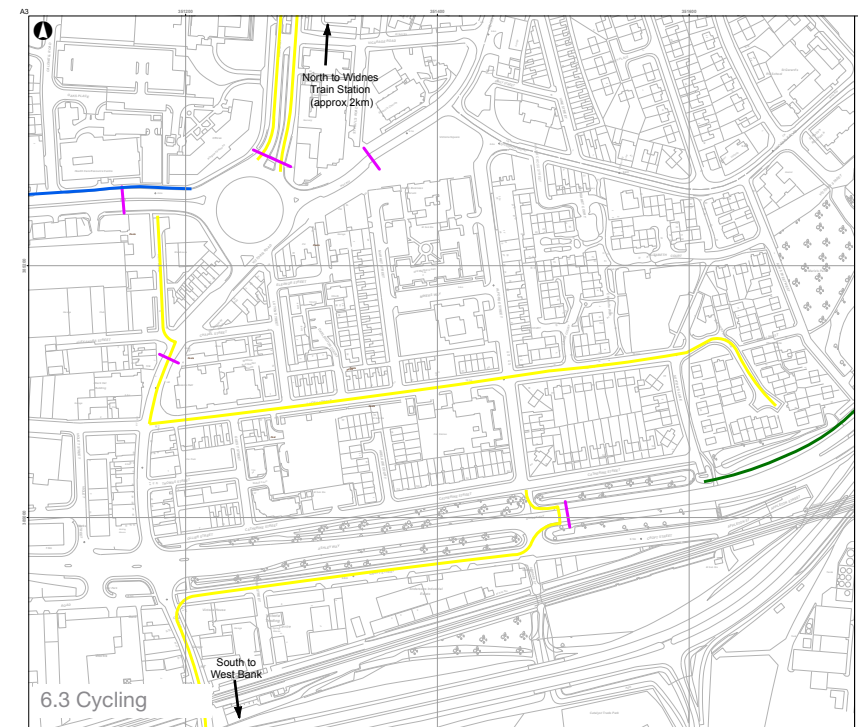
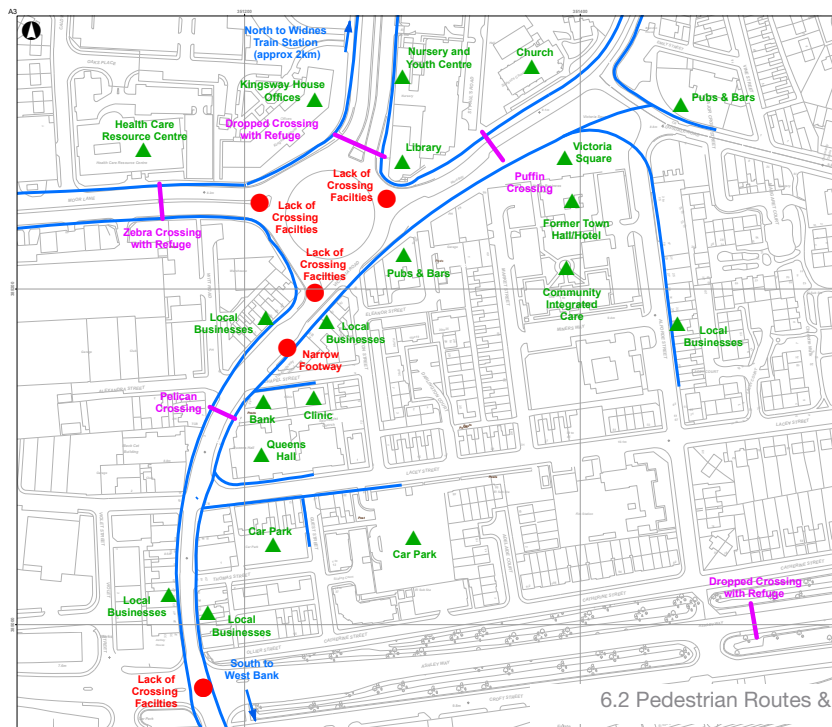
- Traffic Free Route
- Shared Use - Foot/Cycle
- Cycle Route (On road)
- Pedestrian Crossing

Key to 6.4 Public Transport

- Bus Stop
- Taxi Bays
- Public Transport Routes

Key to 6.5 Parking

- Taxis Only
- No Waiting At Any Time
- No Waiting (Mon-Sat 8am-6pm)
- Limited Waiting (Mon-Sat 8am-7pm 20mins No Return 40mins)
- Limited Waiting (Mon-Sat 8am-6pm 40mins No Return 1hr)
- Limited Waiting (Mon-Sat 8am-6pm 2hrs No Return 1hr)
- Public Car Park



Public transport provision within the study area is good, with bus stops at regular intervals. Numerous frequently served routes connect key areas including Liverpool, Warrington, Runcorn and Chester.

National Express services to the town stop on Victoria Road, offering long distance coach connections across the country. Passenger facilities are non-existent, and this amenity is poorly announced.

Widnes Station is a 10 - 15 minute walk to the north. There may be opportunities to enhance connection to the rail station through a more clearly signed route or bus shuttle service.

The study area is well connected to the wider area of Widnes through the highway network which is currently operating below capacity. The roads and junctions within the area have been designed for considerably higher traffic volumes than currently exist. There is therefore an opportunity to reallocate roadspace within the area to enhance the public realm and/or create new development plots.

Parking occupancy levels are well below capacity and are also considerably lower than other areas of the town. A site

visit highlighted significant illegal parking, suggesting that there is limited enforcement of existing Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs).

The low levels of parking suggest that the extensive TROs limiting parking to short periods are unnecessary and date back to the time when the market was located here and demand for parking was higher. Further details are set out in ARUP's baseline report.

ARUP suggest improved access and movement facilities through:

- The need for better provision of pedestrian facilities at Victoria Road roundabout;
- The need for pedestrian crossings at the junction of Ashley Way and Victoria Road;
- The provision of cycle lanes and interconnected cycle routes within the Victoria Road area;
- The provision of up to date information signage for pedestrians and cyclists;
- The potential for the Victoria Road roundabout to be reconfigured;
- The possibility of reallocating roadspace on Victoria Road and Moor Lane.



6.6 Existing Pedestrian crossing on Victoria Road



6.7 Junction of Ashley Way acts as a barrier to pedestrian movement south of Victoria Road

6.8 The facing page shows an aerial view from above Victoria Road of the adjacent 'civic campus'. At present this is separated from the study area by the Moor Lane dual carriageway and weak pedestrian connections to the college and council offices.

A new walking/cycle route between the health centre and adjacent building could generate footfall for Victoria Road (dotted line shows approximate route).



7. INVESTMENT

Retail/business: Although there are few void shop units and a relatively stable level of turnover, it is thought that rental yields are modest in the area.

Re-letting units here requires a flexible approach from landlords.

This limits investment in premises, allowing a slide 'down market' over time without intervention.

The affordable rents help sustain businesses who may otherwise be unable to find such relatively accessible shop front premises.

Halton Borough Council have been targeting owners with a combination of grant assistance and environmental enforcement in an attempt to maintain a healthy business environment and reinforce confidence in the area.

As a result of this intervention some premises have benefited from quality shopfront facelifts; however, these remain a minority.

Residential: During the housing boom several long term gap sites around Lacey Street were finally developed for residential use. In accordance with the UDP action area policy Regeneration Policy RG2, higher density flatted developments were allowed.

It is thought these were more popular with the buy-to-let market than owner occupiers.

In addition to new-build housing, several historic buildings in and around the study area enjoyed refurbishment and conversion to apartments during this period.

Since the 'credit crunch' investor interest in new housing development has fallen away, in common with most similar areas. Housing for market sale is therefore not considered a potential driver of regeneration in the area in the short to medium term, though there may be developer interest in sites as the economy recovers.

There is still thought to be healthy demand for rented accommodation, of which there is a significant stock in flatted dwellings above the shops. Victoria Road serves an established specialist housing market for contract workers providing higher skilled labour on the Mersey estuary's extensive petro-chemical installations. Short leases in accommodation above the shops are tailored for those on such terms of employment.

Specialist housing like extra-care accommodation and Registered Social Landlord affordable dwellings may be viable pending the return of demand for open market sale.

Office: Some shop units are converted to small office premises, and there are also office facilities associated with the warehousing and industrial units along Moor Lane.

Moor Lane Business Centre (and the nearby Waterloo Business Centre) are council run 'incubator' facilities, offering 'easy-in easy-out' low rent premises to encourage small and start-up enterprises. Moor Lane is well let and close to capacity, with healthy demand even in the current recession.

This possible latent demand suggests there may be a further role for the area as a location for business and enterprise support infrastructure to address some of the needs identified in the Economic Strategy reviewed in Section 3.

The Borough is encouraging commercial inward investment to serviced sites including Widnes Waterfront, so it is thought Victoria Road will only look to complement the smaller niche and start-up end of the market, rather than compete for larger users.

Industrial: The industrial area south of Moor Lane has a number of empty units. It has been the focus of earlier council and developer studies looking at reconfiguring the area through the joint venture 'Widnes Regeneration' company, and it is thought some properties may be empty due to site assembly.

The employment area is well located for the main road network but parking and access is ad-hoc especially round Bold Street.

The business environment is physically unattractive, despite housing a good range of unit sizes. Boundary treatments and signage are inconsistent and there is no branding or identity for the area. A landscape buffer hides the area from Ashley Way.

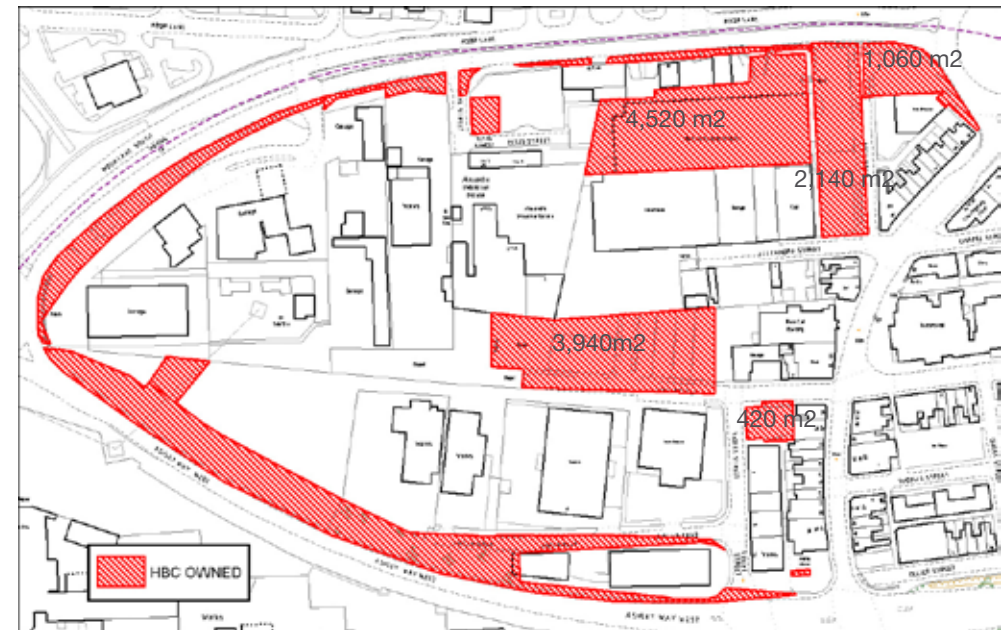
It must be remembered that the employees and customers of the businesses here sustain facilities like the Barclays Bank and small cafes along Victoria Road.

The council has made available some grant funding for small scale improvements to premises such as signage and security, but overall there is a sense of underinvestment.

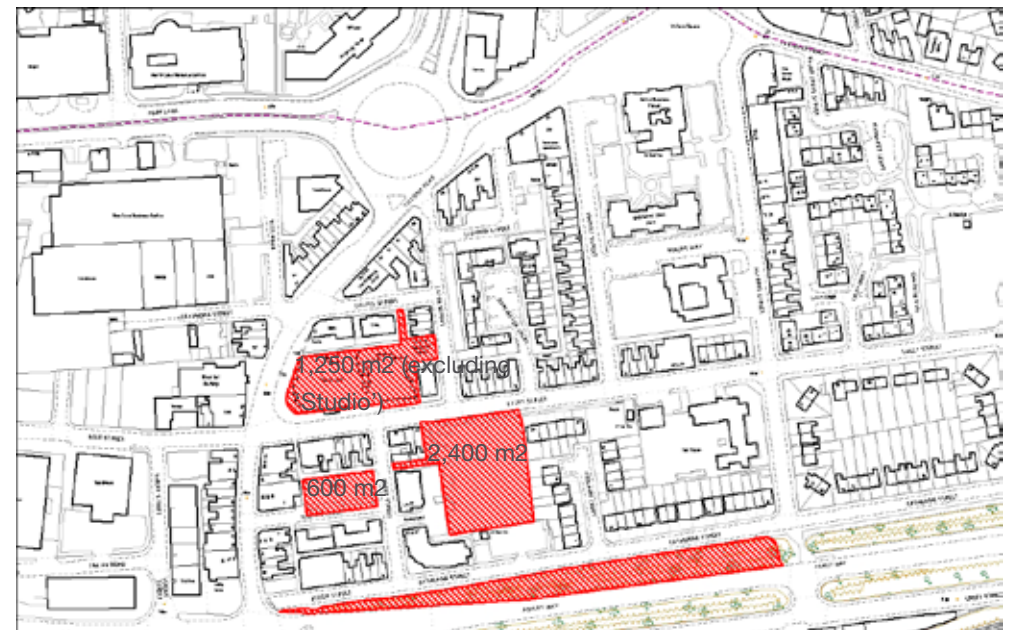
Council Ownerships

Halton Borough Council have significant land ownerships either side of Victoria Road. These include:

- The 'civic campus' to the north of Moor lane (not shown)
- The Kingsway Roundabout (not shown) - approx. 1,200 sq. m.
- Plot east of Witt Road and south of Moor Lane - approx 1,060 sq. m.
- Plot west of Witt Road - approx. 2,140 sq. m.
- Moor Lane Business Centre area - approx. 4,520 sq. m.
- Scrap yard site on Bold Street - approx. 3,940 sq. m.
- Car park on Violet Street - approx. 420 sq. m.
- Queen's Hall and Studio - approx. 1,250 sq.m. (excluding Studio)
- Thomas Street Car Park - approx. 600 sq. m.
- Lacey Street Car Park - approx. 2,400 sq. m.
- This represents a total ownership (excluding very small sites and verges) of approximately 17,530 sq. m (c.4.3 acres).



7.1 and 7.2 All sizes and areas are approximate and are intended for indicative purposes

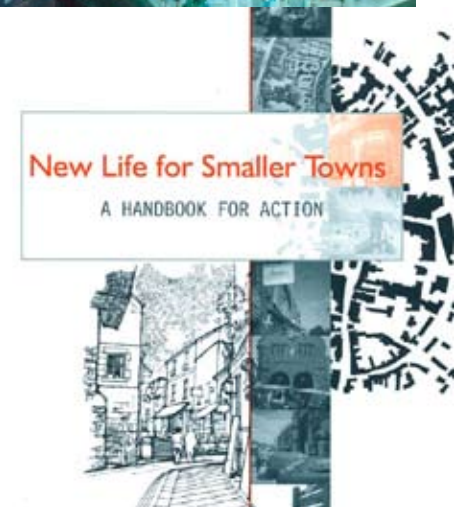


8. BASELINE SUMMARY

Our team has assessed the Victoria Road area against planning and good practice criteria for testing health and viability of shopping streets and town centres. These are sometimes summarised as the Four A's - Attractions, Access, Amenity and Action.

Baseline Study Outcomes:

- 'Attractions' - There are very significant nearby generators of footfall and attractors of activity - College, Council Offices, Library/Learning Centre, NHS and Leisure Centre, but weak 'draws' within the area itself - Queen's Hall is closed, night time uses constrain day time vitality, and some units generate minimal footfall.
- Access - The excellent strategic location helps sustain existing businesses but wider benefits are not captured - pedestrian access is restricted by heavy road infrastructure and traffic speeds; vehicular access to shops is disrupted by obsolete parking regulations.
- Amenity - The benefits of the area's robust stock of Victorian buildings is undermined by deteriorating conditions especially round Moor Lane and the Queen's Hall, insensitive alterations, 'placeless' new-build and a tired public realm.
- Action - Without interventions the area may remain stuck at low levels of investment for some years, marring the edge of the town's key civic and conservation quarter, exacerbating the severance imposed between the town centre and West Bank, and blighting a key gateway to the town from Ashley Way.



9. OBJECTIVES

Despite the air of decline along and around parts of the study area, there are aspects to be positive about in terms of regeneration potential, particularly with the college and council offices so close by.

Rejuvenation has taken place in the adjacent conservation area. Here, private investment in conversion of historic buildings into restaurants, apartments and now a 'boutique' hotel in the old Town Hall has followed council led investment in the Library, Sure Start, Learning Centre and street environment.

The recent development of the NHS Health Centre on Moor Lane is another vote of confidence in the future of Widnes's civic core, as well as a daily focus for employment and patient visits.

In the Business Centres (Moor Lane and Waterloo), demand is strong for space for small and start-up enterprises, and the area continues to sustain a range of specialist firms and traders.

Loose Music Collective's determined work to find a new use for the 'Studio' will rescue a well-loved building and help revive the area's traditional cultural role. The 'Buzz' youth facility is proposed as a way of re-using the Kingsway Health Centre.

In the longer term, the proposed 'Mersey Gateway' river crossing will enhance still further the excellent strategic transport connections, with regeneration directed by the SPD.

Our aim therefore is to produce a shared vision that will allow Victoria Road to share in and add to this regeneration, securing a clear role for this historic civic spine.

Objectives

The strategy needs to:

- generate resources for public realm & facelifting
- make the most of the area's locational advantages
- identify a clear role and function for the area's future
- raise levels of footfall activity to promote vitality & viability
- reduce negative traffic impacts whilst accommodating demand for parking
- preserve and enhance attractive historic streetscape character
- Promote enterprise, support existing businesses and assist re-location where they are out of keeping

10. VISION

Our 'Vision for Victoria Road' is ambitious but, we believe, achievable. It is of a place which defines this part of Widnes as a 'knowledge quarter', where enterprise, learning and creative cultures combine.

This builds on the local demand for start-up space and the strategic need to diversify, densify and add value to the borough's business base. It also links to surrounding assets.

A supportive business environment for small and start-up enterprises provides the core of the area's proposed role and function. That means a good supply of affordable, decent quality accommodation, and also entails a strong infrastructure.

A future Victoria Road will host quality start-up and grow on space, informal meeting areas, formal conferencing facilities, advice and training services, well-signed access and convenient parking.

By day, the greened street and public spaces will allow workers, students and service users from businesses and the civic campus to relax and browse. Cheerful cafes and specialist shops will benefit from footfall on good walking links to the central area and easy on street parking.

Evening life is balanced to protect amenity, with the Studio acting as an open gallery and performance venue, helping support a range of well managed restaurants, pubs and cafes

Over time, the environment around Moor Lane will be reconfigured to transform Victoria Road's setting. This may include new development blocks and restored historic buildings.

Vision

The area will have a clear new role :

- The Victoria Road study area can define this part of town as Widnes's 'Knowledge Quarter'.
- Victoria Knowledge Quarter will be a place where learning, business and creative culture combines.
- It will provide a setting for easy interaction and information exchange.
- By day the greened street and spaces will allow relaxation from the busy civic campus, while evening life can revolve around activities in the Studio, pubs and cafes.
- Easy parking and new enterprise space with support facilities on hand will help attract trade from far and wide.
- Such a role could refocus Victoria Road as a place that once again embodies the town's history of civic improvement.

Knowledge and knowledge workers are mobile. These days people and businesses have a high level of freedom over where they locate, especially those who are best qualified and add most value.

Halton's economic future in part depends upon providing high quality environments to attract those with choices. Victoria Road and the adjacent conservation area with its strong character elements is potentially one of Widnes's best environments in which to work, study, collaborate and relax.

More and more, the condition and setting of physical environments have a direct bearing on economic performance - Victoria Road will rediscover its best urban design qualities are its core economic asset.

Urban Design Principles

Environmental qualities that will sustain a 'knowledge quarter'

- Distinct Sense of Place - on arrival around Victoria Road there should be a sense of having entered a unique part of the town.
- Clear but permeable boundaries - the defined quarter should have clear but open edges, allowing easy movement.
- Visual and physical linkages within and between - visitors need to be able to navigate efficiently and safely between the buildings and places around the area.
- Open and inclusive streets: A vibrant knowledge location must be open and accessible to all, in order to maximise interaction.
- Spaces for exchange - space where people can meet and share knowledge formally and informally are vital for building networks.
- An engaging feel and structure: Thriving locations do not feel sterile and empty, they are active, lived in, comfortable and relaxed, but also have a determined air of progress and endeavour.

In the next section we set out what progress might be made to regenerate Victoria Road in a series of example investment scenarios .

Please note that any site areas given are approximate, and all values are estimates subject to end use, planning where required, contingencies and so on.



SCENARIO 1

Scenario 1 - 'Modest Capital Budget'

Summary: This scenario shows the scope for intervention in the absence of major investment. It could see facelifting of buildings and improved parking, but potentially an unresolved Queen's Hall site and public realm. A significant impact could be made for between c.£350k and c.£575k, including clearance of the Hall.

Scenario 1 is effectively an evolution of the current approach within the study area. The actions suggested are likely to bring significant regeneration impacts, but benefits could be placed at risk if the Queen's Hall remains derelict and continues to blight the area. There is no money allocated for public realm upgrade.

Actions not requiring major investment could include:

- 1.1 Removal of restrictive parking orders to improve access for business and residents. (no capital cost)
- 1.2 Targeted continuation of existing small grant support for shop front improvements etc. (£225 - £450k)
- 1.3 Clearance and disposal of Queen's Hall site (minimal net cost but could require c.£125k up front).
- 1.4 Preparation of Planning Briefs [for Kingsway Roundabout and Moor Lane] (no capital cost).

1.1 Removal of Restrictive Parking Orders

Rationale: As ARUP note, parking management around Victoria Road is obsolete, aimed at controlling access

to a market relocated some 14 years ago. Existing Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs) constrain the business environment. We believe more convenient on-street parking will help sustain existing businesses, through easier capture of passing trade, and more comfortable staff/visitor access.

Delivery: The cost of this de-restriction will be relatively modest. as Halton Borough Council would deliver using its 'in-house' highways resources.

1.2 Small grant support

Rationale: With around 45 units of various sizes along Victoria Road between Market Street and Ollier Street, frontage condition is key to the overall business environment. A grant scheme averaging £15,000 per property would require around £675,000, ruling a 'group repair' type scheme out in this scenario.

Individual shop-front and signage improvements have been undertaken on an ongoing ad-hoc basis through small grants from Halton Borough Council.

At around £10k per unit these are excellent value, being low cost relative to positive impact on environmental quality and business confidence.

Delivery: Resources are very limited and take up dependent on owner co-operation and contribution. As a result the effect is sporadic, and fails to fully overcome the overall sense of decline in building condition and public realm around Victoria Road.

A targeted scheme has been considered. The blocks in most need of visual improvement are at the south end of Victoria Road. [Clearance has been considered but ruled

out due to the high number of businesses and lack of site assembly incentive. The blocks on the east side are of attractive design.]

The 10 units on the SW block between 39 and 59 inclusive would at £10k per facelift require £100k to improve. This is likely to be a conservative estimate given that some appear to have structural issues, but would target the worst block on the street.

The block opposite, housing premises 46 to 58, has all three units in visually poor condition, adding a further £30k; again, this is likely to be a conservative estimate given the larger units (equivalent to around 5 of the shops opposite). Even if the cost were doubled, the total of £60k would be fair value for the uplift it would generate.

There are only two units assessed as visually poor in the block of ten between 69 and 87, adding a further £20,000 at £10k per unit. This would consolidate an otherwise fair to good run of shops for a relatively modest sum.

Not counting the Queen's Hall, there are three further 'landmark' blocks in poor visual condition relative to their underlying architectural appeal. These are:

- the former Drill Hall - this is an interesting building in particularly tired condition. It would add to Victoria Road's sense of place if it were renovated.
- the Kingsway Hotel - in good repair but covered in unsightly white render, which hides its attractive brick facade.
- the former Storey's Nightclub - in fair condition but disfigured by crude roller shutters.

Scenario 1 - 'Modest Capital Budget'

If a goodwill amount of £25k per property could be allocated for improvements this may incentivise investment by owners.

A targeted facelifting scheme conservatively estimated at around £225k would address visually poor properties and improve the blocks along the main frontage. Even if this budget were doubled the total is less than a standard group repair.

1.3 Queen's Hall

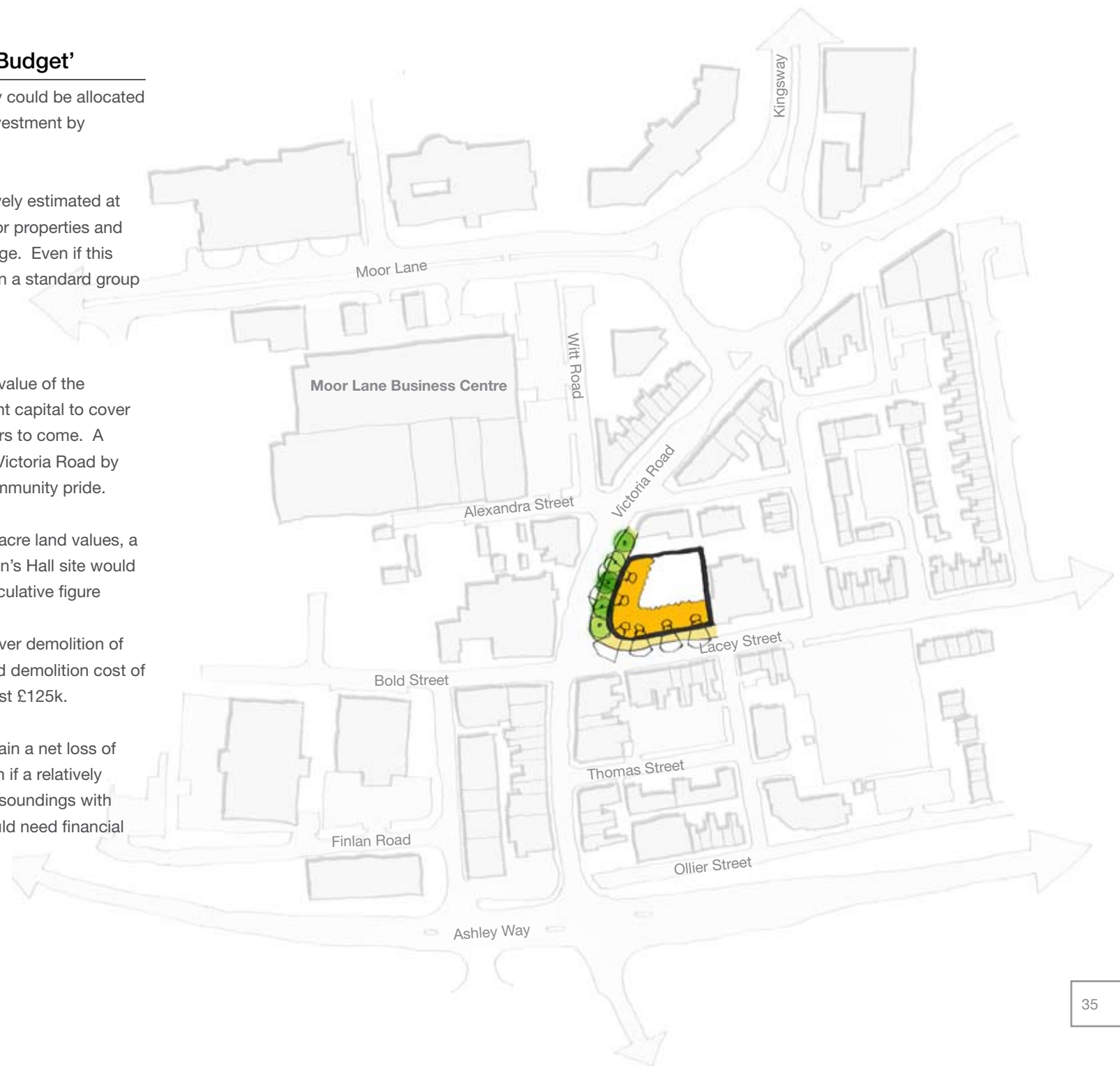
We are concerned that the development value of the approx 0.4 acre site will not yield sufficient capital to cover demolition and remediation for some years to come. A derelict Queen's Hall continues to blight Victoria Road by undermining investor confidence and community pride.

- Making an assumption of £350k per acre land values, a cleared 0.308acre (1250 sq. m) Queen's Hall site would be worth around £108k (this is a speculative figure subject to end use, planning etc.)
- It is thought that this is unlikely to cover demolition of the existing building. At an estimated demolition cost of £100 per square metre this would cost £125k.

The council would therefore need to sustain a net loss of some £13k to provide a cleared site, even if a relatively high land value could be achieved. Our soundings with major leisure operators suggest they would need financial incentives to take on the site.

Legend

-  Residential Development
-  Public Realm
-  Planting
-  Active Frontage



SCENARIO 2

Scenario 2 - 'Maximise Capital Receipt'

Summary: This scenario describes an attempt to generate significant capital resources through disposal and development of council land assets in the study area for income generating uses. Receipts would be re-invested in improvements.

Retail investors are paying highest prices in the current market, so this is the use shown. The advantage is attraction of a substantial capital receipt for reinvestment in facelifts and public realm.

We believe it will be important to re-house Enterprise Centre tenants locally before its Moor Lane site is relinquished, suggesting a future role for the Queen's Hall/site.

The disadvantages of this scenario concern the planning implications of a significant new retail use.

(As in Scenario 1)

- Removal of restrictive parking orders to improve access for business and residents. (no capital cost)
- Preparation of Planning Briefs [e.g. for Kingsway Roundabout and Moor Lane] (no capital cost).

(In addition)

- 2.1 Sale of Moor Lane Business Centre and adjacent HBC ownerships [c. 1.9 acres] could yield c. £1.425m at £750k per acre retail valuation.
- 2.2 Develop a New Enterprise Centre in Queen's Hall/on Queen's Hall site to rehouse businesses from Moor

Lane. At c.£600 per sq.m build costs, a1,250 sq. m building would cost c.£750k.

- 2.3 Development of Moor Lane site for 'Lidl/Aldi' format supermarket [approx. 1,500 sq. m./16,000 sq. ft. gross unit size, plus c. 80 spaces at 1/20 sq. m.].
- 2.4 Possible ring-fencing of remaining c.£775k of capital receipt for enhanced grant support for buildings and public realm improvements. c.2,300 sq. m of public realm at £200 per sq. m would cost c.£460k, leaving c. £315k for facelifts.

2.1 Sale of Moor Lane site for 'Lidl'/Aldi format supermarket.

Rationale: Sale of HBC holdings here could generate a significant capital receipt quickly for the council. Moor Lane Business Centre and adjacent HBC ownerships [c. 1.9 acres] could yield c. £1.425m at £750k per acre retail valuation.

Delivery: Our soundings indicate that operators not yet represented would be very keen to locate in Widnes and would negotiate on terms favourable to the council even in current market conditions.

However, discussions with planning officers have highlighted concerns that retail here may not support policy objectives to protect the town centre, and the prospects of a new local centre in the Southern Widnes SPD area.

Assuming planning and highways considerations were surmountable, relocation of existing Business Centre tenants with minimal business disruption would be key. Although tenancies are short and unsecured, we believe the Enterprise Centre and its occupants serve an important function sustaining other uses and must ideally be retained

in the area.

2.2 New Enterprise Centre in Queen's Hall/on Queen's Hall site.

Rationale: Receipt from sale of the Moor Lane site would be used to provide new/refurbished Enterprise Centre premises. These should front onto Victoria Road for maximum impact. The Queen's Hall site is the obvious choice, being available, in need of a role, high profile, and in council ownership.

Whether a refurbishment/ façading project or ground-up new-build, an Enterprise Centre here can enclose and animate the streetscape around the informal space between the Queen's Hall, Drill Hall and Conservative Club. In this scenario, parking for the Enterprise Centre is provided in the Lacey Street car park.

Delivery: Depending on specifications, the new Enterprise Centre could absorb all the Moor Lane 'windfall'. If build costs and all other considerations were kept to an average £600 per sq.m., a 1,250 sq.m building would be £750,000 (excluding the estimated £125k clearance costs if required).

This would still leave c.£775k available for other improvements.

If the Enterprise Centre specifications and/or floorspace requirements were higher this could leave grant funding required, and/or limit the scope for further public realm and shop-front face lifting.

A higher specification new business centre may need to consider subsidised/below market rents if the change from

Scenario 2 - 'Maximise Capital Receipt'

Moor Lane were to risk being more than businesses could sustain.

2.3 Development of Moor Lane site for 'Lidl/Aldi' format supermarket [approx. 1500 sq. m./16,000 sq. ft. gross unit size, plus c. 80 spaces at 1/20 sq. m.].

Rationale: As well as capital receipt a 'Lidl/Aldi' format store would generate profile and footfall. It must be configured to allow Witt Road to develop as an attractive pedestrian link with the Kingsway 'campus'.

Delivery: As noted above, this is financially deliverable, but only if planning concerns can be overcome.

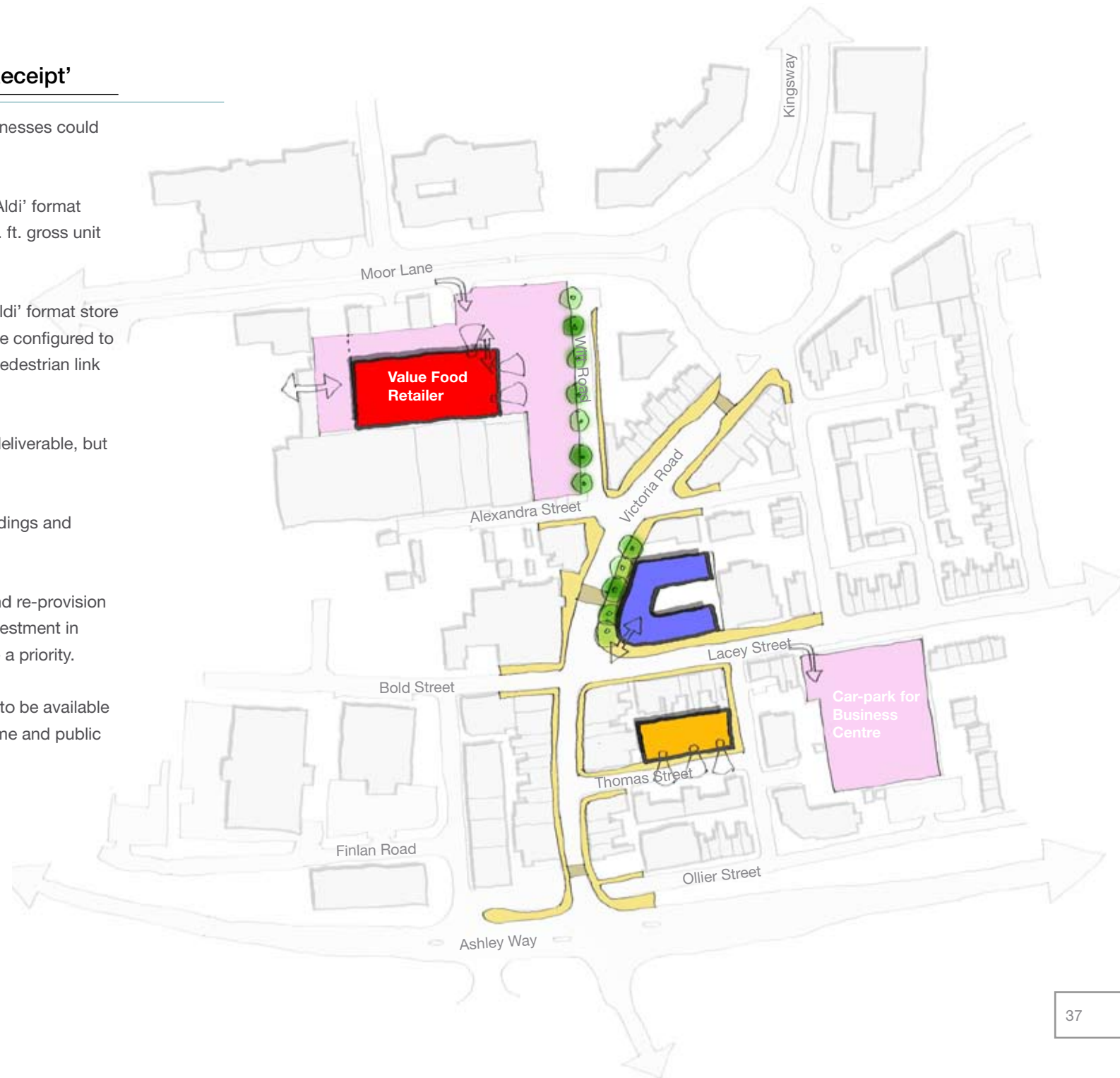
2.4 Possible enhanced grant support for buildings and public realm improvement

Rationale: If resources remained from sale and re-provision of the Moor Lane business centre, further investment in building condition and public realm would be a priority.

Delivery: Were a sum in the region of £3/4m to be available this could finance both a facelifting programme and public realm upgrade.

Legend

-  Residential Development
-  Relocated Business Centre
-  Value Food Retailer
-  Car-park
-  Public Realm
-  Planting
-  Active Frontage



SCENARIO 3

Scenario 3 - 'Transformational Regeneration'

Summary: In this scenario the council seek a transformational regeneration impact in line with the 'Knowledge Quarter' vision.

This will give the area a clear role as a gateway to enterprise, building on the local demand for start-up space and the strategic need to diversify, densify and add value to the borough's business base. It also links to surrounding educational, civic and cultural assets.

(As in Scenario 1 and/or 2)

- Removal of restrictive parking orders to improve access for business and residents. (no capital cost)
- Enhanced grant support for buildings (c. £315k) and public realm improvements (c.£460k).
- Preparation of Planning Brief [for Moor Lane] (no capital cost).

In addition

- 3.1 Retain and complement Moor Lane Business Centre with a Flagship 'Enterprise Forum' on the c.0.28 acre roundabout site.
- 3.2 Prepare Queen's Hall/site for re-use as quality leisure pub/restaurant/hotel development.
- 3.3 Develop selected council owned sites when market conditions allow.

3.1 Retain and complement Moor Lane Business Centre with a Flagship Enterprise Forum on c.0.28 acre roundabout site.

Rationale: A flagship 'Forum' to provide incubation and high quality 'grow on' space would complement the existing nearby business centres at Moor Lane and the Waterloo Centre. It could also contain shared uses like, for example, computing, meeting and break-out spaces, a public cafe and gallery/exhibition areas.

These shared facilities would support informal networking and ideas exchange, linked to the Lifelong Learning centre at the Library and conferencing at the boutique hotel in the former Town Hall, as well as the council and college functions.

A landmark building here bringing together business support and services adjacent to the surrounding educational, hospitality/conferencing and civic/health uses would help re-brand the south end of the town centre as a 'Knowledge Campus' for Widnes.

The building and a landscaped space in front would create a much needed interface between the civic functions clustered round the area and the business community. Strong functional links could also be forged with the Widnes Waterfront, Daresbury and serviced accommodation at the Heath in Runcorn.

Delivery: The 'Forum' concept encompasses both commercial and public areas, to act as a fulcrum linking the various assets nearby. It could be publicly or privately led, depending on specification and function.

The suggested site will involve removing the roundabout and providing a conventional junction, but is already owned by the local authority.

We believe Riverside College are not currently resourced to consider as an anchor tenant, but if in future they were keen to seek expansion or outreach space they would be ideal occupants alongside small business concerns. A suggested building footprint of 1150 sq. m is shown. At two storeys in height this would yield 2,300 sq. m. gross space., while at three storeys the gross area would be 3,450 sq.m.

Assuming a total build cost averaging c.£800 per sq. m. the cost of a two storey block would be £1.84m, with a three storey block costing £2.76m.

At a higher specification cost of £1800 per sq.m (thought to be similar to the publicly funded Salford Innovation Forum) a two storey 2,300 sq. m. block would be £4.14m and a three storey 3,450 sq.m. facility £6.21m.

3.2 Prepare Queen's Hall site for sale as a leisure/pub/restaurant/hotel development.

Rationale: We believe a quality leisure use for the Queen's Hall site, preferably retaining and exposing the historic facade, would anchor the Knowledge Quarter's identity and serve both day-time and evening users in the commercial and creative sectors. This could include banqueting facilities.

Delivery: If the public sector were to prepare a unit ready for occupation it would attract strong interest from operators. This would require up-front investment, likely in excess of the £750k set out in 2.2 above, but with the prospect of healthy future revenues.

Scenario 3 - 'Transformational Regeneration - Knowledge Campus'

3.3 Develop selected council owned sites when market conditions allow.

Rationale: Lacey Street and Thomas Street car-parks may not be needed if the Queen's Hall site became a leisure based re-development, and could be developed to bring more activity and investment to the area.

The land between Witt Road and Moor Lane could also be developed to help consolidate the setting of the new Enterprise Forum.

Delivery: Disposal of these sites could yield further capital receipt for the council. They should be subject to strong planning and development briefs to ensure quality complies with the overall vision.

- Land east of Witt Road - approx. 2,140 sq.m - This could yield an apartment block of around 970 sq. m. gross per floor.
- Thomas Street Car Park - approx. 600 sq. m. - This could yield an apartment block of around 450 sq.m. gross per floor.
- Lacey Street Car Park - approx. 2,400 sq. m.
- These sites total c.5,140 sq. m. or c.1.27 acres - assuming residential land value of £500k this would be worth £635k.

Legend

- | | |
|--|---|
| Residential Development | Public Realm |
| Business Forum | New Road Alignment |
| Value Food Retailer | Potential Development Edge |
| Leisure & Entertainment | Potential Future Development |
| | Planting |
| | Active Frontage |



APPRAISAL

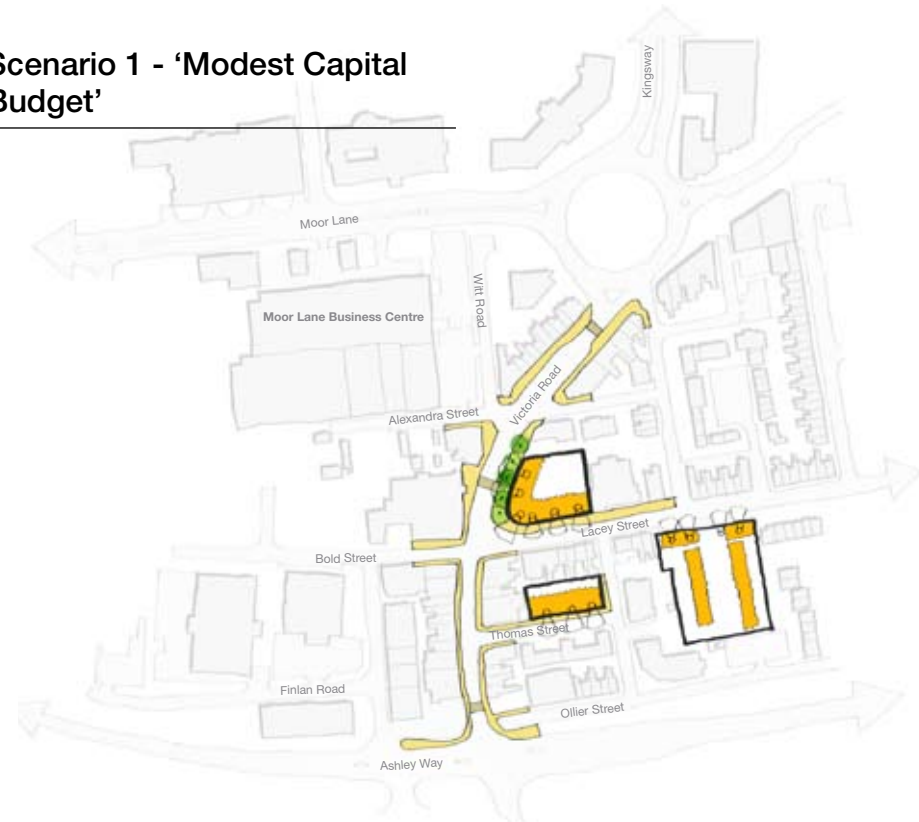
| Objectives | Scenario 1 | Scenario 2 | Scenario 3 |
|--|------------|------------|------------|
| 1. Generate resources for public realm and facelifting | ○ ○ ○ | ● ● ● | ● ○ ○ |
| 2. Maximise locational advantages | ○ ○ ○ | ● ○ ○ | ● ● ● |
| 3. Identify a clear role and function for the future | ● ○ ○ | ● ○ ○ | ● ● ● |
| 4. Increase footfall to promote vitality and viability | ● ○ ○ | ● ● ● | ● ● ● |
| 5. Reduce traffic impacts and accommodate parking. | ● ○ ○ | ● ● ○ | ● ● ● |
| 6. Preserve and enhance historic character. | ● ○ ○ | ● ● ○ | ● ● ● |
| 7. Promote enterprise and support existing businesses. | ● ○ ○ | ● ● ○ | ● ● ● |
| | 5 points | 14 points | 19 points |

The above table assesses each Scenario against the regeneration objectives set out in Section 9. A judgement has been made as to how much each objective is met in each scenario.

Not at all - 0 points
 Somewhat - 1 point
 Significantly - 2 points
 Substantially - 3 points

N.b. The ideas and interventions detailed are not intended to be read as 'exclusive' to each scenario, and could be interchangeable. Figures such as areas and values are given for indicative purposes. They must not be used as the basis for detailed appraisal work

Scenario 1 - 'Modest Capital Budget'



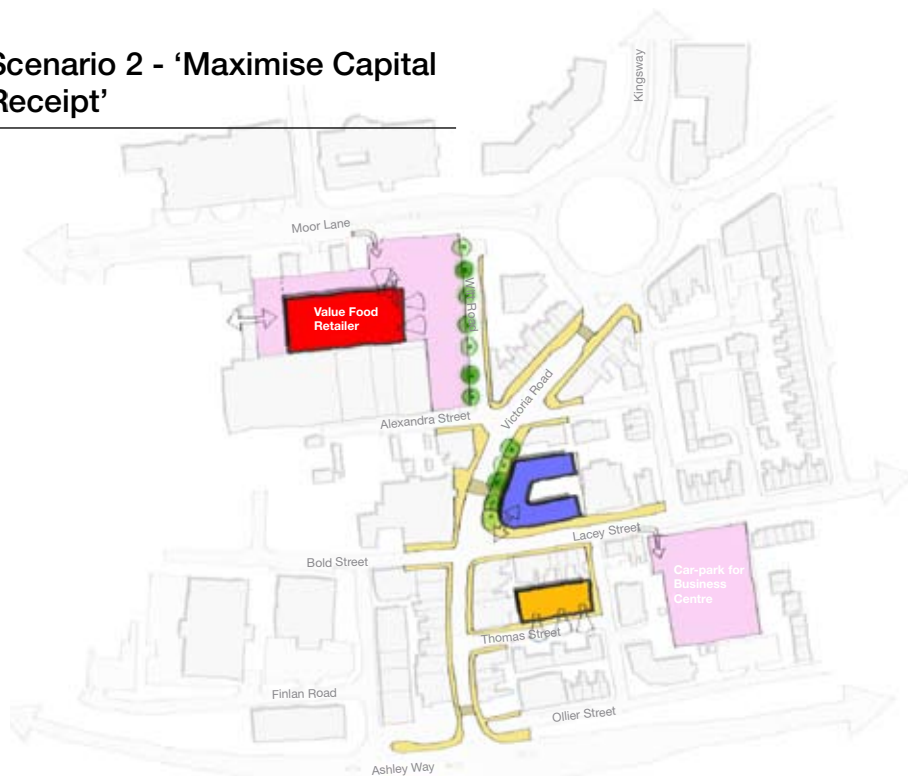
Summary: This scenario shows the scope for intervention in the absence of major investment - an evolution of current policy.

It could see improved parking and access, but potentially an unresolved Queen's Hall site and public realm. A significant impact including targeted face-lifting and clearance of the hall could probably be made for between c.£350k and c.£575k (estimated).

Extra money would have to be allocated for any public realm upgrade.

- 1.1 Removal of restrictive parking orders to improve access for business and residents. (no capital cost)
- 1.2 Targeted continuation of existing small grant support for shop front improvements etc. (£225 - £450k)
- 1.3 Clearance and disposal of Queen's Hall site (minimal net cost but could require estimated c.£125k up front).
- 1.4 Preparation of Planning Briefs [for Kingsway Roundabout and Moor Lane] (no capital cost).

Scenario 2 - 'Maximise Capital Receipt'



Summary: This scenario describes an attempt to generate significant capital resources for re-investment in improvements.

This approach could be 'cost neutral' in the medium term and resolves the main issues of building and public realm condition.

However, the larger retail use has caused planning concerns, and the area could still benefit from a clearer role.

- 2.1 Sale of Moor Lane ownerships [c. 1.9 acres] could yield c. £1.425m at £750k per acre retail valuation.
- 2.2 Develop Queen's Hall site to rehouse businesses from Moor Lane. Suitable building could cost c.£750k.
- 2.3 Development of Moor Lane site for 'Lidl/Aldi' format supermarket [approx. 1500 sq. m. gross unit size].
- 2.4 Possible ring-fencing of remaining c.£775k of capital receipt for enhanced grant support for buildings and public realm improvements.

Scenario 3 - 'Transformational Regeneration'



Summary: In this scenario the council seek a transformational regeneration impact in line with the 'Knowledge Quarter' vision. This will give the area a clear 'enterprise' role, with close links to surrounding educational, civic and cultural assets.

A typical 'incubator' unit can generate an additional 100 jobs. A high spec Enterprise Forum might stimulate even more, but could require substantial public sector investment.

Retaining ownership of the Forum and Queen's Hall sites could secure future income streams.

- 3.1 Retain and complement Moor Lane Business Centre with a Flagship 'Enterprise Forum' on the c.0.28 acre roundabout site. [cost between £1.8m and £6.2m]
- 3.2 Prepare Queen's Hall/site for sale as quality leisure pub/restaurant/hotel development [+£750k].
- 3.3 Develop selected council owned sites when market conditions allow - this could yield c. 41 apartments and 17 townhouses.

PREFERRED OPTION

- Knowledge Quarter concept connects with wider regeneration and economic strategy, and maximises existing assets and location
- Flagship 'Widnes Enterprise Centre' project to anchor local role/function and define 'Knowledge Quarter' identity.
- Envisage adding value to Halton's ownerships through uplift as market confidence returns.
- Our view is that Victoria Road will never regenerate with the Queen's Hall derelict and must be actively addressed, preferably retaining architectural references to the historic faced.

Delivering a 'Knowledge Quarter'

The artist's impression opposite gives an indication of the transformation that could be achieved. Interventions are packaged into five projects:

- 1. Flagship Widnes Enterprise Centre on the Kingsway Roundabout.
- 2. Queen's Hall/site Leisure Development, with new build incorporating architectural reference to historic facade.
- 3. Housing development on council owned 'gap sites'.
- 4. Shop front and building face-lifting programme.
- 5. Public realm improvement programme.



Intervention should aim to activate the ground floors to add life to Victoria Road. Shutters and shop fronts should enhance street



The proposed 'Life Centre' in Wigan is an example of a new building retaining the historic facade of its predecessor, as suggested for the Queen's Hall.



Salford Innovation Forum is a £9m project combining business incubation and community facilities.



This photomontage concept shows how carriageway space could be redistributed to pedestrians, cyclists and street



The £7.5m Caernarfon Galleria offers space for creative businesses, combined with public uses including cafe/restaurants, cinema and gallery space. (Images Daniel Hopkinson, Richard Murphy)





