

SCLP Tactical group – Ainsdale on Sea – Coastal Gateway

25th April 2024 – updates in red

Purpose of Briefing Paper

This paper updates SCLP Tactical Group on the suite of projects at Ainsdale Coastal Gateway, given various blockages on some schemes' delivery, and wider context in the development of the area.

Introduction/Background

The Sefton Coast Plan, , adopted in September 2017, see here item 11: [Sefton Home](#), recognises the need to create high quality visitor infrastructure at a number of access points, known as coastal gateways, along Sefton's Coast. The purpose is to drive growth within the visitor economy to the benefit of local businesses, provide a high-quality visitor experience at these access points, and reduce visitor pressure on areas of high conservation value and on local residents. Ainsdale-on-Sea has been recognised as one of these coastal gateways.

The area is formally protected as internationally important dune habitat, supporting many rare and important species of flora and fauna, as well as providing a natural sea defence. The intertidal areas support internationally important populations of overwintering birds, and the coast is important for passage migrant birds, for breeding populations of European Protected Species such as Natterjack Toad and Sand Lizard, for locally rare insects and other invertebrates and is a hotspot for biodiversity. The Coast is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Special Area of Conservation (SAC), Special Protection Area (SPA), Ramsar site and Local Nature Reserve. Important for recreation, the area includes, a "good" bathing water quality, lifeguarded beach, links to the England Coast Path and national cycling routes and is one of the key bases for Green Sefton. It also contains several other buildings that are owned by Sefton Council, including Toad Hall, and the former Sands public house.

Consultation on the future development of Ainsdale-on-Sea Coastal Gateway was first proposed in Winter 2019 and was due to take place during the Summer season of 2020. Due to Covid this consultation did not take place. Subsequently, consultation relating to this project has taken place as part of the Southport Town Deal bid (Summer 2020). As a response to theme three: Stronger Economy, the investment in Ainsdale-on-Sea Visitor Hub featured as the third most popular option. It was suggested that Ainsdale-on-Sea needs investment, although this wasn't prioritised by the Town Deal Board.

Several operational changes to the way visitors are welcomed to the coast were introduced in the summers of 2020, 2021 and 2022 with the 'Visitor Action Plan'. These included the increasing of staffing, including into the evening when the car park was then closed, the engagement of volunteers as 'ambassadors', and the introduction of skips/ euro bins and other waste management measures. The existing toilets were closed during the Covid pandemic, with temporary portaloos provided during this period. Basic improvements to the toilets were carried out while they were closed, and they were reopened for the summer of 2022.

A further, more detailed, consultation exercise was then completed in the summer of 2021, building on the comments received from the Town Deal consultation, the operational changes that have taken place over the previous 2 years, and the developments planned for the area.

These consultations helped inform proposals for several longer-term development projects, but the area still lacks a masterplan which sets all these in context and co-ordinates delivery. The following sections provides an update on the main elements of the development in the area.

Projects updates

Headlines of ongoing projects in the area include:

The Sands Pub

Following a market testing exercise, and subsequent tendering exercise, Members are considering offers for future development of this asset and are considering the options for next steps (which includes those submitted bids and other potential routes to delivery).

Toad Hall

Temporary repair works to this building have been paused due to concerns about presence of bats – surveys are to be undertaken into late Spring 2023 before they can recommence.

The future of this building/ key location in the gateway needs deciding upon.

Pontins

Public feedback, and that seen on Trip Advisor etc, often refers to dissatisfaction with the quality of the offer given at Pontins (albeit it also serves a need for those that may not be able to afford a holiday otherwise as evidenced by its continuing popularity). Clearly a large and very visible presence in the area, feedback from developers previously has suggested it will always limit the investment they could see in the area.

Wider Landscape Management

The area around the Ainsdale on Sea Coastal Gateway is nationally and internationally protected landscape of the highest importance – it benefits from protected status that brings obligations to maintain it to standards that are audited by Natural England every 5 years. This is not discretionary, and should this audit conclude unfavourably, then DEFRA have the powers to fine the Council, and bring in others to undertake the works required, recharging the authority anyway. Reliance on external grants is essential in addition to core funding/ limited resources. Currently, a Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier grant is funding the staffing, contractor support, and other actions to practically manage the habitat into ‘favourable condition’ status. This is a 5 year fund, running to 2027, after which further external funds will be required.

Beach Parking

The coast is accreting, and always changing. Alterations have been made accordingly to the layout and footprint of the beach car park for the 2023 season, but consideration should be given to the long-term future for domestic cars to access and park on the beach. As the dunes accrete, and the beach levels (and tides) rise, the space for parking cars will shift, and the access road that once brought people onto the beach is already becoming more impassable over time due to soft sand– consideration needs to be given as to whether parking cars on the beach in the long term is viable, and engineered solutions would need developing if this were agreed upon (or alternative arrangements would need to be allowed for visitors transport/ arrival/ parking).

Meanwhile projects:

Whilst awaiting the development of a wider masterplan for the area, Green Sefton were asked to develop a suite of ‘meanwhile’ projects:

- External artwork on Toad Hall (now completed)
- Toilet and wash facility improvements, including introducing a Changing Places toilet unit – project managed by colleagues in the Regeneration team, and with consultant support, this project has been tendered 2/3 times in Spring/ Summer 2023. The ladies, gents and disabled toilet improvements were originally to be completed before the main tourist season (mid July 2023), and with external works and the Changing Places unit to follow in the Autumn of 2023. However, due to lack of interest in the tenders/ limited returns coming way over budget, another route to delivery was explored, with a contractor appointed in Sept 23, works commenced October 23, with completion anticipated Spring 24. **Delays in Planning Permission approval, and extent of roof works required have now extended completion date to end June 2024. Works progressing well on site though, with major refurbishment to be completed. Handover of facility management to Sefton Security once completed (in line with passing over of all public convenience facilities in the borough)**
- A new seasonal pop-up food and drink facility off beach, in the picnic area – trialled in 2021 following a competitive tendering process, Sefton Hospitality Operations Ltd (SHOL) won the concession in 2022, and a waiver has been signed this has been extended for 2023-2025 to continue their presence (adding this to their on-beach hot food concession). SHOL have since confirmed their withdrawal from this concession, and so this was tendered over winter in time for a new concessionaire to be sought from Spring 24 – tenders to be released imminently at the time of writing Jan 24 update. **Tender now awarded, with concession open daily since Easter weekend**

- Improved off-beach car parking, with pedestrian and cycle access improvements, and EV charging points – following an agreed increase in the capital budget required in late 2022, this scheme requires ecological surveys in order to seek Planning Permission, and further to inadequate surveys being undertaken by a previous consultant in 2021 and 2022, the only bidder that tendered for 2023 has since withdrawn (stating personal and professional concerns upon reading the initial objections, and from whom they were made, in the early stages of the Planning process). This project has now been paused to reconsider options, and the previous Planning Application has also now been withdrawn
- A suite of other infrastructure improvements, such as fencing to guide visitors appropriately, new signage and picnic area improvements – that were to follow after the off-beach car park was created

The way forwards

Given the challenges seen across the suite of projects and issues outlined above, officers have been discussing the need to prioritise the development of a masterplan for the area – this would set projects in context, justify their development and by consulting widely on this would gain consensus in the community, and with key stakeholders

The development of a masterplan for the area, especially given the protected status it holds, will need resourcing appropriately – it will require not only a lead ‘client’ service area, with a senior Project Sponsor in place, but no Council service currently has capacity (nor to some extent capability in all aspects) to lead this – it would require an external consultants support and for this to be funded accordingly also.

Members are currently considering this, and a further report can be presented to the next Tactical meeting, but in the meantime it is probably worth noting that this approach has been declared publicly, with a press release and communications on social media in July 2023 as here: [Update on improvement works at Ainsdale-on-Sea \(sefton.gov.uk\)](https://sefton.gov.uk/news/2023/07/20/sefton-council-announces-planning-application-for-off-beach-car-park-at-ainsdale-on-sea/)

Turleys have been appointed to lead on the development of this new vision document, which should be available in draft form early to mid in 2024. Basic consultation is to take place only, with the Beach Forum already having had a site visit with the consultants in October 23, and a further discussion in February 2024. Awaiting outcome of this work at the time of writing

The Britannia announcement to close/ not re-open Pontins may yet have an impact on the masterplanning for the area – officers are seeking clarification on this at the time of writing

Prepared by Mark Shaw, 25.4.24