



Coastal Gateway Visitor Action Plan

Review of 2020 and plans for 2021



Background

Summer 2020

- During Summer 2020, Sefton experienced unprecedented pressures from visitors at its Coastal Gateway locations (Crosby/Waterloo, Formby, Ainsdale and Southport), resulting in significant difficulties with current car parking and waste management capacity being overwhelmed; unacceptable and anti-social behaviour including selfish and aggressive attitudes, large-scale gatherings and organised parties; fires as a result of barbeques, discarded litter and arson; and increased tension between residents and visitors.
- These pressures arose because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic within the UK, including national “Lockdown” from late March and subsequent easing of the travel-distance and time allowed for exercise and leisure; continued restrictions on visitor access to Wales; restrictions on foreign travel/holidays; closure of schools for most children; and furlough of employees in businesses forced to close. The local impact of COVID-19 also resulted in service restrictions at the Coastal Gateways, including reduced staffing for Council and Partner Services; furlough of RNLI Lifeguards, resulting in closure of Ainsdale and Southport on-Beach Car Parks; and continued closure of non-COVID-Compliant public toilets at Ainsdale.
- These types of issues have been experienced at these locations on “busy weekends” in the summer-months for some years but were amplified due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the prolonged period of fine weather. The impact was also amplified by added anxiety amongst residents about increased risk of spread of the virus amongst visitors and between visitors and the local population, and the need to ensure compliance with COVID related restrictions e.g. Social distancing, enhanced hygiene etc. This experience was witnessed at other popular coastal and outdoor locations across England.
- In response, a Cabinet Reference Group was established, with four Cabinet Members to guide, agree and oversee actions to be taken. In early June 2020 Cabinet agreed and implemented an action plan, guided by the following principles: Clear Communication Messages; Safety First; Proactive Management; Enforcement; and Managing Cost.
- The Action Plan sought to manage the four gateways in a coherent way and included a total of 82 coast-wide and gateway-specific actions under the following broad themes: Communications; Access & Car Parking; Facilities; Staffing & Systems of Work; Partnerships; and Public Behaviour. Over the course of the summer, the Action Plan and implementation was kept under review through regular meetings with the Cabinet Reference Group and several updates were sent to Coastal Ward Councillors.
- From Daily monitoring of peak visitor numbers by Green Sefton staff, approximately 344k visitors were recorded across the summer, with an even split between Crosby and Ainsdale at circa 120-130k visitors and about 40k in Southport with about 40k. Visitor numbers were very much in line with the weather, with maximum numbers on the warmer days.

Review of action taken

All actions were delivered, other than three that were not in the Council's complete control:

- *Contacting third party navigation system providers* (e.g. AA, RAC, Garmin, Tom Tom, Google Maps) to address issue of directions to Another Place and Crosby beach – contact was made but no positive feedback received to indicate any action taken;
- *Provision of toilets within National Trust site at Formby Point* – the existing toilet block was opened, but only during quiet times when it could be managed;
- *Implement Cashless payment system for Ainsdale on-beach car park* – the cashless payment system was eventually introduced at Southport Esplanade Car Park, but the temporary removal of the Mobile Phone Mast at Ainsdale prevented implementation at Ainsdale.

What worked well

The first thing to acknowledge is the incredible hard work, flexibility and commitment shown by Sefton Council staff over the whole period, in the face of very difficult circumstances, without which the Action Plan could not have been delivered.

In addition, it is felt that the following also merit specific mention:

- *Cabinet Member Group* – the presence and support from this Group enabled good governance and very agile decision making/delivery;
- *Whole-Coast Management Approach* – this approach ensured a coherent response, whilst still enabling a response to gateway-specific issues, and enabled attempts to divert visitors from the highest-pressure points to other locations more able to manage the impact;
- *Coastal Partnership Operational Meetings* – the regular nature and good attendance at these meetings enabled effective joined up planning/action and a sense of all partners pulling together in same direction;
- *Communications Campaigns* – whilst it is difficult to measure the impact, it is felt that these were effective, delivering joined up messaging across multiple media streams and reaching new audiences (particularly through local Social Media Influencers and Facebook Push);
- *Support from “redeployed” staff* – providing additional, willing and capable resource;
- *Support from NSL* – The Council's parking and Environmental Enforcement contractor proved a responsive and willing partner, with the enforcement service being brought back on-stream quicker than in many other locations;
- *Deployment and messaging on mobile Variable Message Signs* – the flexibility of the signs in terms of location and message was very helpful. They were also visible to residents, reassuring them that we were trying to get the message out;

- *Deployment of Skips & Eurobins* – these provided much needed additional capacity and were generally conveniently placed for visitors to use, albeit this proved more difficult at Crosby;
- *Installation of Alligator Teeth Ramp at Ainsdale* – the ability to close the entrance to the beach whilst allowing safe exit resulted in a reduction in overnight abuse of the site and a significant improvement in beach condition;
- *Provision of Temporary Toilets* – the provision of toilets came at some cost, particularly for the overnight security required, but was considered necessary to provide essential facilities for visitors, minimise abuse of the locations and criticism from residents and visitors;
- *Green Sefton Duty Management* – this worked well, providing a senior officer presence at weekends. Consideration is being given to continuing/mainstreaming but as an 'end of the phone' support, particularly for peak periods;
- *Combined impact of measures* – it was noted that the combined impact of providing enough clean toilets, additional waste capacity, preventing vehicular access to the beach at night and having enough staff at the entrance for meet and greet all contributed to a different 'feeling' on site. One that was far less confrontational and resulted in less BBQs being lit etc.

What worked less well

The following either didn't work, or require improvement ahead of the 2021 summer season:

- *Sand Clearance on Crosby Promenade* – the combination of reduced staffing and unreliable/less than ideal mechanical equipment resulted in an inability to keep the promenade clear of windblown sand, with parts of the promenade completely unpassable. This impacts on visitors (including residents), Council reputation and meant that the additional waste capacity could not be placed in the optimum locations. A trial of a Telehandler is scheduled for this autumn/ winter and it is hoped that this will enable much improved performance;
- *Car Parking in Formby* – This perennial "busy day" issue continues to impact on residents (who suffer congestion, inconvenience and confrontation) and visitors (who experience congestion and very long queues for official car parks). The official Car Parks close enough to the coast are insufficient for the number of visitors drawn to the location in good weather. Their location in a Site of Special Scientific Interest means they cannot be readily expanded and probably couldn't be expanded sufficiently to accommodate all visitors anyway;
- *Implementation of Cashless Payment* – there were several "false dawns" where providers promised but didn't deliver on time, resulting in a few weeks of lost revenue. In hindsight we wouldn't have held out for the cashless payment system before reopening Ainsdale on-beach Car Park and would instead have re-started with cash-only payment earlier than we did. The removal of the Phone Mast at Ainsdale extended this issue. We will have the opportunity to more effectively review this facility next year;
- *Improved on-site Communications* – The existing short-wave radio system (SWRS) was ineffective. The heavy reliance on mobile phones in place of the (SWRS) was highlighted by the temporary removal of the mobile phone mast at Ainsdale, which meant officers were often working alone and

unable to contact colleagues. The SWRS needs to be replaced and shared with partners including the Police, National Trust, Natural England etc. to prevent this;

- *Beachsafe Police Support* – the support from the Police over the summer period has generally been excellent, however increased transparency, including the overtime allocation from the Beachsafe grant, is necessary to understand availability and manage expectations of what is being resourced by the grant. There were also some inconsistencies in the approach taken by different Police Officers. The availability of officers from MFRS ‘on call’ on Friday and Saturday nights was felt to be more effective.

Forward Strategy 2021

The action taken over Summer 2020 provides a strong foundation from which to build. Whilst it is hoped that the UK will not be subject to the same restrictions in Summer 2021 as it was this year, there is no guarantee of this and an effective “whole-population” vaccination programme is still some way off. Restrictions and/or the additional cost of foreign travel may also lead to a continued reliance on UK visitor locations, including Sefton’s Coastal Gateways, in 2021 and, as stated above, some of these issues do also present on the busiest days during a ‘normal’ summer. It is therefore considered sensible to continue planning for similar issues, perhaps in a way that is scalable dependent upon circumstances, and to seek to implement measures that provide longer-term benefit from the investment required.

The 2020 Action Plan was guided by the following Principles/Objectives:

- *Clear Communication Messages* – discouraging visitors to these locations and encouraging correct, responsible behaviour from those who do visit (e.g. considerate behaviour, social distancing, compliance with by-laws). Accompanied by proactive and reactive communication with residents regarding the actions herein and ongoing response;
- *Safety First* – prioritising public safety, staff safety and COVID-19 Secure infection control measures;
- *Proactive Management* – taking the actions we can to manage the issues and tensions, but also to manage expectations of visitors (e.g. what to expect when you visit) and residents (e.g. there are limits to our powers, actions and impact);
- *Enforcement* – Enforcement is an important part of the response, but it cannot be the sole response. The Council and partners have limited powers and enforcement resources, and for some people the penalty is an insufficient deterrent (e.g. PCNs considered by some as a price worth paying);
- *Managing Cost* – Additional costs will be incurred, but this must be visible and managed, to ensure that the impact on budgets is understood and agreed.

These principles/objectives should be reviewed to ensure that they are correct to shape action going forward. The decision to discourage visitors to the Coast Gateways was a reluctant but necessary one, running counter to the general to develop and promote these locations, dependent on the pandemic situation at the time we would hope not to be having to discourage visitors but be much better prepared to manage their experience and impact.

Managing costs will remain important but as far as possible, investment should be aimed at measures that provide longer-term benefit from the investment required and can generate an income stream to cover the cost and/or enable further investment.

It is suggested that the main actions ahead of Summer 2021 should include the following:

Whole Coast Management

- *Overarching Strategy* – to manage issues at all four gateways in line with vision set out in The Sefton Coast Plan 2017–2030, with a particular focus on improving the ‘offer’ and encouraging visitors towards Crosby, Ainsdale and Southport in order to manage and reduce the impact of visitors at Formby;
- *Traffic Management and traffic Regulation Orders* – completion of the independent review of traffic management options, production of a Traffic Management Plan and prioritisation of measures to be introduced;
- *Improved Signage* – Implementation of improved signage on entry to Sefton and on the Sefton road network, highlighting and directing visitors to the Coast Gateways, improved signage and promotion of official car parks at the gateways to direct people to areas where impact can be better managed, on ongoing deployment of Matrix Signs, all informed by the Traffic Management Plan referred to above;
- *Explore CSAS Training* – the explore costs and practical implications of CSAS Training for Green Sefton and National Trust staff, to enable them to manage traffic and implement road closures on the highway network immediately adjacent to their sites, on behalf of the Police;
- *Refreshed Communications Plan* – implementing a refresh plan, learning from experience in 2020, and seeking contributions from partners for the ‘paid for’ elements of the campaign (e.g. adverts, bus wraps etc.);
- *Additional Waste Capacity* – implement additional waste disposal capacity, adjusting positioning, signage and container type based on learning from experience in 2020.

Crosby Gateway

- *Re-opening of Crosby Lakeside Adventure Centre*;
- *Sand Clearance on Promenade* – See separate Options Paper also on this Agenda;
- *Public Toilets* – implementation of purpose build permanent facility at Lakeside and preparation for provision of temporary toilets at Mariners Road (scalable option subject to COVID situation, availability of Leisure Centre facilities and demand at the time);
- *Improved Car Park Signage* – encouraging visitors towards larger Lakeside and Burbo Bank Car Parks;
- *Ambassador offer* – implementation of Ambassadors to meet, greet and support visitors;

- *'Meanwhile' Food, drink and entertainment offer* – as per confidential IPC Paper also on this Agenda.

Formby Gateway

- *Formby Stakeholder Group* – continue to discuss and develop options for managing visitor numbers;
- *National Trust* – continue working with National Trust, to understand their plans and encourage early implementation.

Ainsdale Gateway

- *Off-beach Car Park* – as per IPC Paper also on this Agenda;
- *Public Toilets* – implementation of purpose build permanent facility, as per IPC Paper;
- *'Meanwhile' Food, drink and entertainment offer* – as per IPC Paper;

Southport Gateway

- *Park Active Pilot* – exploring active travel opportunities between Esplanade Car Park and town centre and other locations;
- *On-Beach Car Park* – decision whether to open or close, subject to the availability of RNLI Lifeguard Cover (absent throughout 2020).

Costs

The Estimated revenue costs associated with delivering the above in 2021 are approximately £143k, consisting of:

- Provision of additional skips and Eurobins £15k
- Funded Communications Plan £40k
- New Short-Wave Radio System £10k
- Additional vehicles to ensure Covid-secure £40k
- Provision of temporary toilets at Mariners Drive, Crosby £30k
- Equipment and materials to support Ambassador offer £3k
- Southport Beach Car Park Kiosk replacement £5k

This does not include costs arising from implementation of the Traffic Management Plan or additional highway signage (which are currently unknown) or the capital costs of the gateway improvements referred to in the relevant IPC Paper.

If Members wish to proceed with the above for 2021, funding options will need to be developed, these would include ringfencing additional car parking income at Ainsdale; allocation to government COVID-related funding where applicable; utilisation of service budgets if possible and other funding sources.

