

# Sefton Coast Plan

## Visioning Position Statement 2021



Sefton**Coast**2021

green  
Sefton  
Sefton Council 



# Contents

Sefton Coast Plan.....	1
Visioning Position Statement 2021.....	1
Introduction.....	3
The Natural Coast.....	4
Coast Plan Sub-Strategies:.....	5
Gateways Visioning and Masterplans.....	6
Crosby.....	7
Formby.....	8
Ainsdale.....	9
Southport.....	11
Background:.....	11

# Introduction

The Sefton Coast defines the Borough, and is much loved by both residents and visitors alike. It is the reason many people chose to live and work, as well as spending their leisure time, in the Borough. This popularity dates back centuries, and is the reason the townships and villages have developed in the way they have – from the expansion of Liverpool in the South, to the Victorian resort destination of Southport in the North. All are welcome, and we cater for everyone.

It is a special and unique landscape though – featuring both ‘fixed’ and ‘mobile’ sand dune systems, mud flats and salt marshes – all of which is rarer than rain forest, we are custodians of this special place that has evolved over thousands of years, and continues to change before our eyes to this day. It is home to an incredible array of life – from the infamous Red Squirrels, Natterjack Toads, and Sand Lizards, to the less well known, but no less important, other species of flora and fauna.

It is for this reason that our Coast enjoys a number of high level formal protection – it is a Site of Special Scientific Interest, a Special Area of Conservation, a Special Protection Area and a RAMSAR and Natura 2000/ National Site Network site because of the range of dune habitats and rare species that can be found here. The area has nationally important marine habitat also, with two areas being designated as Marine Conservation Zones.

The coastline also enjoys Site of Special Scientific Interest status because of the large number of migrating birds that use it in spring and autumn, stopping off as they head north or south – roosting birds and the need not to disturb them will play a factor in organising any events along the shoreline, as will the usual tidal and weather issues synonymous with working on any coastline.

Most of Sefton’s coast – from Hall Road northwards - is rural; part of the countryside, and this area is in the Green Belt. Much of the rest – Crosby Coastal Park, and even much of Southport Seafront - is public open space. The natural heritage of the coastline is also its most important facet in terms coast protection and flood defence – as the high cost of the replacement of Southport sea wall, and the developing project in Crosby highlights.

With all this in mind, the overall proposed vision/ strapline for our Coast is:

# The Natural Coast

More detail on the heritage and other background aspects can be found at the end of this document for more information, and in the Coast Plan that was adopted in 2017 (and runs to 2030). The Coast Plan articulates in more detail the overall approach that we need to take in managing this wonderful landscape – to balance the competing demands of People, Place (nature) and Economy. If we get this balance right, the Coast can become the Boroughs greatest asset; creating jobs and economy, a lovely place to visit and live, as well as contributing positively to the climate change agenda and international biodiversity crisis.

The Sefton Local Plan, adopted in 2017, sets the framework for assessing planning applications for development proposals on the Coast. Southport Seafront and Crosby Coastal Park are identified as two of the Borough's four strategic tourism locations; with Southport being the key location for tourism and economic development and Crosby focussing more on outdoor recreation. The role of Formby reflects the extent and sensitivity of its nature conservation status and the importance of the natural dune coast as a natural sea defence. Informal recreation across the whole Coast is broadly supported. The Coastal 'links' golf courses are a major factor in making Sefton the 'Golf Coast'. The economic importance of the Port, and of landfall facilities for offshore installations is also recognised.

The Local Plan sees the Coast as Sefton's key natural asset, and part of its strategic green infrastructure network. Nature policies and objectives prioritise the conservation, management and enhancement of Coastal landscapes, habitats and species; and the Sefton Coast is one of the City Region's Nature Improvement Area Focus Areas. As part of this, it is really important that visitor numbers and overall people pressure are managed - to direct people away from the most sensitive and vulnerable parts of the Coast, towards less sensitive and vulnerable areas and any attractions and facilities sited in these locations, or further afield. The most sensitive and vulnerable areas vary over time, seasonally and even daily if they are affected by the tide.

The Sefton Coast Landscape Partnership is a long standing group of all significant land owners and partner agencies with a key interest in our coast. The Board meet quarterly, are supported by a number of sub committees, and oversee the delivery of an Action Plan that came out of the 2017 Coast Plan. This document you are reading has been created by the SCLP Board to provide a Position Statement on progress with the Coast Plan delivery to date – from the sub strategies that will support delivery, to the gateway masterplans and visioning that are in development. It is the intention for this Position Statement approach to be regularly updated over time.



# Coast Plan Sub-Strategies:

The Coast Plan identified the need for sub-strategies to articulate further the tension between people (with a Visitor Management Strategy), and place (with a Nature Conservation Strategy). It also required the development of an Adaptation Strategy, to balance the competing demands as well as consider the effects of Climate Change.

Whilst these documents remain in development, the pandemic hit in 2020, and required the development of a Coast Visitor Action Plan when large numbers of visitors descended at the end of the lockdown. This Plan was overseen by a Cabinet Member Reference Group who allocated funding to improve facilities and services to cater for the excess visitors seen at this time. This was welcomed and seen as successful, and much of these efforts have been resourced for 2021 as well. This is, in effect, the 'operational visitor management strategy' and serves as a meanwhile approach. The review document, and plans for 2021 can be found here: [www.sefton.gov.uk/around-sefton/coast-countryside/coastal-gateway-visitor-action-plans](http://www.sefton.gov.uk/around-sefton/coast-countryside/coastal-gateway-visitor-action-plans)

With that 'meanwhile' approach in mind, officers are now developing a simple calendar approach to note key dates and timescales to consider regarding 'nature' in its broadest sense. From being mindful of the correct time of year to cease heavy pruning operations, to when and how we should mow to avoid killing off flowering weeds that support our bee population, and the timing of Natterjack Toad breeding, there is much to consider when managing our coastal (and inland) landscapes. This simple calendar approach should provide an easy reference point for us all in advance of the actual strategy being published.



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# Gateways Visioning and Masterplans

The following statements provide an early headline thought on each of the four Gateways to the Coast, from South to North, indicating how we are looking to be ambitious in our visioning for the coast, and how visitor pressure is best managed so that the recreation, leisure, tourism and economic role of the gateways is best integrated with the Natural Coast, with all of the sensitivities to nature that includes:





## Crosby

Crosby Coastal Park is one of Sefton's strategic tourism locations. The first stretch of open coastline north of Liverpool and the Port, the long thin coast bordering the extensive public open space of Crosby Coastal Park is a hugely popular destination. It is easily accessible from the neighbouring urban area, local train stations and bus routes and via the Bootle-Crosby cycle path as well as the Sefton Coast Path. It is home to Antony Gormleys Another Place installation (the 'Iron Men') as well as hosting a children's play area and outdoor gym, formal Victorian parks and gardens fronting the Listed Buildings in Waterloo Conservation Area, Blundellsands Conservation Area, the Marine Lake which is an important focus for watersports and the Crosby Lakeside Adventure Centre.

Given the proximity to natural and heritage assets and the role of Crosby Coastal Park as public open space, visitor facilities need to be developed sensitively, to welcome people to the key locations at the southern end of the park in particular (near the Marine Lake), and to a lesser extent in the Northern end (at the Hall Road car park). Overall we wish to see improvements to the coast experience for people, and these may include food and drink offerings, together with visitor centres with ancillary cafes or retailing. Some additional leisure use may be considered too in appropriate locations, such as the expansion of the heritage fairground ride attractions trialled in recent years. The Southern end of the park in particular also offers expansive grassland areas that may be considered for additional events each year.

The main public open space and paths within Crosby Coastal Park are well used, but this isn't a 'recreational beach' akin to some others on the coast. Although the Iron Men are a focus for those walking on the beach south of Hall Road; the mud flats and fast moving tides are potentially dangerous for people's safety (hence the permanent RNLI presence, the only beach in the UK having such), and the beach is important to a range of birds. Public access to the beach north of Hall Road is not encouraged.

The 'coastal edge' leisure opportunity is more about informal recreation and movement – people walking and cycling along the promenade (where it is not buried in sand), from Waterloo to Hall Road and for a more intrepid few, northwards to Hightown. This itself has challenges though, with beach levels rising, the coast accreting and dunes growing all the time. Although efforts are being made to keep on top of wind blown sand, and new ways of working are being explored, sooner or later a new approach will be needed, as we always need to work with nature, not against it.

### **Crosby succinct vision:**

Informal recreation and leisure time, culture and heritage

### **Crosby Vision/ Masterplan progress:**

Major consultation in 2019 has assisted the drafting of a vision document (to be adopted Summer 2021), and the creation of a new Community Forum launched in March 2021 (stalled in 2020 due to the pandemic). Ongoing projects include England Coast Path and cycleway construction, investment in the Marine Lake, a new toilet block at the South Road entrance, the trial of a new food and drink concession, and of course the major schemes of the Lakeside (CLAC) rejuvenation, and the development of the sea wall/ coastal defence project at the Northern end.



## Formby

Formby is known for its extensive beach complete with prehistoric footprints, sand dunes, pinewoods and red squirrels as well as other features, and over the years has attracted visitors mainly to the National Trust's Victoria Road site and the Council's Lifeboat Road site. With the Lifeboat Road side of the Coast passed to the management of the National Trust in 2017, the entire Formby Coast is now managed by them. They are expected to develop an approved masterplan for this area of the Coast by 2022 (albeit the Covid pandemic has stalled these efforts), which will harvest significant investment to the area. The coast is eroding in Formby, and windblown sand is encroaching inland, so the car park at Victoria Road (the northern side) will disappear in time.

The masterplan will look to develop new visitor facilities at the Lifeboat Road (Southern) side, including replacement car parking and cycle parking, and a visitor centre with ancillary cafe or retailing. All this to be in the context of the very special nature characteristics of the Formby pinewoods, the dune system and associated dune heathland, the rural, Green Belt setting. High visitor numbers to Formby often cause congestion, and so there is a need to manage the impact of traffic and parking on the adjacent village. There are opportunities to encourage walking and cycling and use of public transport as alternatives to car travel.

Formby is a well loved location, often featured on national television, and yet neither the landscape and nature habitats and species, nor the layout or infrastructure of the adjacent village, can cope with the huge visitor numbers that try to descend on a sunny day. As well as working in partnership with the National Trust to develop their plans to enhance the management of the Formby Coast including though enhanced visitor facilities, Sefton Council's priority must be to strategically invest in the other gateways, (and indeed in larger parks and other countryside recreation areas in Sefton) to draw visitors away from Formby (and gain the positive benefits of such visitor numbers to other areas).

### Formby succinct vision

Quiet leisure time in a very natural setting

### Formby Masterplan progress

The National Trust have led on consultation for an overall vision of the Formby Coast in the future and have launched a specific consultation for the Lifeboat Road area in June 2021. Although residents would prefer to see the parking issues resolved more effectively, overall by far most people seem in agreement with the vision and need for improved visitor facilities which are appropriate to the sensitive location.



## Ainsdale

Ainsdale-on-Sea lies within a rural part of the Sefton Coast, at the southern edge of Southport. Ainsdale-on-Sea includes expansive areas of beach, sand dunes, dune slacks and a richness of special and rare flowers and grasses as well as the Natterjack toads and sand lizards for which this part of the Sefton Coast is noted. It also includes the lake adjacent to the former 'Sands' pub which has paths and boardwalks all round it and a range of other special natural features. As well as The Sands, other buildings, such as Toad Hall, reflect past Victorian /Edwardian aspirations for the proposed resort of Ainsdale-on Sea. There are more modern buildings such as Ainsdale Discovery Centre, the small toilet block next to the main beach entrance and the Pontins holiday park. There is a small car park off Shore Road and for many years the beach has been used for car parking (for up to 2,500 or so cars). The Trans Pennine Trail cycling and walking route (linking to central Southport, south Sefton, Liverpool and beyond) and the Sefton Coast Path run through Ainsdale-on-Sea and there are road and path links to Ainsdale Village centre, station and bus routes.

As well as being the main beach in Sefton for 'bucket and spade' and traditional family beach activities, Ainsdale is also recognised as one of the main beaches in the UK for extreme kite activities, with zones set aside for kite buggy, landboard use and kitesurfing.

As this is also a sensitive location and natural environment there is potential for enhanced car park management, enhanced visitor facilities, new and improved paths and other 'movement networks' and enhanced zoning and management of natural areas (which may vary over time). Links with Ainsdale Village and cycle and path routes can be encouraged. This has the potential to benefit both visitors and the natural environment. For example, recently Sefton Council has strengthened access controls over beach parking, and this has a range of benefits, including for controlling anti social behaviour, as well as to nature.

Any new visitor facilities should be appropriate to this sensitive location and the history of Ainsdale-on-Sea. New visitor facilities to be explored may include visitor centre and ancillary café or retail uses, and other traditional seaside experiences, and more basic (but none the less essential) facilities such as increased management of vehicle access to the beach, improved off-beach car parking, and toilet/ shower facilities.

This should be our main 'leisure beach' where people come for the day, not just for a short walk, and with opportunity for generation of income when they do.

As the Ainsdale and Birkdale sandhills surrounding the gateway entrance remains some of the most precious habitats that we manage, this also presents a unique 'eco-tourism' offer for exploring.

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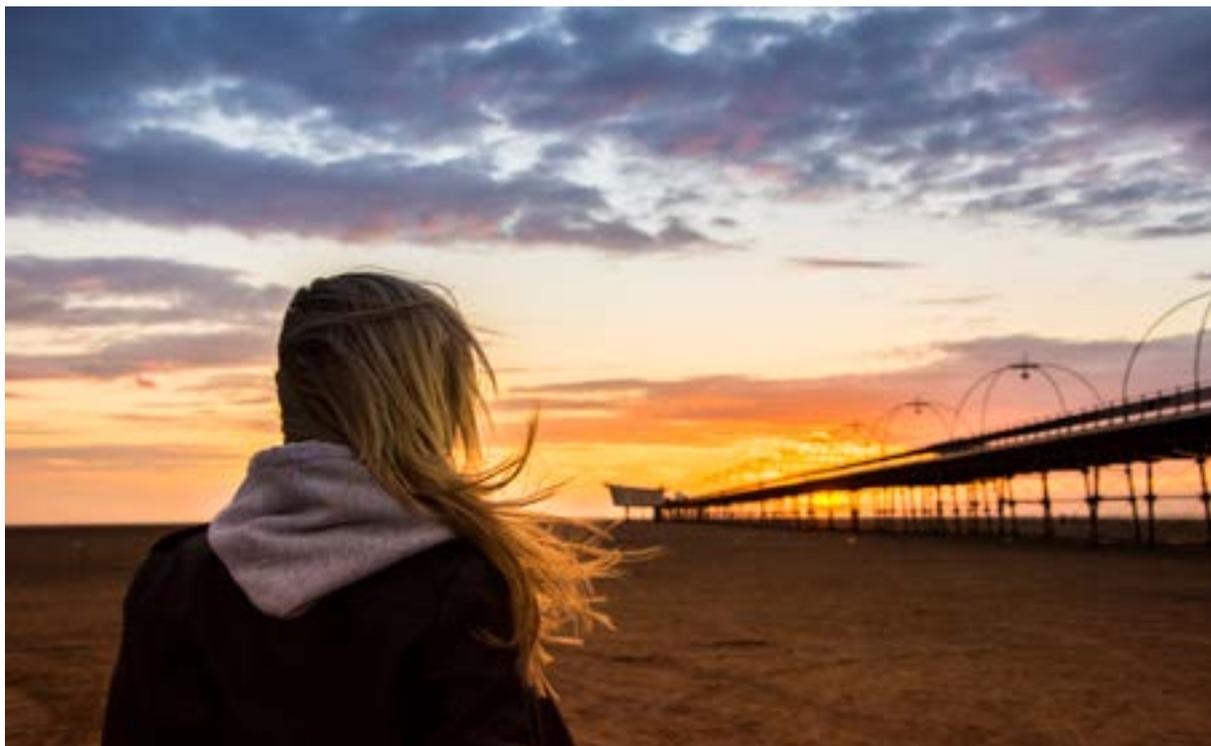
## Ainsdale succinct vision

Leisure beach

### Ainsdale Masterplan progress

Far reaching consultation in 2020 was inevitably stalled, but the Southport Town Deal bid drew out a lot of public feeling for the Ainsdale area. This is enough for an outline vision to be developed, including many of the items described above. This is now being explored further, with a formal community consultation process across Summer 2021. Some of the simpler, short term improvements have already been approved by the Council's Cabinet, and works are in development for a new off beach car park (to open Easter 2022), the trialling of new off beach food and drink concessions, improvements to the outlook of Toad Hall and more in Summer 2021.





## Southport

Southport Seafront and Central Area is one of Sefton's strategic tourism locations; the 'classic resort' of Southport remains the borough's main tourism asset, especially for 'staying' visitors, and a key destination for many from across the region and beyond. It is characterised by a range of complementary heritage, natural, cultural, retail and other assets; the Southport seafront area includes the Marine Lake (which supports water-based activities), Pleasureland, Ocean Plaza, hotels, the theatre and convention centre, Southport Pier and associated amusements, as well as formal parks and gardens. There are exciting proposals for further major attractions in the area in the next few years. The modern seawall includes art features as well as providing a walkway and flood defence.

The beach itself is focussed on the area south of the Pier (northwards of the Pier public access is discouraged); in effect a rural area next to the resort of Southport. However, inevitable natural processes have changed the feel of this beach over time; as the beach levels rise, shallow tides deposit silt, and the golden sands of old slowly change to a wetland habitat and salt marsh develops. This process, part of the accretion of the west coast of England, has been going on for centuries. Like the sand dunes elsewhere in Sefton, the salt marsh is part of the natural coastal protection of Southport; helping to absorb wave energy including from increased storminess or other impacts of climate change.

As such, the 'resort beach' needs to be reimagined with a section ideally kept free of spartina marsh grasses for now, but over time consultation needs to lift the public perception that the 'green beach' is inevitable, but something which has beauty in its own right, and that it has a vital role and benefit to the environment – as coastal and flood defences, and as a carbon sink contributing to climate change mitigation as well as being the home to rare and other salt-marsh species. This will necessitate the reconsideration of major events such as the Air Show, as Natural England are increasingly concerned about the environmental impact of such activities in this changing and sensitive landscape. There is also a need to respect the landscape around the Pier, befitting its status as a heritage feature.

Future beach activities here (as at Ainsdale) need to be balanced against this range of sensitivities, and the need to complement Southport Seafront. However, investment opportunities which could be explored may include managed car parking access and concessions on parts of the beach, together

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with new facilities/ infrastructure (appropriate to the location) to take visitors to where the golden sands remain when the tide is right – perhaps a new boardwalk, or a dedicated route for ‘Trampers’ style electric scooters.

It is also worth noting that the ‘Southport Cove’ surf lagoon concept being explored for Princess Park includes an artificial beach, which could provide the ‘resort beach’ experience some visitors crave. Should this go ahead, it is likely that this would re-frame the discussion, and desires, for Southport beach.

## Southport succinct vision

Reimagined beach complementing Southport classic resort

## Southport Masterplan progress

Consultation to begin the debate on the issues, leading to a new masterplan, was planned for 2021, but clearly the pandemic has stalled Ainsdale’s consultation (and the feedback on Crosby), and so this too will need to be postponed into 2022.

## Background:

### Natural Heritage

The Sefton Coast is home to a number of extremely rare, protected and threatened species including the Natterjack Toad, Sand Lizard, Northern Dune Tiger Beetle, Red Squirrel, Dune Helleborine and Petalwort.

Over 1,200 species of wild flowers can be found here, including 11 species of orchid. It is one of the most botanically important areas in the country.

The coastline as part of the East Atlantic Flyway is vital to tens of thousands of migrating birds and wintering species including Pink Footed Geese, and thousands of other wildfowl and waders.

### Landscapes:

A mosaic of habitats in over 20 miles of sandy shoreline topped and tailed by the Ribble and Mersey and bisected by the Alt estuary.

The shoreline is backed by the most extensive dune system in England (this habitat is rarer than rain forest) and introduced pine belt and globally rare dune heath.

### Archaeology and history:

Prehistoric footprints trapped in the silt from Formby to Ainsdale, occasionally exposed after periods of hard weather, a petrified forest dating back as long as 10,000 years at Hightown, rich local Viking heritage, World War Two heritage and the remains of the “Lost Resort” at Ravenmeols in Formby, and the site of the world’s first Lifeboat Station.

### Maritime:

The rich maritime history of Liverpool Bay is reflected in numerous shipwrecks along the coast from the 19<sup>th</sup> century cotton trader the Star of Hope at Ainsdale to the remains of the Pegu and Ionic Star off Formby. A number of wrecks are visible off the coast but should only be visited with an experienced guide on an organised event.

Marconi pioneering shore to ship radio at Crosby over 100 years ago and in 1886 the wreck of the Mexico off Birkdale claimed the lives of 27 brave lifeboatmen.

### Agriculture:

The coastline’s sandy nature meant a thriving Asparagus industry grew up the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially around Formby. Heritage trails and interpretation explain this fascinating form of agriculture now reduced to just one operating farm.

### **Recreation and tourism:**

8.7M people live within an hours drive of the Sefton Coast, and tens of thousands of people visit the Sefton coast each day for a variety of reasons whether they want to enjoy the fresh air, sun and sea, observe nature, walk, ride, kite surf and exercise.

Day-trippers can come from as far afield as the West Midlands and Yorkshire and the “Another Place” Antony Gormley art installation on Crosby beach draws visitors from all over the world.

### **Partnerships:**

Land owners including Sefton Council, Natural England, the National Trust, Lancs Wildlife Trust, Altcar Rifle Range and golf courses form the Sefton Coast Landscape Partnership supported by other key partners, charity’s and the emergency services to ensure this coastline is respected, protected and enjoyed.



