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SCRUTINY REPORT

Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council

Who decides, who writes the paper, who sits where, and where the money goes.

23 September 2026

£106m
the events centre, up from £73m: a 45 per cent rise with £33m still to borrow or find, appendices exempt, main contract delegated to one officer

£1.95m
lost in four years by the council's own hospitality company, which owes the council £1.99m and was promised to pay it £250,000 a year

13 of 15
freedom of information answers about one officer's roles signed by that officer

5 of 5
waiver reports to the audit committee where every list of no-competition awards sits in a closed appendix, with no public total

999 years
of public land at Southport Business Park leased for no capital receipt, on an appraisal that was not a Red Book valuation

6 to 3
the vote that let the Ainsdale Sands disposal stand, moved by the audit chair and seconded by a councillor eleven weeks off a council company board

£648.8m
paid to suppliers in 2022 and 2023; 41 per cent to adult social care, 8,915 payments with the supplier's name redacted

76%
of freedom of information requests answered on time in one quarter of 2025/26; 282 answered late across the year

4
significant weaknesses found by the external auditor. The council's own draft statement calls its arrangements fit for purpose

Prepared by SIBA with Institrace, from the council's published papers, its published supplier payments, the external auditor's annual report, Companies House and Contracts Finder. This is a report on the public record. It is not a finding of dishonesty or crime.

Contents

1. Purpose

Elected members sign the decisions of Sefton Council. Unelected officers write them. On the matters in this report, officers also complete the awards, sit on the boards of council-owned companies and local charities, answer the freedom of information requests about their own posts, and remain in place after the cabinet that signed has changed.

A cabinet member can be removed at an election. The officer who drafted the recommendation cannot. Scrutiny of those posts, and of the way the council's own brakes are applied to them, is the subject of this report.

The council's external auditor and the council's own draft governance statement have each named the same weaknesses in the past year: financial sustainability, the High Needs deficit, budget monitoring, and the use of procurement waivers. This report sets the decision papers, the payments and the company registers against those findings.

2. How the council is marked

Each decision is marked on four tests. The mark is 0, 1 or 2.

Plan. 2 if the decision was on the forward plan. 1 if an urgency rule was recorded. 0 if it was not on the plan and no urgency is recorded.

Who. 2 if Cabinet, or the committee named for that business, took the decision. 1 if a cabinet member took it, or if Cabinet handed the award or the signature to an officer.

Open. 2 if the report is public. 1 if part of it is exempt with the legal paragraph named, or if the financial terms were withheld under an NDA or a confidential appendix.

Advice. 2 if a specific comment from a statutory officer is in the paper. 1 if the paper records that scrutiny chairs were consulted on urgency. 0 if no such comment was in the text read.

Where a test could not be applied because the original decision notice was not reviewed, the cell says "not reviewed". Where a decision was recorded as non-key, so the forward plan did not apply, the cell says "not applicable". A row that is only a forward-plan entry is not treated as a decision. Silence is recorded as silence. It is not upgraded to a conclusion that advice was never given. Advice is often in a closed appendix.

The standards used are the council's own and the law's. The forward plan and Rule 27 are in the constitution. Section 123 of the Local Government Act 1972 and the General Disposal Consent of 2003 are the legal minimum for a disposal. Section 117 of the same Act, and the council's code, govern officer interests. The Annual Governance Statement is the account the chief executive and the Leader sign. The Auditor's Annual Report is the external auditor's value-for-money verdict. Contracts Finder is the public register of awards. Companies House is the public register of directors and accounts. The monthly supplier publications are the council's own record of payments of £500 and over.

3. Sources

Council papers: the draft Annual Governance Statement for 2025/26; Grant Thornton's Auditor's Annual Report for 2024/25, received by Audit and Governance in January 2026 and by Council in February 2026; the September 2026 revenue report; the adult social care charging report; the Families First and SEND papers; the Sovini reports of November 2025 and July 2026; the Marine Lake Events Centre reports of October 2025 and June 2026 and the motions of November 2025 and July 2026; the Strand papers of December 2023, March 2024 and September 2025; the Bootle Canalside business case of May 2022; the Southport Market papers of September 2020 and November 2025; the garden-waste procurement report; the Sandway Homes and Sefton Hospitality Operations outturns of March 2026; five quarterly waiver reports from September 2025 to September 2026; the minutes of the Sands call-in of 20 August 2026; the Waterloo call-in agenda published on 16 September 2026; the Council papers of 17 September 2026; the appointments to outside bodies of June 2025 and June 2026; the four scrutiny work programmes for 2026/27; the forward plan for 1 October 2026 to 31 January 2027; and the council's published freedom of information performance data for 2025/26.

Payments: Sefton's published supplier payments for every month from January 2022 to December 2023. Twenty-four monthly publications, 144,986 payments. Payments after December 2023 were not available for this report in a form that could be totalled.

Registers: Companies House, consulted on 23 September 2026, for Sefton Hospitality Operations Ltd (13451207), Sandway Homes Limited (11646502), Southport Business Improvement District (09048655), Southport Flower Show (02103365), Victoria Park Management Company (Southport) Limited (03016129) and British Destinations Ltd (13327062), together with filed accounts. Contracts Finder awards where the buyer is recorded as Sefton Council. Information Commissioner decision notices naming Sefton, by date. The published register of interests of the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Economy and Skills.

The council's written answers to SIBA's freedom of information requests, its two complaint-stage responses and its two letters of May 2026 are all on the public record and are cited where they bear on governance.

The disposals in section 12 and the roles in section 8 draw on SIBA's investigation files, each entry of which is sourced to a council paper, a filing or a public statement. Where a claim rests on a filing that was checked again for this report, the date of the check is given.

This report was prepared from the public record alone. No questions were put to the council in preparing it. The council's response to SIBA's earlier governance questions is in section 18.

4. The authority, as appointed on 21 May 2026

The cabinet noted that day:

Portfolio	Member
Leader	Councillor Atkinson
Adult Social Care and Health, Deputy Leader	Councillor Ian Moncur
Children, Schools and Families	Councillor Diane Roscoe
Cleansing and Street Scene	Councillor Harvey
Communities and Partnership Engagement	Councillor Liz Dowd
Corporate Services	Councillor Howard
Housing and Highways	Councillor Hart
Public Health and Wellbeing	Councillor Williams
Regeneration, Economy and Skills, Deputy Leader	Councillor Paulette Lappin

Scrutiny chairs on the same paper: Councillor McKee, adults. Councillor Karen Cavanagh, children. Councillor Hinde, regeneration and skills. Councillor David Roscoe, regulatory and corporate services. Audit and Governance is chaired by Councillor Conalty. Planning is chaired by Councillor Spring. Licensing and Regulatory is chaired by Councillor Kelly. The Health and Wellbeing Board is chaired by Councillor Moncur.

The officer board, from the council's leadership page, is Phil Porter, chief executive, and five executive directors: Stephen Watson, regeneration, economy and assets; Becky Bibby, children's services; Sarah Alldis, adult social care; Andrea Watts, operations and partnerships; Chris Warren, corporate resources. Below Watson sit Stuart Barnes, Assistant Director (Place), Economic Growth and Housing, and Mark Catherall, Head of Service, Visitor Economy and Enterprise. Paul Reilly is a finance officer. Chris Moister is the monitoring officer and Chief Legal and Democratic Services Officer.

Dates the papers support:

Post	Date
Phil Porter, chief executive	Appointed 20 April 2023
Chris Moister, monitoring officer	In post from April 2025
Stephen Watson, executive director	In post from 2018
Stuart Barnes, assistant director	Signing waivers and receiving reviews as Catherall's line manager by 2026. Start date not in the papers
Mark Catherall	Joined the council in 2005. BID development manager from May 2013. Service Manager Tourism from September 2014. Head of Service from 16 April 2026
Paul Reilly	Director of the hospitality company from its incorporation on 11 June 2021

Post	Date
Becky Bibby, Chris Warren, Sarah Alldis, Andrea Watts	Named in current papers. Start dates not in the papers

Councillor Lappin has been a councillor since May 2012 and a cabinet member for regeneration through the whole disposal series in section 12. Councillor Cavanagh was a director of the hospitality company from 19 June 2025 to 4 June 2026 and became chair of children's scrutiny on 21 May 2026. Councillor Conalty chairs Audit and Governance and moved the motion that let the Sands disposal stand.

5. What the auditor and the council say is failing

The external auditor. Grant Thornton's Auditor's Annual Report for the year ended 31 March 2025 was received by Council on 26 February 2026. On value for money it records:

- a significant weakness in the council's medium-term financial sustainability, with four improvement recommendations;
- a significant weakness in the level of the Dedicated Schools Grant deficit, with two key recommendations;
- significant weaknesses in arrangements relating to budget monitoring and reporting, and to the council's use of procurement waivers and its strategic procurement planning, with an improvement recommendation on budget setting;
- a prior-year significant weakness on children's social care lifted after inspection.

The auditor's report notes, as national context, the growing number of councils in receipt of Exceptional Financial Support. On 16 July 2026 Councillor Swaney's motion to Council stated that Sefton "required exceptional government support to set a balanced budget for 2026/27". The budget papers behind that statement were not reviewed for this report. The motion is quoted as what a councillor put on the record.

The council's own statement. The draft Annual Governance Statement for the year ended 31 March 2026 was reported to Audit and Governance on 2 September 2026 by the Chief Legal and Democratic Services Officer. Its conclusion says the arrangements "continue to be regarded as fit for purpose". On the same pages it names two significant governance issues.

The first is the High Needs budget. The statement says the deficit has risen for years because demand has risen and government funding has not kept pace, that it is affecting treasury management and cash flow, and that it is a major risk to financial sustainability. The lead officer is Becky Bibby. The remedy is capacity reviews and an application for a High Needs Stability Grant.

The second is procurement and contract management. The statement names waivers, signed contracts, contract performance management and budget control, sourced to an external audit report and a KPMG contract review. The remedy is a single contract-management system, Atamis, going live in phases to April 2027. The lead officers are Chris Warren and Christian Rogers.

Three further points sit in the same draft. It says a revised Code of Corporate Governance was approved in March 2026. It says the Local Government Ombudsman and the Information Commissioner's review letter identified no systemic issues; four Information Commissioner decision notices name Sefton, dated 18 March 2025, 22 May 2025, 18 June 2026 and 4 August 2026, and their outcomes are not summarised here. And the paragraph introducing the two significant issues reads "The 2024/25 annual governance review has identified the following issues", inside a statement headed 2025/26. Last year's sentence is in this year's draft. The signature block is drawn for Phil Porter and Councillor Marion Atkinson. The dates are blank.

The money position. The September 2026 revenue report, to Cabinet on 3 September, forecasts an overspend of £5.821 million at the end of July. Children's social care is about £12 million over inside that. Education travel support is about £2.3 million over. In-house services are about £1.1 million over. Capital spending to July was £10.150 million against a full-year forecast of £131.338 million. The report is in the name of the section 151 officer and does not name the person.

Freedom of information. The council's own performance data for 2025/26 records 1,505 requests received across the year. Compliance with the statutory timescale ran at 84 per cent in the first quarter, 83 per cent in the second, 76 per cent in the third and 82 per cent in the fourth. 282 requests were closed outside the statutory timescale. 49 were refused in full. 321 were answered in part. 20 internal reviews were received.

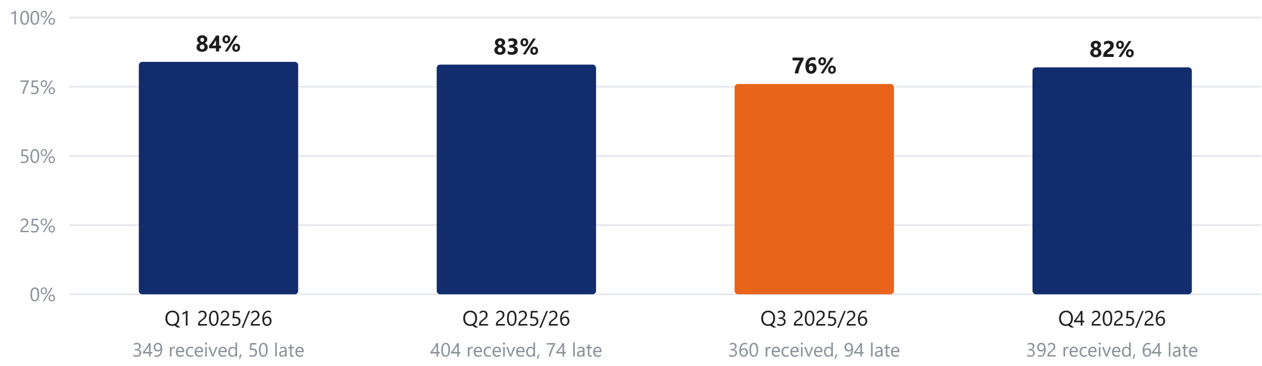

Figure 1. Freedom of information: compliance with the statutory timescale by quarter, 2025/26. Source: the council's own published performance data. 282 requests were closed late across the year.

6. What the council paid, 2022 and 2023

The council publishes every payment of £500 and over, monthly. The twenty-four publications for January 2022 to December 2023 record 144,986 payments and a net total of £648,824,871. That is £315,059,701 in 2022 and £333,765,170 in 2023, a rise of 5.9 per cent. There were 75,402 payments in 2023 against 69,584 the year before.

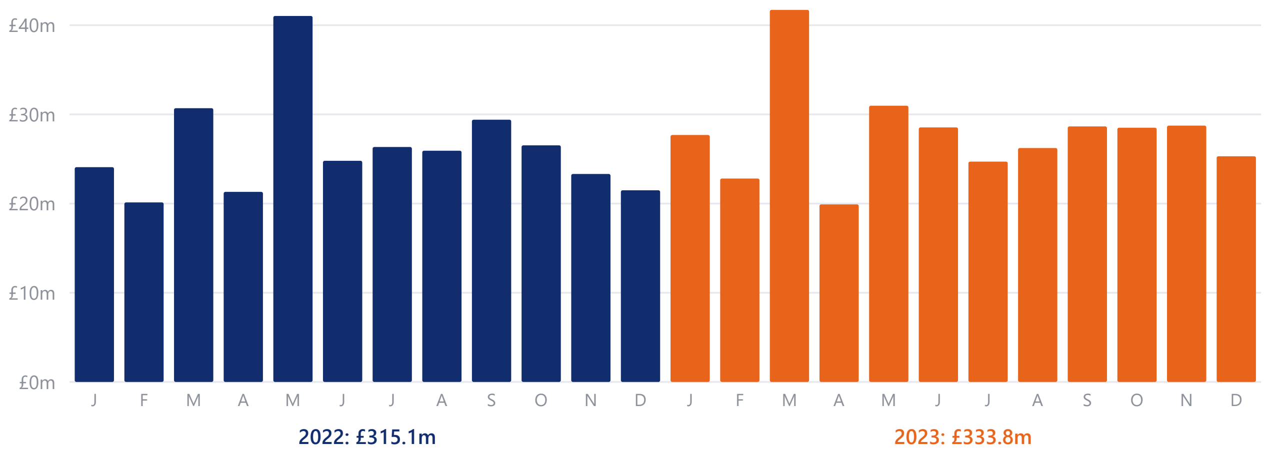

Figure 2. Payments of £500 and over by month, January 2022 to December 2023. Net of credits. Source: Sefton Council published supplier payments.

The highest months are May 2022, at £41.0 million, and March 2023, at £41.7 million. The lowest is April 2023, at £19.9 million, the first month of a financial year. March, the last month of the year, is above the average in both years.

Where it goes. Adult social care is £265,385,044 across 107,394 payments, about 41 per cent of the two-year total. The department recorded as "Corporate" is £115,890,849, most of it levies: £35.3 million to the Liverpool City Region transport levy across eighteen payments, and £26.9 million to the Merseyside Recycling and Waste Authority across seventeen. Capital is £59,045,757. Education excellence is £53,131,601. Health and wellbeing is £32,773,366. Children's social care, the service forecasting a £12 million overspend in 2026, was £14,264,766 in payments over the two years. Economic growth and housing, the directorate whose land decisions fill section 12, was £10,213,683.

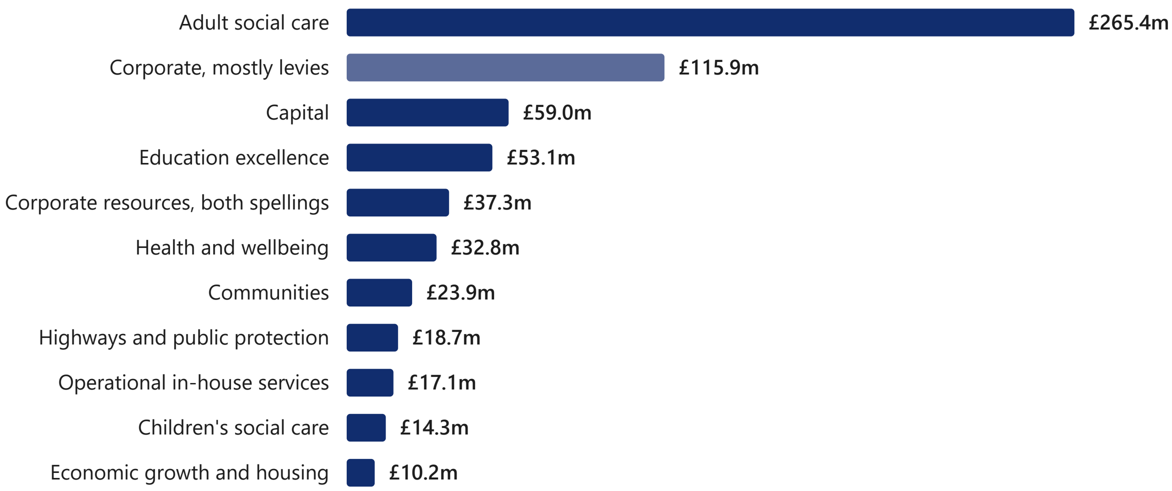

Figure 3. Payments by department, 2022 and 2023 combined. Adult social care is 41 per cent of the total. One department is spelt two ways in the council's own publication; both are combined here.

The publications spell the corporate resources department two ways, "Corporate Resources" and "Corporate Resouces". Together the two spellings are £37,334,484. The council's own records are inconsistent inside its own transparency publication.

Who is paid. There are 3,386 distinct supplier names. The ten largest take 22.7 per cent of the money. The fifty largest take 49.0 per cent. The rest, more than 3,300 suppliers, share the other half.

Supplier, as recorded	Payments	Two-year total
Liverpool City Region transport levy (recorded as MITA)	15	£29,162,000
Sefton New Directions Limited, all spellings	934	£18,955,916
Supplier name redacted	8,915	£18,653,466
Merseyside Waste Disposal Authority (recorded as MWDA)	11	£17,427,627
Mersey Care NHS Trust	158	£16,709,043
Dowhigh Ltd	222	£14,148,575
Autism Initiatives	3,844	£13,509,312
Energy costs, grant payments to households	2	£9,860,400
Npower	34	£9,070,193
Agilisys Ltd	738	£7,749,530
Jones Lighting Ltd	86	£7,730,017
Change Grow Live Services Ltd	37	£7,415,888
Pontville School	307	£6,885,203
Alternative Futures Group	3,676	£6,321,536

Sefton New Directions is the council's own adult care company. Its payments appear under four spellings of its name. Agilisys is the IT contractor that received a £12.3 million award notice in September 2025. Jones Lighting is a named supplier on the £30 million street lighting award of 2017. Dowhigh is a highways contractor.

8,915 payments, £18.65 million, carry the supplier name "SUPPLIER NAME REDACTED". That is 6.1 per cent of payments and 2.9 per cent of value. Care payments to individuals are ordinarily redacted. The publications do not say which payments those are.

How large the payments are. The ledger is made of small payments. 99,282 payments between £1,000 and £10,000 add up to £254.9 million, the largest band by value. Fifty payments of £1 million or more add up to £101.2 million, about 15.6 per cent of the total. 3,138 entries are negative, together minus £16.7 million: credits and refunds, netted inside the totals above.

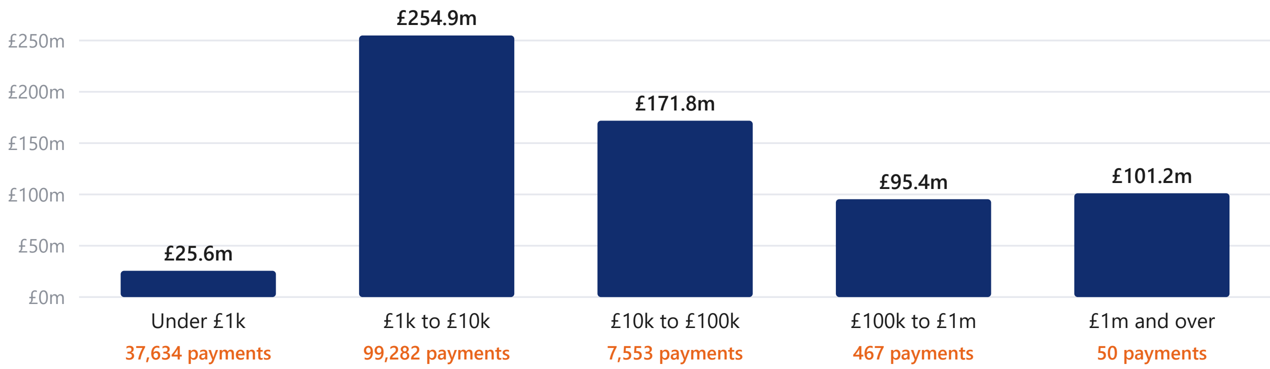

Figure 4. Value of payments by size of payment, 2022 and 2023. Small payments carry most of the money. Fifty payments of £1 million or more carry £101.2 million.

Names from the land and company chapters. In these two years the council paid Southport BID Company £880,821 across 24 payments. Savills (UK) Ltd received £94,572 across 19 payments; SIBA's earlier reading of the same publications from April 2020 to November 2025 found more than £650,000 to Savills across six payment streams, including a single £350,000 payment on 6 June 2025 recorded as "Regeneration Scheme 1". One Vision Housing, part of Sovini, received £393,707 across 45 payments. Sovini Construction received £2,750. Mikhail Contract Interiors Limited and Mikhail Hotels Limited together received £44,019 across eight payments. Sefton Hospitality Operations, the council's own hospitality company, received £13,955 across 15 payments, separate from the shareholder loans that funded it. TSA Consulting, which runs the air show flying display, received £68,201 across 13 payments. Fitton Estates received £2,500 across two. Stand Up For Southport received £1,400 across two; SIBA's earlier reading found £13,700 in direct awards to Andrew Brown's companies between 2020 and 2025, all without competition. Sandway Homes, Silcock, Universal Rides, Vinci and GSL do not appear as payees in either year.

7. The contract register and the waivers

Contracts Finder. Buyer name exactly "Sefton Council". 339 awards with a stated value, from 2015 to four awards dated in 2026. The stated values sum to £339,889,228. Each award is counted once. These are the figures on the notices. They are not cash paid. A framework ceiling is often printed against every supplier. Those copies are not added together.

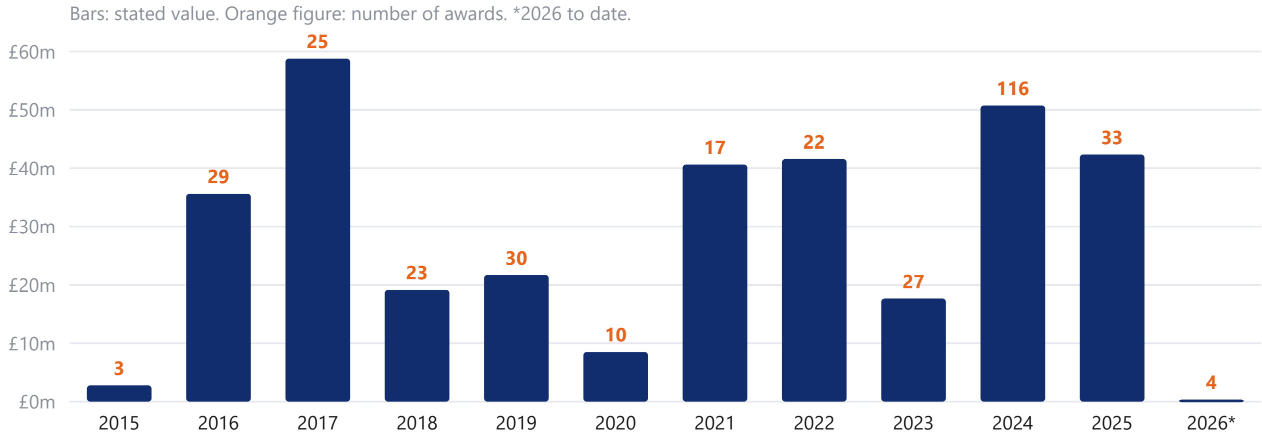

Figure 5. Contracts Finder awards where the buyer is Sefton Council, by year of award. Stated value is the figure on the notice, counted once per award. It is not cash paid.

Year	Awards	Stated value
2015	3	£2,795,000
2016	29	£35,623,618
2017	25	£58,768,271
2018	23	£19,164,447
2019	30	£21,708,314
2020	10	£8,507,690
2021	17	£40,630,889
2022	22	£41,570,079
2023	27	£17,669,391
2024	116	£50,746,922
2025	33	£42,350,198
2026, so far	4	£354,408

2020 is the low year: ten awards, £8.5 million. 2017 is the high year by value: £58.8 million from 25 awards. 2023 is the recent low: £17.7 million from 27 awards. 2024 is a rise in notices, not a new size of council: the count moves from 27 to 116, about 4.3 times, and the value from £17.7 million to £50.7 million, about 2.9 times. The median award in 2024 was £70,444. Awards of £1 million or more were still 76 per cent of that year's value. 2025 returns to 33 awards and stays high at £42.4 million.

Eight awards of £10 million or more account for £206,263,595, about 61 per cent of the total. Thirty-three awards between £1 million and £10 million account for £93,150,832. One hundred and seven awards between £100,000 and £1 million account for £31,149,262. One hundred and ninety-one awards under £100,000 account for £9,325,539, about 2.7 per cent.

The register flags 269 of the 339 awards as going to small or medium-sized enterprises, with a stated value of £269,544,974. The other 70 awards, £70,344,253, are not so flagged. That flag is the supplier's own declaration. On a framework it attaches the whole ceiling to each small firm on the list.

Award	Date	Stated value
Healthy Child Programme, age 0 to 19	19 Sep 2016	£28,926,705
Healthy Child Programme, age 0 to 19, retender	7 Dec 2022	£32,000,000
Street lighting term maintenance	15 Dec 2017	£30,000,000
Passenger transport framework	22 Dec 2017	£24,000,000, 16 suppliers
Passenger transport framework	13 Dec 2021	£28,000,000, 18 suppliers
Warm Homes local grant contractor	21 Jan 2025	£26,000,000
North West legal consortium, external solicitors	27 Jun 2024	£25,000,000, 15 suppliers
Agilisys managed service	29 Sep 2025	£12,336,890
Highways winter service	30 Apr 2018	£6,571,150
Green waste composting, with Knowsley, St Helens and Wirral	26 Sep 2019	£5,777,800
Land-based coastal remote sensing framework	19 Jan 2024	£5,000,000
Integrated homeless service	9 Jan 2022	£4,875,000

Savills appears once, at £42,500. Sovini Group appears once, at £75,000. No award under this buyer names Sefton Hospitality Operations, Sandway Homes, Mikhail, Silcock, or Stand Up For Southport. The published payments in section 6 show that several of those names were paid anyway. A payment without a notice is not itself unlawful. Below the thresholds no notice is required. The gap between the two registers is what the auditor and the governance statement are describing when they name procurement.

Waivers. A waiver is a decision to award a contract without competition, outside the council's own standing orders. The external auditor recommended regular reporting of waivers to Audit and Governance. The committee has now received five quarterly reports: 3 September 2025 (covering 1 May to 21 August 2025), 10 December 2025 (22 August to 25 November 2025), 18 March 2026 (26 November 2025 to 26 February 2026), 17 June 2026 (27 February to 15 May 2026) and 2 September 2026 (May to August 2026).

In every one of the five, the list of waivers is in an appendix marked not for publication under paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A. The public body of each report contains no count and no total. The council's own sentence is: "Overall, the report highlights the number of Waivers that are authorised." The number is in the closed appendix. Each waiver, the reports say, was "submitted and Authorised by Relevant Assistant Directors and Heads of Service".

The fifth report says an Internal Audit report on waivers was issued in May 2026, that an improvement plan is now in place, and that future reports should add the number of waivers per month, the value per month, the average value, waivers as a percentage of procurement spend, and benchmarking against comparable authorities. None of those figures is in the public part of any report to date. The cover of the fifth report is dated "2 September 2025" for a period ending August 2026.

The waiver that SIBA has been able to see is the one disclosed under freedom of information: a 2020 Town Deal engagement contract to Stand Up For Southport, signed by Stephen Watson as Head of Service, with the firm's partnership with Southport BID cited as the reason for direct selection. A second, the March 2025 award to the council's own hospitality company of up to £138,686 to advise on Southport Market, the Enterprise Arcade and bar operations at Salt and Tar, was confirmed in the council's Stage 2 complaint response as a procurement waiver approved by Stuart Barnes, with no declaration recorded by Watson, a director of the company.

On 17 September 2026 Councillor Pugh's motion to Council said it plainly: "the excessive use of waivers and the appreciable impact on the revenue budget of the council's commercial undertakings and regeneration schemes".

8. Overlapping roles

This section records posts and seats. It does not allege that any of them was used improperly. Every seat is from Companies House, a council paper, or a published register, checked on the date given.

Person	Council role	Other seats	Decisions touched
Mark Catherall	Head of Service, Visitor Economy and Enterprise. Formerly Service Manager Tourism and BID Development Manager	Director, Southport Business Improvement District, from 27 Sep 2022 (checked 23 Sep 2026)	VisitSouthport, Southport Market, seafront and pier concessions, major events, MLEC operator agreement, the BID service level agreement, FOI responses about himself
Stephen Watson	Executive Director, Regeneration, Economy and Assets	Director, Sefton Hospitality Operations, from 20 Dec 2023	Sovini report and delegated authority, Strand, MLEC main contract delegation, Canalside, SHOL and Sandway outturns to scrutiny, the 2020 SUFS waiver, the Stage 1 complaint that named him

Person	Council role	Other seats	Decisions touched
Stuart Barnes	Assistant Director (Place), Economic Growth and Housing	Director, Southport Flower Show, from 29 Jan 2025. Director, Victoria Park Management Company (Southport), from 29 May 2025. Former director, Formby Pool Trust, 2020 to 2021	Victoria Park lease and its 2114 extension, the Flower Show capacity increase, Southport Market performance reports, the SHOL consultancy waiver, Catherall's line management and the VisitSouthport review
Paul Reilly	Finance officer	Director, Sefton Hospitality Operations, from 11 Jun 2021	Listed to present the High Needs deficit to scrutiny on 16 Mar 2027
Councillor Paulette Lappin	Cabinet Member, Regeneration, Economy and Skills. Deputy Leader	Shareholder representative for SHOL. Member, Merseyside Pension Fund board. Director and company secretary, Waterloo Community Association. Director and vice chair, Sefton CVS. Council representative to British Destinations. Volunteer, Friends of Victoria Park. Director, South Sefton Development Trust, from 29 Jul 2025	Every cabinet-member disposal in section 12. The Sovini vote. The Sands decision. The Waterloo decision. Consultee status of Sefton CVS on the community assets policy
Councillor Karen Cavanagh	Chair, children's scrutiny, from 21 May 2026	Director, Sefton Hospitality Operations, 19 Jun 2025 to 4 Jun 2026	Seconded the motion that let the Sands disposal stand, 20 Aug 2026
Councillor Conalty	Chair, Audit and Governance		Moved the motion that let the Sands disposal stand, 20 Aug 2026
Peter Hampson	None. Chair of Marketing Southport	Sole director and secretary, British Destinations Ltd. Director and secretary, Southport Pier Trust. Director, Southport Flower Show, from 3 Jul 2025, filed as "Hampton". Town Deal Board. Liverpool City Region Destination Partnership board	The body the council appoints Lappin to represent it on is his one-director company
Geoffrey Wareham	None	Director and treasurer, Southport BID, from 20 Dec 2022. Director, Mikhail Hotels and Leisure Holdings. Director, Lord Street Car Park Ltd. Director, Khepri Investments and Mikhail Pub Group, from June 2026	Mikhail holds the council-awarded bar contract at Southport Market
Andrew Brown	None. Owner, Stand Up For Southport	Director, Southport Flower Show, 4 Jul to 7 Nov 2024. BID media contractor. Paid by Mikhail	Coverage of BID, Mikhail, SHOL venues, Salt and Tar and the Flower Show, without disclosure

Person	Council role	Other seats	Decisions touched
Enda Rylands	None	Director, Southport Flower Show, from 3 Nov 2020. Director, Victoria Park Management Company, from 8 Apr 2024. Director, Southport BID, 2014 to 2016 and 2018 to 2020	
Michelle Brabner	None. Principal, Southport College	Director, Southport BID, from 5 Oct 2020. Town Deal Board	Southport College is the correspondence address of every current BID director
Daniel Taylor	None. Fletchers Solicitors	Director and chair, Southport BID, from 6 Oct 2020	Fletchers' founder chairs the Town Deal Board
Dwayne Johnson	Chief executive until 2023	Director, Southport BID, 1 Jul 2019 to 10 Sep 2020	The then head of paid service sat on the levy company's board

Catherall. The record is the council's own. He designed the BID governance structure as BID Development Manager in 2013 and 2014. He became the council's appointed director on the board he had designed. His job description, disclosed under freedom of information, lists the directorship as Principal Responsibility 12 and the BID liaison as 13, VisitSouthport, Southport Market, all seafront concessions and major events under 6, and oversight of the £73 million events centre operator agreement under 18. His directorship is not on the officer register of interests. The council's own answer, signed by him, was that the appointment was cabinet-approved and there was nothing to declare. Its Stage 2 response put it in one sentence: "There is no policy." Thirteen of the first fifteen freedom of information responses about these roles were signed by him. He was promoted to Head of Service on 16 April 2026 while those requests were open. The review of the platform he runs is, under the council's Stage 2 response, to be led by him and reported to Barnes.

Watson. Wrote the Sovini report and received delegated authority to complete it. Wrote the Strand business plans and holds delegated authority to sign the Combined Authority grant agreements. Was given, on 25 June 2026, delegated authority in consultation with the cabinet member to enter the £106 million events centre main contract. Directs the council's hospitality company and wrote its outturn report to scrutiny. Signed the 2020 Stand Up For Southport waiver as Head of Service and, six years later, was assigned SIBA's Stage 1 complaint about those payments without disclosing that he had approved them. His directorship of SHOL was not declared on the face of the Sovini report or at the Cabinet meeting, so far as the papers show.

Barnes. The officer whose department manages Victoria Park is a trustee of the charity that holds the park on a 60-year lease from 1994, extended to 2114, at a peppercorn rent of a bouquet of flowers, and a director of the trading company that hires the park out. The charity's public claim is that it receives no public funding; the council's contracts register records £27,000 to it for project-managing a publicly funded accessible toilet and £18,000 for hiring back the park it leased out. The park's 80-day closure limit has been exceeded in at least one year without enforcement. The capacity increase from 9,999 to 14,999 was approved by the council six months after his appointment. He approved the SHOL consultancy waiver. He is Catherall's line manager. He is a former director of Formby Pool Trust, whose management fee the cabinet is being asked to halve on 1 October 2026. He was present at the Sovini Cabinet of 6 November 2025 and at the Town Deal Board of 15 September 2025.

Reilly. A council finance officer, a founding director of the hospitality company that has lost £1.95 million, and the officer listed with the executive director to bring the High Needs deficit to scrutiny in March 2027.

Lappin. Her published register, dated 11 September 2026, records the SHOL shareholder role, the pension board, Waterloo Community Association, Sefton CVS, the Combined Authority housing and transport boards, the Friends of Victoria Park, a school governorship, and hospitality: the Your Move property awards on 27 November 2025 and the Sovini winter gala on 12 February 2026, both after the Sovini vote; Invest Sefton hospitality on 17 July 2026; the Airshow on 29 and 30 August 2026. Companies House records her as a director of South Sefton Development Trust from 29 July 2025. That directorship does not appear on the register published in September 2026. Cabinet in June 2025 and Council in July 2025 appointed her, or her nominee, as the council's representative to British Destinations. Companies House records British Destinations Ltd as a company incorporated on 9 April 2021 with one director and one secretary, both Peter Hampson, registered at a house in Southport, filing micro-entity accounts. The council's community assets policy names Sefton CVS as its consultee. She is its vice chair. In December 2025 the cabinet member disposed of No. 2 Lodge, Victoria Park. She is a Friends of Victoria Park volunteer. Each of those is on her register, and none is a breach in itself. Together they place one member at the point of decision, the point of shareholder oversight, the point of consultation and the point of hospitality on the same regeneration portfolio.

Hampson. Chairs the body that markets Southport, sits on the regional destination partnership as Sefton's representative, is the one-person company the council appoints its cabinet member to, has been on the Pier Trust since 2001, sits on the Town Deal Board, and joined the Flower Show board on 3 July 2025, five days before the regional partnership published a piece promoting the show's capacity increase. He declared the Flower Show role at the Town Deal Board on 15 September 2025, with Catherall and Barnes in the room as officers. No public register of interests for the regional partnership has been identified.

Wareham and Mikhail. The BID treasurer is a director of the hotel group that holds the council-awarded bar at Southport Market and, from June 2026, of two new Mikhail vehicles. Mikhail's group accounts show revenue rising from £8.5 million in 2021 to £20.7 million in 2024. The council's tourism platform, run by Catherall, carried Mikhail venues on every seasonal page SIBA reviewed and no independent competitor. Invest Sefton held its Southport 2026 business workshops at Mikhail's Bold Hotel in January 2026.

Brown. Paid by the BID, paid by Mikhail, paid £13,700 by the council in direct awards, a Flower Show director for four months in 2024, and the author of coverage of all of them without disclosure. The 2020 waiver that started the council payments cited his BID partnership as the reason to pick him.

The Town Deal Board and the BID board. The Town Deal Board, which allocated £37.5 million of government money with the events centre as its signature project, was chaired by Rob Fletcher of Fletchers Solicitors, with a second Fletchers executive as a member. The BID board has been chaired since

January 2023 by Daniel Taylor of Fletchers Solicitors. Michelle Brabner, principal of Southport College, sits on both; Southport College received Town Deal grant and is the registered correspondence address of every current BID director. Norman Wallis, whose company holds the Pleasureland lease under an NDA, was twice a BID director before sitting on the Town Deal Board. The officers who attended the Town Deal Board were Watson, Barnes and Catherall. The council's then chief executive was a BID director from July 2019 to September 2020.

9. The freedom of information record

Sefton's own performance data is in section 5: 1,505 requests in 2025/26, compliance between 76 and 84 per cent by quarter, 282 late.

SIBA's requests about the visitor economy are a case study in who answers. Thirteen of the first fifteen responses were signed by Mark Catherall, whose roles were the subject. SP-04, about his own register, and SP-13, about his own job description, were signed by him. SP-01 and SP-02, signed on the same day, contradict each other: one says the council holds no information on BID consultancy costs; the other names the ballot contractor and a £5,665 fee. SP-10, on BID board declarations, directed the requester to the BID, which under clause 20 of the service level agreement cannot answer a request without the council. SP-14 was the first response processed by the information governance team instead.

The Stage 1 complaint, which named Watson, was assigned to Watson. The Stage 2 complaint, which named the officer who had decided every internal review, was assigned to her. The Stage 2 response said there is no policy on cabinet-approved officer directorships, that the register had not been updated because there was nothing to declare, that the SHOL contract was a waiver with no declaration by Watson, and that the VisitSouthport review would be led by Catherall. Three responses in the record carry a warning that future requests may be treated as vexatious, one of them appended to a full disclosure.

SP-17, answered 26 days after the statutory deadline, disclosed that £350,000 was paid to Savills on 6 June 2025 as property managers of the Strand under a contract assigned from the previous owner, without competitive procurement, while stating that no contracts with Savills existed as at 1 June 2025. SP-18, on delegated land disposals and the valuer used, was answered in part on 14 July 2026; the questions on the valuer panel, the instructions to Fitton Estates and the oversight of delegated disposals were not answered.

One Information Commissioner complaint, IC-525261-L0N8, was filed on 10 June 2026 about the refusal of the VisitSouthport audit log. The council's governance statement says the Commissioner's review letter found no systemic issues.

10. Children

On 6 November 2025 Cabinet approved the direction of the Families First programme, a locality model aligned with neighbourhood health. The report was a key decision and it was on the forward plan. On 9 September 2026 the Health and Wellbeing Board was asked to endorse the operating model. A further Cabinet paper, and the Foster4 regional fostering contribution of £94,837, are listed for 1 October 2026. Those decisions have not yet been taken.

On 22 September 2026 children's scrutiny was told there were 4,585 live education, health and care plans on 9 September 2026, about 380 more than at 31 December 2025, and on a path toward about 4,730 by the end of the year. The published total had risen from 1,445 in December 2018 to 4,197 in December 2025, an increase of about 190 per cent. An earlier cabinet-member note said 4,478. The scrutiny count of 22 September is the figure used here.

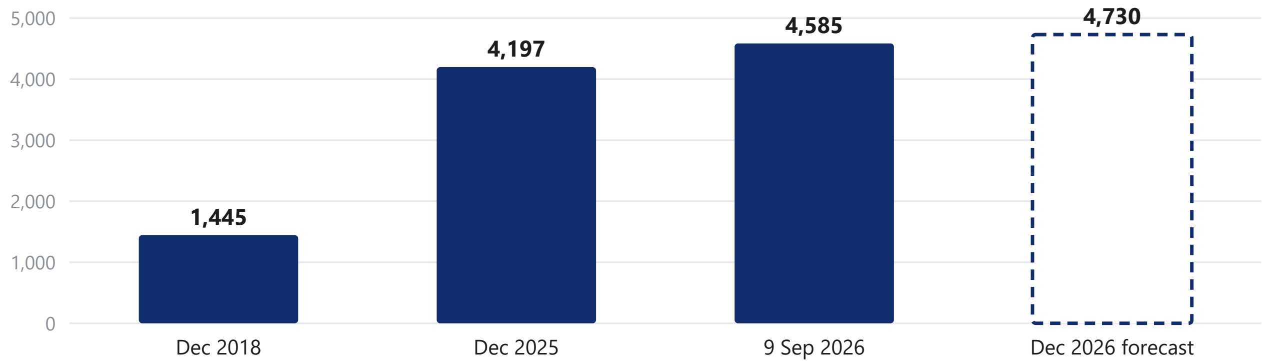

Figure 6. Education, health and care plans in Sefton. Up 190 per cent from December 2018 to December 2025. The dashed bar is the council's own forecast for the end of 2026. Source: children's scrutiny, 22 September 2026.

On 23 July 2026 Cabinet agreed that the Assistant Director of Education Excellence may award new SEND transport contracts, after tender, for two years, in time for the school year. The report was on the forward plan and it is public. The award does not return to Cabinet. The passenger transport frameworks on the register, £24 million then £28 million, are the same family of purchasing. The forecast overspend on education travel support is about £2.3 million. The September cabinet-member note records disruption from one transport provider. Cabinet kept the decision to delegate. It did not keep the individual awards.

In the 2022 and 2023 published payments, the single largest education heading is "Special General Expenditure (High Needs), Non-Maintained Day Schools": £17,857,403 across 1,352 payments. Pontville School alone received £6,885,203. The High Needs deficit is named a significant weakness by the auditor and a significant governance issue by the council. The officer listed to present it to scrutiny in March 2027 is a director of the council's loss-making hospitality company.

11. Adults and public health

On 3 September 2026 Cabinet approved changes to adult social care charging. The report was a key decision, it was on the forward plan, and it is public. Parts of the policy had not been reviewed for several years. The changes include charging from the first day of new non-residential services. The report says the options were tested against the Care Act, fairness, and the Better at Home strategy.

Adult social care is where the money goes. £265.4 million in two years, 41 per cent of all payments. The largest single expenditure headings are supported living for adults with a learning disability, £28.7 million across 12,482 payments; private residential care for older people, £26.5 million across 10,941 payments; domiciliary care for older people, £18.5 million across 14,254 payments; and nursing homes, £12.4 million across 4,615. Sefton New Directions, the council's own care company, received about £19 million. Autism Initiatives received £13.5 million, Alternative Futures Group £6.3 million.

The cabinet-member note for June to August 2026 says the service is seeking £5.5 million of savings, of which about £1 million had been delivered, and that a digital pilot has been extended into early 2027. Procurement of residential rehabilitation is on the forward plan for 1 October 2026. That decision has not yet been taken.

Public health's largest entries on the contract register are the Healthy Child Programme, £28.9 million in 2016 and £32 million in 2022. The 2022 and 2023 payments show £10.6 million paid to the NHS under "Childrens 0-19" and £16.7 million to Mersey Care NHS Trust. The autumn key-decision plan lists no public health decision. The cabinet-member note of 1 September 2026 records the council's figures: adult smoking from 9.1 per cent to 10.7 per cent between 2023 and 2024, healthy life expectancy down for a fourth reporting period, and a stop-smoking grant of £277,042 for 2026/27.

12. Land

Section 123 requires the best consideration reasonably obtainable. The General Disposal Consent of 2003 allows a disposal below that value where the undervalue is under £2 million and the council can show an economic, social or environmental benefit. A disposal can meet that test and still fail the forward plan, the publication of the price, or the separation of the officer who writes the report from the member who signs it.

Victoria Park, from 1986. The park was gifted to the town in 1898. The council transferred its management to the Flower Show company in 1986, granted a 60-year lease from 1994, and extended it by a further 60 years to 2114. The rent is a bouquet of flowers. The charity's accounts record that it acquired the lease and certain buildings for nil consideration. No competitive process for the extension has been found in the public record. The buildings had an existing use value of £470,000 at a 2014 valuation. The officer now responsible for the park is a trustee of the charity and a director of its trading company.

January 2020. Pleasureland, Southport seafront. Cabinet member, recorded as non-key. Fifty years with a further fifty. An NDA. The investment figures in the council's own papers were £5 million, then £9 million. Councillors who asked for the lease terms in April 2022 and January 2023 were told the NDA prevented disclosure.

June and July 2023. Viking Golf, on the same seafront. Cabinet member. The receipt was not published.

March 2022. Plot J, Southport Business Park. A Red Book valuation was obtained.

12 May 2025, in effect 21 May. Plots F, G and H, Southport Business Park. Nine hundred and ninety-nine years to EFT Group Ltd. No capital receipt. Cabinet member. A residual appraisal by Fitton Estates, not a Red Book valuation. Fitton Estates was paid £2,500 by the council in 2022 and 2023. The Leader attended the announcement.

May 2025. Former Bootle High School. Disposal to One Vision Housing, part of Sovini. Cabinet member. The receipt is not confirmed in the papers reviewed.

July 2025. Former TTCables and Peoples site, Linacre Lane and Hawthorne Road, Bootle. Cabinet member. Sale to a preferred purchaser, conditional on planning consent. The price is not in the public paper.

6 November 2025. Sovini, ten sites. Cabinet. A key decision. Not on the forward plan. The chair of regeneration scrutiny and the Leader were consulted under Rule 27, on the ground that delay was impracticable because of the number of people in temporary accommodation. Rule 27 is the urgency rule in the access-to-information procedure. It is not an emergency power. The report is public. The valuations are not in it. The sites: the former Bootle High School, Back Forest Road in Southport, the former Dale Acre School and St Raymond's in Netherton, the former Rawson Road School in Seaforth, the Kings Centre in Bootle, garages at Viola Street and Bedford Road in Bootle, the former youth centre at Redgate in Formby, and Oxford Road in Waterloo. One Vision Housing originated in the 2006 transfer of the council's own housing stock. The cabinet member for regeneration voted. Her register records Sovini hospitality on 27 November 2025 and 12 February 2026, both after the vote. The register is where they belong, and that is where they are. The report's author was a director of the council's hospitality company. That directorship is not on the face of the report.

December 2025. No. 2 Lodge, Victoria Park, Southport. Cabinet member. The receipt is not stated in the public decision. The member's register records her as a Friends of Victoria Park volunteer.

23 July 2026. Sovini, second phase. On the forward plan. Sites in Ainsdale, Bootle East and Formby East. Each site is to come back for its own approval. That is a tighter process than November 2025.

31 July 2026. Former Sands public house, Shore Road, Ainsdale. Cabinet member. A 250-year building lease to GSL Development Limited, company 14060882, with an option over 3.29 hectares. Not on the forward plan. Financial terms in a confidential appendix. The company is a micro-entity with two directors, one of whom was a director of a dissolved company that traded as Go Surf. The published reason is that the property is part of the first phase of the Ainsdale-on-Sea Eco-Vision and that the buildings are in considerable disrepair.

The decision was called in by Councillors Pugh, Thompson and Delves and heard by regeneration scrutiny on 20 August 2026. The call-in was ruled valid. Councillor Pugh's recorded points were that GSL had previously traded as Go Surf, that two earlier exclusivity schemes for the site had not been built, that evidence of GSL's financial capacity "was hard to find", and that on Ocean Plaza the council had asked the developer for a bank letter of comfort. The call-in members asked what would happen if the scheme stopped half-way and funding ceased, what the lease terms gave the council by way of control, and whether the cabinet member was confident the funding was in place or in prospect.

A motion that the committee was not concerned was moved by Councillor Conalty, who chairs the Audit and Governance Committee, and seconded by Councillor Cavanagh, who had ceased to be a director of Sefton Hospitality Operations eleven weeks earlier. It was carried by six votes to three. The decision stood. No declarations of interest were recorded at that meeting.

14 August 2026. Three properties in Waterloo. Cabinet member: Brunswick Parade on the Esplanade, 18 Great Georges Road, and 25 Crosby Road South. Called in. The special scrutiny meeting is on 24 September 2026, the day after this report. The agenda was published on 16 September. If the committee is not concerned, the cabinet member's decision takes effect. The result will be known after the meeting.

Still on the forward plan, not yet decided: the Southport Esplanade park-and-ride, part exempt, slipped from 3 September 2026 because negotiations continue; Sefton 2030 phase 1 disposals in Bootle West, Kew and Netherton North, the same slip and the same exemption; section 106 receipts at Southport Business Park; 486 Hawthorne Road, Bootle; landlord licensing on 5 November 2026, across Birkdale, Blundellsands, Bootle East, Bootle West, Cambridge, Dukes, Kew, Litherland and Waterloo.

Nine disposals in six years, most with no receipt stated in public. The same officer's directorate wrote the reports. The same cabinet member signed them. For most of that period the vice chair of the committee that reviews them was a director of a company inside the same portfolio.

13. The regeneration projects

Marine Lake Events Centre. The signature project of the £37.5 million Southport Town Deal. On 2 October 2025 Cabinet was told the venue would add over £19 million a year to the economy and attract over 500,000 visitors, with Legends Global as operator; Appendix 1 was exempt. On 25 June 2026 Cabinet was told the total development cost would be £106 million, that £33 million of additional capital was needed from government grant, Combined Authority grant and further council borrowing, and that the economic case was now £31 million a year, 386 jobs and over 600,000 visitors. The appendices were exempt. Cabinet was asked to delegate authority to the Executive Director, in consultation with the cabinet member, to enter the main construction contract with Vinci Building. Between October 2025 and June 2026 the cost rose by 45 per cent and the forecast benefit rose by about 60 per cent. Two previous contractors had withdrawn. On 16 July 2026 a motion to Council called for an independent review before any further borrowing was approved. The officer holding oversight of the operator agreement is the officer who sits on the BID board whose treasurer directs the town's largest hotel group.

Figure 8. Marine Lake Events Centre: total development cost as reported to Cabinet, and the change in the forecast benefit between October 2025 and June 2026.

Bootle Strand. Bought in 2017 for £32.5 million on a forty-year loan. By September 2021 the council's own reporting valued it at £14.24 million. In December 2023 Cabinet approved the Phase 1 business case with £20 million of government grant and authorised the direct appointment of the council's existing asset manager as development manager. In March 2024 Vinci was appointed for demolition and Phase 1 against a budget of £3.1 million and £18 million. In September 2025 Cabinet recommended a further supplementary capital estimate of £17.935 million, £7.935 million from the Combined Authority and £10 million from the council, with the appendix exempt and the executive director authorised to sign the grant agreements. The asset manager is Savills, paid £350,000 on 6 June 2025 under a contract assigned from the previous owner without competitive procurement.

Salt and Tar. Bootle Canalside was approved by Cabinet on 26 May 2022 as a key decision on the forward plan, with a £557,000 virement to capital and a £330,000 virement from the growth budget, and the Executive Director (Place) authorised to deliver it. A further £300,000 virement followed in September 2023. The Combined Authority added £585,000 in November 2024. In March 2025 the council's own hospitality company was awarded up to £138,686, by waiver, to advise on bar operations there and on Southport Market. Big Comedy UK holds a three-year contract for the comedy weekender and separately receives tourism-budget funding in Southport. From April 2026 the venue sits under Catherall's remit.

Southport Market. On 3 September 2020 Cabinet agreed the business case, authorised the Head of Economic Growth and Housing to procure and to award the works contract, and kept the detailed appendices exempt. The refurbishment cost about £1.4 million: £900,000 from the council, disclosed under freedom of information, and £500,000 from the Combined Authority, not disclosed in that answer. The central bar contract went to Mikhail. The annual performance reports name Catherall as contact and, in November 2025, were written by Barnes. The council's hospitality company traded from a unit at the market and was then paid to advise on the market's strategy.

14. Operations

On 25 June 2026 Cabinet authorised procurement of a new garden-waste treatment contract, with Star Procurement and the other Liverpool City Region waste councils, before the current contract ends on 31 December 2026. The 2019 award for the service being replaced was £5,777,800, shared with three other councils. Permission to start a procurement is not the award.

The waste authority levy, £26.9 million over 2022 and 2023, and the transport levy, £35.3 million, are the two largest flows out of the council after adult social care. Neither is a contract the council chooses. Both are set by bodies on which the council has seats.

Formby Pool Trust is on the plan for 1 October 2026. The plan says the council will be asked to revise the operating contract and to cut the management fee by half. No report has yet been published. Fleet renewal is listed for 5 November 2026, slipped, and marked part exempt. The Stronger Communities strategy is listed for 3 December 2026, slipped from November.

15. Companies the council owns

Sefton Hospitality Operations Ltd, 13451207, incorporated 11 June 2021. Sole shareholder: the council. Directors on 23 September 2026: Helen Lorna Duerden, from 25 June 2026; Paul Anthony Reilly, from incorporation; Stephen Thomas Watson, from 20 December 2023. Karen Cavanagh was a director from 19 June 2025 until 4 June 2026.

Year to	Loss for the year	Cumulative deficit	Employees
31 March 2022, first nine months	£84,292	£84,292	3
31 March 2023	£729,288	£813,580	51
31 March 2024	£625,623	£1,439,203	54
31 March 2025	£506,330	£1,945,533	58

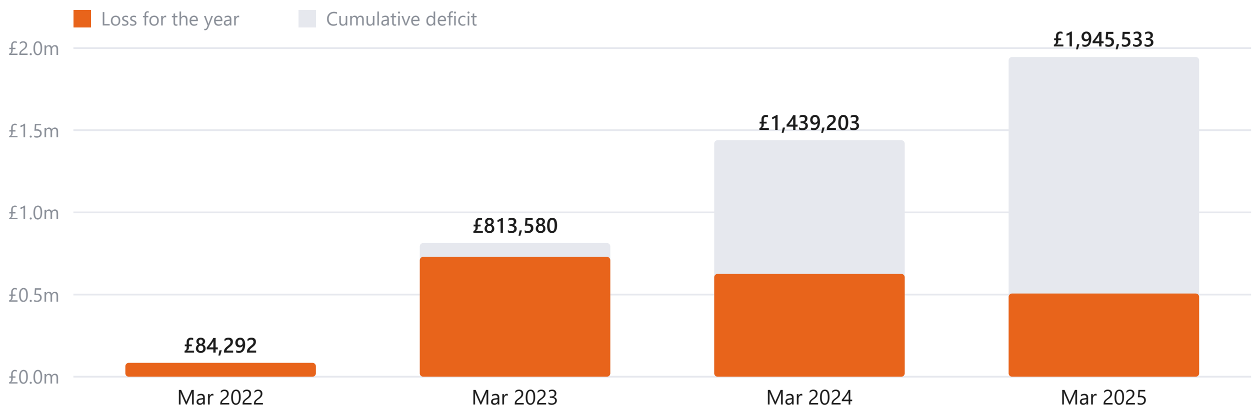

Figure 7. Sefton Hospitality Operations Ltd: loss for the year and cumulative deficit, from filed accounts. The business case promised a £250,000 a year benefit to the council.

At 31 March 2025 the company owed the council £1,990,904 in shareholder loans, £424,459 more than a year earlier. Current liabilities of £1,510,551 stood against current assets of £437,404. The company's business case promised a £250,000 a year benefit to the council. The accounts show the money running the other way. It trades from The Lake House in Crosby, Cone Head at Southport Market and the Beach House at Ainsdale; The White House at the golf links opened in May 2023 and closed after fourteen months.

Watson directs the company and wrote its outturn report to scrutiny. Reilly has been a director for its whole life and is the finance officer listed on the High Needs deficit. Lappin is the shareholder representative. Cavanagh was a director while vice chair of the scrutiny committee that reviews the portfolio, and for fourteen days while chair of children's scrutiny. The company was paid up to £138,686 by waiver to advise on venues it competes at, with no declaration by its executive-director board member. It does not pay the BID levy that independent hospitality businesses at Southport Market pay.

Sandway Homes Limited, 11646502, formed in 2018, owned through a holding company. Business case approved by Cabinet in October 2017. The current director is Maria Porter, from 16 May 2025; that name is not treated as a relative of the chief executive. Diane Elizabeth Roscoe was a director from 23 January 2019 to 14 July 2021; the current children's cabinet member of that name is not treated as holding a current conflict. The shareholder representative in 2024/25 was the Cabinet Member for Housing and Highways, attending as an observer. Sandway does not appear as a payee in the 2022 and 2023 payments. Its outturn was written by the same executive director for the same scrutiny meeting.

Sefton New Directions Limited, the council's adult care company, is the third-largest recipient of payments, about £19 million over two years under four spellings of its name.

Both wholly owned company outturns are listed again for March 2027. That meeting has not been held.

16. Places

Bootle carries the Strand, Salt and Tar, the former high school sold to One Vision, the TTCables site sold to a preferred purchaser at a price not stated, and three sites on the slipped Sefton 2030 list. Waterloo has three properties in front of a call-in and a Sovini site at Oxford Road. Seaforth has Rawson Road on the Sovini list. Netherton has Dale Acre and St Raymond's. Formby has Redgate, a Sovini phase-two site, and a pool whose fee the cabinet is asked to halve. Ainsdale has the Sands, a Sovini phase-two site and the Beach House. Crosby has The Lake House. Southport has the events centre at £106 million, the market, the pier, the park leased to 2114, the seafront under an NDA, the business park on a 999-year lease at nil receipt, and the visitor-economy post held since 2014.

The pattern is not a coastal one. It is a delegation. Cabinet, or one cabinet member. On the plan, or off it under Rule 27. A public report, or a confidential appendix. An officer still in the post when the meeting ends, and often on the board of the body the paper is about.

17. Editorial control

VisitSouthport is operated by the council directly, with no service level agreement, no editorial framework and no audit trail of which businesses are promoted. That is the council's own answer in SP-09 and SP-12 and its Stage 1 concession. SIBA's review of four seasonal pages found Mikhail venues on every page and no independent competitor. The council's published remedy is a review led by the officer who runs the platform.

Stand Up For Southport is the BID's paid media contractor, is paid by Mikhail, was paid by the council by direct award, and was for four months a director of the Flower Show. Its coverage of the BID, Mikhail venues, SHOL venues, Salt and Tar, Invest Sefton and the Flower Show did not disclose those relationships. The council's Southport 2026 business workshops were co-branded VisitSouthport and Invest Sefton and held at a Mikhail hotel.

This report did not search every other council publication for a written editorial policy. It does not claim that none exists elsewhere.

18. The brakes

The forward plan. Sovini was decided off the plan under Rule 27. The Sands was decided off the plan by a cabinet member. Pleasureland was recorded as non-key. Several autumn items have slipped. The plan works when the decision is routine. It is set aside when the decision is large.

Exemption. The events centre appendices, the Strand appendix, the Sands appendix, every waiver appendix, and the market's detailed appendices are exempt under paragraph 3. Councillor Pugh's motion of 17 September 2026 said the tension between confidentiality and accountability is "commonly exemplified in this council" and that councillors "lack sufficient information to provide proper assurance to their constituents" on commercial and regeneration schemes. The minutes recording the vote on that motion had not been published when this report was written.

Call-in. Used twice this summer. On the Sands it produced a valid call-in, a recorded set of questions about funding and control, and a six-to-three vote to let the decision stand, moved by the audit chair and seconded by a councillor who had left the board of a council company eleven weeks before. On Waterloo it is tested on 24 September.

Scrutiny. The children's and adults' committees resolved in September 2026 to hold informal briefing sessions rather than appoint a working group. Regeneration scrutiny deferred the section 106 report to 9 March 2027. Corporate scrutiny deferred the taxi licensing update because the report was not ready, deferred the corporate performance report to balance the agenda, and deferred the health and safety policy because a head of health and safety was being recruited. The committee that reviews the regeneration portfolio had, for two years, a vice chair who directed a company inside that portfolio.

Audit and Governance. Receives waivers in closed appendices with no public totals. Its chair moved the motion that let the Sands disposal stand. Its annual report to Council on 17 September 2026 asks Council to approve the committee's account of itself.

Planning. At the same Council meeting the Chief Planning Officer asked for a national scheme of delegation under the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025, in force by 31 October 2026, moving more applications to officers and reducing the committee from fifteen to thirteen. The minutes had not been published when this report was written. The direction is the one this report is about.

Registers. The officer register does not carry the BID directorship; the council says there is nothing to declare and no policy. The cabinet member's register does not carry a directorship that Companies House shows from July 2025. No register of interests for the regional destination partnership has been found. The BID's own declarations, when requested, were referred back to the council.

The statutory officers. The chief executive passed a probity letter to the monitoring officer and assigned a complaint naming Watson to Watson. The monitoring officer's office wrote the governance statement, both call-in papers, and, in May 2026, two letters to SIBA. The first said a personal claim in libel might be actionable by the officer concerned. The second said the council would take published material to court to have it removed, and asserted that SIBA had not replied to the first, an assertion withdrawn the same day. Neither letter identified a factual error. A local authority cannot sue for defamation: Derbyshire County Council v Times Newspapers. No report under section 5 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 appears on the public record for the period reviewed. The absence of such a report is not itself a failing. The failing would be a decision that misses a legal minimum with no advice beside it. The governance statement that this office wrote says the framework is fit for purpose. The external auditor found four significant weaknesses in the same year.

19. Score table

Decision	Date	Plan	Who	Open	Advice
Southport Market business case, procurement and award delegated	3 Sep 2020	2	1	1	0
Bootle Canalside business case, delivery delegated	26 May 2022	2	1	2	0
Strand Phase 1 business case, £20m grant, asset manager appointed direct	7 Dec 2023	2	1	2	0
Strand supplementary estimate £17.935m, grant agreements delegated	4 Sep 2025	2	1	1	0
Events centre update, appendix exempt	2 Oct 2025	2	2	1	0
Events centre £106m, main contract delegated	25 Jun 2026	2	1	1	0
Families First direction	6 Nov 2025	2	2	2	0
Sovini, ten sites	6 Nov 2025	1	2	2	1
Sovini, second phase	23 Jul 2026	2	2	2	0
SEND transport awards delegated	23 Jul 2026	2	1	2	0
Garden waste, authority to procure	25 Jun 2026	2	2	2	0
Adult social care charging	3 Sep 2026	2	2	2	0

Decision	Date	Plan	Who	Open	Advice
Revenue report	3 Sep 2026	2	2	2	0
Business park, 999 years, nil receipt	12 May 2025	not reviewed	1	2	0
Sands, Ainsdale, call-in dismissed 6 to 3	31 Jul 2026	0	1	1	0
Waterloo disposals, called in	14 Aug 2026	not reviewed	1	2	0
Pleasureland lease	Jan 2020	not applicable, recorded as non-key	1	1	0
Five quarterly waiver reports	Sep 2025 to Sep 2026	not applicable	2	1	0
Draft governance statement	2 Sep 2026	not applicable	2	2	0
SHOL and Sandway outturns	10 Mar 2026	not applicable	2	2	0

Of the thirteen executive decisions scored, nine handed the award, the signature or the delivery to an officer. Seven kept their financial terms in an exempt appendix.

Forward-plan items not yet decided, and therefore not scored: Foster4, residential rehabilitation, the Formby Pool fee, fleet renewal, the Esplanade park-and-ride, Sefton 2030 phase 1 disposals, landlord licensing, the Warm Homes grant top-up, the Matrix agency-staff award, and the Ainsdale equity loan.

20. Comparisons

Measure	Figure	Source
Events centre cost, 2020 bid to June 2026	£73m to £106m, up 45 per cent	Cabinet, 25 Jun 2026; Council motion, 16 Jul 2026

Measure	Figure	Source
Events centre forecast benefit, Oct 2025 to Jun 2026	£19m a year to £31m a year; 500,000 to 600,000 visitors	Cabinet, 2 Oct 2025 and 25 Jun 2026
Strand purchase price to reported value	£32.5m in 2017 to £14.24m by Sep 2021	Council reporting
Strand further capital since 2023	£20m grant, then £17.935m	Cabinet, Dec 2023 and Sep 2025
Hospitality company promise against result	£250,000 a year to the council promised; £1,945,533 lost; £1,990,904 owed to the council	Business case; filed accounts
Payments to suppliers, 2022 to 2023	£315.1m to £333.8m, up 5.9 per cent	Published payments
Adult social care share of payments	41 per cent	Published payments
Ten largest suppliers	22.7 per cent of payments	Published payments
Eight largest contract awards	61 per cent of stated value	Contracts Finder
Contract award notices, 2023 to 2024	27 to 116	Contracts Finder
Waiver reports with the waiver list in a closed appendix	5 of 5	Audit and Governance, Sep 2025 to Sep 2026
Freedom of information requests answered late, 2025/26	282 of 1,562 closed; compliance as low as 76 per cent in one quarter	Council performance data
Freedom of information responses signed by the officer they concerned	13 of the first 15	Responses on the public record
Education, health and care plans, Dec 2018 to Dec 2025	1,445 to 4,197, up 190 per cent	Scrutiny, 22 Sep 2026
Forecast revenue overspend at end of July 2026	£5.821m, children's social care about £12m inside it	Cabinet, 3 Sep 2026
Cabinet-member land disposals since 2020 with no receipt stated in public	Most of nine	Land review, council papers
Longest lease terms granted	999 years at nil receipt; park to 2114 at a bouquet of flowers; seafront 50 plus 50 under an NDA	Council papers; charity accounts
Sands call-in	Valid; dismissed 6 to 3	Minutes, 20 Aug 2026
Significant weaknesses found by the external auditor	4	Auditor's Annual Report 2024/25

Measure	Figure	Source
Council's own view of its arrangements	"Fit for purpose"	Draft governance statement, Sep 2026

21. Conclusion

The external auditor found significant weaknesses in Sefton's financial sustainability, its schools deficit, its budget monitoring and its use of procurement waivers. The council's own draft statement, written by the monitoring officer's office, names two of those as significant governance issues and calls the framework fit for purpose in the same document. A councillor told the chamber on 17 September 2026 that waivers are excessive and that members lack the information to give assurance. Five waiver reports have gone to the audit committee. The public has not been shown a single figure from any of them.

The money bears out the shape. £648.8 million left in payments of £500 and over in 2022 and 2023, 41 per cent of it to adult social care and a tenth to two levies the council does not set. £339.9 million of stated contract value sits in 339 awards, eight of which hold 61 per cent. Names that recur in the land and company chapters were paid without a notice on the register. The events centre has gone from £73 million to £106 million with its appendices exempt and its main contract delegated. The Strand has taken a £20 million grant and a further £17.935 million on a centre the council itself valued at less than half what it paid.

Land follows the same shape across the borough. Nine disposals in six years by one cabinet member, on reports from one directorate, most with no receipt in public, one urgency decision for ten sites, and a call-in that was valid, was heard, and was voted down by a motion from the chair of the audit committee, seconded by a councillor eleven weeks out of a council company boardroom.

The people repeat. The officer who designed the BID sits on its board, runs the platform that promotes its members, oversees the market whose bar its treasurer's employer holds, holds oversight of the events centre operator agreement, and signed thirteen of the first fifteen freedom of information answers about himself. His line manager is a trustee of the charity that holds a public park to 2114 and approved the waiver that paid the council's own hospitality company to advise on the market. Their executive director directs that company, wrote the Sovini report, was given the delegations on the Strand and the events centre, and was handed the complaint that named him. The finance officer on the company's board is listed to present the schools deficit. The cabinet member who signed the disposals is the company's shareholder representative, the vice chair of the policy consultee, and the council's representative to a one-director company run by the man who chairs the town's marketing body and sits on the Flower Show board beside her officer.

None of that is a finding that any officer or member took a bribe, or gained personally from a disposal. It is a finding that the posts which write the papers are unelected, that several of them outlast the chief executive, that the same names sit on both sides of the same decisions, and that the brakes the council describes in its own statement are not the brakes the decision papers, the payment records and the company registers show.

Appendix A. Companies House record

Checked 23 September 2026.

Company	Number	Relevant officers
Sefton Hospitality Operations Ltd	13451207	Duerden (25 Jun 2026), Reilly (11 Jun 2021), Watson (20 Dec 2023). Karen Cavanagh 19 Jun 2025 to 4 Jun 2026. Thomas Bradley Spring 7 Mar 2024 to 19 Jun 2025. Christine Catherine Howard 14 Dec 2022 to 16 May 2024
Sandway Homes Limited	11646502	Maria Porter (16 May 2025). Diane Elizabeth Roscoe 23 Jan 2019 to 14 Jul 2021
Southport Business Improvement District	09048655	Brabner (5 Oct 2020), Catherall (27 Sep 2022), Gregory-Wareing (17 Sep 2024), Halsall (14 May 2026), Kearsley (13 Nov 2023, also secretary), Lloyd (25 Mar 2026), Rankin (9 Jan 2023), Taylor (6 Oct 2020), Wareham (20 Dec 2022). Dwayne Johnson 1 Jul 2019 to 10 Sep 2020. Susannah Porter 1 Oct 2017 to 6 Dec 2022. Rylands 2014 to 2016 and 2018 to 2020
Southport Flower Show	02103365	Barnes (29 Jan 2025), Hampton [Hampson] (3 Jul 2025), O'Neill (3 Jul 2025), Pope, Rylands (3 Nov 2020). Brown 4 Jul to 7 Nov 2024. Brayshaw 4 Jul to 29 Oct 2024. Steinberg, Edwards and Tarpey all ceased 19 Aug 2024
Victoria Park Management Company (Southport) Limited	03016129	Barnes (29 May 2025), Rylands (8 Apr 2024), Pope
British Destinations Ltd	13327062	Peter Thomas Hampson, sole director and secretary, from incorporation 9 Apr 2021
GSL Development Limited	14060882	Two directors. Micro-entity

Appendix B. Principal sources

Sefton Council committee papers on the council's ModernGov system, as cited by meeting and date. Sefton Council published supplier payments, January 2022 to December 2023. Grant Thornton, Auditor's Annual Report 2024/25. Sefton Council draft Annual Governance Statement 2025/26. Sefton Council Freedom of Information Performance Data 2025/26. Companies House, checked 23 September 2026. Contracts Finder, buyer Sefton Council. Charity Commission, charity 1000698, accounts for 2023 and 2024. Register of interests of Councillor Paulette Lappin, published 11 September 2026. Freedom of information responses SP-01 to SP-18 and the council's complaint responses, published at siba.digital. Institrace document holdings for Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council.