

**From:** Ed Conley ed.conley@icloud.com  
**Subject:** Transparency in Sefton Council (2024)  
**Date:** 7 December 2024 at 10:18  
**To:** Sir Ron Watson SirRon.Watson@sefton.gov.uk



Dear Sir Ron,

I still remember your experience with Sefton Council redaction (photo attached) and often have wondered how you have continued with uncovering legitimate public spending regarding the Strand scheme.

I write to update you with a draft letter I am about to send to Philip Porter on behalf of our organisation called Voice of the Families - over 400 people who have suffered at the hands of Sefton's poor quality children's services and pursuant for financial transparency. We believe spending is non-equitable, but we cannot analyse the budget because many suppliers are redacted. This is in direct conflict with UK Government policy as indicate in the recent budget and this notification: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/procurement-policy-note-0117-update-to-transparency-principles/the-transparency-of-suppliers-and-government-to-the-public.html>

We have legitimate queries, for example any ownership or involvement in profit-making children's care, large legal bills at taxpayers expense and unacceptably high profit margins by financial concerns - but we are unable to scrutinise these due to lack of information on purpose of spend or summary contractual arrangements (on purpose of spend) where public money is involved. The need to be transparent is to help balance the budget (see Reeves speech) and more equitably pay for services that are currently unjust.

The attached letter will not be sent yet, we are awaiting the outcome of a new FOI asking what policy determines these exceptions to the transparency guidelines. In the mean time you may be able to comment about whether this is the right approach and/or whether we should add or subtract anything from our request (or cc: additional people etc.).

We are only interested in equity and fairness for the children and families and are not politically motivated.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Edward Conley  
Professional Advocate  
Voice of the Families

Attachments: Sir Ron redaction photo, draft letter to Philip Porter



surplus to the council in that time.

After Sir Ron's attempts to gain information using motion and questions at council meetings did not receive answers, he tried to obtain financial data with an FOI request, which was also refused.

A further request for a redacted version was finally accepted but Sir Ron was shocked when entire pages of the report were blacked out.

He said: "I took this as far as I could requesting the document on a redacted basis and the legal department had to concede that this should

be provided but it's page after page after page of blacked out figures and information.

"I also tried at the council and a question to the council leader to have a current financial statement based on the fact that we are three-quarters through the council year but once again this information was refused.

"There are numerous other issues where the same problem applies and never before in Sefton's history have councillors been treated in this manner."

Sefton Council declined to comment.



● Entire pages of the council's response to Sir Ron Watson's FOI request about the Strand shopping centre, inset, were blacked out

### Entire pages of the council's response to Sir Ron Watson's FOI request about the Strand shopping centre, inset, were blacked out

Sefton Chief Executive Letter on Transparency Policy.pdf  
44 KB



On 21 Sep 2023, at 14:59, Sir Ron Watson <SirRon.Watson@sefton.gov.uk> wrote:

Dear Mr Conley,

May I thank you for your email in respect of The Strand area development programme.

I hope you will bear with me when I say that at such short notice I am afraid I can't go into the level of detail that you might possibly find helpful but I can assure you that I have an active watching brief on the whole of this programme and it remains of great concern to me.

The decisions taken alone by the 9 Cabinet Members and this is one Party body, although this did not used to be the case and at one stage all Parties were actually represented.

The system continues to give great concern and over the past five years there have been some 29 separate attempts to introduce a greater level of transparency but all of these have been rejected.

I should stress that none of them would in any way have stopped the Majority Party from implementing whatever policies they thought appropriate but there would have been a greater degree of transparency.

The Overview & Scrutiny Committees are meant, as the name implies, to deal with policy issues determined by the Cabinet but as they are Chaired by the Majority Party and are not allowed to see what is described as 'exempt' information their role can clearly not be fulfilled.

In simple terms, if you don't have all of the information on which a decision was made you are not able to come to a view as to its validity.

There is provision within the Constitution for individual Councillors, such as myself, to request to have an item to be placed on the Agenda for the Cabinet and this allows the Member to attend and to speak providing they submit a written report on the subject.

By way of example, I am attaching some of my own submissions but on every occasion the Leader of the Council has vetoed my request without explanation even though I have met all of the criteria laid down in the Constitution.

In simple terms I have always been very wary of Local Authorities, such as Sefton, embarking upon commercial enterprises of which they have no knowledge and no experience.

The Strand is a perfect example in the sense that when the complex was offered for sale by the then owners there was not a single offer made by anyone involved in the commercial retail sector and this speaks for itself in my view.

We have been advised that there are all sorts of negotiations with other Bodies concerning the possible use of part of the building but no details have ever been provided on the basis of commercial confidentiality.

You might consider however that it is relevant to note that the major retailer, Marks & Spencer, have actually pulled out of The Strand and their desire to leave was so great that they actually paid the Council a not insignificant amount of money to surrender the lease, but again the figures have not been revealed.

The whole of the area has had quite a widespread series of proposals put forward and whilst an initial application for grant funding was rejected a second approach did result in a not insignificant amount of money – some £20m – for suggested improvements but there is no indication how the further £50m plus is to be covered and there remains the problem that the estimated capital value of The Strand is less than half the amount of money that was borrowed originally and which does of course have to be repaid in full.

In simple terms we will need to pay £2 back for every £1 of estimated value.

The latest issue I have raised is on RAAC and I attach a response for your information but this does need to be followed through and brought up to date in my opinion.

The Council has also borrowed huge amounts for developments elsewhere of a supposed commercial nature and the latest is some £19.6m for a Centre at the Marine Lake in Southport which is going to cost £1m per year in repayments over the next 40 years.

There are also heavy losses in respect of a number of other, what I will describe as, 'facilities' and the financial dividend promised from Sandway Homes has not materialised.

I am advised that there is to be a 'Business Plan' for The Strand to be presented to the Cabinet, either next month or in November, and I have been promised a separate briefing on this which I welcome but I have no expectation that the figures will indicate that the whole development will not require significant council tax funding on an annual basis.

Personally I think the consultation process to which you refer should have taken place after this business report has been produced and analysed and I am at a loss to understand why this is not the position.

I am afraid I will have to cease now but I will keep you up to date and I hope you find this helpful.

Kind regards,

Councillor Sir Ron Watson,  
Dukes Ward Councillor

---

**From:** Ed Conley <[ed.conley@icloud.com](mailto:ed.conley@icloud.com)>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, September 20, 2023 10:13 AM  
**To:** Sir Ron Watson <[SirRon.Watson@sefton.gov.uk](mailto:SirRon.Watson@sefton.gov.uk)>  
**Subject:** The Strand and your redacted answers  
**Importance:** High

You don't often get email from [ed.conley@icloud.com](mailto:ed.conley@icloud.com). [Learn why this is important](#)

Dear Sir Ron

I have in my archives an striking picture of you holding up completely redacted pieces of paper which I recall were an appalling reply to your reasonable questions of finance to do with the Bootle Strand.

Since it is a consultation for the "Transformation Programme" on Friday "We would like to hear your thoughts about the next steps of the Strand redevelopment. Our first consultation event will be held on Friday 22nd September from 10.30-2pm. Visitors will be able to drop in to our Information hub to speak to our staff about our proposed plans, ask any questions and offer their opinions. The hub can be found opposite Specsavers in the Strand Shopping Centre."

I wondered if your original questions were relevant so I can ask them again. I found the blanket redaction patently ridiculous and outraging from a public accountability point of view.

Any help you can give me in asking the right incisive questions would be appreciated.

My personal opinion is the Strand is past its sell by and the redevelopment money can be much better spent.

Ed

---

May be an image of text that says "12:56 70% STORYLINE of BOOTLE THE BOOTLE STRAND TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME"