

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Public Services Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA with remote attendance on Monday, 12th May, 2025 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Armand Watts (Chair)

County Councillors: Jill Bond, Steven Garratt, Meirion Howells, Penny Jones, Tony Kear, Dale Rooke, Frances Taylor, Paul Pavia, Fay Bromfield, Sara Burch, Louise Brown, Emma Bryn, John Crook, Ian Chandler, Lisa Dymock, Christopher Edwards, Catrin Maby, Su McConnel, Phil Murphy, Alistair Neill, M. Newell, Maureen Powell, Peter Strong, Angela Sandles and Sue Riley

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Deb Hill-Howells, Head of Decarbonisation, Transport and Support Services

1. Apologies for Absence

Councillor Frances Taylor advised that she would be late joining the meeting. Councillor Malcolm Lane sent his apologies and was being substituted by Councillor Paul Pavia.

2. Declarations of Interest

None received.

3. Public Open Forum

Town and Community Councillors were in attendance but did not wish to speak under the Public Open Forum.

4. National Highways - M48 and Severn Bridge 7.5t weight Limit - Discussion on the proposed changes to the operation of the Severn Bridges and the implications for Monmouthshire with National Highways, UK.

The Chair invited Ian Thompson, Programme Development and Stakeholder Relations Manager at National Highways and Jonathon Hill (Route Manager at National Highways) to introduce themselves. They delivered a verbal presentation by way of introduction.

Ian provided background on National Highways, a government-owned corporation responsible for operating, maintaining, and improving England's strategic road network.

He detailed the scope of the network, including 4,500 miles of motorway and trunk roads, and the specific area covered by the Southwest operation.

Ian also discussed the M48 bridge, its design, and the increase in traffic since the tolls were lifted in December 2018, explaining the inspection regime for the bridge cables, noting rust and deterioration found during inspections. The decision to remove HGVs over 7.5 tonnes from the bridge was made to prevent further deterioration and ensure safety.

Ian outlined the engagement and briefing exercise conducted with stakeholders and the public after the decision was made. He mentioned ongoing work with various authorities to mitigate impacts and improve traffic flow, as well as future plans to strengthen the bridge cables.

Deb Hill-Howells, the interim Chief officer for infrastructure, explained the Council's response since being notified by National Highways. She mentioned ongoing collaboration with National Highways, Welsh Government, and other relevant bodies to address the impact on Junction 23A and local roads. Efforts are being made to resolve issues at the roundabout and resurface the road before changes take effect.

Deb advised that weekly meetings are held with National Highways to mitigate the impact of the changes and that the Council is lobbying Welsh Government for a new link road from the M4 to the B4245 to reduce traffic on Junction 23A and are awaiting responses from Transport for Wales and Welsh Government regarding the impact on the High Beech roundabout work. She confirmed that the Council continues to liaise, lobby, and work with National Highways to mitigate the impact on residents and businesses.

Cabinet Member, Councillor Catrin Maby, expressed concern about the difficult situation around Chepstow and the junction near Magor due to the changes. She highlighted the impact on the logistics hub at New House Farm and the local economy. She emphasised the need for data on how HGV drivers might react to using the other bridge, including traffic flow data around the area. She also mentioned the importance of understanding the intricacies of road interactions and the existing congestion and traffic flow issues. She noted the potential positive aspect of working more closely with National Highways and other agencies to solve these issues.

The Chair asked Members for their questions, which were answered by Ian and Jonathon.

Key Questions raised by Members:

- Councillor Rooke asked about managing tachographs for deliveries to Chepstow, considering the additional 40-minute journey each way.

Ian Thompson from National Highways explained that they have liaised closely with the haulage industry and provided early notification to allow hauliers time to consider their logistics and manage the impact on drivers' hours and tachographs.

- Councillor Rooke enquired about mitigating the impact of increased HGV traffic coming off the M5 at Gloucester and traveling through Chepstow.

Ian mentioned that National Highways is undertaking a significant modelling exercise to understand the impacts and disbursement of traffic. They are working with SWTRA and Monmouthshire to manage the risks and will report back once further details are available.

- Councillor Howells asked if National Highways had worked out how many of the 3200 HGVs crossing the bridge daily would be directly affected in the Chepstow area.

Ian explained that the modelling work is ongoing to determine where the vehicles are going, including significant distribution sites like New House Farm. They are working closely with SWTRA and Monmouthshire to map out the impacts.

- Councillor Howells enquired about contingency plans if the M4 Prince of Wales Bridge is closed.

Ian stated that during planned closures, HGVs would be allowed to travel over the M48 in a controlled manner, typically overnight. For unplanned closures, they would use the approved diversionary route via the M50.

- Councillor Howells asked how the enforcement of the changes would be managed, particularly for lorries of different weights.

Ian mentioned that enforcement would be managed by police forces and the DVSA, with technological solutions like ANPR cameras.

- Councillor Howells questioned if local businesses would be supported if they incur further charges due to the changes.

Ian clarified that while they are providing ongoing information and communication, businesses financially impacted have no right to compensation from National Highways.

- Councillor Bond asked if the 12 to 18 months timeframe for the mid-term solution is realistic and if the long-term solution involves controlling HGVs going on the M48 bridge.

Ian confirmed that the 12 to 18 months timeframe is realistic for the mid-term solution, which involves managing vehicles with a technological solution. The long-term solution is the cable augmentation to allow HGVs back on the M48 bridge.

- Councillor Bond enquired if the M4 Prince of Wales Bridge is capable of withstanding the additional HGVs due to the M48 bridge restrictions.

Ian confirmed that the M4 Prince of Wales Bridge is capable of handling the additional HGVs.

- Councillor Bond asked if there is any chance of compensation for businesses affected by the changes.

Ian reiterated that while they continue to engage with hauliers, compensation is not available for businesses affected by the changes.

- Councillor Bond questioned the opportunity to consider longer-term environmental improvements by using trains for freight and encouraging Welsh Government's help with the junction on the M48 between Caldicott and Rogiet.

Ian mentioned that engaging with the rail sector for freight is part of a wider strategic question, and they are actively engaged with the rail industry.

- Councillor Jones asked if a risk assessment and contingency plan linked to the economic impact have been carried out.

Ian explained that no risk assessment plan has been carried out because the decision was based on safety and operational needs. However, they are working with partners to limit the impact on businesses and the region.

- Councillor Jones enquired about how businesses can be protected and supported.

Ian mentioned that they are keen on working closely with all required organisations to monitor and adjust as needed, but did not refer to any direct financial support for businesses.

- Councillor Jones asked if the renewal works on the Prince of Wales Bridge can be completed sooner to lessen transport problems and if there is a realistic timeframe for this.

Ian stated that the assessment to accelerate or delay some of the works on the Prince of Wales Bridge is ongoing. Johnny added that the eastbound resurfacing on the M4 has been postponed maintaining three lanes eastbound with a 70 mph speed limit from early May.

- Councillor Taylor asked for more concrete proposals to minimize disruption to local residents and businesses at Junction 23A, including long-term traffic management solutions like permanent traffic lights.

Ian mentioned that they are working with Monmouthshire and SWTRA to understand the impacts and potential solutions, including signalization, but emphasised the need to be evidence-led. Deb Hill-Howells added that signalization is being considered as part of the solutions.

- Councillor Taylor expressed concern about the area being gridlocked during adverse weather or incidents when the bridges are closed and asked if better traffic management measures could be implemented.

Ian acknowledged the concerns and stated that they are working on modelling the impacts and will continue to engage with partners to implement suitable interventions.

- Councillor Taylor enquired if consideration has been given to modal shift and securing alternative delivery methods, such as new stations on the main line, particularly Magor Parkway station.

Ian noted that modal shift is part of a wider strategic question, and they are engaged with rail providers. Deb Hill-Howells added that the new station is part of the Burns work, and they continue to lobby for its delivery.

- Councillor Garratt highlighted the issue of the A40 Leys Bend Rockfall, which is scheduled to be fixed over the winter, and asked for mitigation and modelling to review this.
- Councillor Garratt expressed concern about drivers from Gloucester using the A4136, which is heavily used by goods vehicles and vulnerable to increased traffic. He mentioned the investigatory work being done on Staunton Hill.
- Councillor Garratt mentioned the resurfacing of the Wye Bridge and recent incidents causing knock-on effects in Monmouth and beyond. He urged measures to ensure responsible driving behaviour and mitigate risks on other routes.
- Councillor Garratt reminded that Monmouth is a strategic area and will be impacted by the changes, emphasizing the need for careful consideration of hauliers' behaviour and traffic management.
- Councillor Pavia noted that the High Beech roundabout in his ward is likely to be significantly impacted by the changes, especially if HGVs are diverted through the town. He emphasised the importance of using existing traffic modelling data from Welsh Government and SWTRA.

Ian acknowledged the concerns and mentioned that they will continue to engage with Monmouthshire and SWTRA, using the existing traffic modelling data to understand the impacts and implement suitable interventions.

- Councillor Pavia raised concerns about air quality and noise impacts, particularly in the air quality management zone along Newport Road. He asked if air quality impact assessments will be undertaken and if additional monitoring stations are required.
- Councillor Pavia requested more regular data summaries on air pollution to monitor the impact of the changes.

Ian confirmed that air quality management areas will be included in the weekly meetings with Monmouthshire and SWTRA to address the concerns. Ian highlighted that communication channels exist for residents to share their thoughts and concerns, and they will continue to monitor the impact post-implementation.

- Councillor Pavia raised the current state of repair of the roads, particularly Newport Road, and asked if national highways could look at the structural resilience and repair the roads before the changes are introduced.

Ian mentioned that the impact on local roads will be considered in the weekly meetings, but did not promise any funding at this stage.

- Councillor Kear asked if there is a commitment from Welsh Government to undertake the repairs, given the estimated cost of £300-600 million.

Ian clarified that the funding for the repairs will come through the Department for Transport (DfT), not Welsh Government, and that the feasibility work is underway to determine the required funding.

- Councillor Kear enquired whether the existing works on the Prince of Wales Bridge will be sped up or reduced to accommodate the changes.

Jonathan Hill mentioned that the eastbound resurfacing on the Prince of Wales Bridge has been postponed, and regular inspections will be carried out to maintain the road surface's integrity and safety.

- Councillor Kear expressed concern about the illegal use of roads by HGVs in Usk Town and asked if the modelling would affect the town.

Jonathan stated that while National Highways is not an enforcement agency, they will share any modelling outcomes, and enforcement will be handled by the relevant authorities.

- Councillor Watts asked about the introduction of ANPR cameras to manage vehicles over 7.5 tonnes and whether exemptions could be made for businesses directly impacted, such as those in New House Farm estate.

Jonathan explained that while they considered various weight restrictions, the 7.5 tonne limit was necessary for safety reasons. He mentioned that they are not in a position to allow exemptions at this time but will continue to engage with affected operators.

- Councillor Watts expressed concern about the negative impact on local businesses and employment, particularly in Chepstow, and asked if there could be a trial period to ease businesses into the changes.

Ian acknowledged the concerns and mentioned that they have met with businesses and the owners of New House Farm. He emphasised the need to stop lorries over 7.5 tonnes from crossing the bridge to protect it from further damage and stated that exemptions for specific companies or geographical locations are not feasible.

- Councillor Phil Murphy asked if the Humber Bridge, which has a similar construction, has experienced similar problems and if lessons have been learned from it.

Ian confirmed that the Humber Bridge is managed by National Highways and is under the same inspection regime as the M48 Severn Bridge. They work with the structural engineering community to address similar issues.

- Councillor Phil Murphy enquired about the plan to control vehicles going over the bridge and whether this would lead to delays similar to Operation Stack. He also asked about mitigation measures for increased vehicle use on the A40 and the status of the landslip on the English side of Monmouth.

Jonathan mentioned that controlling vehicles over the bridge is being worked on by a dedicated team, and they will consider the impact on local traffic. He also stated that the landslip work is managed outside their region but they are engaging with the relevant authorities.

- Councillor Lisa Dymock mentioned concerns from the Road Haulage Association and Hicks Logistics about the impact on JCT 23A and the fast light sequence affecting HGVs.

Ian acknowledged the concerns and mentioned that they have worked closely with the Road Haulage Association and Logistics UK, considering suggestions for mitigations.

- Councillor Lisa Dymock asked why the mid-term project to manage vehicles over 7.5 tonnes cannot be fast-tracked sooner than 18 months.

Ian explained that the mid-term project involves a process of feasibility, design, procurement, and construction, which realistically takes 12 to 18 months.

- Councillor Lisa Dymock stressed the importance of keeping the B4245 clear and avoiding temporary road works to ensure free flow of traffic. She suggested looking into dispositions for HGV driver hours, similar to measures taken during closures at Holyhead port.
- Councillor Burch asked if vehicles carrying livestock are included in the restrictions and if there has been any analysis on the impact on the farming sector locally.

Ian confirmed that there are no exemptions for vehicles carrying livestock and that no specific assessment has been conducted on the impact to the agricultural industry. They have focused on intense stakeholder and customer engagement to allow businesses to adjust their logistics.

Jonathan Hill mentioned that they have not engaged directly with the NFU but have ensured that their communications are far-reaching enough for organizations like the NFU to be aware of the impact and know where to direct their questions.

- Councillor Crook asked for clarification on whether the Council was informed later than anticipated about the restrictions.

Jonathan clarified that Monmouth County Council was informed at the same time as MPs and MSs at an officer level. Once it was flagged that the CEO was not informed, they attended meetings and added the leader and CEO to the engagement.

- Councillor Crook highlighted the need for attention to the traffic light sequencing at the B4245 and the junction on top of the roundabout going down to the self-distributor road, especially when the bridge is closed.

Ian acknowledged the need for attention to traffic light sequencing and mentioned that they will continue to engage with Monmouthshire and SWTRA to address this concern.

- Councillor Crook expressed concerns about the stacking of vehicles from Magor to Chepstow and asked for a clearer understanding of how this will be managed going forward.

Ian explained that a specialist team is in the early stages of feasibility to determine how to manage the stacking of vehicles and limit the impact on local roads, residents, and businesses. Detailed plans will be shared as the feasibility progresses.

- Councillor Riley expressed concern about how the bridge closure will impact local residents, including employment, house prices, and planning decisions. She asked if the Council is considering these factors.

Jonathan mentioned that while he cannot speak on behalf of Monmouthshire County Council regarding specific impacts, there are transparent lines of communication between the organizations. Information flow is maintained, and modelling work results will be shared with Monmouthshire and SWTRA.

Ian emphasised the importance of keeping the bridge open to avoid jeopardizing its future safety, which would shut it to all vehicles. He noted that private light goods vehicles, coaches, and buses under 7.5 tonnes can continue to use the bridge, which is crucial for commuting, tourism, and business trips.

- Councillor Riley indicated that her question was directed towards Monmouthshire County Council's planning considerations, specifically mentioning Councillor Murphy and Councillor Burch.
- Councillor Brown asked about the financial responsibility for the bridge repairs, the estimated cost of £300-600 million, and the investigation into the technology required for the repairs. She also enquired about the liaison with other bridges worldwide.

Ian explained that the feasibility of strengthening the cables is underway, with an estimated cost of £300-600 million. The funding will be subject to the outcome of the UK Government's spending review. National Highways is working with structural engineers worldwide, including those managing the Humber Bridge.

- Councillor Brown expressed concern about the impact of heavy vehicles on local roads in Monmouthshire, including the need for more HGV unsuitable route signs

and the potential damage to roads and verges. She suggested considering a compensatory road fund for Monmouthshire.

Jonathan emphasised that the formal diversion route will remain the M4 corridor, and National Highways will continue to share information with Monmouthshire and SWTRA to ensure informed decisions. Enforcement of suitable routes for HGVs will be managed by Monmouthshire.

- Councillor Brown reiterated the need for a compensatory road fund to address the impact on local roads due to heavy vehicles. Jonathan Hill acknowledged the concern and emphasised the importance of transparent communication between National Highways and Monmouthshire.
- Councillor Sandles emphasised the need for mitigation around the Magor roundabout due to significant traffic congestion. She suggested that signalization could help alleviate the traffic issues and improve the flow, making it easier for residents to commute and access essential services.

Ian assured that addressing the Magor roundabout is a priority. National Highways recognizes the impact on traffic flow and is having weekly meetings with the relevant stakeholders, including SWTRA and Monmouthshire, to find solutions.

- Councillor Howells asked about the improvements on the M49/M4 junction, specifically whether these improvements would entail enhancements to the roundabout itself or simply opening the existing junction near the Severn Beach industrial estate.

Ian explained that the junction was completed by National Highways in 2020 but linking it to the local road network falls under South Gloucestershire Council's responsibility. The council has faced significant land acquisition and legal challenges but is now able to commence work, with an estimated completion date of 12 months. The improvements aim to alleviate pressure at the St Andrews roundabouts and improve the flow of lorries from Avonmouth onto the M49 and M4.

- Councillor Rooke enquired whether the long-term plan includes the construction of a third crossing from Lydney to Purton, considering the finite longevity of the Severn Bridge and the potential benefits of having another crossing in place before the current one closes.

Ian responded that he is not aware of any plans by HM Government to build a third crossing. He acknowledged that such a project would require significant investment and linking to the existing road network.

Chair's Summary and Closing Comments:

Councillor Watts expressed the committee's shock at the decision to impose weight restrictions on the Severn Bridge and emphasised the significant impact on local employment and economic opportunities. He highlighted the ambition to develop the Severnside area and the concern that these opportunities might now be lost. He stressed the importance of continued pressure on National Highways to mitigate the

impact and suggested arranging another committee meeting in six months for an update. He then invited Catrin Maby, the Cabinet Member, to summarise the Cabinet's intentions to address the situation.

Cabinet Member Councillor Catrin Maby's Closing Remarks:

Councillor Maby emphasised the complexity of the transport and highways issues, particularly for a border county like Monmouthshire. She highlighted the exacerbation of existing problems due to the sudden restrictions on the Severn Bridge and the need for continued lobbying to address these issues. Key points included:

- The importance of fulfilling the Burns prospectus on rail and the M48 road link.
- The need for action to relieve congestion at High Beach and better traffic management at the Magor roundabout.
- The mismatch between the size and frequency of vehicles and the old roads in Monmouthshire.
- The necessity of investing in public transport, active travel, and rail freight to achieve modal shift.
- The commitment to working with SWTRA and Welsh Government to mitigate the impact on local residents and businesses.

The Chair thanked everyone for their attendance, in particular National Highways and requested an update be scheduled in approximately 6 months.

5. Minutes of the previous meeting held on 7th April 2025

The Minutes were agreed as a true and accurate record of the meeting held.

6. Public Services Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme and Action List

The committee noted the Committee's forward work programme. The chair advised that efforts continued to secure a date for a future meeting with the Police and Crime Commissioner to discuss the CSP's priorities for Monmouthshire, how the strategic assessment led to the development of the plans and also the new Police, Crime and Justice Plan and what this will deliver for the county.

7. Council and Cabinet Work Planner

Noted.

8. Next Meeting

Monday 7th July 2025 at 10.00am.