

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Public Services Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr Usk on Monday, 15th December, 2025 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Armand Watts (Chair)
County Councillors: Jill Bond, Steven Garratt, Meirion Howells, Penny Jones, Tony Kear, Malcolm Lane, Dale Rooke, Frances Taylor, Louise Brown, Sue Riley, Angela Sandles, Emma Bryn, Jan Butler, John Crook and Catrin Maby

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Sharran Lloyd, Community and Partner Development Manager
Deb Hill-Howells, Chief Officer Infrastructure
Ian Muirhead, Community Safety Officer
John Crandon, Community Safety Officer
Sueanne Sandford, Highway Asset Street Works Team Manager
Carl Touhig, Head of Neighbourhood Services
Jonathan Hill
Alan Feist
Maria Evans, Substance Misuse Lead Officer
Brendan Chambers

APOLOGIES: None

1. Apologies for Absence

None received.

2. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Penny Jones declared a non-prejudicial interest as an independent member of Aneurin Bevan University Health Board.

3. Public Open Forum

A video was shown that had been submitted by a resident in relation to traffic resulting from the restrictions to heavy goods vehicles on the Severn Bridge. This related to item 5 on the agenda. The Chair invited Jonathan Hill from National Highways to comment.

The National Highways officer acknowledged the videos, explaining they showed the impact of managing freight over the M48 during planned closures of the M4 Prince of Wales Bridge. He noted that, without such management, freight would face a 100-mile diversion. It was clarified that the high proportion of freight seen in the video was due to the M4 closure and is not representative of normal operations; once the medium-term solution is implemented, this will be a managed scenario only during planned closures.)

4. To discuss drug related deaths and the impact of synthetic drugs with the Heroin & Crack Cocaine Action Area Co-ordinator for Gwent Police.

Maria Evans and Brendan Chambers delivered a presentation and answered the members' questions.

Questions from Members:

- Councillor Bond asked what socio-economic and health factors contribute to drug-related deaths in the county, and is there commonality? How far back do root causes get investigated, especially regarding childhood trauma and abuse?

Maria explained that factors include unemployment, unstable housing, parental substance misuse, and deprivation. Substance use occurs across all social classes, with different drugs prevalent in different areas. Prevention campaigns and education are conducted in schools and universities. Mental health issues and childhood trauma (ACEs) are common among substance users, and interventions are trauma-informed. There are challenges in engaging mental health services, and efforts are made to address trauma through specific pathways.

- Councillor Bond further asked which came first—the chronic conditions or the drug use? Do you work with schools to prevent future cases?

Maria stated that some use substances to mask mental health issues, which can lead to further problems like drug psychosis. There is a revolving door syndrome between substance use and mental health. Schools are targeted for awareness and education, but the school programs focus on drug effects and legal consequences, not on identifying trauma risk. Drop-in clinics are available for students to discuss drug concerns.

- Councillor Bond queried how effective has this approach been, and what were the previous numbers compared to this year?

Maria and Brendan responded that there were 30 drug-related deaths in 2024 and 28 so far in 2025. The highest recorded was 34. In Monmouthshire, there was 1 death in 2024 and 3 in 2025.

- Councillor Howells asked how much of a problem is nitazine in drug-related deaths? Is it easily identified in autopsies, and how effective is naloxone in combating it?

Brendan explained nitazine is an emerging trend, more prevalent nationally and especially in Scotland, with a few cases in Gwent. It is usually mixed with heroin or cocaine, making potency unpredictable and overdoses more likely. Identification is improving through forensic providers and universities. Maria added that naloxone works but often requires many more doses for nitazine overdoses compared to heroin, sometimes up to 10 or 11 injections.

- Councillor Kear asked what is the police team's liaison and approach to prevention regarding drug misuse and related deaths, given trends in drug possession and supply statistics?

Brendan responded that his involvement is primarily investigative after the fact, not in prevention. Prevention is addressed through partnership meetings and other police units, but he is not directly involved in frontline prevention activities. Tony acknowledged this and suggested he may take the question back to the chief and the Police and Crime Commissioner.

- Councillor Jones asked why isn't there more public advertising or government initiative to raise awareness about the dangers of drugs like ketamine and synthetic opioids, given how serious and unknown these risks are? Would a stark campaign (e.g., on social media or TV) be effective?

Maria responded that many harm reduction campaigns are already in place, including multi-agency ketamine action plans, urology pathways, and drug testing kits for users. Despite these efforts, young people often do not seek help until in crisis. Previous national campaigns (like "Say No to Drugs") were found ineffective. The area is also distributing nitazene testing strips. However, Maria noted these efforts only reach the "tip of the iceberg." Penny followed up, suggesting the Welsh Government should be asked to do more, such as a broader publicity campaign, especially for prescribed drugs like pregabalin, which is implicated in many deaths.

- Councillor Rooke asked how prescription drugs are monitored to ensure they are not falling into the wrong hands?

Maria explained that concerns about irresponsible prescribing (e.g., pregabalin, gabapentin) are raised through the Controlled Drugs Local Intelligence Network and reported to the Health Board's Accountable Officer. However, they are still awaiting a response from the Health Board despite these reports.

- Councillor Riley asked whether people become homeless because of drug use, or do they start using drugs because they are homeless?

Maria said it is a "chicken and egg" situation: some become homeless due to substance use (e.g., veterans masking PTSD), while others start using drugs after becoming homeless to survive on the streets.

- Councillor Riley also asked if most drug-related deaths in Newport are due to people migrating there for services, or are they local residents?

Maria explained that while some migrate to Newport for treatment and drug accessibility, issues exist across Gwent, with people moving for temporary accommodation. Newport is a hotspot for drug dealing, but deaths occur in other areas as well.

- Councillor Riley asked whether providing more local services in Monmouthshire would reduce migration to Newport and affect statistics?

Maria clarified that G DAS services cover all of Gwent, not just Newport. Monmouthshire has community pharmacies offering needle exchange and supervised consumption, plus two bases (Chepstow and Abergavenny) for local support.

- Councillor Brown asked whether funding could be changed so that Health Board staff are based in homeless hostels or B&Bs to support people with drug and alcohol issues, rather than relying on peripatetic services?

Maria responded that this would be outside her remit. The current grant from Welsh Government is already allocated for treatment provision, so there are no available funds within their grant for this purpose. She could not speak for the Health Board's ability to provide such funding.

- Councillor Butler expressed concern as a parent about the widespread availability of illegal drugs online, including products like gummies and muesli bars laced with synthetic opioids, and noted the prevalence of substance misuse among young people. She stated that she was concerned that the "Wings to Fly" drug education program is no longer running and emphasized the need for drug education before students enter sixth form and again when they start college. Councillor Butler suggested that the scale of the issue was overwhelming and asked Councillor Kear to raise these concerns with the police board.
- Councillor Watts asked how the Area Planning Board (APB) interacts with Community Safety teams to ensure data and intelligence sharing?

Maria stated that Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs) and the five local authorities sit on the APB, and information is fed back to CSPs via their representatives on the board.

- Councillor Watts asked if there is a hotspot for drug-related data in Monmouthshire and who represents Monmouthshire County Council at multi-agency meetings on community safety, and who focuses on treatment response? He also asked whether data is fed back into the Council?

Maria's explained that the Monmouthshire data is shared with the Council via Community Safety Partnership representatives on the Area Planning Board.

- Councillor Watts asked if the loss of school liaison officers impacted the police's ability to work in schools?

Brendan said the loss likely has an impact on prevention, though he does not have data to quantify it.

- Councillor Watts asked if police resources impact their ability to police drug supply and use?

Brendan explained that policing is proactive and targets local, regional, and national supply chains, but the scale and sophistication of the drug market make it difficult to address fully with current resources.

- Councillor Watts asked how drug supply is being targeted, especially in schools?

Brendan described a tiered approach: local neighbourhood teams target local dealers, organized crime teams target regional suppliers, and the National Crime Agency targets national/international supply. He reiterated the challenge due to the size and complexity of the market.

- Councillor Watts asked what improvements can be made—are more resources needed, or can public bodies work more cleverly together?

Brendan emphasized the importance of prevention and noted the landscape is constantly changing, requiring ongoing adaptation and collaboration.

Chairs Summary:

The Chair thanked both Maria and Brendan for attending the meeting and providing helpful responses to Members' questions on such an important topic. The Chair commented that some of the issues raised could be discussed with the Chief Constable when he is invited to attend a future meeting. The Chair thanked them for their time and for preparing such a cohesive presentation.

5. To present an update on the M48 Severn Bridge Heavy Goods Vehicle Restrictions (question and answer session)

Alan Feist delivered a presentation and answered the members' questions with Jonathan Hill.

Questions from Members:

- Councillor Bond commented that local members could form a helpful part of the stakeholder steering group to improve information flow and allay fears. She asked what the impact and risk assessment is for disruption on the Chepstow side due to the proposed HGV metering solution? How often will significant issues occur, and what is the worst-case scenario?

The project team explained that modelling is tiered (strategic, cordoned, and detailed visual models) and ongoing. The worst-case scenario is a peak hour eastbound ban on HGVs (e.g., 7:00–10:00 AM), which would prevent additional congestion. Best case, the ban could be shorter or not needed. The team does not plan to rebuild the roundabout or A466 at this stage.

- Councillor Bond questioned if HGVs are banned during peak hours, will they stack up on the slip road and roundabout, affecting car traffic?
- *The team responded that the signing strategy will be designed to prevent HGVs from reaching Chepstow during the ban, diverting them via the Prince of Wales Bridge. Signs will be triggered early enough to avoid stacking.*

- Councillor Howells asked whether there has been any progress on opening the M49 junction at the Avonmouth/Severn side, and could the opening date be brought forward? What effect would opening this junction have on M48 bridge traffic?

The project team confirmed the M49 junction (Junction 1) is scheduled to open in late summer next year. Its opening will allow haulage units from Avonmouth to access the M4 and Prince of Wales Bridge directly, reducing their need to use the M48 via Aust. The team expects this will provide additional network resilience, though the exact proportion of traffic shifting routes will be determined through further modelling. They noted that bringing the opening date forward is unlikely, as six months is a short timeframe for such a civil engineering project.

- Councillor Rooke asked whether economic impact assessments have been done for the area, especially considering the serious impact when both bridges were closed?

National Highways stated that no economic assessment was required for the safety-driven HGV removal decision, so none was done. However, a cost-benefit and value-for-money analysis will be required for the medium-term solution, and the long-term business case will include socio-economic impacts, such as effects on employment and growth.

- Councillor Rooke asked what can be done in exceptional circumstances when both bridges are closed to prevent complete shutdown of local infrastructure and business?

The team is conducting a full debrief of the recent event and response. The main mitigation is to ensure non-essential journeys are avoided so essential ones can proceed. Messaging and communication are key, and lessons will be learned from the recent closure.

- Councillor Taylor asked when there will be signalisation at the Magor Junction 23 interchange, and what improvements are planned for signage during adverse incidents?

National Highways meets regularly with Monmouthshire County Council, Sutra, and Welsh Government. A proposed signalisation solution for Magor Roundabout is in internal pricing and expected to be a 2026 project. An update will be shared in January.

- Councillor Taylor asked what are the thoughts of National Highways on the removal of tolls and the long-term cost of maintaining the bridge?

The response was that the removal of tolls was a government decision. National Highways continues ongoing maintenance and reviews infrastructure investment. The recent incident is under review for lessons learned, and messaging is being improved.

- Councillor Taylor raised the matter of what the Department for Transport's (DfT) long-term proposals are for managing and maintaining the bridge, given its importance and ongoing issues? She

suggested the Committee may want to consider requesting National Highways or the DFT to detail the long-term proposals and maintenance plans for the bridge, highlighting its significant economic and social impact.

Councillor Taylor clarified she was not advocating for a return to previous tolls but supported the idea of maintaining a minimal toll or public transport levy to fund bridge maintenance and promote alternatives like rail, reiterating the importance of a long-term solution. She thanked the National Highways representatives for their updates on current and medium-term solutions but stressed the need for a comprehensive long-term strategy.

- Councillor Garratt asked why there was a lack of signage and information during a recent car fire incident near Bristol, and can information provision be improved during such events?

National Highways acknowledged the feedback and will pass it on. They are aware of the need for better corridor-wide communication and are working on improving holistic information sharing, including using technology to provide targeted, in-car updates to drivers approaching incidents.

- Councillor Garratt asked if there is a holistic approach to managing the impact of works and incidents across the wider transport corridor, including the M48, A449, and A40?

National Highways confirmed they are working with local authorities and other regions to coordinate works and communications across the corridor, not just on the bridges, to manage impacts more effectively.

- Councillor Bond requested that a local member (e.g., a Chepstow member) be part of the stakeholder group, given their significant local knowledge?

National Highways advised that senior officers from local highway authorities are on the stakeholder steering group, with the expectation that information from members is fed up to officers and back down. They also provide a monthly newsletter and are open to direct engagement triggered by member questions.

- Councillor Bond asked if Members could be updated on the proposed junction on the M48 between Rogiet and Caldicot, which could reduce congestion at Magor and Chepstow?

National Highways responded that this junction is not on their network and would need to be addressed by Monmouthshire, SWTRA, and Welsh Government.

Deb Hill-Howells advised that the proposed link has been included in the Regional Transport Plan, but as it is a SWTRA road it will need to be agreed by Welsh Government. She explained that the Council has met with the Cabinet Secretary to lobby for the inclusion of this junction. This has also been referenced in the High Beech studies and reassured Members that officers and the Cabinet Member are continuing to push the case for this junction as part of the Burns work. The latest update is that Welsh Government Officials have been asked to look at the proposed re-classification of the

M48 which will be essential to enable the junction to be constructed due to the differential in costs. Another hurdle that will need to be overcome is the roads review, which ruled against the construction of this junction, however we understand that this may be reviewed.

- Councillor Brown asked whether the new system for HGVs on the M48 (starting October next year) will be monitored for its impact on the local network, especially in Monmouthshire?

National Highways confirmed they will conduct before-and-after monitoring of the impacts and expect the community and elected members to report any unforeseen issues.

- Councillor Brown asked how will coordination be managed if there are works or closures on the Prince of Wales Bridge, especially regarding wind-related closures, to avoid traffic chaos like the recent incident?

National Highways explained that the Met Office is involved in planning, and coordination between the M4 and M48 is prioritized to manage such events, though last week's impact was acknowledged.

- Councillor Brown asked what can be done about traffic using unsuitable rural roads (e.g., at Haysgate, Crick, Newton, Hayesbrook) as rat runs during incidents, including large vehicles and coaches, which are a danger to residents?

National Highways noted that while they understand the wider impact, restrictions on local roads (like traffic regulation orders) are a matter for local authorities. They emphasized the importance of communications to discourage non-essential journeys and manage impacts before they occur.

- Councillor asked if there is a way to improve signage or prevent satellite navigation from directing traffic onto these unsuitable single-track roads?

National Highways reiterated that signage and restrictions on local roads are not within their remit and should be addressed by local authorities.

- Councillor Rooke asked whether the traffic light system on the Chepstow end of the bridge will require use of the A449 for stacking HGVs?

National Highways responded that they do not anticipate needing to use the A449 for stacking; the slip road is expected to be long enough to accommodate the required number of lorries.

- Councillor Watts commented that the slip road on the A449 seems able to accommodate only about five vehicles—so where would the other five go if up to ten are needed?

National Highways explained that typically, no more than ten HGVs are on the bridge at any time, and arrivals are usually spaced out, so stacking beyond the slip road is rarely needed. In rare cases of incidents, stacking may occur on the roundabout, but this is not expected in normal operations. The duration of any eastbound HGV ban in the AM peak will be set to avoid over-stacking.

- Councillor Watts highlighted that the resident's video evidence showed more than five, possibly more than ten, HGVs—does this contradict your modelling?

National Highways acknowledged the point and indicated that their forthcoming visual traffic model (visim) will help demonstrate and clarify how the system will operate in practice.

- Cabinet Member Councillor Maby expressed encouragement about the short-term plans from National Highways and emphasized the importance of progressing plans for Junction 23, noting ongoing officer work and positive updates from Welsh Government. She highlighted the need to get the medium-term solution right for the M48 bridge, recognizing the long-term solution will be expensive and take time.

Councillor Maby referenced the comments echoed by Councillor Taylor and stated that she agreed with Councillor Taylor on the need for a long-term vision, especially regarding freight, and raised concerns about large lorries using rural roads and towns, suggesting broader issues with strategic road networks and advocating for better rail alternatives.

Councillor Maby expressed confidence in officer representation on the stakeholder group and found the monthly newsletter helpful, but noted that members may want more frequent updates, especially on Junction 23.

- Councillor Watts raised concerns about communication, suggesting it could be improved and advocating for councillor involvement in the stakeholder steering group to provide direct democratic input and alleviate public fears. He questioned why the committee is limited to officer-level membership and not elected members.

National Highways explained the stakeholder steering group is intentionally officer-level and non-political, with clear communication channels for councillors to feed in concerns; they are open to meeting with councillors and parish councils as needed.

- Councillor Watts expressed concerns about livestock welfare during the Christmas period, specifically regarding animal transport delays due to bridge restrictions, and questioned the stacking capacity for vehicles on the Chepstow slip road, doubting the claim that only five vehicles would ever be stacked.

On livestock welfare, National Highways stated responsibility lies with hauliers, but they assist in emergencies and have experience supporting animal welfare during incidents.

- Councillor Watts asked for clarification on confusing road signage (e.g., A48 North closed) and whether it accurately reflects local traffic patterns and raised concerns about emergency situations where Wales is cut off, referencing recent incidents where people were stranded for hours.

On communication and incident management, National Highways acknowledged the need for improvement and are conducting a debrief to learn lessons from recent events, aiming for better messaging and management in future emergencies.

- Councillor Watts requested to see the current Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs) and asked for clarity on which authority is responsible for them (National Highways or SWTRA). **(Action)**.

Regarding TROs, they confirmed the orders are managed by National Highways and go through the English parliamentary process for the bridge, but coordination with SWTRA/Sutra is required for any orders affecting their networks. They agreed to provide copies of the relevant orders. They reassured Members that they are willing to provide information and meet with councillors to address concerns and clarify technical details.

Chair's Summary:

The Chair recommended that the Council has a democratically elected member on the user group (stakeholder steering group) to improve communication and representation. This recommendation was voted upon and approved by a show of hands.

The Chair concluded that National Highways would be invited to return in 6 months' time to update Members.

6. Public Services Scrutiny Committee's Forward Work Programme

The work programme was noted.

7. Council and Cabinet Work Planner

Noted.

8. Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the 28th October 2025 were agreed as a true and accurate record of the meeting.

9. Next Meeting: Monday 9th February 2026 at 10.00am

Action List:

No.	Action	Responsible	Timescale
1	<p>Update on the M48 Severn Bridge Heavy Goods Vehicle Restrictions</p> <p>Councillor Watts requested to see the current Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs) and asked for clarity on which authority is responsible for them (National Highways or SWTRA). <u>(Action)</u>.</p>	Jonathon Hill	To be sent via email
2	<p>The Chair recommended that the Council has a democratically elected member on the user group (stakeholder steering group) to improve communication and representation. This recommendation was voted upon and approved by a show of hands.</p> <p>The Committee requested National Highways to return in 6 months' time to update Members.</p>	For consideration by National Highways	

The meeting ended at **12.55 pm**.