

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, 7th April, 2025 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Armand Watts (Chair)

County Councillors: Jill Bond, Steven Garratt, Penny Jones, Tony Kear, Malcolm Lane, Dale Rooke, Frances Taylor

Officers in Attendance

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

APOLOGIES: County Councillor Meirion Howells

1. Declarations of Interest

None received.

2. Public Open Forum

None present.

3. Highways Responsibilities and Funding

To provide an overview on the funding for highways, the responsibilities of the Council, the South Wales Trunk Road Agency and others. Discussion on issues raised by Members in relation to the M48, A466 and the two Severn Bridge Crossings.

Carl Touhig delivered a presentation and answered the members' questions with Deb Hill-Howells:

Key Questions raised by Members:

- How is SWTRA's responsibility for roads determined, and why are some A roads not their responsibility?

The allocation of trunk roads is complex and seems to be linked to the motorway system. For example, the A48 from I beach down through Chepstow is a SWTRA road, but the A4810 is not. The exact criteria for this allocation are not fully clear.

- When SWTRA does safety cuts, should they also be picking up litter? It often looks worse after the cuts.

SWTRA should ideally pick up litter before mowing, but this does not always happen. The Environmental Protection Act 1990 states that local authorities are responsible for litter clearance on trunk roads, which complicates the issue.

- What is our direct labour workforce in highways?

The maintenance side has about 30 operatives, with 24 operatives split equally between the north and south. The back office has about 10-12 people, and there are around 40 others doing various jobs within highways.

- What is the annual spend on contractors in highways?

The spend on external contractors for maintenance is relatively low, but larger projects like the White Bridge resurfacing, which costs around half a million, are outsourced. The total spend is around £3-4 million, with SWTRA's budget being slightly more than £5 million.

- Is the planned highways workshop open to all members?

Yes, the member seminar on highways will be open to all members. It will cover the BRAG system and the matrix for prioritising road works.

- Can we raise the issue of legislation for littering with SWTRA and Welsh Government?

Yes, it is possible to raise this issue. Currently, Wales does not have legislation to prosecute drivers for throwing litter. This is an ongoing concern, and efforts are being made to push for such legislation.

- What would be the effect of downgrading the M4 to alleviate traffic through Magor and Chepstow when the M48 bridge is shut?

Deb explained that the potential for a new link road on the M48 was part of the recommendations from the Southeast Wales Transport Commission. The declassification of the M48 and the construction of a new junction would substantially reduce costs and improve traffic flow. However, Welsh Government officials initially resisted the idea of declassification due to diversion implications. Monmouthshire County Council continues to promote the scheme and has included it in the regional transport plan consultation. Public support for the consultation is encouraged to help advance the project.

- Why does SWTRA close the Thornwell Junction and then direct traffic back onto the bridge into a single lane, causing issues for local residents?

SWTRA closes the Thornwell Junction and directs traffic back onto the bridge into a single lane to manage traffic flow and ensure safety. This approach helps to slow down traffic and prevent congestion on the bridge by merging vehicles into a single lane before they reach the bridge. However, this method can cause significant issues for local residents, particularly at the Thornwell roundabout. Carl mentioned that he would

discuss this with SWTRA to explore alternative traffic management solutions that could mitigate the impact on local residents.

- When will the safety barriers that have been an issue for over a year be replaced?

Not in this financial year. They have a schedule but we will try to get an answer back from them

- What is the Council's view on voluntary litter picking groups operating on the roads?

The Council is very grateful for the voluntary litter picking groups. They advise these groups to pick litter on slower roads and avoid trunk roads due to safety concerns. The Council provides high-visibility clothing and sometimes traffic management for larger litter picks.

- What is the process for pothole repairs, and how are they prioritised?

When a pothole is reported, the team initially uses cold tarmac for a quick fix to ensure safety. For more durable repairs, hot tarmac is used, but this requires scheduling and may involve road closures. The prioritisation considers road usage, safety, and other factors.

- Is there a legal timeframe for pothole repairs once notified?

Yes, there is a legal requirement to address potholes within a certain timeframe once notified to ensure road safety.

- Can you explain the Local Government Borrowing Initiative (LGBI)?

The LGBI allows local authorities to borrow money, with Welsh Government providing the funding to repay the loan over 20 years. This initiative helps fund road maintenance and improvement projects.

- Who is responsible for repairing bridges over trunk roads, such as those over the A449, which are in a state of disrepair?

Responsibility for these bridges can be complex. Generally, if a bridge goes over or under a trunk road, it is considered the responsibility of SWTRA. However, there are agreements and drawings that specify maintenance responsibilities.

- How does Monmouthshire County Council's performance in road maintenance compare to other local authorities?

Monmouthshire's road conditions are comparable to other local authorities. The general state of the road network across the UK, particularly in Wales, is not great, but Monmouthshire is not worse than others.

- How is SWTRA monitoring and managing traffic flow around Monmouth with the current contraflow system and other roadworks?

SWTRA is actively monitoring traffic flow and has improved their relationship with local authorities to better manage the impact of roadworks on local communities. They have measures in place, such as tow trucks, to address issues like breakdowns quickly.

- Why were trees felled near the junction and the tunnel, and why weren't local members notified?

The trees were felled because they were rotten and needed to be removed. SWTRA has acknowledged the lack of communication and agreed to improve consultation and provide additional planting to replace the felled trees.

- What is the status of the repair work on Staunton Road and the Link Road?

Staunton Road requires significant work, with estimated costs between £15-18 million. Design works are ongoing. The Link Road is also scheduled for repair, but specific timelines were not provided.

- Can Monmouthshire County Council work with the Forest of Dean District Council to address the impact of heavy traffic from the quarry on Staunton Road?

The Council recognises the impact of heavy traffic from the quarry and is open to working with the Forest of Dean District Council to address these issues.

- Is there a way to give feedback to the local members to avoid misunderstanding, especially regarding the cherry trees?

Carl mentioned that during the works in Monmouth, they had regular catch-ups with Monmouth members and used a Teams channel to keep everyone informed. He acknowledged the importance of communication to avoid misunderstandings and stated that they try to manage noise and control communication levels effectively.

Action Items:

- **SWTRA Responsibilities:** Find out why certain roads are allocated to SWTRA and provide a detailed explanation.
- **Safety Barriers Replacement:** Determine the schedule for replacing the safety barriers on the M48 and provide a response.
- **Traffic Management at Thornwell:** Discuss with SWTRA the possibility of adjusting the traffic management to avoid using the Thornwell roundabout for up and over diversions.
- **M48 Link Road:** Promote the inclusion of the M48 link road in the regional transport plan and encourage public response to the consultation.
- **Workshop on Highways:** Set up a workshop to cover the LGBT funding, prioritisation matrix, and pothole repair methods.

- **Litter Legislation:** To write to SWTRA/Welsh Government to request legislation to prosecute littering from vehicles.
- **Communication with National Highways:** Clarify the legal basis for National Highways managing traffic on the A466 and their coordination with SWTRA.
- **Feedback on App Usage:** Work with Paul Sullivan's team to increase publicity and encourage residents to use the My Mon app for reporting potholes.

4. Potholes and Road Repairs - To provide the Committee with oversight of how the recent monies allocated to Councils from UK Government will be spent in Monmouthshire

Carl provided an update, which included the following points:

- The allocation of money for pothole repairs is still pending, so it's not possible to provide specific details on which roads will be fixed until the funding is confirmed.
- This year, more money will be allocated to pothole repairs, with an emphasis on using hot mix for more permanent fixes.
- Cold mix will still be used for emergency fixes to ensure road safety, but the goal is to follow up with more permanent repairs using hot mix. 3
- There is an acknowledgement that there is a need for more staff to keep up with the repairs and hopes that the additional funding will help catch up with the backlog.
- The plans for the pothole repair process will be covered in detail during the upcoming workshop, including the use of cold mix and hot mix, and the prioritisation matrix.
- The workshop will be scheduled once the funding is confirmed, likely by the end of April or beginning of May.

Key Questions from Members:

- Is there still a schedule of works for highways, and can it be used to manage residents' expectations regarding road repairs?

Once the funding situation is confirmed, members will be provided with a list of works scheduled for this year, including bigger projects and smaller patching works. Carl emphasised that while a schedule of works will be available, emergency repairs and changes in priorities due to unforeseen events (e.g., storms) may affect the schedule. He advised the goal is to improve communication with residents and manage expectations more effectively.

The chair thanked Carl and Deb for attending and answering questions comprehensively. He reminded the committee that the forthcoming workshop being hosted by Pace Scrutiny Committee would be open to all elected Members and encouraged attendance.

5. Minutes of the previous meeting held on 10th February 2025

The minutes were proposed by Councillor Dale Rooke and seconded by Councillor Malcolm Lane.

6. Public Services Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme

The committee discussed broadening the scope of mental health services to include concerns about suicide prevention and occurrence, but agreed that adult mental health and children's mental health should be considered separately due to the breadth of the topics.

A member suggested the changes in domiciliary care and improvements to the combined approach to care by Aneurin Bevan University Health Board should be included in the work programme.

7. Council and Cabinet Work Planner

Noted.

8. Next Meeting: 12th May 2025 at 10.00am

Noted.

The meeting ended at 11.53 am.