

Preserve the unique character of the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal for the future generations of Wales

Pwyllgor Deisebau | 12 Mai 2025
Petitions Committee | 12 May 2025

Reference: SR25/11287-7

Petition Number: P-06-1525

Petition title: Preserve the unique character of the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal for the future generations of Wales.

Text of petition:

The Mon and Brecon is one of the most picturesque and tranquil waterways in the UK winding through Bannau Brycheiniog National Park and through many rural and later urban communities as it makes its way from Brecon, through Talybont on Usk onwards through Goytre Wharf towards Newport. It provides the lifeblood to residents and communities in its path and attracts approximately 3 million visitors a year who make significant contribution to the local economy enabling these communities to thrive.

Since its inception by act of parliament in 1792 the canal has depended on water abstracted from the River Usk and its tributaries. The Usk at Brecon provides 80% of the water required. The water is not 'consumed' as it is returned to the river once it has travelled along the route. Until recently water abstraction did not require licences. For 200 years it has been free of charge. The canal, managed by the Canal and River Trust Wales (a charity), is now required by National Resources Wales to obtain a licence and limit water abstractions. Without a daily supply of water through its locks the canal will quickly become inoperable and closure will be inevitable. The consequences to the livelihood of our communities, natural environment and local economy are unthinkable. An unmanaged canal can lead to catastrophic failure and destruction of properties in its path. Dwr Cymru and NRW have indicated they will supply support water but at prohibitive cost which The Charity cannot afford.



1. Background

1.1. The Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal

The Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal runs from Brecon to Newport, through Bannau Brycheiniog National Park. A partially restored branch of the canal, the Crumlin Arm, runs alongside the Ebbw River from Newbridge, Caerphilly County Borough, to Newport. The canal was built in the 1790s, and was originally used to transport coal, limestone, iron ore, and agricultural produce. It fell into disuse and disrepair in the early 20th century, but large sections have been restored since the 1960s. The northern section of the canal is owned and managed by the Canal and River Trust (CRT), while south of Pontypool it is owned by the respective local authorities of Torfaen, Newport, and Caerphilly.

A section of the canal near Govilon sits within the Blaenavon Industrial Landscape World Heritage Site.

1.2. Water abstraction licensing

Abstraction is the removal of water from a source of supply, such as surface or groundwater. The CRT relies on abstraction to supply the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal. It holds abstraction licenses to do this at seven locations:

- River Usk at Brecon;
- Trosnant Spring (near Pontypool);
- Cwm Crawnon;
- Llangattock;
- Castle Turn;
- Mill Turn; and
- Ochram Turn.

The first of these abstraction points is by far the largest, supplying around 80-90% of the canal's total water demands.

According to NRW's July 2017 River Usk Abstraction Licensing Strategy, 94% of licensed abstraction in the catchment supported the public water supply, managed by Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water (DCWW), 6% was for hydropower, and less than 1% for other purposes. The CRT's abstraction for the canal (which was then unlicensed) accounted for around 3% of all abstraction in the Usk catchment area. However, the proportion of the River Usk's flow it abstracted could increase significantly during droughts. Afonydd Cymru, a river charity, says the CRT abstracted up to 30% of the Usk's flow to maintain the canal during the 2022 summer drought.

In Wales, abstraction licensing is overseen by Natural Resources Wales (NRW). An abstraction licence is required for anyone removing at least 20 cubic metres of water per day from an inland waterway or groundwater, unless they hold an exemption. The CRT held exemptions prior to 2018, but these were removed following the issuance of new

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Regulations by UK and Welsh Ministers. Those who previously held exemptions had to **apply for a new transitional licence** by 31 December 2019 to continue legally extracting water. NRW outlines its approach to water management for the Usk in its Abstraction Licensing Strategy and 2022 **Core Management Plan**.

NRW issued the CRT with the seven transitional licences above in 2022. These licences included limits on permitted abstraction volumes. The conditions are intended to ensure compliance with *The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017* and to protect the River Usk Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Severn Estuary SAC. The River Usk's SAC is **designated for the habitat it provides** for nine nationally and internationally important species, including Atlantic salmon and European otter.

1.3. Licence appeals

In December 2022, the CRT appealed against two of the seven transitional licences – for the River Usk at Brecon, and Troisant Spring. These appeals concerned conditions of the licences that set daily and annual abstraction limits, and additional daily abstraction limits based on river flow volume.

Planning and Environmental Decisions Wales (PEDW) rejected both appeals in November 2024. **PEDW's decision report** says river flow is a critical component of protecting features of the River Usk and Severn Estuary SACs, including maintaining river levels high enough to allow seven migratory fish species to reach their spawning sites. The report acknowledged the potential economic impact of PEDW's decision, saying:

I do not make light of the impact of closing all or sections of the canal on tourism, local business and local economies or that long periods of drying out can lead to structural damage. However, the canal has not closed in recent years other than for maintenance and I am not persuaded the conditions would lead to closures or the impact of the conditions is likely to be as dire as the [Canal and River] Trust makes out. In any event, the importance of maintaining the integrity of the SACs and protecting the species that contribute to their special status must take precedence.

PEDW says its decision is “in compliance with the *Water Resources Act 1991*” and *The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017*, and took into account “sections 3 and 5 of the *Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015*.”

The CRT says it is now **exploring other water supply options**:

We've secured an emergency short-term supply of water from DCWW during the dry weather in April, however this is only for a short-term period and has seen us reallocate funding from elsewhere that will have consequences for our charity's programme of maintenance in other parts of our network.

2. Welsh Government action

The response from the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs, Huw Irranca-Davies MS, outlines the changes to abstraction licensing

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and the CRT appeals detailed above. On the current situation, including the agreement between the CRT and DCWW for a short-term water supply, it says:

Although the Welsh Government is not involved in these commercial negotiations and abstraction licensing considerations, it remains cognisant of the situation and is actively monitoring it.

The letter also highlights funding for the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal Adventure Triangle project delivered through the [Tourism Attractor Destinations \(TAD\) programme](#) between 2017 and 2023. The TAD programme was funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and delivered through the Welsh Government. Torfaen County Borough Council led the Adventure Triangle project, which received £1.65 million TAD/EDRF funding and £2.65 million match funding. Project achievements are [listed in the TAD evaluation report](#), and include making the canal fully navigable between Brecon and Cwmbiran, improving canal side facilities, and improving the towpath in Torfaen.

3. Welsh Parliament action

Delyth Jewell MS [tabled a written question](#) for the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Energy and Planning, Rebecca Evans MS, on 7 March 2025 on this issue. The Cabinet Secretary answered on 19 March 2025:

The abstraction licensing regime in Wales is managed by Natural Resources Wales (NRW). The licence restrictions were put in place to ensure compliance with the Habitats Directive and to protect the River Usk SAC.

I understand the licensing process was undertaken by NRW in accordance with the relevant regulations and the appeals process, which was heard independently and refused by Planning and Environment Decisions Wales (PEDW).

I would encourage any business which has been adversely affected by these changes to contact Business Wales, which can talk them through the range of support available.

On 11 March 2025, Peter Fox MS [requested a statement](#) from the Deputy First Minister on this issue. The Trefnydd, Jane Hutt MS, [responded](#):

Obviously, we really value our canals, and the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs I think is aware of some of the challenges facing them, and I'm sure you've probably already discussed that with him. But it is important to share again, in terms of the impact of the water extraction from the Usk river. I won't go into it any further, because I'm not briefed fully enough to reassure you on this, but I was very interested.

Laura Anne Jones MS [requested a statement](#) on 1 April 2025 on the canal. She said:

The canal generates £26.5 million annually, 4.6 million people visit the canal every year, and there are 290 pubs, restaurants and cafes within a mile of the water that rely on the footfall the canal creates. The local councillor Jan Butler

has started a petition to protect the canal, which has now reached the 10,000 people mark, demonstrating the strength of local feeling about the issue, and I look forward to debating it in this Chamber soon.

So, can I please request an urgent statement from the Welsh Government on what discussions they're having with Welsh Water, the canal trust and other stakeholders? Because there is a solution that the water can be taken from the nearby Llandegfedd reservoir, which is owned by Welsh Water. This is a great historic and economic asset to my region. So, please can we have that? Thank you.

The Trefydd responded:

...I'm aware that the Deputy First Minister recently met with Lynne Neagle, in her Senedd capacity, and also with the leader of Torfaen council to discuss the challenges. I'm aware that there's an abstraction licence issue facing the Monmouthshire and Brecon canal.

The licence restrictions were put in place to ensure compliance with the habitats directive and to protect the River Usk as a special area of conservation river. And I understand the licensing process was undertaken by Natural Resources Wales, in accordance with relevant regulations, and the appeals process heard independently by Planning and Environment Decisions Wales. So, if a technical solution is available, it will require agreement between the Canal and River Trust and Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water. So, the Welsh Government have no part in this. But NRW have been engaged with both the Canal and River Trust and Dŵr Cymru regarding this solution, and they're prepared to continue with this engagement. So, we hope that all can be done to make water efficiency improvements to the canal to allow it to operate in line with the current licences.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.