

Submission by Mark Flood, Preserve & Protect the Mon & Brec Canal group for the Senedd Petitions Committee 12th May 2025



In respect of:

Open Petition 246570: Preserve the unique character of the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal for the future generations of Wales. Petitioner: Cllr Jan Butler

And Rejected (as a duplicate) Petition 246574: Preserve and protect the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal for future generations. Petitioner: Mark Flood

Our response to the Cabinet Secretary Huw Irranca-Davies's letter to the Chair of the Petitions Committee dated 28th April 2025

Background: Preserve & Protect the Mon & Brec Canal (PPMB) is a non-political voluntary group which works to ensure that this beautiful and special canal remains in full and sustainable use for the benefit of all its users, wildlife, and visitors to the national park for generations to come.

We have representatives from canal boat hire businesses, local tourism businesses such as pubs, restaurants, hotels, B&Bs, and shops who all rely heavily on visitors to the canal. We also have representatives from the leisure boating community, and from boaters who have made the canal their home and live on their boats on the canal. We also have representatives from other canal user groups such as walkers, runners and angling.

The navigable Mon and Brec canal runs for 35 miles from Brecon to Cwmbran. 33 miles of the canal is owned and managed by Glandŵr Cymru (the Canal and River Trust in Wales) (CRT). 2 miles of the canal from Sebastopol to Cwmbran is owned and managed by Torfaen County Borough Council. The Torfaen CBC section of the canal is dependent on water from the CRT section of the canal.

Our response: Whilst we welcome the Cabinet Secretary's recognition of the significance and benefits of the canal to the community and to Wales, we disagree with many of his comments in his letter. We believe that the Welsh Government should be taking a more pro-active approach to resolve the issue. The Cabinet Secretary is relying on the Canal and River Trust (CRT) to find medium and long-term solutions. We feel that the Cabinet Secretary fails to recognise that:

- **The Short-Term Solution is Unsustainable** - as a charity with already tight finances and many demands on it across the whole of England and Wales, CRT will be unable to continue to buy extra water after this summer's season. Although the water costs are not publicly available there are reportsⁱ that CRT is paying up to £100,000 per week for water from Dŵr Cymru. Pressures on CRT from the other parts of CRT's network will force them to stop prioritising the Mon & Brec canal. They have said publicly that their budget for extra water is capped and that they cannot continue to pay for water at this rate. It may not last this summer. Unless a viable sustainable solution is found very quickly then these same problems will arise again in the spring of 2026 if not sooner.
- **Infrastructure Projects** – although possibly viable, any medium or long-term solution such as infrastructure projects will not happen quickly enough to save the many dependant businesses such as boat hire and trip boat companies who are facing the

very real prospect of failing this year. Other dependant businesses such as pubs, B&Bs, shops and holiday rental businesses will also be seriously affected. There is also an assumption that Infrastructure Projects are feasible and will provide a solution. There is no guarantee that a technical solution can be found. Any solution will be expensive to implement requiring capital investment and will still come with an ongoing water charge to be paid to Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water. CRT will still be expected to pay for water;

- **Social and Economic Impact (Welsh Government Areas of Responsibility)** - if the canal becomes unusable the impact on areas that the Welsh Government is responsible for, such as tourism, local employment, economic prosperity, sustainable travel such as National Cycleways, and the mental health and well-being of future generations could be catastrophic. It is not sufficient for the Welsh Government to just be “...actively monitoring it.”

Additionally, we feel strongly that the Cabinet Secretary’s letter fails to address:

- **Wider Problems on the River Usk** - the fact that the canal is being penalised to help address long standing issues with the River Usk such as pollution, abstraction for farm irrigation, and abstraction to supply Llandegfedd Reservoir. Previous work by the Usk and Wye Abstraction Group (UWAG)ⁱⁱ found that nearly all the demand for water for the river, drinking water and canal should be met from the existing river flows and network of reservoirs without breaching the tough rules imposed by the Habitats Directive. However, within a month of the licence being implemented the canal became so adversely affected that CRT had to issue a warning to canal-based businesses.
- **Demands on the River Usk** – There are many other significant abstractions of water from the River Usk. The Usk Reservoir (which previously fed the river) is now supplying the Swansea area’s needs. Also, without the Usk Reservoir water, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water continues to abstract water from the River Usk for Llandegfedd Reservoir which supplies much of Newport’s water.
- **CRT, a Charity, is now expected to pay for water** - water is available as long as CRT pays for it. This is not an issue of lack of water, except at very dry periods. This is now a financial issue for CRT. CRT has to pay huge sums to Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water for water that is available. Is it right that CRT, a charity, should be paying Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water, a non-profit company, for water that is available? CRT paying Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water for water is not a commercial transaction. CRT will incur a significant expense but will not increase its income as a direct result of this investment.
- **The Catastrophic Effect on Businesses** – it is a significant issue that the many dependent businesses, especially the 6 hire boat businesses and the 2 trip boat businesses need certainty for long term business planning. Many hire boat customers book up to a year in advance. These businesses have already had many cancellations for this year. They need certainty to be able to plan for the future, and to make investments in their fleets. These businesses cannot wait beyond a few months for a long-term solution to be put in place. They cannot wait for “investment in infrastructure” which will take years to implement even if it’s technically and financially possible. They will have failed before that happens. Without the hire boat and trip boat companies the future of the canal will be severely threatened. The canal cannot survive on private leisure boats, cyclists and walkers alone.
- **The Impact on People who live in boats on the canal (“live-aboards”)** - there is also a catastrophic effect on those people who live on their boats on the canal. They now don’t

have any security, and if the water drops significantly their homes will end up tilted on the bottom of the canal. These people need an immediate solution to protect their homes and livelihoods.

- **The Impact on the Canal's Ecology** - the loss of water in the canal will have a devastating impact on the canal's biodiversity and ecology. The canal and river are alongside each other for much of the 35-mile length of the canal. The river wildlife is protected at the potential loss of the significant and currently thriving wildlife on the canal. The canal's wildlife includes a huge range of fish including roach, perch, bream, eels, gudgeon, dace, chub, carp, tench and pike. There are otters, and many birds including ospreys, kingfishers, mallard ducks, herons, swans, moorhens, mandarin ducks, swifts, and wagtails.
- **The loss of the Canal as a Historic Heritage Asset** - the many heritage assets such as canal wharfs, locks, bridges, aqueducts and lime kilns will all be lost or harder to access if the canal fails. The canal is also an important part of the Blaenavon World Heritage site.
- **Structural and other maintenance** – if the canal becomes disused its clay structure will be prone to decay. The structure is supported by substantial embankments for most of length. How will the structure be maintained to limit the risk of a breach affecting people and property below? Who will maintain it, and how will it be funded? The cost of maintaining an embanked disused structure could well be greater than the cost of providing water to keep it operational. Further, who would maintain the towpath and how could that be done safely? – thousands of walkers, cyclists and runners would lose this much-loved recreational asset.

We would also wish to highlight the following sections of the Cabinet Secretary's letter which we disagree with, or question:

- *“The Canal & Rivers Trust appealed against the limitations, seeking to abstract more water than they had applied for.”* We believe that is not correct – CRT appealed against the “Further Conditions” that the NRW licence contained. These Conditions restricted the abstraction amounts to significantly less than the maximum figure that CRT had originally asked for.
- *“Through Visit Wales, it supported the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal Adventure Triangle project with £2.75 million of ERDF and Welsh Government funding from the Tourism Attractor Destination programme.”* Whilst we recognise and applaud this funding, it did little to support the navigable canal from Brecon to Cwmbran. The Cabinet Secretary mentions projects in Cwmcarn Forest. This is well away from the canal. Caerphilly County Borough Council are still looking for funding for an outdoors activity centre on the non-navigable canal by Cwmcarn Aqueduct. The one point of the “Triangle” on the navigable canal was Pontymoile. The planned Canal Centre at Pontymoile was not built. Also, at Pontymoile the historic Junction Cottage and Toll House for the canal was recently sold by CRT to raise funds.
- The letter refers to the *“Water Resources Modelling task and finish group”*. We assume this means the “Usk & Wye Abstraction Group (UWAG)”.

Further Questions to the Cabinet Secretary

We feel it would be useful for the Cabinet Secretary to answer the following questions:

1. How will the Welsh Government ensure that NRW is committed to balancing the ecological needs of the river Usk with the operational requirements of the canal? How will the Welsh Government ensure that NRW provides tangible support to CRT in ensuring that the canal has sufficient water?
2. Given that the Special Area of Conservation (SAC) protects the ecology of the Usk and the Severn, how will the Cabinet Secretary ensure that the ecology of the canal, its heritage assets, tourism, outdoor education, and canal dependent businesses etc are also protected?
3. How will the Welsh Government ensure that NRW and Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water are committed to balancing fairly the abstraction of water from the River Usk in a way that meets the needs of all stakeholders (including Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water itself and CRT)?
4. If CRT decides that, as a charity, it is unviable to keep the Mon & Brec canal operational is the Welsh Government prepared to let the beautiful and valued Mon & Brec canal become the first operational canal in England and Wales to be closed? Such a decision could be forced on the charity as soon as this coming winter.

Solutions

We ask the Welsh Government to consider the following possible solutions:

- To reconvene the Usk and Wye Abstraction Group (UWAG) water resources modelling exercise to determine why the canal ran out of water within 2 weeks of reopening in March 2025, to ensure that this will not happen again in spring 2026 or the future. If the new modelling exercise shows that the existing licence conditions are unrealistic, then NRW must review and amend the conditions as required.
- To instruct NRW to recognise that the Mon and Brec canal and the River Usk should be treated as one combined eco-system to protect both river and canal wildlife.
- To work with all partners to enable and support CRT in Wales with practical solutions to preserve the Mon and Brec canal (including financial grants to stop leaks, to dredge the canal, and to provide access to alternative low or no cost water sources including solutions through infrastructure projects).
- For Welsh Government to implement joined-up strategic water planning, across Wales as a whole and with a multi-sector approach (i.e. including key users such as inland waterways as well as water companies)
- To put a legislative duty on Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water to include navigable waterways in their strategic planning.
- To set up a new project specifically for the River Usk, similar to the current Upper Wye Catchment Restoration Project, to ensure there is a holistic view of water supply for the benefit of the ecology of the river and the canal.

ⁱ BBC - "Emergency water supply for at-risk canal costing £100k a week" <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c70z8rdw0lno>

ⁱⁱ Usk Fishing Association – Water Abstraction <http://uskfishing.org/issues/water-abstraction/>