

**MEETING OF THE PLANNING, COMMERCE AND ENVIRONMENT (PlaCE) COMMITTEE
OF ABERTILLERY AND LLANHILLETH COMMUNITY COUNCIL HELD ON 31 October
2025 AT 5:30 PM at the Council Offices, Mitre Street, Abertillery.**

PRESENT

Councillors: Barrie Page (Chair), Ralph Henderson (MBE), Chris Hill, Peter Adamson and Josh Rawcliffe.

Officers: Erika Davies (Deputy Clerk).

Absent: Nick Simmons, Rob Phillips and Mark Lewis

Other: Nick Smith MP and BG Cllr. Ross Leadbeater

40. Apologies for Absence

Nick Simmons, Rob Phillips and Mark Lewis

41. Declarations of Interest or Dispensations

None

42. Q&A Session with Nick Smith

Chair, Barrie Page, welcomed Nick Smith MP and Blaenau Gwent Councillor Ross Leadbeater to the meeting and thanked them both for attending. The questions for this meeting had been provided to Nick Smith prior to the meeting, as agreed at the previous PlaCE meeting.

Q1. Does Nick Smith support the Welsh Government view that the Abertillery spur line should be put in place and, will he put pressure on the UK government to either provide the funds for the spur or have the line devolved to the Welsh government?

A1. Yes, I do support and have always supported the improvement of the line. The Valley line has had significant investment, particularly Llanhilleth station, over the last few years, as well as the Pye Corner line, to improve the service.

Lord Peter Hendy (Minister of State for Transport of the United Kingdom) advised me to talk to Vernon Everett. Recently, I met with Vernon Everett, Chair of Transport for Wales. He pointed out how important the Valley line is to local people and the area's future and investment. I discussed progress of the proposed Abertillery spur line and its inclusion in future strategic planning. The scheme is progressing towards the business case stage, which would make the proposal ready for formal consideration by TFW. Vernon Everett, in his role as Chair of TFW, will see all business cases in Wales and therefore this seems like an important win. Vernon is still waiting for the status update from TFW officers on the current status of this case. Once he gets the update, he will share it. Vernon offered to have a site visit, and I offered to meet with him to explore the proposed site and area. Vernon is developing a Wales Rail Prospectus to include a range of future schemes, including the proposed spur line, subject to business case approval and funding availability. With the prospectus he wants to establish a pipeline of potential projects. Mr. Everett acknowledged the concern of the Abertillery spur scheme being overlooked and is going to try and seek inclusion of it in the prospectus to safeguard its viability for the future. Both myself and Ross felt it was a positive meeting. The Ebbw Vale line to Cardiff and Newport with a spur off to Abertillery is important for the community and economic growth and Mr. Everett wants to hear about it.

Initial:

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Cllr. Ralph Henderson – Is the site safeguarded for the railway station? There are rumours of a Lidl being built in the area and possibly on the site.

Cllr. Ross Leadbeater – I can confirm that the site is safeguarded and only a rail station can be built on it.

Cllr. Chris Hill – Where is the money for the spur line coming from?

Nick Smith MP – UK government recently gave Welsh government £435 million which will be spread across a number of different places but Mr. Everett has indicated that they want to proceed to the next level, which is the business case plan. Cllr. Ralph Henderson is correct to talk about the cultural benefit of having a spur line in Abertillery but equally there will be a positive impact on people moving here and also tourism.

Cllr Ross Leadbeater – The two things with transport projects is that a lot of business cases have to be developed and go through a lot of stages. It's only at that point that you can get funding for a project. Thanks to the nearly half a billion pounds of investment, not an insignificant amount of money, there is enough money to take our project to the final business case stage and there is a lot of hope in that. What we have for the first time in 14 years is a UK government that is giving Wales almost half a billion pounds to develop these business cases

Cllr. Josh Rawcliffe – Why isn't the HS2 money being invested into the line?

Nick Smith MP – There has been gradual improvement to the Valleys line over the years and gradual investment. The biggest gain would be for us to join the Valleys line and the electrification that is currently being undertaken; this is something we should be talking more of. When the business case plan comes forward, it will have figures and costings and will give us the information to put a good case forward to the decision makers.

Cllr. Barrie Page – Young people without a car are stranded due to the lack of a train station and poor bus connections.

Nick Smith MP - You allude to a different question here which is supporting young people into work and encouraging people to stay in the area. I hope the Trailblazer plan, announced by the Department of Work and Pensions a few months ago, to the value of around £10 million, will give young people a leg up into work. Transport is an issue but it's not the sole issue.

Q2. Can Nick Smith explain why he is opposed to the devolution of the Crown Estates?

A2. Nick Smith MP. At the time, I believed this would have the best outcome for Wales and I still stand by that. The concern for off shore wind farms and energy security are important to the economy. I am not against devolution but I felt that at the time, this was most important.

Cllr. Josh Rawcliffe – Despite all 22 authorities voting for the devolution, Labour still decided to go against what the people voted for.

Nick Smith MP – When Russia invaded Ukraine a few years ago, there was a huge spike in our energy costs which cost the public purse massive amounts of money. To have energy security has been foremost in my mind in recent years and therefore investment in green energy and off shore wind was the priority for me.

Cllr. Josh Rawcliffe – Given the amount of wind farms power we produce and water we have in Wales, it feels as though we are sending the benefits all over the UK and people in Wales are living in fuel poverty. We continue to be a cash cow with our energy, water and the crown estates. The people of Wales do not benefit from these schemes.

Nick Smith MP – We are a united kingdom and energy produced in Wales will benefit the whole of the UK and there are also schemes in other parts of the UK that benefit Wales.

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Cllr. Barrie Page - Wind turbines are being turned off as the grid is being overloaded. Is this because the turbines are connected to the wrong part of the grid or in the wrong place? It's costing over a billion pounds to turn them off.

Nick Smith MP – Energy security is very important and it will take time to get to grips with any issues. There are issues and some matters like planning need further discussion. I will be getting more information on wind turbines, grids and their constraints. I will look for the latest House of Commons library on this matter.

Cllr. Ralph Henderson – Due to our local environment, shouldn't we be looking at hydroelectric power?

Cllr. Ross Leadbeater – This is something we can look into at BGCBC and I would be happy to send any information from you onto BG for further discussion.

Q3. Can Nick Smith comment on the SPF funding mess where the Labour promise was it would be a replacement for direct EU funding? There has now been a 60% reduction and payments were not made until October from grants being awarded in March. All of this has had an impact in our area.

A4. Nick Smith MP – The reason we have SPF funding is because we voted to leave the EU. I campaigned to stay in the EU as I knew that leaving the EU would have a huge impact on our place and our relationships around trade, security, and culture. SPF was continued for another year after the EU so we wouldn't be left on a financial cliff. Welsh government got the biggest financial settlement ever from devolution. Wales has benefited pretty well out of the UK government. Since then, more funding has become available such as the Growth Fund. Labour wants growth to boost our economy and our future. There will be more clarity around funding for Wales in the coming months.

Cllr. Ross Leadbeater – There was a fallout from Brexit resulting in less funding from the EU. The ability for us to attract business is harder now than ever as we are no longer a part of Europe. We are now less incentivised in terms of business investment.

Cllr. Josh Rawcliffe – as a result of the loss of funding, it is local communities that are losing out.

Nick Smith MP – SPF funding should carry on until next year. I am happy to get and provide further information on further funding schemes.

Q4. What were the reasons for Nick Smith to vote for the Winter Fuel Payment cuts?

A4. In the summer of 2024, Rachel Reeves, Chancellor of the Exchequer, found a huge financial black hole in the figures and had to make in year financial cuts. Originally, the winter fuel payments were for all pensioners but this has now been changed to a ceiling of £35,000 for those wanting to claim and I am really pleased this decision has been taken.

Cllr. Ross Leadbeater – The winter fuel payment was a universal payment. However, not all pensioners need the winter fuel payment. It is my understanding that the policy was to target the wealthy pensioners and ensure it was the poor pensioners and the most vulnerable who would receive the help and payment.

Cllr. Barrie Page – If we are short of money and cannot afford to pay all pensioners, why have we sent 3.5 billion to Ukraine?

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Nick Smith MP – Although charity begins at home, the war in Ukraine has made an incredible impact on the UK and the wider world and made a massive increase to our energy costs. I believe it is the right thing to do for us (the UK). For those pensioners needing further help, I run pension credit workshops in Ebbw Vale and Rhymney to get help and advice to those who need it.

Q5. Does Nick Smith support the introduction of E-Car charge points for terraced houses?

A5. Nick Smith MP – In principle yes, I agree. We need a pilot scheme and get it done right. If the costs, design and pilot scheme went ok, I'd be happy to support this.

Cllr. Ralph Henderson – This is the perfect argument for a station in Abertillery! It's not feasible to have charging leads running all over the pavements and streets in our area.

Cllr. Ross Leadbeater – I think work needs to be done on improving the buses and bus links that we currently have whilst the electric charging points and Abertillery spur line are being discussed.

Q6. What are Nick Smith's views on the number of off road vehicles that are causing damage and chaos in our area?

A6. Nick Smith MP. There is fantastic work being done by Gwent Police in tackling this issue. Both hikers and people using the land are afraid of bad behaviour exhibited by those using the off road vehicles.

This issue was raised in prime ministers questions and I've been working for a few years now to try and reduce the amount of off-road vehicles being used in our area. In Tredegar, there has been a great result and improvement in this topic. Progress is being made but it is something we need to continue to work hard on.

Cllr. Barrie Page – Are drones being used? This seems a good way forward.

Nick Smith MP– Yes, drones are being used along with new tactics to make a difference to this and I will encourage them to do more.

Cllr. Ralph Henderson – This is no deterrent for those committing these crimes. The public need to know who these people are and be made publicly accountable.

Cllr. Josh Rawcliffe– Will our area be getting any new Police staff? (NS to write to Gwent Police to get information on their planned staffing numbers for Abertillery and Llanhilleth Community Council wards in the future).

Q7. Does Nick Smith have regular contact and meetings with his Welsh government representative?

A7. Nick Smith MP. Yes. I have 3MS's in my area and also have two borough councils and local town councils who are trying to do their best for their community. I always to my best to keep in touch but don't always succeed. I have a large area to cover.

Initial:

Date:

43. Date of Next Meeting

TBA

The meeting ended at 6:35 pm

These minutes were produced by Erika Davies (Deputy Clerk).

Signed as a correct record by the Chair:.....

Dated:.....

Initial:

Date: