

Minehead and Watchet LCN Meeting Notes

B3191 Coordination Meeting – 19/05/2026

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Attendees (speakers on the call)

- **Brenda Maitland-Walker** (Chair)
 - **Cllr Mandy Chilcott** (Minehead)
 - **Cllr Hugh Davis** (Watchet)
 - **Cllr Cara Strom** (Dunster)
 - **Cllr Marcus Kravis** (Dunster)
 - **Loretta Whetlor** (Watchet Town Council)
 - **John Irven** (Watchet Town Council / LCN rep)
 - **John Richards** (Watchet Chamber of Trade)
 - **Peter Finney** (Dunster Parish Council)
 - **Mark Philipson** (West Quantoxhead Parish Council)
 - **Mike O'Dowd-Jones** (Service Director, Infrastructure & Transport, Somerset Council)
 - **Paul Tucker** (Bridges & Structures Service Manager, Somerset Council)
 - **Neil Ogilvie** (Flood & Coastal Manager, Somerset Council)
 - **Sam Murrell** (LCN Link Officer)
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- **Cleeve Hill Road Closure and Structures Fund Bid:** Mike O'Dowd-Jones from Somerset Council presented the current status and requirements for a bid to the Department for Transport's Structures Fund to address the Cleeve Hill road closure, with input and questions from Brenda Maitland-Walker, Cllr Mandy Chilcott, John Irven, Neil Ogilvie, Paul Tucker, John Richards, Peter Finney, and others, focusing on the business case, economic impact, technical challenges, and the need for coordinated local support.
 - **Structures Fund Bid Overview:** Mike O'Dowd-Jones explained that Somerset Council is preparing a bid for the Department for Transport's Structures Fund to finance the repair or replacement of local highway structures, specifically targeting the unaffordable Cleeve Hill road closure. The fund requires that the scheme be completed by March 2030, and the business case must demonstrate value for money, local support, and alignment with national and local priorities.
 - **Business Case Requirements:** Mike outlined the five-case business case process required by the Department for Transport, including strategic, economic, commercial, financial, and management cases. The strategic case must show alignment with national and local objectives, the economic case must demonstrate benefits such as reduced journey times and economic impact, and the financial case must justify why the scheme is unaffordable from existing funds. The management case will detail delivery arrangements, and the commercial case will address procurement strategies.
 - **Timeline and Milestones:** The group was informed that a pre-submission response was submitted on April 29, with a final business case due by August 3. Announcements on funding are expected in

autumn 2026. The council has received enhanced support from the Department for Transport, including consultant input, but will need to commission its own consultancy work, primarily through WSP, to refresh previous studies and develop the business case.

- **Local Contribution and Funding Sources:** Mike clarified that while the government has not set a minimum local contribution, higher contributions are viewed favorably. Potential sources include the Environment Agency, which may contribute if the scheme includes coastal protection elements, and Somerset Council's own Highways grant. The target is to assemble about 10% of the estimated £40 million scheme cost from local sources.
- **Community Engagement and Consultation:** Participants including John Irven, John Richards, and Brenda Maitland-Walker raised concerns about the lack of early consultation with local councils and the Chamber of Trade. Mike apologized for the short notice and committed to ongoing, open dialogue throughout the business case process, emphasizing the need for local economic data and support to strengthen the bid.
- **Technical and Environmental Challenges:** The meeting addressed the technical complexities of the Cleeve Hill project, with Neil and John Irven discussing the need to coordinate road realignment with coastal protection efforts, update geotechnical data, and consider environmental approvals, while Paul Tucker and Mike O'Dowd-Jones responded to concerns about bridge vulnerability and alternative access.
 - **Coordination with Coastal Protection:** Neil described the coastal adaptation pilot being developed under the West Somerset Coastal Protection Board, aiming for a community-engaged solution to address multiple failure mechanisms along the coast. The pilot will be aligned with the Cleeve Hill road project, and both teams will coordinate to ensure technical and business justifications are integrated.
 - **Updating Technical Data and Options:** John Irven and others emphasized that the original WSP options study from 2020 is outdated due to accelerated cliff erosion. Mike confirmed that consultants will refresh the technical data, review all previous options, and incorporate new geotechnical surveys, including input from Geckoella and local data on cliff recession.
 - **Environmental and Planning Approvals:** Mike acknowledged the complexity of the project, noting that it will require planning permissions, environmental approvals, and potentially land acquisition. The business case will include a risk assessment for compulsory purchase orders (CPOs) and outline a strategy for negotiating land acquisition, with CPOs as a last resort.
 - **Bridge Vulnerability and Access Concerns:** Peter Finney raised concerns about the structural integrity of the main bridge into Watchet, especially with increased traffic. Paul Tucker confirmed that current inspection records show no issues, but contingency plans for temporary bridges are being explored in case of future problems. The bridge is owned by Somerset Council but leased to West Somerset Railway, which is responsible for maintenance.

- **Economic and Social Impact of Road Closure:** Participants including John Richards, Peter Finney, Brenda Maitland-Walker, and Cllr Mandy Chilcott discussed the severe economic and social impacts of the Cleeve Hill road closure on local businesses, tourism, and daily life, providing evidence and data to support the business case.
 - **Business and Trade Impact:** John Richards and Peter Finney reported significant declines in local trade, with some shops experiencing up to 50% reductions in turnover and others closing or changing business models. The Chamber of Trade continues to survey members and collect data on the negative effects of the road closure.
 - **Tourism and Visitor Numbers:** Cllr Mandy Chilcott and Brenda Maitland-Walker highlighted the drop in visitor numbers, referencing car parking data and the importance of tourism to the local economy. The closure has led to fewer visitors, impacting not only Watchet but also Dunster, Minehead, and surrounding areas.
 - **Traffic Congestion and Alternative Routes:** Multiple participants described severe traffic congestion and long tailbacks on the A39 and alternative routes, especially during peak times and when temporary traffic lights are in place. The lack of alternative routes and the limitations of existing roads exacerbate the problem, affecting residents, businesses, and emergency access.
 - **Social and Community Effects:** The closure has led to missed appointments, increased travel times, and general disruption to daily life. The group agreed that the impact extends beyond Watchet, affecting the wider West Somerset area, and stressed the need for comprehensive data to support the business case.

- **Next Steps and Ongoing Collaboration:** Mike O'Dowd-Jones and Cllr Mandy Chilcott outlined the next steps, including commissioning further technical work, establishing regular meetings for updates and input, and ensuring ongoing collaboration with local stakeholders to strengthen the business case and support the project.
 - **Commissioning Technical and Economic Work:** Mike stated that Somerset Council will commission WSP and other consultants to refresh technical studies, update economic impact assessments, and gather new data on cliff erosion and traffic patterns. Local input and data from stakeholders will be incorporated into the business case.
 - **Regular Meetings and Communication:** Cllr Mandy Chilcott and Brenda Maitland-Walker proposed regular meetings to maintain dialogue, share progress, and coordinate input from the working group and local councils. Mike agreed to return with a proposed schedule and to provide updates as the programme develops.
 - **Reporting and Representation:** The group discussed reporting back to the Local Community Network (LCN) and the possibility of Mike or Matthew Scriven presenting updates. Sam offered to circulate meeting notes and coordinate participation, ensuring all relevant stakeholders are included.
 - **Action Items and Offers of Support:** Participants offered to provide economic data, local knowledge, and technical input to support the

business case. Mike welcomed these contributions and emphasized the importance of a joint effort to maximize the chances of a successful bid.

Follow-up tasks:

- **Economic Impact Evidence:** Provide quantifiable data and evidence on reduced trade, visitor numbers, and economic impacts (including car parking figures, shop turnover, and business closures) to support the business case for the Cleeve Hill road scheme. (Brenda, Cllr Mandy Chilcott, John Richards, Peter, Mark, John Irven)
- **Cliff Erosion Data:** Collect and share updated local data and information on cliff erosion rates and recent changes with consultants and technical teams to inform the feasibility and technical justification of road alignment options. (John Irven, Neil, Geckoella)
- **Local Contribution Identification:** Identify and confirm potential sources and amounts for local financial contributions to the scheme, including Environment Agency and Somerset Council Highways grant, and clarify the mechanism for Environment Agency grant aid. (Mike, Neil)
- **Land Ownership Clarification:** Determine the current owner of the land previously held by Cleeve Hill Developments Limited to facilitate negotiations for land acquisition related to the road scheme. (Brenda, Watchet representatives)
- **Bridge Contingency Planning:** Contact suppliers and investigate options for temporary bridges and alternative access solutions in case the existing bridge over West Somerset Railway becomes unavailable during the project. (Paul)
- **Regular Working Group Meetings:** Establish a schedule for regular meetings of the working group to provide updates, input, and support for the business case development, and coordinate with Sam for meeting logistics. (Mike, Sam)
- **LCN Reporting and Presentation:** Arrange for a short presentation at the next LCN meeting to update members on the Cleeve Hill road scheme progress and impacts, and coordinate attendance if needed. (Mike, Matthew Scriven)

✓ Key Points

1. Proceed with DfT Structures Fund bid

- Somerset Council has **formally prioritised the Cleeve Hill / B3191 scheme** and submitted an initial response to the Department for Transport.
- The authority has received “**enhanced support**” from **DfT consultants** to help shape the business case.

2. Business case submission confirmed

- A **full business case will be submitted by 3 August 2026**.
- Funding decisions are expected **Autumn 2026** (exact timing not specified).

3. Scheme basis agreed

- The scheme will:
 - Build on **previous WSP options work (2020)** as a starting point
 - Be **updated to reflect current coastal conditions and risks** (not simply reused)

4. Joined-up approach required

- Agreement that the bid must be **coordinated with coastal protection work**, including:
 - Environment Agency input
 - Coastal Adaptation Pilot proposals

5. Approach to engagement

- Due to tight timescales:
 - **No formal consultation stage** during business case preparation
 - Instead, **ongoing informal engagement and evidence gathering** with the working group and stakeholders.

6. Local contribution expectation

- Somerset Council indicated a likely **~10% local contribution** (subject to final scheme costs), potentially from:
 - Highways funding
 - Environment Agency / coastal funding routes.

7. Competitive funding environment

- The fund is **competitive**, and success depends on a **strong value-for-money and economic case** (confirmed in meeting chat).

Key Next Steps

A. Somerset Council (Lead: Mike O'Dowd-Jones and team)

- **Commission and undertake required technical work**, including:
 - Updated engineering and options appraisal
 - Costing and affordability work
 - Programme and delivery plan (including risks such as planning, land, environment)
- **Develop full DfT business case**, including:
 - Strategic case (overall narrative and need)
 - Economic case (value for money)
 - Financial, commercial, and management cases
- **Engage consultants (WSP and others)** to support updated analysis and modelling
- **Coordinate with coastal teams and Environment Agency** to align bids and maximise funding opportunities
- **Develop a delivery programme** demonstrating (optimistically) reopening by March 2030.

B. Working Group / LCN Partners

- **Provide evidence to strengthen the business case**, particularly:
 - Economic impacts (reduced trade, visitor decline, business losses)
 - Transport impacts (journey times, congestion, diversion impacts)
 - Community impacts (access to jobs, healthcare, services)
- **Share local data and intelligence**, including:
 - Cliff erosion records and recent changes
 - Business surveys and trading data
 - Traffic impacts and anecdotal evidence

- **Contribute to shaping the narrative** (wider West Somerset impact, not just Watchet).

C. Joint Working Arrangements

- Somerset Council to:
 - **Return with a proposed engagement approach and meeting structure** (via Sam as LCN Link Officer)
- Likely actions:
 - Establish **regular working meetings** (programme-led rather than fixed initially)
 - Maintain **continuous dialogue during business case development**.

D. Communications & Governance

- Option for **presentation to full LCN meeting** (short version of briefing)
- You (Sam) to:
 - **Circulate notes and manage stakeholder involvement**
 - Identify any **missing stakeholders or representation gaps**.

⚠ **Key Risks Identified (implicit in discussion)**

- Tight delivery timeframe (to 2030)
- Environmental and planning complexity
- Land acquisition requirements
- Demonstrating sufficient **economic value vs larger national schemes**
- Need for **robust, quantified local evidence**.

✅ **In practical terms for you**

To stay ahead of this:

- Start coordinating **local evidence gathering (economic + transport)**
- Identify **key contributors across parishes and business groups**
- Prepare to support **rapid engagement cycles over next ~8–10 weeks**