

PRESS RELEASE

From JIM MATHER MSP (ARGYLL & BUTE)
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MATHER WELCOMES RET TRIAL

Argyll & Bute MSP, Jim Mather, has welcomed the announcement from the government of the trial of Road Equivalent Tariff (RET) which will be tested on all the routes serving the Outer Hebrides for a 30 month period starting in the autumn of this year. Such a trial was a feature of the SNP manifesto during the May elections and has been a standard feature of SNP policy for many years.

Jim Mather said,

"It has always been the intention of the SNP to first prove the principle of RET by trialling it and then to roll it out to benefit all the communities on islands and on peninsulas dependent upon ferries. This is part of a wider process to open up access and make remote communities more competitive that will also include the removal of the burden of Business Rates from many businesses in the Highlands & Islands.

Obviously, the costs of such proposals are borne by the Scottish Budget and our parliament does not benefit directly and fully from the resultant economic growth of such moves. These currently accrue to the UK Treasury and that may explain why previous Scottish administrations lacked the ambition to start the process of making Scotland and its West Coast more competitive.

Although current resources are limited the ambition of this government to reverse the years of decline in the economies of our island communities is not.

And this RET trial is proof that the process has started.

Naturally, as MSP for Argyll & Bute, I would have liked to see many more of the routes within my constituency derive the first benefit but I am informed by Highland Councillor Roy Pederson, the architect more than 30 years ago of the concept of RET, that there are sound and informed reasons for the choice of the Western Isles routes, which by default include the Coll & Tiree destinations, as the natural and best choice for the trialling of RET.

And meanwhile, we are budgeting to open up the Campbeltown Ballycastle route that will bring many more visitors and investors to Argyll & Bute.

Further light is shone on the situation by Highland Cllr. Roy Pederson, responding to suggestions from Lib-Dem MSP Tavish Scott that the Western Isles trial was "blatant discrimination" against Orkney and Shetland, has stated,

"The Western Isles Council, on a cross-party basis, has, over the last five years, undertaken detailed research into the practicalities and relative benefits of adopting a variety of ferry fares mechanisms with particular focus on RET. Neither of the local authorities of Shetland, Orkney, nor for that matter, Argyll & Bute have shown interest in participating in this work. This foundation of research in the Western Isles, therefore, offered the Scottish Government the most convenient platform on which to mount its £22.5 million trial. Two and a half years is the minimum time in which resulting traffic trends and economic impacts can be properly evaluated.

The most astonishing thing about Tavish Scott's claim however, is that Orkney and Shetland are somehow disadvantaged by this. In fact the three NorthLink ferry services are by far the most heavily subsidised in the UK at £31 million per annum. Even the £116 High Season vehicle fare between Aberdeen and Shetland is below the projected RET level which would result on a £130 charge for a car on the 200 plus mile passage. In the case of Orkney, the excellent Pentland Ferries service between St Margaret's Hope and Gills Bay in Caithness, developed by Orkney businessman Andrew Banks, provides an inexpensive and frequent service without public funding. Contrary to Tavish Scott's claim, it is in fact Orkney and Shetland that have hitherto had an "unfair advantage" of cheap fares. Rather than make wild accusations, unsubstantiated by fact, Mr Scott should welcome the Scottish Government's well conceived initiative to enable the Western Isles to catch up."

Jim Mather concluded,

"Roy Pederson is far too much of a gentleman to conclude, as I do, that if Tavish Scott can now so clearly see the advantage to be gained by island and remote communities by the introduction of RET it is surely pertinent to ask why he did not make any attempt to introduce this while he and his colleagues were Ministers for Transport for eight long years in the last administration.

The record will show that far from doing this Mr Scott has always opposed the principle of RET and dismissed the concept when SNP members raised it with him."

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