

A Modern and Sustainable Ferry Service for Scotland - A major inquiry into current and future ferry provision in Scotland

Recognising the pressing deficiencies of present island ferry services in terms of capacity, reliability, and resilience, and given the vital link between connectivity and the sustainability of Scottish island communities, it's hard to overstate the urgency for change, and therefore Scottish Islands Federation (SIF) welcomes this inquiry and the opportunity to contribute.

A1. What do island residents, businesses, and other ferry users need in the short, medium and long term from Scottish Government-supported ferry services?

In terms of needs, each user group has differing priorities and there is also significant variation across different island situations. SIF is a federation of island community groups, with feedback from across the isles, and we would refer to the submissions from each island ferry representative committee and stress the need to consult locally on individual routes. **Ensuring that the views of island stakeholders play a much fuller role in the entire process to ensure fit with current and future local needs would be strongly supported.**

In general terms, a ferry service that has capacity, reliability, flexibility, and resilience, is affordable, contributes to island decarbonisation, and provides the equivalent to the road network that communities need to make island life viable and appealing, is what is needed. **The underlying need to make this a reality across most routes is increased capacity, reliability and tonnage.**

In the short-term there is a desperate need to secure additional capacity to enable more frequent sailings and to prevent the continuous shifting around of vessels to cover breakdowns, technical problems, and routine maintenance. The constant instability of some ferry routes has a massive impact on island residents and businesses and there is genuine concern among our members that a real disincentive to living, working, and visiting the islands is unfolding before our eyes.

In the medium term, vessel replacement is the only real solution and in the long-term, a programme of replacement that prevents vessels becoming too old and unsuitable for their routes needs to be established.

There is a need for ferries to better link with mainland public transport and, for many short routes, a desire to extend the service later into the evening and weekends to provide better access to activities, services and onward travel. The out of hours ferry service, run by Shapinsay Development Trust is a good example of this. **Also, given our drive to low carbon and ultimately Net Zero, we need to give people the incentive and option to leave their cars (and campervans) behind by improving a connected and integrated public transport system.**

We would advocate for much greater consideration of the requirements of people with special needs, disabilities, small children, the elderly and so on. Passenger access on

some ferries is by steep ramps and slipways, or even by climbing into the small motorboats.
Compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act is an issue that must be resolved.

Consideration should also be given to the contribution of ferry travel to the higher cost of living in islands, and solutions which might help tackle this. For example, reviewing RET to enable reduced carriage and transportation costs for businesses, suppliers and island residents.

Many of these issues as experienced on the Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Services (CHFS) are mirrored elsewhere where ferry services are owned and operated by local authorities. Whilst there are some capacity issues experienced by the Orkney Ferries inter-island ferry fleet the dominating issue is vessel age and the increasing number of technical issues arising, for example. While the Strategic Transport Projects Review set out to include island connectivity late in the process it became clear that only those ferry services operated by Transport Scotland would be in scope – a similar story has been presented with regard to the Island Connectivity Plan. There is an urgent need for Scottish Government to consider and fund ALL ferry services on an equal basis whether owned / operated by local authorities or Scottish Government. **Having safe, accessible, reliable, optimal vessels operating on all ferry routes should be an urgent and immediate priority.**

A2. Are current services meeting the needs and sustainability of island and remote rural communities and businesses? This includes the provision of secure employment for those working for ferry services

We recognise that ferry operators do create secure jobs and good career paths for island residents. For example, CalMac provide excellent apprenticeship opportunities to young people across deck handling, engineering, retail, hospitality etc., and have contributed to the development of the National Progression Award in Maritime Skills, hugely important for young people growing up in the maritime communities. The catering offer has also improved greatly and is freshly prepared, increasingly uses local produce and served using earthenware crockery and metal cutlery, rather than plastic.

However, in terms of meeting the needs and sustainability of island communities and business, while this will vary across different routes, we believe the general answer is no and would point to the level of local evidence of the detrimental impact of the continued disruption and lack of capacity across the ferry network.

The ferry provides a life-line service for island communities and we depend on it for everyday life, to access work, education, health, visiting family, shopping, deliveries, entertainment, livestock movement etc and it cannot be stressed enough how critical these considerations are to the local quality of life and the attractiveness of islands to visitors, contractors, suppliers, and business as well as potential new residents.

In wider terms, islands hold significant assets and contribute massively to the Scottish economy and profile. Renewable energy, environment and biodiversity, tourism, culture and heritage, as well as low-intensive sustainable crofting and farming which delivers to

Scotland as a food nation produce such as lamb, beef, venison, and in fishing, salmon, smoked salmon, shellfish and a growing number of island-based artisan distilleries. There is also huge potential to tackle climate change and diversify our economy via blue green growth for both local and national benefit. We know there is a growing appetite for enterprise and development across the isles and in some situations, this is constrained by ongoing ferry issues, making projects less viable through lack of capacity, reliability and added cost.

Any degradation of existing ferry service provision will inevitably have a detrimental impact socially and economically. However, there is a much larger dilemma at stake here that needs to be addressed by the wider Government urgently and seriously. Our islands need to be developed so that they are economically and socially sustainable, possibly through the place planning process: the Government should be leading the way in outsourcing facilities and jobs to the islands, with local authorities close behind; and the provision of ferry and air connectivity needs to be thoroughly reviewed in that context – maybe it's time to review RET? Maybe constantly increasing frequency is not the only answer?

A3. Are current services meeting the needs of mainland communities and businesses, including visitors?

As above, we believe the answer to be no and there is concern that reputational damage is becoming an issue. SIF has heard concern from some members over a growing reluctance of contractors, trades, hauliers, specialists e.g., approved insulation providers and renewable energy installers and engineers, to travel to islands due to the risk of delay or cancellation which may lead to an extended trip and the associated logistical cost and hassle.

There is a similar situation for visitors, worried that travel will be delayed or cancelled, and they might not get back home when they need to and be stranded with nowhere to stay.

These examples are predominantly related to the reliability issues currently being experienced on the CHFS network. In other locations, such as Orkney and Shetland there is the same reluctance to travel to islands (from a trade point of view) but for other reasons – the long ferry journey times coupled with time away, plus the fact that there is sufficient work available on the main islands. Thus, there are underlying issues within the economy which may need to be addressed alongside improving ferry services.

In Shetland, there is a chronic lack of capacity, for both freight and passengers which has resulted from not increasing freight capacity when Streamline took their the boat off the route, and secondly due to the large quantities of materials currently being shipped for the Viking Wind Farm.

A4. Are service needs different at different times of the year?

The demand for the ferry service varies greatly across different times of year, but the underlying basic service needs - i.e. the things which are required for islands to operate on a day to day basis - are similar. Connectivity is a fundamental component of 'living' islands

and regardless of the time of the year, people living in the islands, businesses, as well as those traveling to the islands to work, or holiday need a reliable, adaptable, flexible, and affordable mode of transport. By consulting and collaborating with local stakeholders, the service needs of each route across the year can be more accurately determined.

A5. Which needs are better met by other modes of transport, e.g. air, where available?

For island travel the only other real option to ferry travel is by air. Air travel is preferable in some circumstances, depending on the journey times and service reliability, such as travelling for health-related appointments on the Scottish Mainland. It is quicker, in some cases, and more comfortable. However, air travel tends to be more expensive for those trips that are paid for by the traveller.

There is an urgent need for local authorities and Governments to consider implementing Public Service Obligations across the Highlands and Islands network – since Covid patronage has not recovered to pre-Covid levels, and as a result there continues to be much fewer flights connecting islands with the Scottish Mainland – it is hardly possible to make a day trip from anywhere and the costs remains as high as it was before. These commercial routes are in danger of becoming non-viable.

In terms of ‘needs’ other than health or business travel, it is the case the ferry transport is vital for our island communities, both internally and externally.

A6. How should the Scottish Government support council-run ferry services?

There is an urgent need for Scottish Government to consider local authority operated ferry services on a par with CHFS and Northern Isles Ferry Services (NIFS) networks. Local authority operated ferry services are still in effect funded by the Scottish Government through budgets made available to local authority.

This could be best developed through consultation with each service and its local stakeholders, but in general terms it is felt that no community should be disadvantaged by being part of a council-run service.

For example, in Shetland, the inter-island ferries are council-run through subsidies. Many of the islands have relatively short crossings and Fixed Links should now be considered, principally tunnels. [Unst-Yell 10 minute crossing; Yell-Mainland Shetland 20 minutes; Lerwick - Bressay 5 minutes; Laxo (Shetland mainland- Whalsay 30 mins.)

While expensive to fund (feasibility studies, land purchase, new road construction, tunnelling and maintenance) there would be savings in the long run on vessel maintenance of ageing vessels, terminal maintenance, ferry purchase, crew salaries, training and lastly diesel fuel, which is a large amount of the council’s overall fuel budget. Having a "24 hour road" would also make these islands more attractive for people to move to and take up work in other parts of Shetland, or access services.

A7. How can ferry users and island communities be involved in decision making at strategic and operational level?

SIF strongly believes that strategic transport plans need to be tailored to local needs, aspirations and opportunities and that action should be taken to recognise island communities as equal stakeholders in substantial strategic investment in infrastructure developments, so far as practicable.

Many communities and their ferry committees have been campaigning for what is needed for years, researching and producing evidence of need, assessing options, learning from best practice, responding to consultations, and working through complex issues to find good solutions. **This work needs to be acted upon and the process for actively engaging community stakeholders as collaborative partners improved and resourced.**

A first step could see island ferry committees, the Ferry Community Board and equivalent in Orkney and Shetland given a stronger role and greater influence in future strategic transport planning involving islands. The consultation process for the Islay ferry routes, which remains ongoing, is a good example of enabling communities to have a fuller role.

The recent Voluntary ICIA undertaken by Calmac for the freight operation for the Small Isles in close cooperation with the Small Isles Community Council has resulted in a positive outcome for both the ferry company and the users of the freight service and it would be good to think of similar island proofing processes being used to ensure better transport planning. The monthly check-in meetings between the port and area managers and the Small Isles CC which started during Covid to identify sticky points have also been beneficial and demonstrate how regular meetings between ferry operators and user groups can lead to a better understanding of the challenges encountered on both sides and a quicker resolution of problems encountered. **Recognition of the ferry operator as a Relevant Authority under the Islands Act and therefore subject to ICIA guidelines would be welcome. For example, at the moment David MacBrayne Ltd is listed as a Relevant Authority but this does not extend to CalMac Ferries Ltd.**

Representation of island residents and business on the boards of the ferry operators would also be strongly supported as would decentralisation of headquarters, senior positions, and job opportunities.

Greater transparency of the process from the outset would also seem appropriate to ensure that considerations of design and specification of new vessels are as well informed as possible, drawing on perspectives of all relevant parties.

B1 What institutional and funding arrangements would most likely deliver service patterns, vessels, and crewing arrangements that meet the needs of current and potential future ferry users?

We do not feel well enough qualified to provide feedback although do believe that the current arrangements need to be overhauled and simplified and the role of owner and operator re-merged.

B2 Can the current tri-partite arrangement (Transport Scotland, Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd (CMAL), Ferry Operator) for managing most ferry service provision be improved?

The position CalMac is in of not being able to specify ferries directly to their own requirements must be extremely frustrating and time consuming and almost unique among ferry operators. There is no doubt that the current tri-partite arrangement appears to be at times cumbersome and time-consuming from a decision-making point of view and may benefit from streamlining and simplifying.

However, circumstances do vary and, for example, working directly with Transport Scotland, the Jura Passenger Ferry (JPF), has been largely positive and has offered important oversight and advice which is independent from operators.

B5 Are current services providing best value for the taxpayer?

We don't believe they are. At the moment, the situation that has been allowed to develop within the current fleet and procurement of new vessels is cause for particular dismay and requires a huge subsidy just to keep the existing old vessels running.

What vessel size, type, deployment and crewing arrangements would best satisfy the needs you have identified?

C1 What size and types of vessels are required?

The service, infrastructure and island circumstances are so diverse that there isn't a single solution in terms of size and type of vessel required. However, these can be identified through local consultation and collaboration, with a number of ferry committees having already conducted valuable research into the best options. On some routes, for example, having two modest-sized vessels may provide greater frequency, flexibility, and resilience.

C2 What type of sustainable propulsion systems (including energy-use and moves to low carbon systems) would meet the needs of ferry services?

Many island communities are pioneering in decarbonisation and committed to realising a just transition and consideration should be given to how operators can partner with island-based renewable energy initiatives to widen the opportunities for and the economic benefit of decarbonisation.

A number of islands have recently been selected as pilots for the Scottish Government Carbon Neutral Island programme and it is recognised that ferries are a significant contributor to the carbon footprint. Sustainable propulsion systems such as the electric hybrid systems currently being considered should be supported but it will be crucial that

such systems are tried and tested as the ferry service is just too critical and in too fragile a state to sustain further setbacks.

Just as significant a consideration in the move to low carbon systems, is the actual energy needs of the vessels and how lowering this can be incorporated within the design. Also, how improved connection and integration with the public transport system could unlock opportunities for reduced car use.

C3 How can we ensure ferries are compatible with harbour facilities?

Ensuring ferries are compatible with harbour facilities is a basic requirement, fundamental to any project and should be ascertained at the earliest stage of planning and development through collaboration with harbour owners, local communities, engineers and other relevant stakeholders.

C4 What type of onboard crew accommodation is required?

Again, we would emphasise that the solution will differ across different routes depending on the vessel and local circumstances.

Many of the crew currently travel considerable distances to work on the ferries and if there is no onboard accommodation, and there is a lack of local options as encountered for the crew of the Loch Frisa, onshore accommodation might need to be provided at ports by the ferry operator. This may reduce the scope for shuffling vessels around in the event of breakdowns, weather events etc. In other circumstances onshore accommodation may not be required, where the crew live locally.

Camille Dressler
Chair, Scottish Islands Federation