

INQUIRY INTO A MODERN & SUSTAINABLE FERRY SERVICE FOR SCOTLAND

SUBMISSION BY THE HARRIS TRANSPORT FORUM

21 June 2022

Dear Mr Lockhart,

As Chair of Harris Transport Forum, I would like to thank the Committee for asking us to contribute to your upcoming work on the future of Scotland's ferry network. There is widespread consensus across Harris residents and those in our neighbouring islands that :

- the voice of islanders, as customers of the service, in discussions on ferries is inadequate,
- this failure has contributed significantly to the current ferry crisis, and
- efforts to recover the situation will not succeed unless the islanders have a greater voice in the solution.
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I would like to commend your committee for moving forward in the right direction, though this can be but a start.

Secondly, your work is both important and urgent to our community. The economic and social lifeblood of Harris is draining away by the day and has been for at least the last four years, since Vessel 802 was due to enter service. In that time, there has been much discussion, but very little of substance has been achieved to improve the situation.

Indeed, the severity of the issues has gradually increased. Given this, the future you are discussing needs to be the next 2-3 years not twenty years away. Island communities face many other challenges, but unless the ferry issue is addressed in the near future, they are academic,

The Harris Transport Forum

Before responding to your questions, I would like to introduce our organisation. We are the community organisation dealing with transport matters across Harris, with membership drawn from the local authority (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar), the Community Councils for Harris and Scalpay, the two Community Land Trusts (North Harris Trust and West Harris Trust), the Harris Development Company (HDL), Third Sector Interface and our local tourism organisation (Outer Hebrides Tourism). The breadth of membership means we talk with authority on transport and directly related matters,

The Origins of the Ferry Crisis

The seeds of the current failures in the ferry service, in our opinion, stretch back to the early 2000s, resulting from:

- A failure to invest in the fleet over a long period means that two-thirds of the fleet is now more than 20 years old
- The disastrous decision, whoever took it, and for whatever reasons, to award the contract for hulls 801/802 to Ferguson Marine
- A complicated management structure, which seems to have been based on the rail industry, where it has since been consigned to history. Yet in ferries it plods on, slow, unresponsive and with each of the bodies focused on blaming the others. This behaviour rightly infuriates islanders.
- Ignoring the opinion of islanders when commissioning new vessels. There is widespread consensus on Harris that the community preference was for a two-vessel service on the Uig-Harris-Lochmaddy service (just as there was in Lewis when the Loch Seaforth was commissioned). On both occasions, single large vessels were procured. Calmac launched a consultation on a change to the Harris weekend timetable which was met with howls of derision earlier this year. Issuing such a poorly considered proposal to be issued for public consultation, like each of the other mis-steps this has eroded local confidence in the operator, and broader management structure even further.

Regular investment, reliable suppliers, streamlined management, local involvement - all are important elements for any future ferry plan, especially in light of their absence from past decisions.

Current Service Issues

Perhaps, as users of the service, the best way we can help the Committee is in illustrating to you the extent of the problems we face right now to show the shortcomings of the current system. Currently, we are battling to resolve the following issues, all of which remain unaddressed despite months of discussion with a wide variety of politicians and CalMac management.

1. Our existing regular vessel to the mainland (the MV Hebrides) is operating below its maximum capacity by sailing without the mezzanine deck deployed. Transport Scotland have authorised this capacity reduction, despite many services being booked out weeks, if not months ahead. By April, the Saturday service for the Hebrides was full for the entire summer season, reducing the freedom of islanders to travel and the economic benefit of tourism.
2. We face a complete withdrawal of our service for six months from mid-October until the end of March. At the time this was first raised, we were reassured by the promise of additional capacity on other services, but this has not materialised and so we are left with no service at all this winter. We just need to battle for space on the regular Stornoway sailings, and pay the extra costs incurred. We have gone as far as pleading for a re-think on this decision.

The removal of the service for such an extended period removes the lifeblood from the port and makes it even more difficult for businesses to navigate the winter. There is real fear of an overrun into April which will cause chaos with the tourism industry, for whom the Easter weekend is crucial,

The situation was not helped by a far-from-adequate consultation meeting. The project planning had failed to give any consideration to the additional cost borne by the community, nor, indeed, the local transport required to assist those without cars. The additional cost of the Stornoway sailing, and the fuel to get there from Harris will cost residents almost an additional £100 for each round-trip they undertake, doubling the cost as well as adding three hours to the journey.

3. The constant stream of service withdrawals that is undermining island life. The last two weekends have both seen service withdrawals: the Harris-Uist service was withdrawn last weekend, the MV Hebrides was withdrawn the previous weekend, due to a fire fault, disrupting lives and damaging business. One newly established business, which has made it through the COVID pandemic, was forced to cancel their first mainland event due to the withdrawal of the Hebrides and has had multiple cancellations for a Lewis-based event last weekend, due to people being unable to travel from Uist,

This is, sadly, not a one off, but a regular part of island life. Any discussion on compensation is met with a stone-wall, despite the scale of disruption being easily equivalent to that caused by the Edinburgh trams project, which did result in compensation,

Adding to the frustration is that many service failures do not impact the reliability figures, quoted by Calmac, as once a substitute timetable has been signed off by Transport Scotland, Calmac measures itself against that. Therefore, Harris will have a guaranteed 100% service reliability for Calmac this winter without a single vessel sailing !

What do Islanders Need

Responding to your first question, Islanders want, and deserve, a safe, reliable, affordable, convenient service. In too many cases this seems to have been diluted by other considerations. We are not dismissing the importance of economic policy on the Clyde, environmental policy or operational factors, but when these outweigh service provision in network design, something has gone badly wrong,

We are also of the view that medium-sized vessels will provide a more resilient and more convenient service in the long term. We are at a loss to find ways to get this message into the organisations that manage our ferries,

We strongly believe a louder voice for islanders would help improve the service and/or locating the management of our ferries within the communities, not 200 miles to the south. We are dismayed that the Calmac board still includes no island representatives, and that the opportunity for introducing fresh ideas in the

appointment of the Chair was not taken. In defending its decision, during a debate in Parliament, the Minsiter said that a top priority of the new Chair would be to ensure that islanders are heard. It is now six months since his appointment and we still await any action on this issue. Six months without action in the real, rather than the political world sends a clear message that this is not important,

The people and structures that have led us into the current crisis are still largely in place, and there is little confidence that they will be able to lead us out of it. No new tonnage has been built or purchased and, in many cases, we are struggling to even develop plans to address the situation. As a volunteer group, we continue to invest our own time, on a voluntary basis in an endless round of meetings and consultations, but in our experience:

- it is only when we challenge decisions or plans that a proper analysis of the situation is undertaken (as seen in the proposed closure of Uig pier in September)
- Much time is spent explaining to us ‘why things can’t be done’. The current ferry community consultation desperately needs an overhaul.
- Follow up from meetings is not routine and is often only achieved when we chase for responses,
- Deadlines for taking action and publishing reports drift without consequence. The findings of Project Neptune have been promised for months. We still await the Islands Connectivity Plan, given the current Ferries Plan was developed in 2012.
- There has been a complete disregard of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 which was introduced to support and help meet the unique needs of our islands now and in the future.
- An Islands Impact Assessment was not done prior to decision making, had it been undertaken issues such as extra cost , travel time etc would have been identified,

We will leave others to provide evidence on how other nations meet the transport needs of their own island communities and on emerging technologies and manufacturing design,

Alleviating the Pain

From an islander perspective, the following actions would go some way to rescuing our ferry service and restoring community trust,

1. Agreement to operate the mezzanine desk on each sailing of the MV Hebrides. To be clear, even in the current capacity crisis, one of our vessels is criss-crossing the Minch with a reduced capacity, due to the failure to resolve crew scheduling, staffing, contractual funding arrangements between Calmac and Transport Scotland. It does not reflect well on either organisation and is completely unacceptable.
2. Postponing the closure of Uig Pier by 12 months until alternative sailings and/or additional capacity can be secured.
3. Appointing island representatives to the Calmac Board

4. A clear and transparent approach to procurement of additional second-hand capacity. Things are so bad that a simple statement that “nothing is available” is inadequate. We are in a desperate situation – there need to be real scrutiny of the decisions and why any available capacity is being rejected.
5. Design and implementation of a new, simpler management structure, preferably with fewer decisions taken in Gourock, Glasgow or Edinburgh
6. A clear set of tangible milestones for the launch of 802. We are extremely concerned that this will become a Cinderella vessel. Huge effort will go into completing MV Glen Sannox in an attempt to salvage reputations, but only then will attention be moved to 802 and the realisation that the current timetable is simply not achievable. We fear that the recently-ordered vessels for Islay and Jura, due in 2024 will be in service before Vessel 802.

We did not want to miss the opportunity of explaining to you, the importance of ferries to Harris (and to all our Hebridean islands), the severity of the current crisis and the collapse in confidence among islanders of the current management system and its ability to restore an acceptable service,

There is a well-known Gaelic saying, “*Am fear a bhios fada aig an aiseag, gheibh e thairis uaireigin*” - Whoever waits a long time on the ferry, will eventually get across” (in English). It is used as an equivalent of “Good Things Come to Those Who Wait”. You might adopt it as the slogan for your inquiry. We hope, but are far from convinced, that the saying will apply to the future of our ferry service.

Kind Regards,

Margaret Morrison
Chair
Harris Transport Forum