

The Highland Council

Agenda Item	17
Report No	ECI/23/2024

Committee: Economy and Infrastructure

Date: 2 May 2024

Report Title: Islands Connectivity Plan Consultation

Report By: Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 Transport Scotland are developing an Islands Connectivity Plan – which also takes account of peninsulas – to replace their Ferries Plan and to broaden the scope to include air services and mainland connections. They have published a draft Strategic Approach Paper and have invited comments on it. A draft consultation response is attached to this report.

2 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to **comment** on and approve the draft response which is attached as Appendix 1.

3 Implications

3.1 **Resource** – There are no resource implications arising directly from this report, but the opportunity is taken to press for adequate funding for Corran Ferry.

3.2 **Legal** – There are no legal implications arising from this report.

3.3 **Community (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island)** – Ferries are crucial to our island communities, and to the Ardgour/Ardrnamurchan/Morvern, Knoydart and Scoraig peninsulas. The consultation response is designed to support the future sustainability of these communities. The recommendation for Transport Scotland to extend free concessionary travel to ferries, in the same way as buses, contributes towards equality between island and mainland areas.

3.4 **Climate Change / Carbon Clever** – Carbon reduction on ferry routes is a topic in the consultation.

3.5 **Risk** – There are no risk implications arising from this report.

3.6 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – There are no Health & Safety risks arising from this report.

3.7 **Gaelic** – There are no Gaelic implications arising from this report.

4 Background and scope

4.1 Transport Scotland are developing an Islands Connectivity Plan (ICP) to replace and update their Ferries Plan which was published in 2012. Their draft strategy paper is available at <https://www.transport.gov.scot/consultation/public-consultation-for-islands-connectivity-plan-strategic-approach-paper-and-vessels-and-ports-plan/>. In some respects the scope of the ICP is broader than the Ferries Plan, in that it also takes account of mainland connections and air services, but in another respect, it is more restricted as it gives less attention to routes out with the Clyde & Hebrides and Northern Isles contracts which Transport Scotland fund. However, Transport Scotland have accepted that peninsulas as well as islands are within scope of the ICP.

4.2 The Clyde & Hebrides contract includes the following ferry routes wholly within the Highland Council:-

- Mallaig – Small Isles;
- Mallaig – Armadale; and
- Sconser – Raasay

4.3 The Highland Council operates the Corran Ferry and awards contracts (held by local operators) for five routes:-

- Mallaig – Inverie – Tarbet;
- Mallaig – Small Isles (for transport to Mallaig High School);
- Camusnagaul – Fort William;
- Cromarty – Nigg (summer only); and
- Scoraig – Badluarach

Of these, only the Cromarty – Nigg route carries vehicles.

4.4 Transport Scotland provides a specific grant to the Council for ferry operation, which covers the cost of the ferry contracts, but due to the high costs of repairs on the Corran vessels has fallen far short of covering the cost of that route.

4.5 Some island routes, to Orkney, Lewis, Harris, the Uists, Barra and Mull use mainland ports in Highland.

5 Key issues

5.1 A draft response to the consultation is attached. Generally, it is recommended that the Council supports the HiTrans response but some issues of specific interest to Highland have been explained. These include the particular situations of the Corran Ferry, Knoydart, the Small Isles and scope for greater collaboration and integration between Transport Scotland and Council services.

5.2 The provision of the Ferries Special Grant is welcomed but the lack of funding for new vessels at Corran is highlighted.

5.3 The draft response also recommends the extension of free concessionary fares to ferry services on the same basis as exists for bus services.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy

Date: 4 April 2024

Author: David Summers, Principal Transport Officer

Background Papers: None

Appendices: Appendix 1 – Public Consultations for Islands Connectivity Plan – Strategic Approach Paper and Vessels and Ports Plan

Public Consultation for Islands Connectivity Plan - Strategic Approach Paper and Vessels and Ports Plan

Consultation Identifier Questions

Q1. Are you completing this on behalf of yourself or an organisation?

- Individual
- Organisation

Q2. If an organisation, please list below.

The Highland Council

Q3. What statement best describes your living situation?

- I live on the mainland the majority of the time
- I live on a Scottish island or peninsula the majority of the time

Q4. If you live on a Scottish island or peninsula, please comment below which one.

Q5. What age category are you in?

- Under 16s
- 16 to 18
- 19 to 21

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- 22 to 34
- 35 to 44
- 45 to 54
- 55 to 59
- 60 and over

Q6. Are your day-to-day activities limited because of a health problem or disability which has lasted, or is expected to last, at least 12 months?

- Yes, limited a lot
- Yes, limited a little
- No

Q7. What do you mainly use the ferry services for?

- For Business
- For Employment/Education
- For Personal/Leisure
- All of the above

Q8. How frequently do you use the ferry services?

- Never
- Occasionally
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Seasonally (Summer period)

Main Consultation Questions

Themes, Vision and Priorities

Transport Scotland has gathered feedback from previous workshops and consultations to identify priorities for the future of Island transport connectivity: ferry networks,, supported by the integration with other transport services. This information has contributed to the development of themes, which are the focus for the Islands Connectivity Plan.

The following key themes emerged:

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- Community voice and transparency
- Reliability and resilience
- Accessibility
- Timetables, unplanned and essential travel
- Integration of services
- Capacity and demand
- Freight
- Vessels and ports
- Low carbon and environmental impact
- Ferry fares
- Local authority services

Q9. Do you think these key themes capture the main aspects of transport connectivity for island and peninsula communities?

- Yes
 No

Please explain your answer.

Transport Scotland

Based on feedback and discussions with key stakeholders and drawing on Scotland's National Transport Strategy 2 and the National Islands Plan, we have developed a draft vision and associated priorities for ferry services, supported by other transport services.

While the bullet points listed correctly identify most of the main aspects – with the exception of fixed links – detail for some of them is lacking in the Strategic Approach draft. In particular, while recognising that there are financial challenges, the draft paper says that local authorities “... are encouraged to adopt the agreed Vision and Priorities as an example of the desired standard for our ferry services across Scotland”, but without offering financial support beyond the existing special grant, which covers direct operating costs but does not allow for future investment. This is a crucial issue for Corran. Unlike the previous Ferries Plan, there is no mention of possible transfer of responsibilities between Transport Scotland and local authorities.

Integration between local authority and CHFS routes should be considered. The Corran Ferry, in addition to providing a connection for the Ardgour / Ardnamurchan peninsula, forms part of a route to Mull (via Lochaline). The draft paper raises the possibility of a fixed route to Mull. If this is an aspiration, a fixed link for the shorter and busier crossing at Corran should also be considered (with or without a further fixed link to Mull). We accept that this is a long-term prospect and stress that new ferries are urgently required in the interim.

Another case of integration concerns the Small Isles and Knoydart. The CHFS contract for the Small Isles does not suit the needs of school transport to Mallaig High School, so the Council has a separate contract with a local provider for this purpose. NHS Highland also have a separate contract to carry medical personnel when required. For Knoydart, the Council has a contract for passenger traffic and small freight, but transport of vehicles and larger freight is dependent on an unsubsidised local operator using a landing craft. Knoydart is therefore unique in having no Government-funded provision for vehicles.

The previous Ferries Plan envisaged a two-vessel service for the Small Isles. This would enable integration of the contracts described above for the islands, and support a less expensive freight service to Knoydart. The second vessel need not be part of a CHFS contract; we agree with the draft strategy paper in that local authorities “... are best placed to respond to their local communities' needs” and that “A collaborative approach between all local authorities and Transport Scotland will be essential”. Indeed we believe that provision in the Ferries Special Grant to support the second vessel would be the most flexible and cost-effective means of providing this facility.

Transport Scotland

Draft Vision

Scotland's ferry services, supported by other transport services, will be safe, reliable, affordable and inclusive for residents, businesses and visitors enabling transport connectivity, sustainability and growth of island and peninsula communities and populations.

Draft Priorities

Priority 1: Reliable and Resilient

Reliable and resilient ferry services that meet the needs of communities and businesses and support the transition to a well-being economy which is fair, green and growing.

Priority 2: Accessible

Ferry services that are accessible and provide easy to use and affordable transport connectivity for all users.

Priority 3: Integrated

Ferry services that enable sustainable and active travel choices which support our health and well-being and make our Island and other ferry dependent communities great places to live, work and visit.

Priority 4: Low Carbon

Ferry services that take actions to reduce the negative environmental impact of their operations and help to achieve Scotland's net-zero targets.

Q10. Do you believe the draft vision captures the aspirations of island and peninsula communities for their future ferry services?

Yes

No

Please explain your answer.

Broadly, yes. Reliability is absolutely crucial. Regularity of service is important, and facilitates integration. Further analysis is needed of where these aspirations are not met, and the steps required to meet them.

Q11. Do you think the 4 draft priorities reflect what island and peninsula communities see for their future ferry services?

- Yes
- No

Please explain your answer.

Community Voice and Transparency

We acknowledge the importance of empowering community voice and transparency in communications. The current methods of engagement that are used by operators to inform communities are through email and webpage updates, with further communications shared through relevant Ferry Committees and Transport Forums.

Local authorities and Scottish Government/Transport Scotland use engagement methods such as through project reference groups, stakeholder groups and webpage updates.

However, we have heard from communities that more can be done to take account of their views when it comes to decisions on ferry services and that there is a lack of clarity on how decisions are made.

Transport Scotland

Q12. Are there other ways of engaging with communities and stakeholders that would benefit decision making on ferry services, including vessels and ports projects?

- Yes
 No

Please explain your answer.

Accessibility

We propose introducing an Accessibility Standard that would be in addition to the legal requirements and could act as guidance for all ferry services. This is to ensure that our ferry services, vessels and ports are easy to use for all, while recognising that people have different needs and capabilities.

The Standard could include standards such as inclusive and disability training to be carried out frequently and an accessibility review carried out periodically on ferry services, ports and vessels.

Q13. Do you think an Accessibility Standard is a good idea?

- Yes
 No

Please explain your answer.

Q14. What do you think should be included in this standard?

Please explain your answer.

Reliability and Resilience

Community feedback highlighted that the reliability and resilience of ferry services needs to be seen as a priority due to the impact on communities, businesses and visitors when ferry services are disrupted.

Q15. Do you agree or disagree that the first priority of the Islands Connectivity Plan should be to improve reliability and increase resilience of ferry services?

- Agree
- Disagree

Please explain your answer.

While CHFS routes affecting the Highland Council area have been less affected than several elsewhere by reliability issues, it is a priority for all. The Mallaig – Armadale route has suffered in recent years from issues caused by vessel availability, leading to irregular timetables and service disruptions. In the last year there have been major disruptions to the Corran Ferry. While we appreciate the assistance given by CalMac in trying to resolve these issues, a strategic approach by Government to avoid these problems in future is vital.

Timetable, Essential and Urgent Travel

We are aware that as ferry travel has become more popular, some services have become more difficult to accommodate short-notice spaces for essential vehicle travel by island residents and key workers.

Q16. Do you have any suggestions as to how the booking process could release vehicle space on services when island travel with a vehicle is essential?

Please explain your answer.

Integration of Services

Journeys on our ferry networks are often only part of a longer journey between the traveller's ultimate origin and destination. The end-to-end journey can combine the use of several transport modes which can include public transport and/or active travel (walking, wheeling, and cycling) or a private vehicle. An integrated transport network that allows easier transition between the ferry and public transport or active travel is a key enabler to encourage the use of our ferry networks without the need for a private vehicle. This has benefits to the user such as making the transport

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system more accessible, making better use of capacity on ferries and contributing to net zero.

Q17. What would encourage you to use public transport or active travel as part of your overall journey when using the ferry services?

Capacity and Demand

We have heard that the space for vehicles on busy ferry routes fills up quickly at popular times, especially in summer. This makes it difficult for residents of those islands, and visiting key workers, to travel with a vehicle at short notice.

We propose to address ferry capacity issues by:

- Using refreshed community needs assessments to identify different options for service frequencies and vessel size
- Collaborate with operators and communities to identify ways of using existing and planned capacity better
- Identify the key “pinch points” on the Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Service and Northern Isles Ferry Service networks and consider options for additional vehicle capacity where this is practical, beneficial, and affordable.

Q18. Do you agree or disagree with this approach to dealing with ferry capacity due to increased demand?

- Agree
 Disagree

Please explain your answer.

Freight

The Scottish Parliament's Net Zero Emission Transport (NZET) Committee recommended reconsideration of wider policy on the provision of freight capacity on our ferry routes; and the point at which profitable businesses should no longer be reliant on public subsidy of their freight costs.

Q19. In what way do you think the costs of island freight transport could be shared differently between users and public funding?

Vessels and Ports

To renew the vessel and port assets, required for the long-term sustainability of our current networks, prioritising where to invest is required due to budget constraints in the current financial environment. We are proposing that the following factors are taken into consideration when making decisions on prioritisation:

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- The sustainability of ferry services by maintaining and increasing reliability and resilience.
- Ferry routes and services providing the primary transport connection for people, goods and services required for the sustainability of each community.
- Those communities identified as at greater risk of depopulation and economic decline.

Q20. Do you agree or disagree that these are the right factors to consider when making decisions on prioritisation?

- Agree
 Disagree

Please explain your answer.

Q21. Currently the factors above are not ranked. Do you think they should be?

- Yes
 No

Please explain your answer.

Low Carbon and Environmental Impact

A Strategic Environmental Assessment will be carried out on the of the Islands Connectivity Plan. This process aims to ensure environmental and sustainability aspects of the Plan are captured and considered in the development of policies and plans detailed in the draft Islands Connectivity Plan.

Q22. What environmental issues do you believe should be captured in the Strategic Environmental Assessment in relation to this plan?

Please explain your answer.

The Scottish Government committed in the Climate Change Plan to 30% of the ferry fleet, owned by Scottish Government, to be low emission by 2032. The Scottish Government is committed to looking at how we can use hybrid and low carbon energy resources for the fleet, which is currently taking place through the small vessels replacement programme.

Transport Scotland

Q23. Do you have any other suggestions in how ferry services can contribute to the reduction of carbon emissions?

Please share your views.

Ferry Fares

The Road Equivalent Tariff (RET) system of fares is in place across the Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Service (CHFS) network for passengers, cars, coaches and small (under 6 metres long) commercial vehicles. A different fares structure remains in place for the Northern Isles.

A key aim of RET was to allow ferry users to pay a fixed element plus a rate per mile travelled, which is linked to the cost of the equivalent journey length by road in a private vehicle. RET also resolved many previous issues of complexity in the fares offering and fare-inconsistency across routes, within the CHFS network.

The 3 key principles of RET are:

- **Simplicity and Transparency** - the basis for fares must have an established rationale and simple for a user to understand.
- **Comparability and Consistency** - the basis for fares should be the same for each community.
- **Public Sector Affordability versus Community Sustainability** - fare-setting needs to balance the different requirements of public sector affordability with sustaining communities.

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Q24. Do you agree or disagree with retaining the current RET principles set out above, as the basis of a ferry fares structure?

- Agree
- Disagree

Please explain your answer.

We have not answered either “Agree” or “Disagree” as the characteristics of routes vary, the same issues may not apply to all, and the capacity concerns have a greater bearing on the routes to the Western Isles than those in Highland. We support the HiTrans response on this topic.

We welcome the provision within the Ferries Special Grant of implementing a version of RET – configured through discussions with the local community – to reduce the fares on the Knoydart route. This is a good example of Government/Council/community co-operation and may be a model which could also apply elsewhere.

Ferries – and particularly, but not only, the shorter ones – are islands’ and peninsulas’ roads. They are also islands’ and peninsulas’ bus routes. Therefore, the same provision of free passenger fares for people aged under 22, over 60 or with disabilities should be available as exist on bus services.

Introducing different levels of fares such as “islander fares” on Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Service routes, could increase overall fare revenue and keep services more affordable for islanders. It could also allow use of different fare types to tackle overcrowding of vehicle-deck capacity, on busier sailings through the year.

Q25. Do you agree or disagree with the option to create different levels of fares for different types of users, e.g. islander and non-island residents.

- Yes
- No

Please explain your answer.

Q26. Which of these groups do you believe should be eligible for islander fares?

- Permanent residents
- Second homeowners
- People who work, but do not live, on islands
- Island residents who are currently students and living at mainland addresses during term-time
- Service providers
- Nominated friends & family
- None

Q27. Do you agree or disagree with a fares structure that both encourages passengers to travel without a private vehicle and incentivises travel at quieter periods?

- Agree
- Disagree

Please explain your answer. If other, please add further information.

