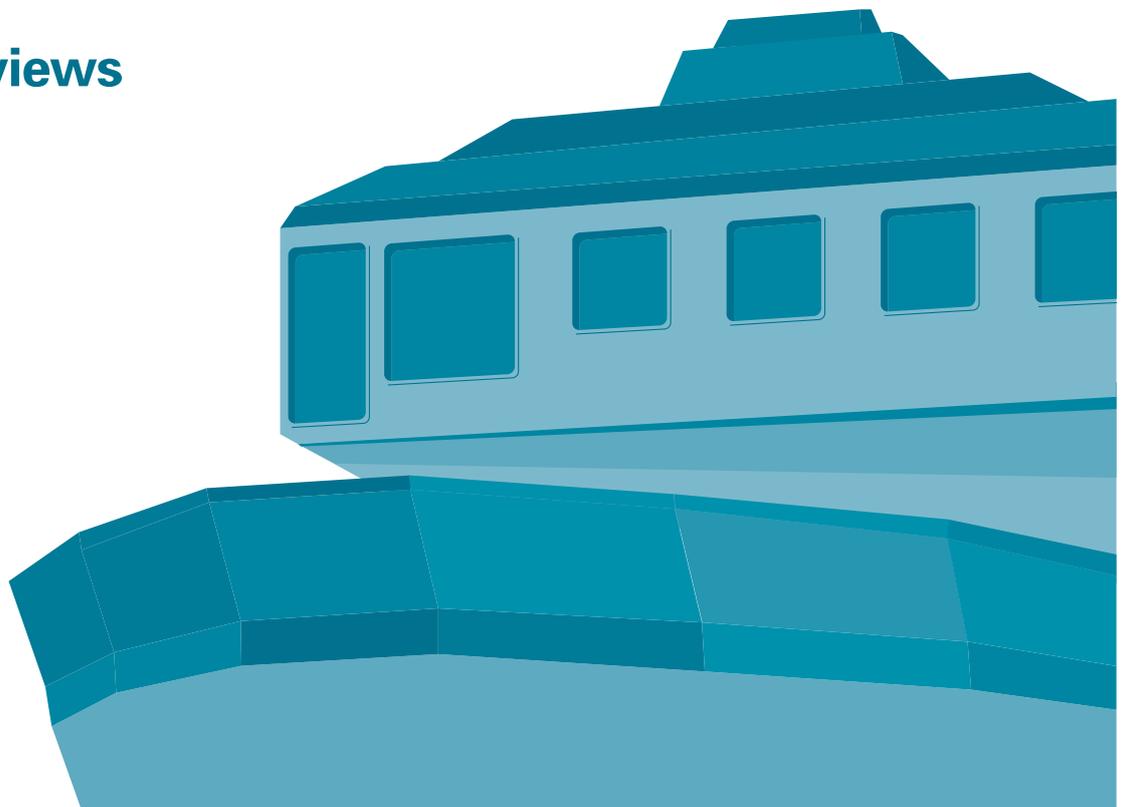


Supplement

Transport Scotland's ferry services

Ferry users' views



AUDITOR GENERAL 

Prepared by Audit Scotland
October 2017

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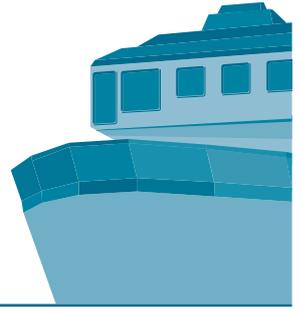
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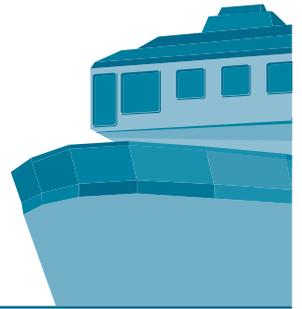
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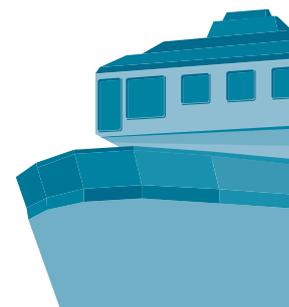
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Introduction



1. As part of our audit on Transport Scotland's Ferry Services we visited ten communities to talk to ferry users about their experiences and views of ferry services.
2. Transport Scotland's ferry operators gather regular user feedback from surveys carried out online, on board and by email and results are generally positive ([paragraph 55, main report](#) )
3. The purpose of our visits was two fold:
 - To supplement the user surveys conducted by ferry operators to help provide a more rounded picture of service delivery.
 - To allow us to experience, first hand, the ferry services that were the subject of our audit.
4. Our ten visits helped to inform our judgements in the main report. This was not a representative sample of ferry users but was used to understand the range of users' experiences and views. The views that we heard were considered alongside a range of other evidence.
5. [Paragraph 56 in the main report](#)  summarises the key themes from our visits. This supplement sets out more detail on each of the visits; including each community's views on what is working well and what could be improved.
6. For each community that we visited, we have provided some context on its ferry service. If the community is served by more than one ferry route, we have presented data for the busiest route. We have presented information on summer and winter ferry services, 2016 passenger and car numbers and 2016 reliability and punctuality performance. Two sets of reliability and punctuality figures are presented:
 - **Actual** – the percentage of sailings that took place and the percentage of sailings that were on time
 - **Contractual** – the percentage of sailings that took place and the percentage of sailings that were on time after 'relief events', including bad weather, have been taken into account.

Methodology



7. Between February and April 2017, the audit team visited ten locations across the three Transport Scotland contracts:

- **Clyde and Hebrides:** Arran, Barra, Benbecula, Cumbrae, Islay, Mull and Skye
- **Northern Isles:** Orkney and Shetland
- **Gourock-Dunoon:** Dunoon

8. We selected locations based on desk research and discussions with Transport Scotland and the ferry operators. We selected the sample to provide variety in terms of:

- ferry operator
- remoteness
- frequency of ferry service
- user satisfaction.

9. For each community, Transport Scotland and the ferry operators advised us of the main contacts, which included chairs of ferry committees, community councils or local councillors. We asked our main contact to identify a sample of individuals to attend a focus group discussion. In some communities, we held a number of separate meetings with individuals. On average, we spoke to around 10-12 people during each visit.

10. Over the course of our visits we met with representatives from: ferry committees; the business sector; the tourist industry; community councils; hauliers; the fishing, farming and whisky industries; and disability and access groups. Who we spoke to, and when, is set out at the start of each case study.

11. We issued an agenda in advance of our discussions with each community. The agenda covered the following:

- Views on ferry services (including timetables, cost and customer service)
- Views on vessels
- Views on harbours
- How ferry operations have changed over time
- Communication with the ferry operators and Transport Scotland
- The Road Equivalent Tariff (RET) (if applicable)

- What aspects of ferry operations work well
- Main concerns/complaints about ferry operations
- What changes could be made to:
 - improve ferry services for customers
 - improve value for the public purse?

12. In this supplement we have summarised the views of each community into the following categories:

- Positives
- Main issues
- User engagement and communication
- RET
- Suggestions for improvement.

13. Responsibilities for the various aspects of ferry operations that we discussed are as follows:

- **Transport Scotland:** Implements ferry policy, which includes ferry routes, timetables and fares (including RET). It also funds new vessels and major harbour upgrades.
- **CMAL:** Owns most of the vessels and about half of the harbours on the Clyde and Hebrides network. It commissions the design and build of new vessels and is responsible for major harbour works.
- **CalMac, Serco Northlink and Argyll Ferries:** Responsible for the operation of ferry services, including reservations, customer service and user consultation. In addition, CalMac is responsible for the operation of CMAL's harbours and decides where vessels on the Clyde and Hebrides network should be deployed.

More information on roles and responsibilities is set out in [Appendix 1](#)  of our main report.

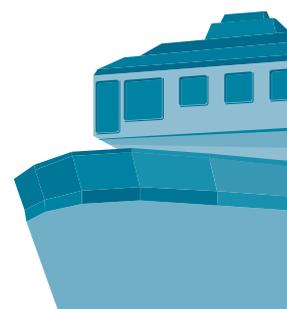
Important note



The opinions and experiences described are solely those of the representatives we spoke to and do not necessarily reflect the views of the whole community.

The views expressed in this supplement are not those of Audit Scotland and have not been verified by Audit Scotland.

Arran



This is a summary of the views expressed by members of the Isle of Arran Ferry Committee at a meeting with Audit Scotland on 7 March 2017.

Context



Routes: Ardrossan to Brodick, Lochranza to Claonaig¹



Operator: CalMac

For the busiest route, Ardrossan-Brodick:



Summer service: Two vessels are used. Up to ten return sailings per day from 07.00 to 19.20 on Monday-Thursday and later sailings operate on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights. The first sailing on Sunday is 09.05.



Winter service: One vessel is used. Up to five return sailings per day from 07.00 to 19.20. The first sailing on Sunday is 08.20. Up to eight return sailings per day in the first three weeks of January with relief vessels of smaller capacity to the regular vessel.



Passenger numbers in 2016: 828,300



Car numbers in 2016: 202,800



2016 performance: 94.7 per cent (99.5 per cent) of scheduled sailings took place
(contractual performance) 89.3 per cent (99.3 per cent) of sailings were on time

Note: 1. The Ardrossan-Campbeltown route is also of interest to the Committee.

Users' views

Positives

- The introduction of a year-round, two-boat service from 2018 is welcomed and should resolve most capacity issues that are currently experienced, if deployed appropriately.
- The redevelopment of Brodick harbour is a big positive. Engagement with CMAL regarding this development has been very good. CMAL are part of the Arran Economic Group, which helps with engagement.
- Local port staff are very helpful.
- The committee welcomed the proposed development at Ardrossan to accommodate the new vessel in 2018. They look forward to reviewing the plans to ensure the timetable and service levels are maintained during the work. They would welcome an opportunity to contribute to the development plans, to ensure resident and business priorities are considered.

Main issues

- The service runs smoothly when the vessels operate at around 60 per cent capacity, but when capacity utilisation increases to 80 per cent and above, it struggles. The committee believes there is a lack of contingency in the system.
- In 2017, almost half of Arran's residents thought that ferry spaces were constrained as a result of increased tourist numbers. But there is no way of knowing how big a problem lack of capacity is as CalMac does not estimate unmet demand.
- The committee considers that the booking system is not fit for purpose. For example, the system can show that sailings are full when there are spaces. CalMac say that this is due to people who book onto sailings and don't turn up. However, the committee's own analysis shows that this is not the issue, and that it is a problem with the system.
- Hauliers prefer to book on the large vessel (MV Caledonian Isles) because they believe that the smaller vessel (MV Isle of Arran) is unreliable. This reduces the available space for passengers on the larger vessel. Hauliers book months in advance and often do not turn up for their booked sailing (they can do so as they do not face any financial penalties). This is very frustrating for other customers.
- During the summer, one vessel is taken off the Ardrossan-Brodick route and re-routed to Campbeltown for two peak-demand days per week. Despite trials of the Campbeltown service showing no increased demand, Transport Scotland continues to operate it to the detriment of the Ardrossan-Brodick service (CalMac's busiest route).

- Users believe that the timetable specification in the contract is flawed and any operator of the service would have issues with it. The summer timetable is confusing because some sailings are at different times to the winter schedule. Due to the requirement to support the Campbeltown route, services to Arran have reduced capacity at weekends.
- The committee thinks that there has been underinvestment in the vessel fleet. It also believes that vessels are larger and more expensive to build and operate than necessary because seagoing staff sleep on the vessels overnight. There is no recognised user input to the development of the Vessel Replacement and Deployment Plan.
- Transport Scotland does not appear to have enough ferry staff and this means that they are perceived as not fully aware of the services they are providing.

User engagement and communication

- The committee considers that responsibilities are not clear – users do not know which issues should be discussed with CalMac and which with Transport Scotland. There is the perception that Transport Scotland is limited in its desire to hold CalMac to account.
- In the committee's opinion, communication, in general, is poor and there is no clear escalation process for complaints. For example:
 - the committee requested that the Ardrossan-Brodick route was served by two boats for the entire summer period in 2016. The committee submitted an economic forecast to back up their request. CalMac refused the request because they did not have enough boats. The committee had no right of appeal and there was no discussion about it. Transport Scotland was not aware of the issue before the committee raised it with them
 - there is a protracted process for timetable changes and there are no grounds for appeal. Delays in finalising timetables have negatively affected local businesses.
- Ferry User Groups (FUGs) are not fit for purpose. The Clyde FUG has only met once a year for the last three years and it feels like a tick-box exercise. Users feel that they are not on a level playing field because HITRANS organise the FUGs and have an influence on CHFS services. Arran is not covered by HITRANS and users feel that this disadvantages services on the Clyde where SPT is the relevant body.
- Historically, meetings between the ferry committee and CalMac are not as useful and productive as they could be. Usually meetings involve the committee presenting statistics to CalMac and suggesting improvements to the service. The committee would prefer that roles were reversed.

RET

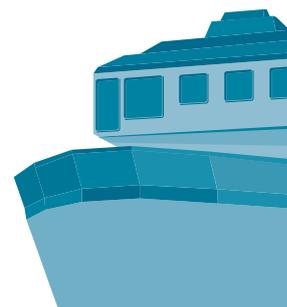
- The introduction of RET has mostly been positive. For example, Arran's economy has grown by an estimated ten per cent.
- The increase in passenger numbers is a great opportunity that the committee wants to embrace and maximise, but they feel that CalMac and Transport Scotland see 80 to 90 per cent capacity utilisation figures as a problem that needs to be solved, rather than an opportunity.
- The main negative impact of RET is that it has become increasingly hard for residents to book a sailing at the last minute.

Suggestions to improve the service

- To improve communication, the committee would like CalMac and Transport Scotland to operate with greater transparency and a more open attitude.
- The committee would like the performance reporting process to be clearer. For example:
 - there should be an agreed performance plan with clear metrics and targets
 - Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) should be based on what is important to users. For example, this should include the quantification of unmet demand
 - CalMac should publish regular reports in a standardised format
 - reasons for cancellations need to be better communicated
 - CalMac should be open to challenge.
- The committee believes that timetable changes are necessary. For example:
 - the two-boat service starting in 2018 should run seven days a week throughout the whole of the summer season
 - demand is growing for an earlier service in the morning and a later one at night. An early morning service could carry much of the freight, which would free up capacity for the public on sailings later in the day.
- CalMac should consider setting up an 'innovation group' similar to the one run by Stena Line, to look at opportunities for continuous improvement. The CHFS2 contract calls for CalMac to prepare annual improvement plans and these should be shared with users.
- The Scottish Government should move away from talking about 'lifeline ferry services'. It should be embracing the islands and planning the ferry service to maximise economic opportunities.
- Transport Scotland's procurement processes need to improve.
- The booking system needs to be streamlined and modernised with urgency.²

Note: 2. This is currently underway.

Barra



This is a summary of the views expressed by representatives from Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, community councils, tourism, business, transport and voluntary sectors, at a meeting with Audit Scotland on 7 April 2017.

Context



Routes: Oban-Castlebay, Oban-Coll-Tiree-Castlebay, Ardmhor-Eriskay



Operator: CalMac

There is one vessel on the busiest route, Oban-Castlebay:



Summer service: There is one return sailing per day which departs Oban at 13.30. The return sailing departs Castlebay at 18.15. On Wednesday there is an additional sailing via Coll and Tiree. It departs Oban at 07.15 and returns from Castlebay at 14.30.



Winter service: There is one return sailing per day which departs Castlebay at 08.00. The return sailing departs Oban at 14.30 (13.40 for most sailings between 10 November and 29 March).



Passenger numbers in 2016: 43,300



Car numbers in 2016: 15,700



2016 performance: 91.9 per cent (98.1 per cent) of scheduled sailings took place
(contractual performance) 79.8 per cent (97.0 per cent) of sailings were on time

Users' views

Positives

- There have been big improvements to the ferry services in recent years. For example:
 - the publication of the Ferries Plan is a positive development
 - the new timetable is better, but it took a long time to finalise
 - the MV Isle of Lewis (which operates the Oban-Castlebay route) has increased capacity. Users now know that they can always get a place on the ferry
 - the vessel now berths in Barra and this is a huge positive.
- The ferry service has a positive impact on businesses on the island.

Main issues

- Representatives believe there are seasonal capacity issues. During the summer months residents struggle to get space on a ferry to the mainland.
- There are a few problems with the MV Isle of Lewis:
 - It has no open car deck so it is unable to carry flammable goods, such as propane. Residents and campers (who make up a large proportion of Barra's tourist visitors), require propane. CalMac have cancelled meetings that have been arranged to discuss this issue.
 - The lift from the car deck can be faulty for long periods of time.
 - Ferry crew get priority over paying passengers for a car space.
 - The area for pets is too restricted.
- Due to the shape of the slipways, modern buses are not able to board the Ardmhor-Eriskay ferry (or the Berneray-Leverburgh ferry to Harris).
- There are occasions where the height of vehicles means that the mezzanine deck on the ferry cannot be used. This reduces capacity and this can sometimes be an issue.
- The Wi-Fi service on the ferries is considered to be very poor.
- Modern legislation on health and safety and working conditions has resulted in increased cancellations. There is a perception that captains are increasingly risk averse and not willing to sail in bad weather. Users believe that less experienced people are being promoted to captain and that new captains can take a long time to get used to the route and the harbours.

- Transport Scotland does not appear to have thought through the implications of increased passenger numbers (brought about by service changes and fare reductions). For example, users do not believe that the impact on shore infrastructure and road condition has been considered fully.

User engagement and communication

- Representatives believe that user engagement structures are inadequate. The community has had a lot of interaction with Transport Scotland, but there is a lot less engagement with CMAL and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's transport committee. Users do not think that engaging with CalMac helps to solve any issues because it does not make the final decisions.
- Users think that CalMac's complaints procedure could be improved. There are occasions when a complaint is raised and CalMac issues an automatic confirmation but does not provide a response to the complaint.
- Users feel that because Transport Scotland's, CMAL's and CalMac's directors do not live on, or come from, an island, they don't fully understand islanders' issues.

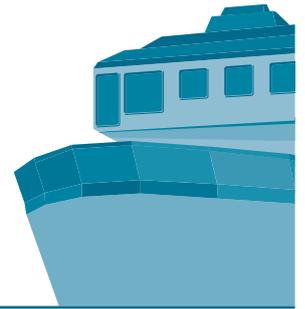
RET

- Residents do not feel that RET has benefitted the local community. Their fares have not reduced in comparison to the multi-journey tickets that they used to have access to.

Suggestions for improvement

- Users think that cancellations at Oban (both in the marshalling area and out at sea) needs to be resolved. Ferries travelling to Mull should not always have priority when more than one ferry is waiting to enter the harbour.
- The community would like a clear commitment that the MV Isle of Hebrides will replace the MV Isle of Lewis in 2018.
- Harbours need investment – the community has been waiting to hear about Castlebay harbour development for several years but they still do not know what is happening. Slipways and passenger waiting areas need to be improved and made more accessible.
- The community would like the speed of the ferries to stay the same (slowing down vessels saves fuel and makes them cheaper to run). They do not want the journey to the mainland taking longer than it already does.
- There were mixed views on the on-board service – some users would like the journey to be made into an 'experience' with improved options for eating and buying merchandise, as this would help to promote tourism. Other users believe that the main priority of a 'lifeline' service is to get to and from the mainland as quickly and reliably as possible.

Benbecula



This is a summary of the views expressed by representatives from community councils and the tourism, business and transport sectors from Benbecula, North Uist and South Uist, at a meeting with Audit Scotland on 20 March 2017.

Context

 Routes:	<p>North Uist: Uig-Tarbert/Lochmaddy, Berneray-Leverburgh</p> <p>South Uist: Mallaig-Lochboisdale, Oban-Castlebay, Ardmhor-Eriskay</p>
 Operator:	<p>CalMac</p>
<p>For the busiest route, Uig (Skye) – Lochmaddy (North Uist) one vessel is used:</p>	
 Summer service:	<p>One or two sailings per day (in alternating directions) from 07.15 to 22.30 (Monday to Saturday) but departure times vary on each day. On Sunday, there are two sailings per day from 09.30 to 20.40, except for April and between mid September to mid October when there is only one sailing which departs Lochmaddy at 11.00 and returns from Uig at 18.30.</p>
 Winter service:	<p>Monday to Friday sailings follow the same pattern as the summer timetable, but the times range from 07.30 to 18.00. There is one return sailing on Sunday which departs Lochmaddy at 11.15 and returns from Uig at 14.30. Between 12 and 30 March 2018 there are up to four sailings per day (Monday to Saturday) and one return sailing on Sunday.</p>
 Passenger numbers in 2016:	<p>188,100</p>
 Car numbers in 2016:	<p>74,700</p>
 2016 performance: (contractual performance)	<p>94.3 per cent (99.8 per cent) of scheduled sailings took place</p> <p>91.2 per cent (99.2 per cent) of sailings were on time</p>

Users' views

Positives

- The MV Hebrides vessel on the Uig-Tarbert/Lochmaddy route is adequate. A new vessel is due to arrive in the second half of 2018 and this will be a big positive.
- Services are generally very good for passengers with cars, but are less so for foot passengers.
- Port staff are very helpful and alert users to standby places when available. Port staff are the most aware of last-minute spaces on the ferry, so users call them directly rather than going through CalMac's call centre, which can be less helpful.

Main issues

- Cancellations are too frequent (there are approximately two days of disruption every month), and this seriously impacts the transport of freight.
- Cancellations seemed to be more frequent when the MV Hebridean Isles was allocated to the route (when the MV Hebrides was in dry dock for routine maintenance, for three weeks). New captains take a while to get used to the route, harbours and the weather. Users believe that captains feel under pressure not to sail in poor weather, in case of vessel damage.
- Users would like the Uig triangle (Uig-Tarbert/Lochmaddy) to be split into two routes with two boats. The nature of the triangle means there are multiple knock-on effects when a ferry is delayed. Also, the timetable means that people on North Uist are unable to leave the island until lunchtime.
- Users have a number of concerns about the current and planned new vessels:
 - The lift on the Lochportain (which sails between Berneray and Leverburgh) requires two members of staff to operate it. This sometimes delays sailings because the staff have to stop loading the vehicles to man the lift.
 - The replacement vessels used when the MV Hebrides is in dry dock are not suitable for the route.
 - Parking on vessels is too tight and it is dangerous for passengers to get from their car to the deck.
 - Wi-Fi service is poor.
 - One of Transport Scotland's two new vessels (which are identical and currently in production) is to be deployed on the Uig triangle from 2018. Users believe that the design of the vessel is primarily based on the needs of Arran (where the other vessel will be deployed) and does not adequately reflect the needs of the Uig-Tarbert/Lochmaddy route.

- Users are concerned that the capacity of the new vessel is going to be too small because it is based on current demand, not future needs. CalMac does not capture data on unmet demand so it cannot accurately assess needs.
- Standby places were previously allocated on a first come, first serve basis, according to when people booked. Priority is now given to cars that arrive earliest at the port. Users think this is an unfair system because it disadvantages those who live furthest away.
- Users believe that port staff shut the queue too early which means that there is often unused space on vessels.
- The public online booking system is not linked to the freight booking system. This results in empty spaces on sailings that appear to be fully booked. This issue is exacerbated by block bookings made by large haulage companies.

User engagement and communication

- Engagement with CMAL is very good. Staff are good at listening to the needs of the community.
- Users think that communication with CalMac has deteriorated over the past 20 years:
 - When CalMac visit the Outer Hebrides, Benbecula, North Uist and South Uist are often missed out.
 - CalMac are poor at responding to emails and phone calls. Contact with CalMac is impossible out of hours.
 - Islanders tend not to submit complaints as they know they will not get a response.
- There is a lack of transparency regarding the new CHFS2 contract. For example, islanders have not had sight of CalMac's 350 commitments, they therefore don't know how the service is to be improved or changed.
- No one seems to take responsibility for problems. For example, CalMac tends to blame the weather for cancellations or Transport Scotland for other issues. But Transport Scotland blames CalMac for some things.
- Communication on the progress of the Freight Fares Review is poor. Commercial fares need to be fair across all routes, the former traders rebate scheme worked well.
- Timetable consultations are very slow. CalMac previously provided community councils with draft timetables but have not done so for seven years. The Hebrides Ferry User Group is provided with explanations for any timetable changes but no direct feedback is given to the community council.

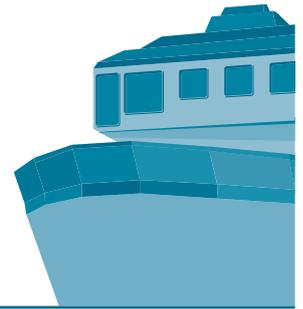
RET

- Low ticket prices for passengers and cars are welcomed.
- Users think that higher ticket prices for vehicles over six meters long is detrimental to the local economy and community:
 - Haulage companies are suffering and the 'white van man' has emerged as a serious competitor.
 - Minibuses for community groups are struggling to afford the ticket prices.
- RET seems to have increased tourist numbers. It is becoming more difficult for locals to secure a last minute booking, for example, for funerals and medical appointments.
- The RET formula appears inconsistent and ticket prices do not always match the length of routes. For example, ticket prices for the Mallaig-Lochboisdale route should be double the price of the Lochmaddy-Uig route as it is double the sailing time. But the tickets are less than double the price.

Suggestions for improvement

- To make better use of vessel space, users would like CalMac to:
 - integrate bookings from the public and for freight
 - charge for cancellations. CalMac are meant to charge hauliers if they cancel within 24 hours of a sailing, but this is never followed up.
- Experienced captains could mentor new captains to help reduce the number of cancellations when captains start on a new route.
- CalMac could locate senior management on the islands rather than in Gourock, to improve its understanding of islanders' issues and make them more accessible to users.
- On-board customer surveys should be carried out in winter as well as summer, to ensure that results are not skewed by tourists' views.
- The remit and purpose of Ferry User Groups need to be revised.

Cumbræ



This is a summary of the views expressed by representatives from the Cumbræ Ferry Committee, at a meeting with Audit Scotland on 27 February 2017.

Context

	Route:	Largs to Cumbræ
	Operator:	CalMac
	Summer service:	Up to every 15 minutes, from 06.45 to 20.30 (Monday-Saturday) and 09.15 to 20.30 (Sunday). Later sailings operate on Friday nights between May and August.
	Winter service:	Every 30 minutes, from 06.45 to 20.30 (Monday-Saturday) and 08.15 to 20.30 (Sunday)
	Passenger numbers in 2016:	738,550
	Car numbers in 2016:	161,300
	2016 performance: (contractual performance)	98.1 per cent (99.8 per cent) of scheduled sailings took place 95.4 per cent (99.9 per cent) of sailings were on time

Users' views

Positives

- The timing and frequency of service is very good and meets users' needs (with a few exceptions, mainly the break in service at 9am). The service is largely reliable, although some improvements could be made.
- The main vessel used (MV Loch Shira) is perfect for the route and is kept in good condition (eg, the passenger facilities are always clean and comfortable).

- The buildings at Largs harbour are excellent and port staff are always very helpful.
- CalMac's communication on service disruption has greatly improved, mainly due to technology and social media alerts.

Main issues

- There has been an increase in service disruptions in the last ten years, due to both weather-related and technical issues.
- The general consensus is that weather-related cancellations and delays are becoming more frequent (for example there were over 750 cancelled sailings in summer 2016). It appears to ferry users that captains are now overly risk-averse. Decisions on weather-related disruptions can be inconsistent and are sometimes not communicated quickly enough and this causes frustration.
- A lot of the service issues happen first thing in the morning, which creates problems for people getting to school and work.
- The committee believe that trains no longer run in sync with ferries, which is problematic for commuters in particular.

User engagement and communication

- The committee feels that engagement and communication, with both Transport Scotland and CalMac, could be improved. For example:
 - there is no process in place to query or challenge decisions that are being made, for example, about timetables or cancellations. The complaint resolution service is inadequate
 - there does not appear to be any system in place for users to challenge CalMac on their services, costs and operational methods. The company's decision-making is not transparent
 - Ferry User Group meetings are not useful, they are not very strategic and little comes out of the meetings, for example, minutes are not actioned
 - although there is engagement with Transport Scotland and CalMac, the islanders feel like their opinions are not considered and their requests for information are ignored
 - the committee was not happy about its involvement in the Ferries Plan development. For example, the committee said they did not receive a copy of the draft report to review. It also did not agree with the information that was included about the local ferry service but there was no mechanism to challenge this, and it did not understand Transport Scotland's impact assessment process.

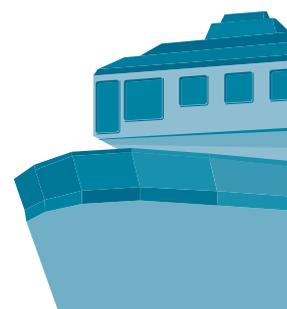
RET

- The committee met Transport Scotland once prior to implementation of RET. The committee felt that there was insufficient discussion on RET and that the island was forced to accept RET in its 'inflexible form'.
- The impact of RET on the island has been mixed, while the increase in visitor numbers has been a positive for some of the island's businesses, there have been a number of negative consequences:
 - Island residents have not benefitted from the same fare reductions as visitors, as islanders used to be able to purchase multi-journey tickets (which were cheaper than single tickets).
 - There has been a significant rise in daytrippers, which does not benefit the island economy as much as they don't spend the same amount of money on hotels and restaurants as overnight visitors do.
 - Low fares have led to a significant increase in car and campervan traffic, which the island's infrastructure cannot cope with. On some days, an additional 500 cars can be on the island, which is too much for only ten miles of road. There has been a visible reduction in road condition; a rise in traffic congestion, which is compounded by the lack of parking; and an increased amount of litter.

Suggestions to improve service

- The committee would like to have a conversation with Transport Scotland about the ferry timetable. For example:
 - it would like services at more convenient times – a 06.30 and a 09.00 ferry would be really beneficial for commuters. Changes to the timetable and season tickets for islanders for car travel (similar to the passenger scheme), might encourage people to move to the island, as commuting to Glasgow, for example, would be more feasible
 - there is no need to have sailings every 15 minutes, seven days a week, throughout the summer. This could be limited to weekends.
- The committee would like better and earlier information on the reasons for cancelled services, rather than just 'technical issues'. This may lead to reduced complaints.
- There needs to be a change to the current user engagement process. Current forums need to have more 'teeth' and a proper role. It would also be helpful to have a complaints resolution process in place, for example a ferry regulator or ombudsman, to help users when they are unable to agree important issues with Transport Scotland and CalMac.
- It would be helpful if older people and those with mobility problems were able to buy multi-journey tickets. Currently they can only buy tickets in Largs, which has no parking facilities.
- There are currently few port facilities at the Cumbrae side, it would aid congestion and improve the customer experience if there was a covered waiting area and ticket machines.

Dunoon



This is a summary of the views expressed by representatives from the Dunoon-Gourock Ferry Action Group, at a meeting with Audit Scotland on 2 April 2017.

Context

	Route:	Gourock to Dunoon ³ (passenger-only town centre service)
	Operator:	Argyll Ferries
	Service:	Between Monday and Thursday there are 28 return sailings per day from 06.20 to 23.10. There are two later return sailings on Friday and Saturday evenings with the last sailing leaving Dunoon at 01.25. On Sunday there are 15 return sailings from 08.20 to 22.50.
	Passenger numbers in 2016:	303,400
	2016 performance: (contractual performance)	94.1 per cent (97.6 per cent) of scheduled sailings took place (99.9 per cent) of sailings were on time. Data on delays before relief events are accounted for is not available.

Note: 3. A commercial operator, Western Ferries, operates a passenger/vehicle service on an adjacent route.

Users' views

Positives

- The group had nothing positive to say about the passenger-only service as it believes that a passenger/vehicle service is required.

Main issues

- There has been no vehicle service on the route since 2011. The group believe that the passenger-only service does not meet users' needs and requires additional subsidies from Transport Scotland. This is not good value for the public purse.

- The group's view is that vessels used on the route are not suitable; they are small and cannot cope with local weather conditions. Transport Scotland staff appear to have little knowledge of vessels.
- The loss of the vehicle service has led to significantly reduced passenger numbers. This has been detrimental for town centre businesses as people no longer pass through.
- A third vessel (MV Coruisk) is used during the winter months to help improve reliability in bad weather (it does not have a license to operate on its usual route during the winter). The third vessel significantly increases Argyll Ferries' running costs. It is used as a commuter vessel (that is, early morning and the evening) and it sits in the harbour for the rest of the day. This is not a good use of public money, in the group's opinion.
- Users believe that Transport Scotland's procurement process is not effective:
 - The tender exercise in 2011 wasn't well planned and gave bidders only a few weeks to prepare bids. This limited bidders' options, in terms of access to vessels for the service, and meant that all bidders submitted bids for a passenger-only service.
 - The specification for the next contract (starting in 2018) states that a 40-meter vessel must be used and that the current ferry timetable must be adhered to. Users believe that this does not meet users' needs.
 - Vessels have to be built specifically for the route. This takes around two years but it is not built into Transport Scotland's tender timescales.
 - Harbour charges are not transparent in tender documentation. Charges are very high (around 70 per cent of operational costs) and likely to put bidders off submitting a tender for a vehicle service.
- Transport Scotland has earmarked up to £50 million public subsidy for the new 12-year contract. But a passenger-only service means running large vessels that will be 80 per cent empty and the lack of vehicle ticket income requires high levels of public subsidy.
- Access to a passenger-only vessel at Gourock harbour will be via steps, this is not disability compliant and is also inconvenient for passengers with mobility problems or buggies. £8 million was invested in the linkspan for loading vehicles on and off the ferry, but this is has not been used since 2011, when the passenger-only service was introduced.

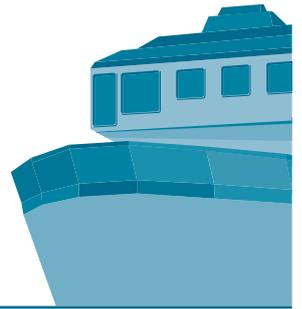
User engagement and communication

- The Action Group have been raising matters with Transport Scotland, CMAL and Scottish ministers since 2013. Generally, there is poor communication between the bodies involved and the group. They feel like they 'go round in circles' and no one takes responsibility.
- There was a lot of consultation and engagement by Transport Scotland on the new CHFS contract. Representatives went to Dunoon to discuss it even though it wasn't relevant for the community. However, there was no formal consultation on the Gourock-Dunoon tender.

Suggestions to improve the service

- Introducing fairer, more appropriate harbour charges could encourage bidders to provide a vehicle service. The vehicle ticket income could reduce the amount of public subsidy required.

Islay



This is a summary of the views expressed by representatives from the Islay Community Council Ferry Committee, which includes representation from freight, tourism and marketing industries, plus small businesses and distillery representatives, at meetings with Audit Scotland on 2 March 2017.

Context



Routes: Kennacraig-Islay, Kennacraig-Islay/Colonsay/Oban



Operator: CalMac

Two vessels are used on the busiest route, Kennacraig-Islay:



Summer service: Up to five return sailings per day from 07.00 to 18.15. The last sailing on Saturday is 20.45. The first sailing on Sunday is 09.45. There are three return sailings on Wednesday and Sunday. For July and August, Easter weekend and the whisky festival weekend (25-26 May), later sailings operate on Thursday and Friday nights resulting in six return sailings on these days, plus an additional sailing on Sunday.



Winter service: Up to four return sailings per day from 07.00 to 20.15, Monday to Saturday. There are two return sailings on Sunday from 09.45 to 18.00.



Passenger numbers in 2016: 203,200



Car numbers in 2016: 69,700



2016 performance: 96.5 per cent (99.2 per cent) of scheduled sailings took place
(contractual performance) 93.3 per cent (99.1 per cent) of sailings were on time

Users' views

Positives

- The new vessel has improved the passenger experience. The on-board service, including the food, is good.
- The frequency of the service broadly works, although the Saturday service during the summer (which diverts to Colonsay) is not great for tourists.

Main issues

- There were serious problems with the service in August 2016 after a vessel collided with Kennacraig harbour. Due to vessel damage, the route was serviced by one vessel only and this vessel did not have a fully operating mezzanine deck. This reduced capacity on the route by up to 50 per cent, at the busiest time of the year. This led to a high number of cancellations and disruptions and had a negative impact on Islay and Jura's tourism and economy. Users think that this highlighted a lack of contingency planning in the system.
- Harbour size and design – only four vessels in CMAL's fleet fit the harbour and three of these are over 29 years old. This is a risk to the service. All harbours lack facilities, including parking, covered walkways and food options. When services are delayed cars have to remain in the queue while they wait for an update. Passengers lose their space in the queue if they choose to go for something to eat when the ferry is delayed.
- Users believe that none of the vessels deployed on the route are ideal. The new vessel is taller and less able to deal with winds. This has resulted in the service becoming less reliable and it slows down the movement of materials for hauliers and the distillery. The older vessels have limited weight capacity and are less suitable for freight. There appears to be insufficient capacity during the summer.
- There is a general consensus that captains have become more cautious and will refuse to sail in weather conditions that would have been considered acceptable in previous years. This has resulted in a higher number of cancellations and delays.
- Transport Scotland does not hold some key data on the ferry service. For example, it has inaccurate data on capacity utilisation. It does not differentiate between lorries and vans, which use very different amounts of deck space. It does not hold records of unmet demand, which would be useful for the future planning of vessels and services.

User engagement and communication

- The structure of ferry services is confusing and users are not clear who has responsibility for decisions. Information can be different depending on who users speak to. There needs to be greater accountability and transparency.

- The Ferry User Groups are not useful. There are too many attendees and they are a forum for Transport Scotland to rubber stamp decisions, rather than being a forum for users to provide input to decisions. But Transport Scotland's presentations on the new CHFS contract have been helpful.
- The Ferry Committee has suggested that CalMac should have a lay-member on its board to improve users' input to decision-making. The new CHFS contract includes a new user panel but, at the time of the meeting, users were not aware of any details of this.
- Users feel that customer service is poor. There is an apparent lack of interest and follow up by CalMac's area operations staff. Complaints are now referred to CalMac customer care rather than being dealt with directly. There is also a shortage of telephone lines in local offices which sometimes makes it difficult to speak to staff.
- Transport Scotland has been consulting on its freight fares review for a number of years. While the Road Haulage Association has been asked for input, the haulier B Mundell, CalMac's second biggest customer, has not been consulted.
- Users believe that Transport Scotland lack knowledge and expertise in running ferries and that they don't make good use of the Expert Ferries Group. Users feel that it is necessary to involve their MSP on serious issues.

RET

- Users feel that the roll out of RET was premature.
- Islanders have not benefitted from reduced fares as they used to be able to purchase books of tickets which were less expensive than single fares. Islanders would like to see a return of concession fares or a regular traveller discount for residents.
- Introducing RET on Islay is not a good use of public money – tourist traffic was projected to increase anyway and Islay tourists are not price driven. Therefore there was no need to introduce lower fares to increase tourism.
- RET has resulted in the need for additional sailings throughout the CHFS network to meet the surge in demand during summer months. This means there is no longer any flexibility during peak periods to re-deploy a vessel to deal with a problem. There is a lack of contingency in the timetable.

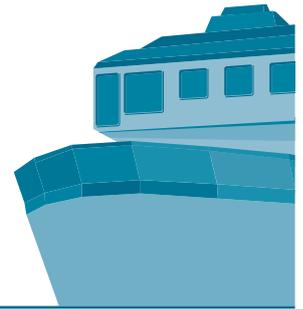
Suggestions for improvement

- Harbours should be developed to take larger ferries and this would result in greater flexibility. Islanders feel that the £6-£7 million estimated cost of developing Port Askaig (and potentially a similar amount for Port Ellen) is relatively low compared to other planned harbour improvements on the network.
- There needs to be better management of vessel capacity. There are too many examples of passengers not being able to book on services despite there being vacant space. Users feel that staff quarters are not a good use

of vessel space. It would be helpful if Transport Scotland introduced a Key Performance Indicator for operators that compares originally booked space with actually used space, to encourage better use of space.

- Vessels should be built to suit weather conditions to make them more reliable.
- There could be better integration and coordination of user groups and forums as users across different islands experience many of the same issues.
- Islanders believe that demand for passenger and freight services is going to increase, due to new hotel developments and distillery expansion. Services need to be developed to match this. Similarly, services need to reflect that Islay is a huge exporter of freight and a significant contributor to Scotland's economy.

Mull



This is a summary of the views expressed by representatives from the Mull Ferry Committee and local businesses, at a meeting with Audit Scotland on 28 March 2017.

Context



Routes:

Oban to Craignure, Tobermory to Kilchoan, Fishnish-Lochaline, Fionnphort-Iona



Operator:

CalMac

For the busiest route, Oban-Craignure:



Summer service:

Two vessels are used. Up to 11 return sailings per day from 06:45 to 22.45 (Tuesday-Saturday). The last sailing on Monday is at 20.00. There are nine sailings on Sunday from 09.30 to 19.30.



Winter service:

One vessel is used. Up to seven sailings per day from 08.00 (06.45 on Monday and Saturday) to 17.00 (19.00 on Tuesday and 21.45 on Friday and Saturday). There are four sailings on Sunday from 09.00 to 19.00.



Passenger numbers in 2016:

644,800



Car numbers in 2016:

162,300



2016 performance:
(contractual performance)

98.1 per cent (99.9 per cent) of scheduled sailings took place

95.4 per cent (99.2 per cent) of sailings were on time

Users' views

Positives

- Customer service is good and the harbour staff in particular are very helpful.
- The summer timetable is suitable, even though the service can get busy.
- The island has had a two-vessel service during the summer for the last couple of years and this has been welcomed. However, the additional vessel does not fit the harbour well and this causes problems for passenger access.

Main issues

- Users feel that there are more weather-related cancellations than before. Users believe that captains are wary to sail in weather that they would have previously sailed in.
- Users feel that the winter timetable is not suitable and is too restrictive for islanders and local businesses. For example, the timetable makes commuting difficult, it creates longer round trips for people who use the routes on/off Mull to get to Oban, and it can mean that people have to pay for overnight accommodation as it is not always possible to travel in a day. The winter timetable period is also too long as demand starts increasing from February.
- Users believe that Transport Scotland and CalMac are lacking in knowledge about the island which means they are unable to match the service to the needs of the community.

User engagement and communication

- CalMac's engagement with the Mull Ferry Committee has improved since the start of the new contract; there is now a representative at all ferry committee meetings. CalMac's engagement on the new timetable proposals was also good, although it was unable to explain Transport Scotland's decisions.
- There is limited engagement with Transport Scotland and this needs to improve. Users feel that they get little feedback from Transport Scotland and that it could better explain its decision-making, for example, on timetables or vessel deployment.
- Users believe that FUGS are ineffective.
- Transport Scotland's vessel replacement strategy is not always accurate and changes regularly. For example, Transport Scotland may say that a particular route is getting a new vessel and then the next year the new vessel is used on a different route.

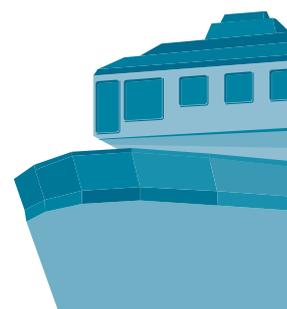
RET

- The cost of travel to Mull was never an issue, but RET has made it cheaper.
- RET has led to more cars, motorhomes and tourists using the service. In the summer commercial vehicles need to book further in advance in order to ensure a space.
- The removal of RET for commercial vehicles in 2012 resulted in haulage companies passing on the higher cost of transporting goods to consumers. This has increased the cost of living on the island.

Suggestions for improvement

- Transport Scotland should improve their communication with island residents.
- Users feel they have four stakeholders to deal with on ferry related matters – Transport Scotland, CalMac, CMAL and Argyll and Bute Council. The responsibilities of each of these bodies need to be made clearer.
- The purpose and remit of the Ferry User Groups (FUGs) is not clear and they are not being used in the way users thought they were intended. There needs to be a clearer role for the FUGs and CalMac's new community engagement board.
- Transport Scotland's Ferries Plan needs to be updated and should take into account the interconnectedness of routes in the region.
- Users feel that public funding could be better used if Transport Scotland and CalMac were to adopt good practice from commercial operators and other countries. In particular, users feel that new vessels are expensive and overstaffed.
- Changes to the timetables should be trialled before they are fully implemented and agreed.

Orkney



This is a summary of the views expressed by representatives from Orkney Islands Council (OIC), local businesses and the farming and tourist industries, at meetings with Audit Scotland on 29 and 30 March 2017.

Context



Routes: Scrabster-Stromness, Aberdeen-Kirkwall, Kirkwall-Lerwick



Operator: Serco NorthLink⁴

For all Serco NorthLink routes to Orkney:



Scrabster-Stromness service:

There are two return sailings per day from 06.30 (09.00 at weekends) to 19.00. During the summer and on some Saturdays in September and October there is an additional sailing at 11.00.



Aberdeen-Kirkwall-Lerwick service:

Tuesday (except in winter), Thursday, Saturday and Sunday northbound, departing at 17.00 and Monday (except in winter), Wednesday and Friday southbound, departing at 17.30.



Passenger numbers in 2016:

190,000



Car numbers in 2016:

46,000



2016 performance:⁵
(contractual performance)

97.4 per cent (99.9 per cent) per cent of scheduled sailings took place

90.6 per cent (99.4 per cent) of sailings were on time

Notes:

4. OIC noted that their main concern was fair funding for inter-island services, but this discussion and summary focuses on the Serco NorthLink service.

5. Performance data is for all Serco NorthLink services.

Users' views

Positives

- The current vessel fleet is fit for purpose – two freight vessels and two passenger vessels is the right mix and they are the right size.
- An appropriate relief vessel is now used on the Scrabster-Stromness route when the boats are in dry dock (previously Pentland Ferries provided the relief service).
- Customer service is very good and has improved since Serco NorthLink took over. Serco NorthLink is better at promoting local produce.
- In relation to livestock freight services:
 - Current pricing is fair. Increases in fares have been less than inflation. There is no rebate for large livestock carriers, but Serco will return empty livestock crates to Kirkwall (from Aberdeen) on the overnight service free of charge.
 - Port staff are very skilled in managing livestock on and off the boats. This has been consistent across contracts.
 - Harbour condition is fine at the moment. The new harbour development at Nigg in Aberdeen will be better for livestock transit.
 - There has been an improvement in animal welfare, compared to 2002. Animals are held in carts of 5-6 and ventilation has improved.

Main issues

- Representatives think that passenger fares on the Serco NorthLink services are too high, in particular on the Scrabster-Stromness route.⁶ Ticket prices are high compared to routes of a similar distance in the Western Isles and this is unfair. High fares have limited the capacity for Orkney's economy to grow. The process to introduce lower fares has taken too long.
- The cost of freight on Serco NorthLink's Stromness-Scrabster route is roughly double the cost on an equivalent CalMac route. The Scottish Government have not yet published their decision on addressing the problem of unequal freight fares across Scotland.
- Users believe that the frequency and timing of the Scrabster-Stromness service is inadequate:
 - Serco removed the midday sailing when they took over the contract. This has resulted in a loss of business for hotels.
 - The current timetable does not suit tourists because the sailings are either very early or late.
 - The privately-run Pentland Ferries service is more frequent and sailing times are more appropriate for tourists and islanders. It is also cheaper.

Note: 6. It has since been announced that lower passenger and vehicle fares will be implemented from 2018.

- There are capacity issues on the Aberdeen-Kirkwall route during the summer. There is insufficient cabin availability on peak summer sailings. There are also capacity issues for livestock on the Aberdeen-Kirkwall route during October and November.
- The main issue for OIC is the Scottish Government's decision on 'fair funding' for its inter-island ferry services. OIC are forecasting a £4.8 million deficit for the inter-island services in 2018/19. Due to ageing vessels and harbours, OIC estimate £133 million of capital investment is required over the next five to 15 years. This issue outweighs any concerns regarding the Serco NorthLink service. Discussions on 'fair fares' have been ongoing since 2012 and OIC are increasingly concerned that the issue will not be resolved in time for the 2018/19 budget.
- The Scottish Government review of ferries' procurement has caused uncertainty.

User engagement and communication

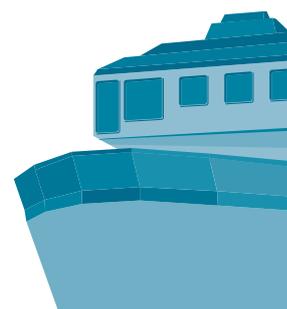
- There are no specific forums for ferry users in Orkney, although OIC runs a Transport and Travel Forum for interested people to discuss all transport issues affecting the island, including air, sea and road.
- OIC meet with Serco NorthLink, Transport Scotland and Shetland Islands Council every six months, but OIC said that there was generally little need for regular meetings because the service provided by Serco NorthLink is so good.
- OIC's transport department has led the consultation with Transport Scotland in relation to the next NIFS contract. Representatives from the farming and tourist industries in Orkney have not been asked to contribute to this.
- HITRANS has facilitated an improvement in relations with Transport Scotland. Transport Scotland's understanding of Orkney is improving but some think that Transport Scotland doesn't fully understand the social and economic benefits of ferries.
- The farming industry regularly speaks to Serco NorthLink about operational and service matters. Communication between the operator and the farming industry has improved in comparison to when P&O ran the service.
- When the community complained about the loss of the midday service between Scrabster and Stromness, Serco NorthLink claimed that there was no demand for it.

Suggestions for improvement

- More flexibility is needed in the NIFS contract. Orkney has more than 20 festivals per year and users regularly request additional sailings to meet the increased demand. But Serco NorthLink reports that additional sailings are not permitted under the NIFS contract.

- The timetable for the summer season should be extended to include April, May and September. More tourists are starting to visit during these periods. OIC have requested that the next NIFS contract includes three daily return sailings between Scrabster and Stromness.
- Travel smart cards are needed.
- Connectivity with the bus service needs to improve.
- The length of ferry contracts should be extended and made more flexible to allow the operator to make efficiency savings. The operator should also own the ferries.
- The current service of returning empty trailers at no charge should be kept in the next NIFS contract. The current proposal is a 50 per cent subsidy for all livestock trailers.

Shetland



This is a summary of the views expressed by representatives from the Shetland External Transport Forum and the Stewart Building Transport Group, at meetings with Audit Scotland on 2 March 2017.

Context

	Routes:	Aberdeen-Kirkwall-Lerwick
	Operator:	Serco NorthLink
	Summer service:	One daily return sailing which departs from Aberdeen or Lerwick at 19:00. On Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday the northbound sailing departs at 17:00 and also calls at Kirkwall. On Monday, Wednesday and Friday the southbound sailing departs at 17.30 and also calls at Kirkwall.
	Winter service:	Same as the summer service except that the Tuesday northbound and Monday southbound services do not call at Kirkwall.
	Passenger numbers in 2016:	131,000
	Car numbers in 2016:	21,300
	2016 performance:⁷ (contractual performance)	97.4 per cent (99.9 per cent) per cent of scheduled sailings took place 90.6 per cent (99.4 per cent) of sailings were on time

Note: 7. Performance data is for all Serco NorthLink services.

Users' views

Positives

- Good relationships and open communication exists between Serco NorthLink and its stakeholders, such as councils, Regional Transport Partnerships, hauliers and the fishing, aquaculture and seafood industries.
- Serco NorthLink's customer service is very good. Engagement with customers has improved since Serco took over the contract. It provides regular updates to customers, for example, on sailings and capacity, and provides customers with an opportunity to discuss any concerns.
- There has been a lot of public consultation over recent years. For example, Transport Scotland has consulted with customers and stakeholders on two NIFS contracts and ferry fares. However, stakeholders are not always clear what the results of consultation are.
- The current freight and passenger service is good and the timetable largely meets users' needs.
- The on-board service is excellent.
- Connectivity has improved since Serco introduced a bus service from the ferry to the airport in Aberdeen. This is a valuable service.
- Serco NorthLink provides value for money. Because they are a commercial operator, they are continually considering how to make efficiencies and reduce costs. It manages to do this while maintaining or improving customer service.

Main issues

Fares

- The price of fares is the biggest issue for ferry users. The basic passenger fare is fine, and customers appreciate that they can change and cancel bookings for free. However, vehicle and cabin prices are expensive and this is a problem for families. There are also concerns that the high prices discourage tourists and that they may choose to visit the Western Isles instead due to the lower cost of travel.
- In 2016, the Scottish Government committed to reduce fares in the Northern Isles, but it is taking a long time for this to be realised, despite a lot of discussion about it.⁸ It does not seem fair that fares on the Clyde and Hebrides have been reduced and fares to the Northern Isles are high.
- Freight fares are reasonable, but many customers questioned why they had been static on the Clyde and Hebrides routes since 2007, but had only been static on services to the Northern Isles since 2015. There has been little output from the freight fares review process.

Note: 8. It has since been announced that lower fares will be implemented from 2018.

Capacity/vessels

- In general, the freight vessels have enough capacity to cope with demand but there are seasonal capacity issues, especially for time-sensitive freight. During the livestock shipping season (September-October) there are no freight vessel sailings from Lerwick on Monday or Tuesday evenings. The single passenger vessel has to accommodate all traffic on the Lerwick to Aberdeen route. On Monday evenings, this sailing departs at 17.30 and Shetland has to share deck space with traffic joining the vessel in Orkney. The earlier departure time of 17.30 puts additional pressure on seafood shipments emanating from Shetland's northern isles of Yell and Unst, as well as outlying mainland areas, to ensure that it reaches Lerwick in time.
- While Serco NorthLink's average monthly capacity utilisation figures are helpful, they mask certain days in the month where hauliers cannot book on sailings.
- The freight capacity issues are currently managed well by Serco NorthLink, but there are concerns about future capacity. Haulage companies and the aquaculture and fishing sectors have informed Transport Scotland and Serco NorthLink of increases in their production and exports. Ideally, they require a freight ship sailing on Monday to Saturday every week.
- The availability of passenger cabins during the peak summer months is a concern because these book up quickly. There are times when vehicle deck space is also unavailable.
- Haulage companies are disappointed that Transport Scotland signed a new five-year lease for the two current freight vessels without any consultation. Both vessels are middle aged (15-20 years) and are subject to more cancellations than the passenger vessels as they don't cope well in poor weather conditions. Hauliers would have liked new, larger freighters for the start of the next contract.

Planning

- It feels like there is a lack of long-term strategic planning on Transport Scotland's part. For example, vessel, harbour and contract decisions appear to be made in isolation.
- Transport Scotland does not have a clear strategy for investment in the Northern Isles service; the Ferries Plan is focused on services and assets in the Clyde and Hebrides.
- There is a disconnect between Transport Scotland's ferries planning and local economic planning. For example, Shetland is a net contributor to the Scottish economy and the ferry service is vital for its future economic growth. Yet there is no joined up planning.

User engagement and communication

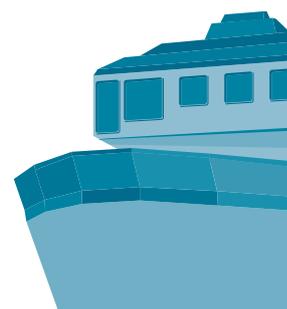
- Serco NorthLink's customer engagement is excellent. It regularly communicates with the public, haulage companies and representatives of the fishing, aquaculture and seafood sectors. Serco NorthLink provides useful information on demand and capacity which allows it to plan ahead in conjunction with hauliers.
- The quarterly meetings of the Shetland External Transport Forum and the Stewart Building Transport Group are really useful and efficient forums for discussions between Transport Scotland, Serco NorthLink, stakeholders and customers.
- Engagement with Transport Scotland is generally good, but some stakeholders feel like they trust Transport Scotland less because of the ongoing review into reducing fares. Progress has also been slow on the internal ferry service review. Stakeholders feel that while they are much consulted, they do not always feel listened to as little action results from consultations.

Suggestions for improvement

- A strategy for the future development of ferry services to the Northern Isles is required. This needs to be planned in conjunction with the council, other community planning partners, Aberdeen harbour and ferry users. This is vital to make the most of the economic opportunities in Shetland. The strategy should set out how Transport Scotland will prioritise its investment across Scotland, and should be based on need and economic opportunity, not on historical funding.
- There were mixed views on the need for Transport Scotland to tender for the Northern Isles ferry service. The seafood sector and its associated hauliers do not agree with Transport Scotland's notion to take ferry services 'in-house.' A number of users suggested that a tender exercise is required, as the competition helps to improve services and reduce costs. There is some concern about the outcome of the ferry procurement review as users do not think that an in-house operator would provide value for money. Other users were concerned about the cost of the procurement exercise.
- Transport Scotland should introduce lower fares as soon as possible.⁹ Lower fares should include cars and cabins, not just the basic passenger fee.
- The future funding arrangements for internal ferry services needs to be decided. Transport Scotland made a commitment in its Ferries Plan to consider taking over responsibility of Shetland's ferry services but talks on this have not resulted in any changes. There is current inequity in the funding of ferry fares because inter-island fares in the Western Isles are subsidised as part of the CHFS network.

Note: 9. It has since been announced that lower fares will be implemented from 2018.

Skye



This is a summary of the views expressed by the Sleaf Transport Forum, at a meeting with Audit Scotland on 10 March 2017.

Context

	Routes:	Mallaig to Armadale; Raasay to Sconser; Uig-Tarbert/Lochmaddy ¹⁰
	Operator:	CalMac
For the busiest route, Mallaig-Armadale:		
	Summer service:	Two vessels are used. There are nine return sailings per day from 07.40 to 19.10 (Monday to Saturday). Due to low tides in September and October the timetable is amended and there are six return sailings on some days. On Sunday there are six return sailings from 09.30 to 19.00.
	Winter service:	One vessel is used. Up to three return sailings per day from 08.40 to 18.15 (Monday to Saturday). The last return sailing of the day only operates for a fortnight before the summer timetable starts and fortnight after it finishes. On Sunday there is one sailing which departs Mallaig at 16.00. The return sailing departs Armadale at 16.45.
	Passenger numbers in 2016:	250,800
	Car numbers in 2016:	61,800
	2016 performance: (contractual performance)	92.8 per cent (99.1 per cent) of scheduled sailings took place 91.9 per cent (98.5 per cent) of sailings were on time

Note: 10. Our discussion with the Sleaf Transport Forum was based on the Mallaig to Armadale route. We did not discuss other services to Skye.

Users' views

Positives

- For 12 years (up to 2016) they had an excellent ferry service. This was because they had a reliable ferry that was custom built for the unique route.
- The port staff are very friendly and helpful.

Main issues

- The main problem with the service, in the forum's opinion, is the choice of vessel for the route. The forum has campaigned for the return of a reliable ferry service, following a ministerial decision to re-deploy the custom built vessel, the MV Coruisk, to the Oban-Craignure service.
- In summer 2016, the MV Coruisk (50 car capacity) was replaced with two vessels, the MV Lord of the Isles (49 car capacity), and the MV Lochinvar (23 car capacity). Following several revisions to timetables, a third vessel, the MV Loch Bhrusda (18 car capacity) was deployed. The MV Bhrusda and MV Lochinvar could not operate at low tides because they are designed to operate from fixed concrete slip ways, rather than hydraulic linkspans. This led to a reduction in service between summer 2015 and summer 2016. For example, during summer 2016 there were:
 - 395 cancellations
 - 357 fewer coaches travelling, which led to a 16 per cent reduction in coach revenue
 - significant increases in sailing times, from 25 to 45 minutes.
- Recently, there have been more weather-related cancellations. Ferry users feel that captains are more risk averse than they were previously. It feels like CalMac are not responsive enough to changing weather conditions, and often make decisions either too early or too late. It is often the case that services are running when users have been informed that they are cancelled, and vice versa.
- Users think that the timetable could be improved. For example:
 - there are large gaps in sailings during the day on Sundays and days when tidal restrictions are in place and this has a detrimental impact on businesses because there is no traffic flow
 - there are only two sailings a day in winter and users feel this is inadequate
 - the last sailing from Mallaig is 6pm, which is too early
 - the tidal timetable is not appropriate for the route conditions. The forum had to provide CalMac with tidal information which led to significant timetable changes

- CalMac operated additional sailings to mitigate the cancellations, but they were not well communicated and the changes were 'chaotic'.
- Armadale harbour is not well designed. It cannot cope with a build-up of vehicles and this leads to congestion on the roads. Users also have health and safety concerns in relation to the gangway and ramps.
- The forum is concerned about CalMac's staff turnover in recent years. It appears that CalMac no longer have appropriately experienced staff (ie, staff with experience in the shipping industry and with the technical knowledge to make informed service or vessel decisions).
- The forum believes that because the route is not classified as lifeline (due to the Skye Bridge) it is not viewed as a high priority and it is one of the first routes to suffer when there are problems.

User engagement and communication

- Engagement with Transport Scotland and CalMac used to be adequate but it has declined recently. The forum feels that both bodies can be unresponsive and it can take several attempts, and a lot of time, to get information or to organise a meeting. The forum has to submit FOI requests to get information that it needs.
- The decision-making process is not clear, it appears to users that Transport Scotland and CalMac pass responsibility on to each other and no one takes control. There does not seem to be any accountability when things go wrong.
- There is not enough discussion on timetable changes.
- The complaints process is not effective and it feels like there is less focus on good customer service.
- The Ferry User Groups are not strategic enough and are not a decision-making forum. There needs to be a better system in place for more structured, meaningful engagement.
- CalMac's proposed Communities Board is a positive development as it should give communities more input to decision-making.

RET

- RET is a positive change and it should bring many benefits to the community. But problems with the service have meant that the island has not benefitted from RET. Unlike other islands, Skye has not experienced increased traffic as a result of the number of cancellations and delays. Instead, there was a 15 per cent reduction in coaches and no increase in passenger numbers between summer 2015 and summer 2016. There was an 11 per cent increase in cars, but this is lower than the increase in car numbers on other routes.
- The success of RET in Mull has had a negative impact on Skye as the high passenger numbers were the main reason for the MV Coruisk to be re-deployed to the Oban to Craignure service.

Suggestions for improvement

- Vessel decisions should be appropriate and better communicated.
- CalMac should be more responsive to changing weather conditions and communicate cancellations and delays more effectively.
- The length of the sailing day during the summer should be extended (6pm is the last sailing from Mallaig).
- A ferry regulator should be appointed to hold Transport Scotland and ferry operators to account.

Transport Scotland's ferry services

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