



**TRANSPORT  
SCOTLAND**  
CÒMHDHAIL ALBA

# **Consultation on the Islands Connectivity Plan: Strategic Approach & Vessels and Ports Plan**

## **Initial Responses**

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# Key findings and initial responses

## Introduction

A public consultation on the Islands Connectivity Plan (ICP) draft Strategic Approach and the updated Vessels and Ports Plan, which was accompanied by community engagement on a number of islands, concluded on 6 May 2024. This exercise allowed us to hear directly from communities and wider stakeholders, both online and through a series of in-person engagement events.

The [consultation and engagement analysis report](#) has now been published along with this initial response to themed consultation feedback. The report indicates good levels of support for our key proposals. There was particularly high support for Reliability and Resilience as the First Priority of ICP and for the development of an Accessibility Standard for ferry services. There was also clear majority support for the proposed Vision, the 4 proposed Priorities and the proposed 11 key themes.

Alongside support for retaining the current RET principles, there was support for a fares structure that encourages passengers to travel without a private vehicle, incentivising travel at quieter periods, and for creating different levels of fares for different users e.g. islanders/non-island residents.

Focusing on more reliable and resilient services will support the view that investment must be prioritised to firstly ensure that essential core transport services, including freight, are provided to all communities. This will be supported by the delivery of six new major vessels and the procurement of seven new smaller vessels for the Clyde and Hebrides network, as well as some major port projects. These investments will also increase capacity and enhance services.

A series of improvements on the community voice and transparency theme will be delivered to the Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Services through the recently published [CalMac's Enhancement and Change Plan](#). This includes strengthening local decision-making and the accessibility of CalMac management by reviewing processes and policies and, where possible, devolving decisions to local areas and adapting to meet local needs.

The finalised ICP Vision and Priorities alongside the Vessels and Ports Plan, will provide shared and recognised direction to ferry operators and vessel owners responsible for delivery of Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Service (CHFS) and Northern Isles Ferry Services (NIFS), while recognising local community plans.

Over the coming months we will use the feedback received to finalise both the Strategic Approach and the Vessel & Ports Plan. This feedback will also inform the development of the remaining elements of the Islands Connectivity Plan, including work on ferry fares, Community Needs Assessments, onwards and connecting travel and the Islands Communities Impact Assessment.

## Scope

### Issue

Some respondents said ICP is too focused on ferries and does not sufficiently address wider island transport connectivity issues including fixed links and air services, which can improve transport resilience, and the potential for strengthening and prioritising connectivity between islands to their mutual benefit, potentially bringing longer-term efficiencies.

### Response

Review the Strategic Approach paper to make clearer its inclusion of aviation and fixed links and their current and potential contribution to supporting reliable and resilient connectivity. The planned community needs assessments will identify options to address transport connectivity problems that could include aviation, fixed links and onward and connecting travel, as well as ferries. This will recognise whether responsibility for these services rests with private operators or local authorities, who would then be responsible for considering services changes as appropriate.

The draft Strategic Approach paper noted that we would be publishing an aviation document setting out our wider actions for aviation for all of Scotland, including Highlands and Islands air travel. The Scottish Government's [Aviation Statement](#) was published on 24 July and includes various new action points that relate to the Highlands and Islands, primarily on decarbonisation.

The final version of the ICP Strategic Approach paper will provide an update on how the Aviation Statement actions related to the Highlands and Islands will be taken forward alongside our wider work on islands transport connectivity.

### Issue

Local authorities with ferry responsibilities commented that funding is a barrier to changes, including investment to help achieve national targets, or adoption of the proposed ICP Vision and Priorities. Concerns that with no additional funding being allocated to local authorities through ICP, it is difficult to see how this will significantly

improve island transport connectivity over the lifetime of the Plan. Local authorities also put forward their views on future delivery responsibility for ferry services.

## Response

We will review the Strategic Approach text to see if specific points raised, particularly around coverage of local authority services and current work underway, can be addressed whilst respecting local government autonomy. We remain committed to constructive engagement with local authorities on funding of their ferry services and vessel replacement plans, including through established Ministerial task forces.

## Vision and Priorities

### Issue

There was overall support for the draft Vision and the 4 draft Priorities and a good range of comments and suggestions from both those who agreed and those who disagreed with the proposed wording. A common theme was that the aspiration set out in the Vision and Priorities was supported but there needed to be more reflection of people's current experience of ferry services. There were also views expressed that each community will have different priorities and that the focus on reliability and resilience is driven by issues with certain CHFS services, with the concern that services that are operating well in these respects but face other challenges, in particular capacity and demand, risk being overlooked when it comes to Government action and funding.

### Response

We will consider proposed changes and confirm the Vision in the final ICP Strategic Approach.

We agree that delivery of the Vision is essential. The ICP Strategic Approach and Vessels & Ports Plan are important steps in providing the long-term plan that has been asked for and will be followed up by more detailed local planning through community needs assessments. This is alongside the scaling up of the vessel replacement programme, with 13 vessels (almost a third of the CHFS/NIFS fleet) now under construction or in procurement, the preparation for the next CHFS3 contract, and the recent announcement of CalMac's Enhancement & Change Plan.

The 4 Priorities reflect those of the National Transport Strategy but we will review alignment with other key policies, in particular the National Islands Plan and the National Strategy for Economic Transformation.

Given the high support, the Strategic Approach will confirm Reliability & Resilience as the First Priority of ICP. This will support the view that investment must be prioritised to firstly ensure that essential core transport services, including freight, are provided to all communities. The delivery of 6 new major vessels and the procurement of 7 new small vessels, along with associated port works, represent significant steps towards addressing the backlog in investment. The Vessels and Ports Plan notes the importance of maintaining momentum with this programme.

Funding and implementation of the investment programme set out in the Vessels and Ports Plan will, in future, will seek to deliver vessel replacements and port redevelopments before these reach the age when there is a high risk of reduced reliability due to asset life. Thus, services that are currently reliable and resilient should remain that way through asset management, including timely replacements and rebuilds. The current vessels in build and in procurement highlight this approach.

We agree that priorities will differ between routes and between communities – and also over time. A recurring theme noted in the consultation report is that the design of services should reflect local circumstances and priorities to support long-term economic development. Therefore, we endeavour to continue working with local communities to identify best ways to support those local priorities. This can include earlier and fuller consideration of the transport impacts of development planning; and developing ferry and other transport services to inform and support the delivery of local development plans. We are considering how to ensure that future community needs assessments have sufficient flexibility to enable this whilst using a consistent methodology and will be engaging with relevant local authorities and other key partners on this. This could be, for example, through the development of, and consultation on, localised transport planning objectives that would be linked to the network-wide priorities but enable those local objectives to inform and steer the identification and appraisal of options for change.

As stated in the draft Strategic Approach, the final version of the Vision “will guide long-term planning and decision-making and, with the Priorities, will provide high-level targets for us to monitor and review progress against.”

## Funding and Prioritisation

### Issue

Concerns about references to budget constraints are raised, particularly linked to those ICP proposals to encourage better utilisation of existing ferry capacities including through fares. There are views that changes to fares that would affect affordability for residents and/or visitors could damage island sustainability. Views

expressed suggest that providing additional capacity, particularly for vehicles and freight, should be of greater importance than addressing public sector affordability.

## Response

A number of proposals in the draft Strategic Approach explored how to deliver and develop ferry services, as a key part of island transport connectivity, during a period of financial constraint. These included the proposed approaches on investment prioritisation, capacity and demand, freight and fares. These are considered further below.

As set out in the draft Strategic Approach, the delivery of the Islands Connectivity Plan, including through community needs assessments, provides an opportunity to look at how and why people use ferries, as well as fixed links, air services and onward and connecting travel taking account of the differing roles of operators, local authorities and Scottish Government. These assessments would identify options to address transport connectivity problems for island or peninsula communities that could include aviation, fixed links and onward and connecting travel, as well as ferries. The aim would be to provide reliable and resilient connectivity to essential services for local communities and other users in a cost-effective way, while supporting local authority development plans and island economic growth. Exploring the potential for improved connectivity between islands could allow for improved access to existing island-based services such as schools and medical practices thereby increasing potential demand for, and sustainability of, those island services. This would complement, and reduce reliance on, connectivity with services based on the mainland, consequentially easing current capacity pressures, particularly for vehicle deck space. This would be particularly relevant where islands are closer to other islands than they are to the mainland.

## Fares

### Issue

The most frequently made point was that RET fares should be retained, with the importance of affordability for island residents often highlighted. Some respondents suggested that fares for island residents could be reduced further.

### Response

We will continue to consider the detail of our fares proposals and confirm future plans for RET and its application in the final ICP Strategic Approach.

## Issue

The draft Strategic Approach paper highlighted a proposal for free foot passenger travel for residents who are under 22 within the Outer Hebrides, Orkney, and Shetland Island groups. There was support for this position but also calls for such a concession to be extended to cover travel between all islands and the mainland; and for ferries to provide the same access to free travel for those aged under 22 as is currently available on bus services.

## Response

We will continue to consider the detail of our fares proposals for under 22 year old island residents, including affordability to the Scottish Government, and confirm future plans in the final ICP Strategic Approach.

## Vessels and Ports – Prioritisation

### Issue

There was substantial agreement with the approach proposed in the Vessels and Ports Plan for how to prioritise investment in the CHFS and NIFS networks. Concerns were raised (as above) about the focus on reliability and resilience over other priorities, such as vehicle-deck capacity, and also with the prioritisation of services for “vulnerable” over “successful” islands. A majority of respondents were against ranking the 3 factors.

### Response

Given the high-level of support, the use of the 3 factors to inform TS prioritisation decisions for investment in CHFS and NIFS vessels and ports will be confirmed in the final version of the Vessels and Ports Plan. These 3 factors will not be ranked, which is consistent with the view of the majority of respondents. Although the factor of “communities identified as at greater risk of depopulation and economic decline” will be retained, we recognise the concern at what this could mean for vessel and port projects serving growing islands and can confirm that these projects will continue to be developed and reported on. The Vessels and Ports Plan will also retain its emphasis on planning ahead to replace vessel and port assets as they



approach asset life expiry, retaining the aim of achieving a fleet average age of 15 by the end of this decade.

The importance of vehicle-deck capacity, including for freight, is covered below and will be reiterated in the final ICP documents.

## Capacity and Demand

### Issue

The consultation report captured views that the ICP does not sufficiently seek to increase vehicle-deck capacity of ferry services and instead focuses too much on utilising the existing capacity, including by using fares and by encouraging reduced usage of personal cars for part or all of the journey. Increasing vehicle-deck capacity was seen by some respondents as important as, or more important than, the reliability and resilience of ferry services. This is in line with feedback received to the recent new Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Services contract consultation.

### Response

We will confirm Reliability and Resilience as first priority of ICP. Delivering more reliable and resilient ferry services will automatically increase available capacity on some key routes. With the introduction of larger vessels and increased services, vehicle deck capacity has already increased and planned vessel deployment and service enhancements will bring further increases during the current decade. Community needs assessments and ongoing collaboration with partners and communities will improve understanding of local community priorities and allow a more targeted appraisal of options to meet those.

CalMac's Enhancement and Change Plan includes commitments to reviewing the current deck space reservation pilot for Mull, Coll and Tiree and, if this has delivered the intended benefit, engage with other communities on potential roll-out opportunities. CalMac also plan a pilot creating dedicated vehicle-deck space for healthcare workers travelling to and from Arran and Cumbrae.

Currently, for many, but not all, islands, the only or dominant transport connection is provided by a ferry carrying passengers, vehicles and freight together. In many of those cases this will be more efficient than separating traffic into different services. However, for some communities, there is already the option of using freight-only sailings and passenger-only services by air or ferry which supplement and complement "combined" ferry services.

## Freight

### Issue

The consultation paper noted that the NZET Committee recommended reconsideration of wider policy on the provision of freight capacity on Scottish ferry routes and the point at which profitable businesses should no longer be reliant on public subsidy of their freight costs. Consultation respondents were concerned about the negative impact of freight fare increases.

### Response

We recognise concerns about the negative impact that a blanket increase in freight fares could have on small island businesses and on on-island consumer prices.

We will revise the Strategic Approach section on freight to clarify that the proposal for a different way of sharing these costs, as suggested by the NZET Committee, is not intended to increase the cost of goods for island residents, noting the potential for unintended consequences.

We will continue to explore the feasibility of this proposal as part of the planned revisit of the Freight Fares Review and set out in the final Strategic Approach how we intend to consider freight issues including meeting capacity, fares and reliability/resilience in partnership with operators and industry. This work will include consideration of the significant but time-limited freight requirements of major development projects.

## Community Voice and Transparency

### Issue

One of the more frequently raised points was that, although there have already been many surveys and consultations, those who make decisions about ferry services do not listen to communities and that requests and suggestions have not been acted upon. The most frequent suggestion was that there should be more direct, face-to-face communication with members of the community, in the form of public meetings, workshops and drop-in sessions. There was also a view that CalMac's Ferries Community Board should provide more feedback and communicate discussions directly to the communities themselves. A community representation on boards of public organisations delivering ferry services was also seen as a way to improve community voice and transparency of decision making.

## Response

We recognise that further improvements are required. We will look at ways to proactively engage with island communities. Suggestions from respondents include: visiting them, rather than asking people to attend meetings, providing opportunities for questions at engagement sessions and reaching out those who are more difficult to reach. We are keen to hear from everyone who wants to provide us with their insights and contributions. We have done so during recent face to face community visits where alongside drop-in sessions we have, through a workshop type exercise, explored three of the key themes: community voice and transparency, accessibility, and integration of ferries with onward and connecting travel.

We will be looking in detail at the suggestions provided by those who responded to the consultation and/or attended our engagement events and will include updated plans in the final Strategic Approach.

We consider that the finalised ICP vision, priorities and the Vessels and Ports Plan will provide shared and recognised direction to ferry operators and vessel owners responsible for delivery of CHFS and NIFS services. We will establish meaningful and transparent way of tracking the delivery against agreed performance indicators across all organisations.

CalMac's Enhancement and Change Plan includes a commitment to increasing the level of engagement with community members including early face to face engagement to discuss timetables and reviewing the consultation process for major service changes.

We will, through the next CHFS contract, enhance the role of the Ferries Community Board and improve awareness of it across communities and its primary purpose to be the voice of the communities.

## Accessibility

### Issue

There was strong support for an Accessibility Standard and a good number of suggestions for what this could include.

## Response

Given the strong support, the final version of the Strategic Approach will confirm this commitment and set out, in broad terms, how and when this will be developed. We have had an initial discussion with MACS and will be working together on this alongside operators, local authorities and other partners, such as Scottish Tourism Alliance, to deliver improved travel by ferry for all people in Scotland, unlock long term sustainable economic development for island communities and delivery towards wider Scotland's policies.

## Integration of services

### Issue

Encouraging island respondents to use public transport or active travel as part of their overall journey when using the ferry services was seen by some as simply not being a realistic option in their situation, due to lack of infrastructure and/or unsuitable weather. However, others pointed to more realistic options to improve usage of public transport and active travel. Benefits to islands economies from growing sustainable and ecotourism were recognised amongst the respondents. Growth of aviation services, offering lower-cost and more frequent flights connecting islands to the Scottish mainland is one way to ensure cars are to be left at home for visitors.

### Response

The final Strategic Approach will clarify that Transport Scotland's approach to car use reduction, an overall national ambition, is inclusive and flexible and there is not a requirement for all individuals to reduce their car use at the same rate or in the same way. Through the ICP Onward & Connecting Travel workstream, we will continue to promote integrated journeys, noting a wide range of suggestions from consultation respondents including: improved air services (in terms of connectivity, affordability and integration with other modes), increased support for rural and on-island bus services, increasing availability of demand responsive transport services on islands and introducing Car Clubs at ferry terminals. We will work with and invite the valuable insight of tourism organisations, local businesses and members of the community to help come up with informative, innovative and affordable solutions.

CalMac's Enhancement and Change Plan includes a commitment to developing formal partnerships with ScotRail other transport operators to enhance service integration and improve connectivity between different transport modes. Transport

Scotland will be collaborating with CalMac to put in place a transport forum for addressing timetable conflicts.

## Low carbon

### Issue

Some respondents questioned whether environmental issues are currently priority for the communities that rely on ferry services. There were calls for a realistic approach which ensures that achieving targets on emissions does not come at the expense of reliable ferry service provision. Some respondents highlighted that while broadly agreeing with Low Carbon priority, it is considered as a necessary outcome of the work that will need to be done as opposed to a high priority in its own right and should not be delivered at the cost of other three priorities.

### Response

The final Strategic Approach will restate our commitment to ferries, and island transport connectivity more widely, contributing to the Scottish Government's legal obligation to achieve net zero by 2045. We will clarify that this will not be to the detriment of our priorities of reliable and resilient, accessible, and integrated service but will be part of planned vessel and port replacement projects with appropriate specifications and targets included in the CHFS and NIFS contracts.



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