TRANSPORT SCOTLAND
CÒMHDHAIL **ALBA**

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

Summary Report

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Introduction

This summary sets out headline findings from the analysis of responses to a public consultation, along with a number of engagement events held by Transport Scotland officials, on the draft Islands Connectivity Plan: Strategic Approach and Vessels and Ports Plan. It also covers

The purpose of the Islands Connectivity Plan (ICP) is to set out how ferry services, supported by other transport modes, will be delivered, and strengthened, working towards a long-term vision, and supported by clear priorities and defined outcomes for people and places. The Strategic Approach Paper is one part of the ICP and proposes an overall strategic approach to island transport connectivity including ferries, aviation, fixed links and, especially, addressing the strategic challenges facing Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Services (CHFS) and Northern Isles Ferry Services (NIFS). Alongside the draft Strategic Approach Paper, Transport Scotland has published the updated Vessels and Ports Plan (VPP) for the CHFS and NIFS networks.

The consultation exercise on the two documents was launched on 1 February 2024 and ran until 6 May 2024, with the consultation documents available on the Scottish Government's website.

The consultation asked a mix of closed and open questions, and the summary results at the closed questions are set out below. The analysis of comments at the open questions is thematic rather than according to the answer at closed questions. This approach was taken because respondents may have raised similar points or suggestions irrespective of their answer at the closed questions. If a point was more frequently raised this will be indicated, but otherwise the focus is qualitative and on giving on overview of the types of issues raised by respondents. This approach reflects not only the relatively small and self-selecting sample, but also the nature of qualitative data of this type. For example, comments may vary considerably in both length, focus and precision. Given this diversity, it is often the case that specific points have been made by only one or a small number of respondents.

It is also important to note that an analysis of this type reflects the comments made and does not seek to verify the accuracy of those comments or make any judgment on the views expressed.

The full qualitative analysis of the comments at open questions, along with further detail on the results at the closed questions, is set out in the main consultation analysis report.

Profile of respondents

A total of 197 responses were available for analysis. The majority, 141 responses, were submitted by individual members of the public. The remaining 56 responses were submitted by organisations or groups. A majority of the individual respondents – 78% of those who answered the relevant question – said that they live on a Scottish island or peninsula the majority of the time.

It should be noted that, given the sample size, the results should be seen as indicative rather than statistically robust. Additionally, and as with any public consultation exercise, it should be noted that those responding generally have a particular interest in the subject area. Therefore, the views they express, although important in themselves, cannot necessarily be seen as representative of wider public opinion.

In addition to undertaking the online consultation, Transport Scotland held a number of engagement events. They visited 23 locations, holding a mix of discussion and drop-in events. The discussion events focused on three main themes of: community voice and transparency; accessibility; and onward and connecting travel.

Key themes of the Strategic Assessment

The draft Strategic Approach paper sets out the following key themes: community voice and transparency; reliability and resilience; accessibility; timetables, unplanned and essential travel; integration of services; capacity and demand; freight; vessels and ports; low carbon and environmental impact; ferry fares; and local authority services.

A majority of all respondents – 71% of those answering the question – thought that the key themes set out capture the main aspects of transport connectivity for island

and peninsula communities. Individuals were more likely to be supportive than organisations at 74% and 64% respectively.

Although some respondents set out why they had agreed or disagreed at the closed question, general observations were made about the importance of ferry services, the ICP or one or more of the 11 themes set out in the draft Strategic Approach Paper. There were also suggestions for changes to one or more of the themes, and/or suggested additional themes.

Respondents were most likely to suggest that 'reliability and resilience' and 'capacity and demand' are the themes that should be prioritised. However, it was also noted that priorities may vary from island to island, and that different communities may have different views on how the themes should be prioritised.

Respondents suggested a number of additional themes that should be included, with economic development, including tourism, the most frequently made suggestion.

Vision and priorities

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

A majority of all respondents – 65% of those answering the question – believed that the draft vision captures the aspirations of island and peninsula communities for their future ferry services. Organisations were more likely to be supportive than individuals, at 73% and 63% of those answering respectively.

General comments included that the vision captures the main priorities and themes for consideration in the delivery of future ferry services, with reliability or connectivity being the crucial priorities referenced. However, it was also noted that the challenge will come with delivery and, in the interest of inclusivity, it was suggested, by a small number of respondents, that the vision needs to reflect the interests of communities served not just by ferry services but also by fixed links.

Other suggestions included that, to make the vision relatable and real, it should reflect the impacts upon islanders and their communities.

In order to both ensure that the vision is the right one, and help rebuild community trust in the ferry service, there was a suggestion made to ensure that the voice of island communities is reflected in the vision and called for a shift away from communities being consulted and towards "meaningful co-design".

Draft priorities

Priority 1: reliable and resilient. Reliable and resilient ferry services that meet the needs of communities and businesses and support the transition to a well-being economy which is fair, green and growing.

Priority 2: accessible. Ferry services that are accessible and provide easy to use and affordable transport connectivity for all users.

Priority 3: integrated. Ferry services that enable sustainable and active travel choices which support our health and well-being and make our Island and other ferry dependent communities great places to live, work and visit.

Priority 4: low carbon. Ferry services that take actions to reduce the negative environmental impact of their operations and help to achieve Scotland's net-zero targets.

A majority of respondents – 59% of those answering the question – thought the four draft priorities reflect what island and peninsula communities see for their future ferry services.

Further comments often reflected themes raised at Questions 1 and 2 and included that work will be required to define communities' needs, and that priorities may differ across the islands.

There was a view that Priority 4 (low carbon) may not be a particular priority for most ferry users, and that they would not want a low carbon focus to delay improvements in service. It was suggested that the primary aim must be to get the ferry service

running properly, with Priority 4 only applicable providing it does not have a negative impact on delivering Priorities 1 (reliable and resilient) to 3 (integrated).

It was also noted that, as with the vision, delivery of the priorities will come with significant challenges which should not be under-estimated. In order to deliver the priorities there was reference to the need of retaining flexibility as well as committing to continuous improvement and investment into infrastructure which supports these services.

In addition to comments on the four proposed priorities, there were also a small number of suggestions for additional priorities to be included in the ICP. These included: capacity, as a standalone priority; accountability; community voice and transparency; providing an excellent service; sustaining population; and biosecurity.

Community voice and transparency

Respondents and event participants were asked about ways of engaging with communities and stakeholders that would benefit decision making on ferry services, including vessels and ports projects.

One of the most frequently raised points was that, although there have already been many surveys and consultations, those who make decisions about ferry services do not appear to be listening to the communities that use them, and that community requests and suggestions have not been acted upon. There was an associated view that those making decisions do not understand, or are too far removed from, the problems of living with unreliable ferry services. To rectify this, it was argued that some operator senior posts, including board members, should be island based, and that island communities should have their own representatives on operators' boards. The need for greater accountability was also highlighted with suggestions including appointment of an independent commissioner.

Going forward it was argued that further engagement must be meaningful, with a transparent process for engaging with all the communities served by the ferry infrastructure, and clear lines of communication with local communities and stakeholders. 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. Some users suggested that community engagement could be achieved by working through existing groups, including

Community Councils, Local Ferry Committees, and the Ferries Community Board, in the CHFS area.

The importance of acknowledging suggestions from consultees and of follow-up communication to explain how the decisions are being/have been made were seen as important; both providing greater transparency in relation to operational matters and allowing consultees to understand how their feedback was considered and addressed.

Accessibility

Transport Scotland proposes introducing an accessibility standard that would be in addition to the legal requirements and could act as guidance for all ferry services. A substantial majority of respondents – 89% of those answering the question – thought that an accessibility standard is a good idea. This rose to 91% of organisations.

Those who thought that an accessibility standard is a good idea sometimes commented that, in 2024, it should be a given that ferry services are accessible for those with particular needs. However, a number of respondents, including individuals and community council respondents, highlighted some of the problems that they, or members of their community, encounter when attempting to use ferry services. Event participants also shared their experiences, which included wheelchair users being unable to access waiting rooms, including the toilets, or move around on car decks.

Although generally still agreeing that an accessibility standard should be introduced, some respondents did comment on what may be appropriate or realistic in the short to medium term. In particular, there were concerns that failing to meet any new accessibility standard should not lead to vessels being taken out of service.

In terms of its contents, one of the more frequently made suggestions was that engagement and co-production should be at the heart of producing any standard. Staff awareness and training were also seen as vital, with well trained staff key to delivering good quality support and assistance.

There were a number of suggestions about aspects of ports and vessels that could be made more accessible. For example, in relation to boarding and disembarking, there were calls for weatherproof shelters and accessible boarding ramps. There

were also suggestions relating to clear and accessible communication and booking systems.

Reliability and resilience

A substantial majority of respondents – 88% of those answering the question – agreed that the first priority of the ICP should be to improve reliability and increase the resilience of ferry services.

Many respondents and event participants gave examples of how unreliable services can, or have, impacted on their lives, with reports of people having difficulties in attending medical appointments, social and family events, education sessions and business appointments. As well as the impact on the day-to-day life of people living on the islands, it was also noted that periods of disruption have created problems for hauliers and have also had a significant impact on tourism to a number of islands, with a lack of resilience, reliability and capacity not only depriving island economies of visitor spending but also causing reputational damage. Respondents also highlighted a number of major development projects planned and noted that these will require a reliable freight service.

Although sometimes agreeing with the importance of reliability and resilience, some respondents did point to other changes or improvements that could help increase transport-related resilience overall. This included looking to new or improved fixed links, including tunnels, as well as opportunities for improving air services.

In terms of other priorities that may be as or more important than reliability and resilience, respondents were most likely to refer to increasing capacity.

Other suggestions included that the quality of the customer service, accountability, sustainable and integrated travel, or environmental sustainability are as or more important than reliability and resilience.

Timetable, essential and urgent travel

In relation to travelling with a vehicle, most of the suggestions were focused on accessing spaces under certain circumstances and generally at short notice. There was reference to emergency or urgent travel spaces being made available for:

islanders attending medical appointments; key workers; and people travelling with a vehicle for business-critical needs, including those relating to urgent maintenance and repair work.

Some respondents favoured reserving a proportion of spaces on each crossing for emergency or essential travel, with the spaces then released if not needed. Other comments pointed to some form of general priority reservation or booking system for island residents, essential service providers or emergency vehicles. There were also references to waitlisting, including that there needs to be a fair way of allocating spaces that become available.

Integration of services

In relation to encouraging respondents to use public transport or active travel as part of their overall journey when using the ferry services, many of those answering commented on the barriers that they and others face in terms of using public transport or active travel. Although a small number reported that they already use public transport when viable options are available, most explained that it simply is not a realistic prospect for them. It was sometimes noted that this applies particularly to the island side of a crossing and, in particular, to anyone living outside the immediate port community.

The most frequently made point was that public transport systems, particularly on the islands, are simply not good enough – in terms of coverage, frequency or reliability – to enable people to leave their cars behind. It was also reported that those travelling with luggage, children or pets, and those with mobility issues, are not well catered for currently.

Many of the comments emphasised the importance of an integrated transport network and the vital role that reliable and well-connected public transport can play. It was suggested that many people would be willing to reduce their car use when travelling by ferry, but only if alternatives are convenient and cost-effective, and that this will require co-ordination and investment.

Along with generally improved services, co-ordinated timetabling of ferry, bus and train timetables was seen as vital, with minimum wait times and sufficient capacity ensuring that switching between different modes of travel is not only viable in terms of journey times, but also reliable.

Another focus for respondents was the potential to better support customer journeys, including their experience of using public transport, by improving integration at ferry terminals. There was reference to ensuring that ferry terminals are easily accessible by public transport, as well as having better car parking facilities.

The other frequently raised issue was the potential of an improved ticketing system, and in particular a system which would allow people to book and buy a through ticket. There were concerns that the new CalMac booking system is not integrated with other service providers, and it was suggested that a review would be in order, especially since some island communities have highlighted the difficulties associated with booking ferry travel.

As noted earlier, some respondents did not see active travel as an option for them, and others noted the challenges, such as inclement weather and distances to and from ports, that would make active travel unappealing or impractical. Nevertheless, a number of respondents did comment on how active travel modes, such as walking and cycling, could be made a more viable and attractive option for accessing ferry services. There were calls for continued investment in infrastructure to create safe cycle and walking routes, including creating dedicated cycle routes on islands.

Capacity and demand

A majority of respondents – 69% of those answering the question – agreed with the approach set out for dealing with ferry capacity due to increased demand. Organisations were more likely to be in agreement than individuals, at 73% and 67% respectively.

There were references to the planned approach looking like a good solution, and support for having a better understanding of capacity issues. However, it was also noted that extra capacity has been mooted for a number of years without apparent progress, and that it would not be acceptable to leave things unchanged.

For some respondents, the solution lay in increasing capacity, rather than seeking to manage demand. However, there was an alternative view that the focus should be on optimising current capacity rather than necessarily increasing it.

Community Needs Assessments

In terms of how the Assessments should be framed, suggestions included that enabling community involvement in the design and delivery will be critical to success, and that they should be based on metrics and assessment criteria defined in close partnership with island communities across Scotland.

In relation to the focus of the Assessments, suggestions included that they should include a measure for constrained/unmet demand for each route, so as to fully reflect current and future community needs.

Using existing and planned capacity better

Irrespective of their views on extra capacity being required, many respondents thought there are opportunities to use existing and planned capacity better, with a number of suggestions made. These included that engagement with islanders and communities needs to be meaningful, incentivising hauliers to travel on off-peak sailings and running freight only services.

Existing pinch points

A general point made by a local authority respondent was that pinch points need to be identified across all ferry services which are fully revenue funded by Scottish Government, not just the CHFS and NIFS networks; it was suggested that an 'Islands Connectivity Plan' needs to consider this aspect of connectivity for all islands.

In addition to looking at current pinch points, respondents highlighted the importance of looking to the future and, in particular, to economic developments that will require capacity and resilience to be improved. Examples given included a number of major infrastructure schemes, including offshore and onshore wind, along with the whisky and aquaculture sectors.

Freight

The consultation paper noted that the Scottish Parliament's Net Zero Emission Transport (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.

For many respondents, the overriding issues were that any approach should not increase costs in a way that undermines local businesses and, by extension, the local economy, or result in even higher prices for island residents. Given its critical role, it was suggested that the ferry service should not be viewed as a profit-generating enterprise but as warranting a level of public subsidy that ensures the long-term viability of freight ferry services.

While there was occasional support for the status quo, most respondents were looking for some form of increased public subsidy for freight, with the most frequently made point that RET fares should apply to freight. Associated points included that this would bring significant economic and social benefit, including because high supply costs for businesses act as a brake on business development. Some respondents also addressed the consultation's reference to profitable businesses, including by suggesting that some businesses are only profitable because subsidised ferry fares enable them to compete with companies on the mainland.

Vessels and ports

Transport Scotland is proposing that the following factors are taken into consideration when making decisions on prioritisation:

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

A majority of respondents – 78% of those answering the question – agreed that the factors set out are the right ones to consider when making decisions on prioritisation.

Organisations were more likely to agree than individuals, at 85% and 75% respectively.

The issue of funding and investment was raised, with concerns about references to budget constraints; while it was recognised that the current financial environment is challenging, it was also noted that it is not just about national budgets, but about impact on communities, including those for whom ferries are lifeline services. Equally, the risk of having to prioritise lifeline services in the short term at the expense of long-term sustainability was highlighted, with planning and investment around vessels and ports described as the most fundamental part of the ICP.

In terms of the three factors (as above), respondents were most likely to comment on communities identified as at greater risk of depopulation and economic decline. When looking at depopulation, it was seen as important to consider not only total population but also the demographic structure, such as loss of young people and an ageing population. Good connectivity was seen as vital to supporting population growth, including by retaining young people and attracting those of working age.

While most of those commenting on depopulation were looking to see it halted or reversed, there were also a small number of queries about whether this is a sensible or reasonable priority. Comments included that the approach could hold back areas that are currently growing and that, where economic decline and depopulation is already taking place, ferry services will be far from the only issue.

A majority of respondents – 59% of those answering the question – did not think that the factors set out should be ranked. Those who did not favour ranking were most likely say that the factors were all of equal importance, and sometimes also that they are fundamentally linked and need to be considered as a whole. There were also references to priorities needing to be assessed on a case-by-case basis, reflecting the needs of different communities.

Some of those who did support a ranking approach went on to suggest a range of possible ranking orders. They were most likely to suggest the order currently set out is the right one; maintaining and increasing reliability and resilience (Factor 1); providing the primary transport connection required for the sustainability of each community (Factor 2); followed by a focus on depopulation and economic decline (Factor 3).

Low carbon and environmental impact

A Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) will be carried out on the overall ICP to ensure that environmental and sustainability aspects are captured and considered in the development of policies and plans.

In terms of the SEA, some respondents questioned whether environmental issues are currently a top 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.

In relation to issues to be included in the SEA, the importance of reducing carbon emissions, along with moving to renewable energy sources were the most frequently identified. With respect to decarbonisation of vessel operation, there were references to potential for use of renewable energy – both electricity and green hydrogen – as power sources, with scope to use locally-generated energy highlighted. Other suggestions covered: carbon emissions associated with port operations; carbon emissions associated with the whole journey of service users; flood risk and coastal erosion; air quality; water quality; noise; biodiversity; waste management; landscape and cultural heritage impacts; and cumulative impacts.

With regard to how ferry services can contribute to the reduction of carbon emissions, themes raised included: improved operational efficiency; cleaner fuels; vessel design and size; freight related issues; action on electric vehicles; encouraging use of public transport and active travel; and building fixed links.

Ferry fares - the current RET principles

A key aim of the Road Equivalent Tariff (RET) system of fares was to allow ferry users to pay a fixed element plus a rate per mile travelled, which is linked to the cost of the equivalent journey length by road in a private vehicle. The three key principles of RET are: simplicity and transparency; comparability and consistency; and public sector affordability versus community sustainability.

A majority of respondents – 66% of those answering the question – agreed with retaining the current RET principles as the basis of a ferry fares structure.

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.

Some respondents who disagreed with retaining the current RET principles referenced the potential to introduce different levels of fares, for example calling for RET fares to be available only for island residents.

Other respondents highlighted the unintended consequences arising from RET fares, such as increased use of private vehicles creating capacity constraints on some routes; potential loss of business for island shops in such cases where it is cheaper for residents to shop on the mainland; as well as busier roads on islands adding to the pressure on local authority budgets for maintenance.

Few respondents commented specifically on the principle regarding simplicity and transparency although it was suggested that initiatives to standardise and simplify fare structures would be welcome.

With respect to comparability and consistency, there were views that RET fares should be applied to all routes, notably to the Northern Isles where both residents and visitors are perceived to currently face higher travel costs.

Most respondents who commented on the third principle emphasised the importance of community sustainability or argued that affordability for residents – and hence community sustainability – should be of greater importance than public sector affordability.

Fares structure

A majority of respondents – 74% of those answering the question – agreed with the option to create different levels of fares for different types of users, such as island and non-island residents. Individuals were more likely to agree than organisations, at 79% and 58% respectively.

Among respondents who supported different levels of fares for different types of users, the most frequent comments related to the possibility of an island resident fare, with reasons for supporting this option including the high cost of living on islands, and the lifeline nature of the service. In contrast it was argued that using the

ferry service is a choice for visitors, who will generally make only one return journey and can probably afford to pay more. However, there were also suggestions that fares for visitors must remain affordable to ensure the tourism economy is not damaged.

Among respondents who did not support different levels of fares for different types of users, the most frequent comments were that such an approach would be difficult to define and complicated to enforce. Some respondents highlighted potential alternatives to different fares for different types of users, including a frequent user scheme, either as a season ticket or books of discounted tickets.

The draft Strategic Assessment paper proposed 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.

In terms of which groups should be eligible for islander fares, respondents were asked to select as many options as they wished from seven options. Overall, 90% of respondents chose 'Permanent residents' (almost all of those who made a choice other than 'None'), with 81% supporting eligibility for 'Island residents who are currently students and living at mainland addresses during term-time'. There was lower, but approximately equal support for 'People who work but do not live on islands' and 'Service providers' at 54% and 52% respectively, followed by 29% support for 'nominated friends and family' and only 8% in favour of islander fares being available to second homeowners.

A majority of respondents – 59% of those answering the question – agreed with a fares structure that both encourages passengers to travel without a private vehicle and incentivises travel at quieter periods.

Although there was support in principle for encouraging travel without a private vehicle, the most frequent comments concerned availability of public transport or connectivity between ferry services and other modes of transport. For some the absence of adequate public transport in rural areas or lack of integration between different forms of public transport were seen as making travel without private cars

impractical for most people, and as a reason for disagreeing with the proposed fares structure.

Points in support of incentivising travel at quieter periods included that variable pricing is a sensible way to try to encourage better use of quieter services, but that encouraging travel at quieter times should not be achieved by increasing fares on busier sailings. It was suggested that it would be unfair to penalise those who need to travel at a particular time – for example for work.

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