

Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity
Ministear an Àiteachais agus Ceangal
Jim Fairlie MSP
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Councillor Daniel Hampsey
Chair of the Cowal Transport Forum
By Email:
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13 March 2025

Dear Daniel,

I appreciated the recent opportunity to meet with you, other councillors and members of the Cowal Transport Forum to discuss the future of the Gourock-Dunoon passenger ferry service. I have carefully considered the views of Forum members alongside feedback from the public engagements on this matter and advice from Transport Scotland that drew together evidence from the community needs assessment report, the user survey and feedback from communities and stakeholders.

I have now approved a recommendation from Transport Scotland to remove 3 return sailings a day, of the 30 currently scheduled. This is necessary to address identified over-provision and ensure that the service complies with subsidy control requirements. Future service provision will therefore balance legal compliance with meeting identified travel needs. Transport Scotland considered the other options set out in the report alongside the user survey and feedback evidence. These options were for more substantial service reductions, such as an hourly service all day or ending services after 8pm; the negative impacts of these would have been significant and could not have been easily mitigated and were therefore not recommended.

I have not made this decision lightly and I recognise that there will be concerns about its impacts. I also appreciate that there are likely to be people who will lose a sailing at their preferred travel time. To minimise any impacts, I have therefore asked CalMac to identify lesser-used off-peak sailings as possible options for removal. I have also asked them to take into account the availability of local public transport that would allow for alternative connectivity for foot passengers via Western Ferries, recognising that this will require longer journey times but could mitigate the loss of these direct passenger ferry crossings. These considerations, along with crew consultation, will allow CalMac to identify options which can then be discussed with the community to identify the most appropriate for service removals. The aim is to start this community engagement around mid-April and, taking account of the

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Easter break, conclude it within about a month so that a final decision can be reached before Summer.

The Scottish Government remains committed to the Gourock Dunoon passenger ferry route. The needs assessment report and other evidence has confirmed that the passenger ferry service is required to meet identified needs, with a high use by commuters alongside use for health, social and other reasons, and forms part of an integrated public transport network including the important connection with trains to Glasgow. Compared to other CalMac ferry routes, the service has a high frequency which means that many sailings outwith commuting times are lightly used. The route has experienced poor reliability which has led to a lack of confidence and it is acknowledged that this will have suppressed user numbers. Nevertheless, there remains a dedicated user base which continues to rely on it for their travel needs.

I know reliability is a key issue for passengers: this was recognised in the needs assessment report and was a clear message received through public and stakeholder engagement. Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd (CMAL) is leading a vessel replacement project alongside plans for upgrade works by CMAL at Gourock and by Argyll & Bute Council at Dunoon. My decision on service levels clarifies the future service requirement which will help inform the business case for those investments. Addressing the reliability issue will, when delivered, bring benefits to current passengers and is expected to attract additional patronage, supporting the positive developments taking place in Dunoon and Cowal.

I welcome the work you and the Cowal Transport Forum are doing to promote public transport connectivity in the area including through the recent changes to timetables to improve connections with rail services. I would welcome the opportunity to meet with the Forum again, following the community engagement, before a final decision is taken on which services are removed from the timetable.

I hope you find this information helpful and look forward to discussing further when we meet again.

Yours sincerely,



JIM FAIRLIE

Copied to:

Jenni Minto MSP
Stuart McMillan MSP
Jackie Baillie MSP
Pippa Milne, Chief Executive, Argyll & Bute Council
Louise Long, Chief Executive, Inverclyde Council
Duncan Mackison, Chief Executive, CalMac Ferries Ltd
Kevin Hobbs, Chief Executive, Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd
Gordon Ross, Managing Director, Western Ferries
Angus Campbell, Chair, Ferries Community Board (CHFS)

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