The Sleat Transport Forum

Response to CalMac Ferries Ltd. October 2015

The Sleat Transport Forum representing a range of bodies on Sleat has expressed dismay at the proposals from CalMac Ferries Ltd (CFL) for significant amendments to ferry services on the Mallaig-Armadale route with effect from March 2016. The Forum convened on Monday to discuss the new schedule and considered representations from ferry users and community interests. It is calling for an urgent meeting with CalMac management to review and revise the proposals. Given the expected dramatic rise in vehicle and passenger traffic, including coaches, due to the introduction of the 'Road Equivalent Tariff' on the route, the CalMac proposals fall far short of what is required. The proposed deployment of a two vessel service with significant differences in capacity, customer facilities, journey times and reliability is viewed as a backward step for the communities of Sleat, Skye, Mallaig and Lochaber. Among the concerns voiced in Sleat are the withdrawal of the MV Coruisk, the vessel built specifically for the Armadale-Mallaig service, its replacement by a much smaller, slower vessel and a drastic reduction in capacity on the service on Sunday.

The main points emerging from discussions at the Transport Forum are as follows:

1. The proposed deployment of the MV Lochinvar is **unacceptable** for the Mallaig-Armadale service. The vessel’s capacity of 23 cars operating six services each way Monday to Saturday will not meet the expected demand in summer 2016. The vessel has a maximum speed of 9 knots as against 14 for the present vessel, resulting in an increased journey time of 40 minutes, provides no customer refreshment facilities on board enjoyed currently on the MV Coruisk, will be subject to localised tidal conditions, and importantly will not provide the capacity for coaches, on which a number of tourism businesses in Skye heavily rely. **The Forum will not support the introduction of the MV Lochinvar on this route under any circumstances**.
2. The schedule presented by CalMac for Sunday sailings using the MV Lochinvar presents an unacceptable reduction in capacity offered for the route. The MV Coruisk can accommodate 40 cars per sector making of total of 240 spaces on the present schedule of 6 sailings per day. The MV Lochinvar with its much reduced capacity of 23 cars with six crossings on a Sunday would result in a capacity of 138 spaces, down 102 from that currently enjoyed on the present vessel, a massive reduction for this route. We note that the last departure from Mallaig under the proposed schedule is at 1700, whereas the departure currently is 1800. The earlier time is not acceptable. as it does not allow for suitable road and rail transport connections.
3. It is proposed that the Monday-Saturday six crossings per day each way will be supplemented by the larger MV Lord of the Isles. This would provide 4 crossings each day slotted in between the MV Lochinvar schedule. The revised timetable offers the use of this vessel whilst on downtime in its proposed new daily year-round service from Lochboisdale to Mallaig. This would see an arrival daily in Mallaig at 1000 and a departure to Lochboisdale at 1810. The Forum is concerned that whilst the utilisation of the larger capacity vessel on the route providing four round trip sectors each day (Mon-Sat only) is to be welcomed, there is a potential likelihood of service delays or cancellations on the daily Lochboisdale-Mallaig sector which could result in the non-availability of the vessel to operate its planned four daily crossings under the proposed scheme. Should this occur the route on some days would be required to operate with the MV Lochinvar as a single vessel resulting in an unacceptable capacity issue for passengers, coaches and other vehicles.
4. The Forum is very much aware that the current fleet operated by the Company has a complexity that does create constraints in the varying areas that vessels serve and no further vessels will be available on the network until 2018. It is to be welcomed that Company is seeking new ways to increase fleet utilisation and to attempt to satisfy local aspirations from various communities as published in the Final Ferries Review of December 2012.
5. The Ferries Plan suggested that the Mallaig Armadale route would be expected to remain at 2013 levels, with no planned fleet or schedule changes. Year on year growth on that sector has been exponential with 228k pax in summer 2013, 49k cars, 2,200 coaches, an overall increase by 9.73% (pax) and 4.92% (cars) as against summer 2012. We believe that the Company does not collate statistics for unmet demand and this is known to be substantial.
6. **The Sleat Forum proposes the following revision to the schedule as advised to us by the Company on 22nd September.**
* **Retention** of the MV Coruisk on the Mallaig-Armadale route operating in its current form for the duration of the summer season with a minimum of 8 services per day Monday-Saturday and an increase to 7 on Sundays.
* Utilisation of the MV Lord of the Isles as advised to us to operate a minimum 4 crossings per day in the downtime at Mallaig from the Lochboisdale service. This to include additional sailings from Mallaig to Armadale on a Sunday to supplement the MV Coruisk as referred to above. That would require the Sunday departure from Mallaig to Lochboisdale to fall into line with the Monday to Saturday timetable.
* In the event of service cancellations or delays by the MV Lord of the Isles the Mallaig- Armadale sector would enjoy at least the level of capacity offered on the route in summer 2015. This, however, will still create significant capacity issues as a result of RET and current unmet demand but represents a more acceptable compromise than if the MV Lochinvar were to be deployed.
* It is of some concern that the MV Lord of the Isles is more than 26 years old and was deployed on the route to Armadale from Mallaig up to August 2003 when the purpose-built Coruisk was introduced.
* We have examined the capacity statistics of the options proposed as against the current schedule and these can be made available if required.
* Further factors that need to be considered are the infrastructure at both ports, congestion at Mallaig with a single linkspan, and the possibility of the MV Lord of the Isles being required elsewhere to act as a relief vessel covering service failures. This list is not exhaustive.
* The Forum is anxious to ensure that the ferry timetable fully integrates with bus and train connections at both mainland and island terminals.

The Sleat Transport Forum suggests that the alternative proposals outlined above offer an acceptable solution for the highly popular Mallaig–Armadale route. The crossing has in recent years been recognised internationally as one of the best ferry sailings in the world and the CalMac traffic statistics have seen a continual growth in vehicle and passenger numbers, which in 2016 **will** increase dramatically. The businesses, organisations and individuals that the Sleat Transport Forum represents view the proposals by the Company for 2016 as a retrograde step for the route and cannot accept the plan in its current form. We are willing to work with CalMac and partner public transport organisations, agencies and others to achieve a schedule that is acceptable to all concerned. We would further wish to emphasise that these changes not only affect the Sleat community, but that of Lochaber and Mallaig, the Isle of Skye, the West Coast and further afield to the Western Isles. We look forward to an early consultation with representatives of the Company.

Rob Ware

Secretary, Sleat Transport Forum

1st October 2015