**The Sleat Transport Forum**

**Ferry Service Mallaig-Armadale Winter 2016**

**Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to petition Transport Scotland and CalMac Ferries Ltd/the Operator[[1]](#footnote-1) for improvements to the ferry service from Mallaig to Armadale with effect from the winter season 2016 on 24th October. This is as a result of recently agreed schedules for the summer 2016 timetable which will see a significant change in operation and vessels deployed from the previous summer schedule which, potentially, creates opportunities for the winter service on the route.

The Sleat Transport Forum represents community interest groups, ferry users, businesses and organisations in the Sleat peninsula of Skye, with a remit to lobby for improvements to all modes of public transport and related infrastructure.

**Background**

Following the Minister for Transport and Islands’ Statement on 22nd September announcing a review of a number of Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Services(CHFS) summer routes, an extended community and public consultation was undertaken by CalMac which concluded in January 2016. Proposals by Transport Scotland and CFL for the Mallaig-Armadale route were vigorously challenged by the Sleat Transport Forum during that period citing that the timetable being proposed for the route, which included the deployment of no less than three vessels during the summer peak, was a downgrade of the service previously offered in summer 2015. A Capacity Analysis paper[[2]](#footnote-2), produced by the Forum comparing the two summer seasons, proved beyond any doubt that, vehicle capacity available in 2016 is, in real terms, significantly less. Despite continuing opposition to the new schedules the Forum recognised that it was necessary for the new timetable for the route be ratified as soon as possible and this was confirmed in January 2016. The revised timetable was subsequently published on-line and printed copies of the CHFS timetable are now widely available. The use of alternative vessels in summer 2016 presents an opportunity for significant improvements to the winter schedule on the Mallaig-Armadale route both in terms of capacity and frequency. This is a long-held aspiration of the Sleat community with clear economic and social benefits as will be described later in this paper.

**Proposal for Winter 2016**

The key elements of the revised summer timetable include the deployment of the ‘MV Lochinvar’, one of the fleet of Hybrid vessels with a maximum vehicle capacity of 23 PCUs.[[3]](#footnote-3) The vessel was built specifically for the Tarbert-Portavadie route and will be re-located to Mallaig for 25th March 2016. The Forum understands that the MCA Classification for the ‘Lochinvar’ will allow the use of the ship year-round on this sector. The use of a year-round vessel dedicated to the Mallaig-Armadale service will provide a consistency of service, albeit with minimal customer service facilities. The deck capacity offered by the ‘Lochinvar’ is 65% higher than the current vessel on the route, the ‘MV Loch Nevis’. [[4]](#footnote-4)

The Forum proposes that the ‘Lochinvar’ be used as the dedicated winter vessel with a minimum of four rotations per day Monday-Saturday and a minimum of three on Sundays. An aspirational timetable for these rotations is shown in Appendix 1 below. This is subject to further discussion between the Operator, Transport Scotland and the communities that benefit from the Mallaig-Armadale sector year-round.

It is recognised that the ‘Lochinvar’ will be subject, at times, to low-tide restrictions at Armadale which were experienced in the Spring of 2014 when its sister ship ‘MV Hallaig’ was temporarily deployed on the Mallaig-Armadale route[[5]](#footnote-5). On these occasions the continuing deployment of the ‘Loch Nevis’ at Mallaig will allow the rescheduling of that vessel to provide some operational cover for the Hybrid.

The deployment of the ‘Lochinvar’ as the single vessel for the Mallaig-Armadale winter service will allow (other than annual ‘off-route’ maintenance and tidal substitution), the ‘Loch Nevis’ to provide a much improved service to the Small Isles, communities that have seen significant development in recent years, including the increasing popularity of day and short-break visitors. It is known that CalMac are keen to promote the Small Isles services both for the community and the evolving tourism market.

The Forum believes that the use of the ‘Lochinvar’, (or possibly the newly constructed ‘MV Catriona’) will bring a host of benefits to the communities of Sleat and Skye, Mallaig and Lochaber, and these are outlined in the following section. It has always been recognised that the route across the Sound of Sleat is part of the wider west-coast network and has experienced overall year-on-year growth since 2007. This is demonstrated in the carrying statistics for the sector shown below.[[6]](#footnote-6) It can be seen that for 2015[[7]](#footnote-7) the data for passenger, cars and coaches show the highest totals so far from the information readily available in the public domain. The Forum has no information relating to the varying totals during this period for commercial vehicles, but it is evident that with increased capacity and frequency there is a clear opportunity to attract more commercial vehicles during the winter season.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| MLG-ARM | Passengers | Cars | Coaches | C/Vs |
| 2015 | 247,613 | 54,927 | 2,289 | 382 |
| 2014 | 239,453 | 53,156 | 2,106 | TBC |
| 2013 | 237,445 | 52,360 | 2,103 | 440 |
| 2012 | 217,274 | 50,324 | 1,740 | 410 |
| 2011 | 220,782 | 52,441 | 1,615 | 306 |
| 2010 | 212,417 | 51,853 | 1,499 | 416 |
| 2009 | 208,840 | 54,330 | 1,194 | 431 |
| 2008 | 187,507 | 46,597 | 1,227 | 676 |
| 2007 | 190,557 | 46,941 | 1,303 | 391 |

**Benefits**

The use of a dedicated vessel for the route year-round presents a range of opportunities for the communities that economically and socially depend on the Mallaig-Armadale route. The list of benefits shown below is not exhaustive, but highlights the long-held aspiration by organisations, businesses (including tourism providers) and ferry users in Sleat, Skye, Mallaig and Lochaber.

* Additional capacity and frequency of service offers a much improved product than that offered at present
* A significant proportion of passengers in the winter travel to and from the Central Belt: revising and improving schedules will allow southbound customers to depart Skye, for example, at lunchtime so as to arrive in daylight hours
* Tourism providers welcome the opportunity to offer a year-round product, currently restricted by a lack of frequency, and at times, capacity, utilising the existing vessel
* Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, Scotland’s National Centre for Gaelic Language and Culture in Sleat is the largest private employer in Skye, with a significant number of its staff and students using the ferry to and from Mallaig year-round. The College continues to develop its Conference business out of season, using its own and local accommodation, which bring major economic benefits to the community as a whole
* The College hosts a number of ‘tuition weekends’ throughout the year and which would increase in popularity and frequency as a result of an improved winter service
* Armadale Castle & Gardens is the second largest private employer on Skye - a growing, year-round business which employs 24 FTE’s, dependent on robust transport links incorporating the ferry service for its continued success and development.
* The road network north of Fort William to Skye is often subject to adverse weather conditions during the winter, which includes the A82/A887/A87 corridor, with the number of closures of the Skye Bridge significantly increasing in recent years. Increased frequency on the Mallaig-Armadale route will provide a shorter and safer alternative route in snow and icy driving conditions and in cases of road closures north of Fort William.
* Confidence in the operation of the ferry service will ensure a greater use during the winter months. It is important that public transport schedules are co-ordinated with ferry times
* The development of the Kilbeg Village project in Sleat will see an additional 100 homes built over the next 15-20 years
* The Highland Council is currently renewing the West Highlands and Islands Local Plan, and early indications are that growth in Sleat and South Skye will gather pace in the coming years, continuing the significant development in the past 10 years
* Use of the ferry when travelling south from Skye saves around 50 miles of driving as against via the Skye Bridge. Increased use of the ferry in the winter will reduce the number of vehicles using the principal road route to Skye
* It was recently announced that, in due course, a new hospital will be built in Fort William replacing the 150 years old ‘Belford Hospital’. Patients that that have appointments will use the ferry service more if frequency is improved during the winter. The introduction of RET will see more people use the service for both health appointments, shopping and leisure activity in Fort William and beyond whereas at present many of them have to travel the longer journey to Inverness
* With an average crossing time of 40 minutes the Forum will continue to press for the introduction of improved customer facilities on the Hybrid vessel, including tea/coffee and snacks using vending facilities
* It has been noted that due to the operational constraints of the current winter vessel, ‘MV Loch Nevis’ vehicles are required to reverse on to the ship at both Armadale and Mallaig. Whilst not a major issue, comments have been made about some drivers (particularly foreign visitors) being reluctant to use the current service because of this ‘challenge’.

**Conclusion**

A much improved winter service on the Mallaig-Armadale route is vital for the continuing economic prosperity of South Skye and for the communities of Mallaig and Lochaber and will add to the growth that has been experienced in recent years. The full effects of RET have yet to be assessed but it is expected that in Summer 2016 there will a marked increase in demand on the route, despite capacity restrictions in the ‘shoulder’ periods from March to June and from late August to October. Capacity in the peak summer months, utilising three vessels, still only provides an additional 5 PCUs per direction per day, far from the ‘significant increase in capacity’ that has been claimed in recent weeks by Transport Scotland Ferries Division and the Transport Minister’s office.

Whilst the now finalised summer 2016 timetable remains flawed in the Forum’s view, every effort will be made to work with the CalMac to ensure the operation runs successfully. It is a natural development, especially in light of the benefits from RET, that long-held aspirations for improvements to the winter schedule can now be realised given the re-deployment of the Hybrid vessel which will provide greater capacity, frequency and operational integrity. The Forum has welcomed the recent marketing support being offered by CalMac and comprehensive meetings have already taken place.

The Sleat Transport Forum looks forward to working with officials from Transport Scotland and the Operator to realise these improvements effective from October 2016.

**Appendix 1**

Indicative Schedule (excluding public holidays and annual dry-dock maintenance)

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Depart Mallaig | Arrive Armadale | Depart Armadale | Arrival Mallaig | PCUs |
| 0810 | 0850 | 0900 | 0940 | 23 |
| 1140 | 1220 | 1230 | 1310 | 23 |
| 1400 | 1440 | 1450 | 1520 | 23 |
| 1800 | 1840 | 1850 | 1930 | 23 |
| 0810 | 0850 | 0900 | 0940 | 23 |
| 1350 | 1430 | 1440 | 1520 | 23 |
| 1810 | 1850 | 1900 | 1940 | 23 |

Key : ’MV Lochinvar’ or other hybrid vessel

Red= Monday to Saturday w.e.f. 24th October 2016 to 31st March 2017

Blue=Sunday w.e.f 30th October 2016 to 26th March 2017

No service 25th/26th December and 1st/2nd January 2017

This draft schedule is designed to co-ordinate with current rail departures and arrivals at Mallaig and is based on the winter 15/16 timetable.

Note: This is a draft timetable very much subject to further discussion but is believed to be a realistic proposal for Winter 2016, subject to the regulatory, commercial and financial approvals. The Forum will welcome any comments from any party to assess this proposal further.

Rob Ware, Secretary for the Sleat Transport Forum, 19th Feb 2016

1. It is recognised that as the Winter 2016 period falls within the period of the new CHFS contract any agreement made in principle will be subject to ratification with the successful bidder and Transport Scotland [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://s3.spanglefish.com/s/19168/documents/calmac-summer-timetable-2016-capacity-analysis-mallaig-armadale-v-2015-26-01-16.xlsx [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Passenger Car Units-a unit representing an average sized car for the use in deck capacity [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. MV Loch Nevis principally deployed on the Small Isles route with max PCU of 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Operated as a result of damage to the ‘Coruisk’ at Dunoon, March 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.calmac.co.uk/corporate/carrying-statistics> and Alan Redhead 16/2/2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 1st January to 31st December 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)