**The Sleat Transport Forum**

Further Response to CalMac Ferries Ltd 5th January 2016

The Sleat Transport Forum (STF) represents community interest groups, businesses, organisations, residents and ferry users in the Sleat peninsula in the south of Skye.

**Background**

The Minister for Transport and Islands’ Statement on 22nd September 2015 charged CalMac Ferries Ltd (CFL) to initiate a community engagement process across the Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Services (CHFS) network on proposals for major timetable changes which would take effect in the summer season of 2016. Furthermore, it was indicated by CFL that community responses were required by the 7th of October, *just* 15 days from the date of that announcement. It is generally accepted that the changes to the timetables as presented to the Forum on 22nd September were the most significant in more than 30 years, with major vessel, capacity and schedule amendments affecting many communities. The Forum regarded the time frame offered by CalMac to consider, review and propose options across the communities involved was completely unrealistic and an indication that the Minister’s announcement was simply a public relations exercise. It has clearly transpired that the process of consultation was largely a paper exercise as we believe that the decisions on vessel deployment, capacity and service levels had, in fact, been decided prior to the Minister’s Statement. This applies, particularly in the case in the Mallaig-Armadale route, to which this Response principally refers.

Within eight days of the Minister’s Statement the Forum submitted a detailed Response on the proposals for the new timetable, considering the implications of the schedule, and offering an alternative option that involved the retention of the ‘MV Coruisk’. This would be supplemented by four rotations from Mallaig to Armadale of the ‘MV Lord of the Isles’ whilst on ‘down-time’ from its proposed Lochboisdale-Mallaig service. **The objective of the Forum is to ensure transport links including ferry services meet the needs of residents, business and tourists. These proposals do not.** A copy of the Forum’s initial Response on 1st October is attached to this correspondence. The Forum repeatedly requested an urgent meeting with CalMac officials to review and discuss the significant changes to the timetable. Our statement at the time was ‘*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*.’

Despite being among the first community organisations to formally respond in writing to the changes offered by CFL, at no time have we ever received a written acknowledgment to our Response of 1st October. This is considered ‘shameful’ and was compounded by the fact that numerous attempts made to seek an urgent meeting, some through Martin Dorchester’s own office, were ignored. Treating the community in this way is nothing short of disdainful and further suggests the decision to re-deploy the ‘Coruisk’ to the Oban-Craignure route had been taken many months before. This, in our view, suggests that the exercise in community consultation was only ever intended to ensure the appropriate ‘tick in the box’ for the Ferries Division of Transport Scotland (TS). Members of the Forum attended the ‘CalMac Travel and Tourism Conference’ in Oban on 13th October and took time to brief Martin Dorchester and Operations Director Drew Collier on the serious concerns about the Mallaig-Armadale proposals, but again attempts to seek an urgent meeting came to nothing. Two members of the Forum attended the Skye, Small Isles and Lochaber Ferries User Group meeting in Fort William on the 27th October which was convened by HITRANS to bring together community groups, CFL representatives, Elected Members, HIE, Transport Scotland and public transport operators to discuss a range of topics including the proposals for the changes to the summer 2016 timetables. We were astounded at the cavalier attitude of Mr Matthew Harrison[[1]](#footnote-1) in respect of the proposals to re-deploy the ‘Coruisk’ to solve a problem in Mull at the expense of the Mallaig-Armadale service. MSP Dave Thompson made this very point in his Press Release of 23rd November.

***Ferry Improvements Must Not Be at Expense of Mallaig/Armadale Crossings Says MSP***

***Dave Thompson, SNP MSP for Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch, who has already written to Caledonian Macbrayne regarding their proposed new ferry provisions, believes attempting to solve an Oban/Mull problem should not be at the expense of the Mallaig/Armadale service.***

The Forum was finally granted a meeting with CalMac Area Manager Robert Morrison on 11th November who ‘regretted that this community was the last to be consulted with’, despite so many attempts made to discuss the issues earlier. A full and frank discussion took place and left Mr Morrison in no doubt the proposals for Mallaig-Armadale remained far short of what is required, particularly in light of the introduction of RET. Minor amendments to the timetable were presented to the Forum including revised times and marginal additional capacity on Sundays. The key issues of vessel capacity, customer service, longer journey times, suitability of vessels for the route and the significant reliability issues with the ‘Lord of the Isles’ remained the same as submitted in our Initial Response. It was clearly obvious that CalMac and Transport Scotland had no intention whatsoever of seeking an alternative solution to deploying the ‘Coruisk’ on the Oban-Mull service.

The Forum contests that CalMac has been less than open and transparent in its handling of this entire process and at no point, particularly immediately after the Minister’s Statement, did they have the courtesy to offer a written and detailed response to our alternative proposal which we consider to be a fair and achievable option and in the best interests of users of this important route. Implementing these major changes, at a time when the full effects of RET are not known, is premature in the least. Many would suggest that these timetable changes, which require comprehensive infrastructure changes, vessel modifications, union negotiations and regulatory approval should be delayed until Summer 2017 to allow sufficient time to consult, plan and implement changes. What is perhaps surprising is that these changes, timed during the current and complex CHFS contract process and ahead of national elections, appear to have been expedited without good reason and without due process. The extent of support by regional MSP’s has reflected the concern in the communities that these changes will affect, namely Skye and Lochaber and in particular, Mallaig and Sleat. The Forum has stated, on a number of occasions, that this impacts the wider West Coast community in terms of tourism, residents, businesses and organisations, a view echoed by Allan Henderson, Elected Member for Caol and Mallaig.

**Current Proposals (December 2015)**

On 23rd December the Forum was briefed by telephone on CalMac’s latest proposals for the Mallaig-Armadale route. Astonishingly the revised version of the timetable provides a great diminution of service to the version previously proposed. The key items include:

* The re-introduction of a three period seasonal timetable of Shoulder-Peak-Shoulder which can only lead to customer confusion and was discontinued some years ago for that very reason
* The introduction of a third vessel, the wholly unsuitable ‘MV Loch Bhrusda’ to operate crossings in the so-called ‘peak’ summer period, with capacity for just 18 cars and no passenger facilities, and with a speed of just 8.5 knots and a crossing time of 40 minutes
* The reduction to just three rotations per day (Mon-Sat) of the ‘Lord of the Isles’ from the original four offered in the previous versions of the timetables. We had only discovered this the day before following an FOI[[2]](#footnote-2) request to the Company asking for all information pertaining to the consultation process for the Mallaig-Armadale route. In this FOI response it can be seen that statements made in the ‘Significant Points to Note’ (Page 7) demonstrate that the Mallaig-Armadale route is almost expendable! More importantly on Page 4 of this note it states ‘REVISED PROPOSAL FOLLOWING COMMUNITY CONSULTATION: LoTI 3 return sailings per day, reduced from 4’. This change was **never** advised to the Forum, which reduces available capacity than that proposed in September. Notably in this FOI response there is no reference to any comments that were made from the community in Mallaig although it is known that the Harbour Authority had written to CFL expressing their own view on the timetable proposals. The removal of the fourth rotation further reduces the capacity for coach traffic, one of the key issues for local businesses which was highlighted in our Response of 1st October. We can only assume that this reduction has been brought about by serious concerns that the ship was being operated ‘beyond reasonable operating limits’ with the original proposals suggesting a working day of up to 15 hours (without any possible disruption). The Forum is now aware that CFL/Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd (CMAL) is planning to remove the newest propellers on this vessel (fitted as part of the ‘eco-ship’ project) and replace them with those formerly installed as the current system is unworkable and has raised major concerns about the reliability and manoeuvrability of the ship
* The capacity offered by this new timetable sees a further reduction across the route and suggests that there will be a **staggering** reduction on Sundays between 1st May to 23rd June of approximately 20%. Equally on Monday-Saturday during the peak summer the available capacity is the same as in 2015, and this is without RET
* The introduction of a third vessel in addition to the ‘Loch Nevis’ serving the Small Isles means that there will be little opportunity for timetable slippage and **will** inevitably result in operational disruption. We quote the Mallaig Harbour Master[[3]](#footnote-3) in an email of 30th December *‘it is unworkable for Mallaig Harbour and possibly Armadale. Mallaig uses a red light system when a ferry is due to enter or leave the port. This would mean the red light being on all day, preventing other tour operators, Knoydart ferry, fish farm boats or any other shipping from entering or leaving the harbour. It is not a viable option.’* This was further elaborated on by a member of the privately run ‘Ships of CalMac Forum’ who responded *‘That's interesting - the harbour has a point. The slots would be restricted for other users. I'm presuming for example the red light would be on from 0945 in the high season for Lochinvar departing at 0950, then Loch Nevis manoeuvring into the Linkspan , departing at 1015 but staying on as LOTI would be on approach , then onto the berth. She would be out at 11 (light on 1055) clear the harbour and then the Loch Bhrusda would be on approach at 1115. You could see how having an Armada of ferry traffic would restrict others. You wouldn't be far off Dublin Ports slot system! Miss your slot, and you have to sail around and wait for a free slot. Sort of unworkable at Mallaig. A lack of joined up working? Back to the back of a cigarette packet’*
* There has been no further information on infrastructure issues including the Armadale Passenger Access System which is ‘fixed’ for the ‘Coruisk’ at 65m as against 85m for the ’Lord of the Isles’. Does this mean that CMAL will not carry out this expensive modification in the time remaining before the Summer 16 season begins on 25th March? Will all passengers have to access and egress the ship via the linkspan? A request to consider the introduction of vending machines for the Hybrid fleet has not been answered
* The Forum holds that the deployment of the ‘Lochinvar’ on the route remains a serious concern. The vessel is not ‘tried and tested’ on this route and we are aware, from the experiences of the emergency deployment of her sister ship the ‘Hallaig’ in April 2014 that the vessel will not be able to operate to its timetable in low-tidal conditions
* We are further surprised that sector times listed in the new schedule show journey times for the ‘Lord of the Isles’ ranging between 25 and 35 minutes for the crossing. The Forum asserts that this is an indication that the use of three vessels on the route is so tight that slippage of operations will occur on a daily basis
* It is clearly evident that this latest timetable is the ‘last throw of the dice’ for CFL to ratify a schedule for approval by Transport Scotland. It is the last of the Summer 2016 timetables to be published on the CalMac’s website. This is remarkably demonstrated during the peak season when both the ‘Lochinvar’ and the ‘Loch Bhrusda’ are shown as being on the single linkspan at Armadale at exactly the same time!

**The Sleat Transport Forum view**

The Forum vigorously opposes this latest timetable proposal for the Mallaig-Armadale route for many of the reasons stated in our earlier Response and re-iterated by MSP’s, Elected Members, Ian Blackford MP, Mallaig Harbour Authority, Mallaig Community Council, the Road to the Isles Marketing Group, Lochaber Chamber of Commerce, Visit Sleat and HITRANS. We fervently maintain that the re-deployment of the ’Coruisk’ (built specifically for the Mallaig-Armadale route) to Mull should not be at the expense of the Mallaig-Armadale route. We have already highlighted the statements made in the 2014 Vessel Replacement and Deployment Plan (Para 52) ‘*From the analysis it is clear that there is no compelling short/medium-term need for additional capacity in the non-major fleet, other than perhaps the Sound of Harris and Mallaig-Armadale.’*  This extract totally contradicts what has now been proposed for Mallaig-Armadale where capacity in real terms has been reduced across the board and takes no account of the massive expected demand from the introduction of RET. Para 49 further states *‘Overall levels of vehicle deck utilisation (on non-major vessels) are considerably lower than that typically seen on the routes served by the major vessels – the exceptions to this being the routes between Mallaig and Armadale and across the Sound of Harris’.* The accompanying table of demand shows an increase in Deck Capacity Utilisation from 68% in 2015 rising to 81% in 2016, as a direct result of RET.

The Forum calls for the retention of the ‘Coruisk’ on the route for Summer 2016, complemented by the sailings of the’ Lord of the Isles’, and removal of the retrograde three seasonal periods. We believe that the effects of the roll-out of the final routes of RET should be fully assessed prior to the implementation of these changes. If the Minister for Transport and Islands ratifies the latest version of the Mallaig-Armadale route then he must be made aware of what the consequences will be for the communities that the route serves and the wider West Coast tourism trail from the south of Scotland through Oban, Mull, Ardnamurchan, Lochaber, Skye, the Western Isles and onwards to the North West Highlands. As Dave Thompson MSP said in his Press Release of 23rd November:

***‘As I have mentioned before, the increased frequency of sailings is to be welcomed, however I am concerned that there is an Oban/Mull problem being solved at the expense of the Mallaig/Armadale service. This must not be allowed to happen.***

***Part of the proposals include re-deploying the MV Coruisk to the Oban/Craignure route to meet the expected significant increase in demand as a result of RET, however the same significant increase in demand applies equally to the Mallaig/Armadale route. Therefore, the MV Coruisk should stay where it is, supplemented by the Lord of the Isles. I back the Sleat Transport Forum with their efforts in this regard. A separate alternative solution must be found for the Oban/Mull service.***

***If a new vessel cannot be built in the short term, chartering should be considered and in the longer term, we should give thought to building a new vessel, possibly a hybrid one. This of course would require upfront costs, but the new vessel could also be tendered for and hopefully then built at Fergusons yard, with the prospect that such a******vessel could be designed to have a much lower operating cost.***

***It is necessary, given the wider goal of improvements for all, that CalMac, and the Scottish Government, give further consideration to these matters prior to the implementation of the new timetable’.***

**Conclusion**

The Forum repeats its major concerns at the wider effects that the introduction of the proposed timetable will have both in our community and on those who rely on the economic importance of this route. As stated previously this is not simply the community of Sleat expressing its views. In the three months since the process began we have consulted with many other community groups, businesses, organisations, local politicians of all parties, ferry and harbour users. The response and support has been unequivocal.

The Forum wishes to underline its concerns at some of the repercussions this latest proposal from CalMac will have if is approved by the Scottish Government.

* The utilisation of the ‘Lord of the Isles’, a vessel which entered service in 1989, and which has been shown to have frequent service failures, caused both by adverse weather and engineering issues. It is more than likely that this service disruption will continue in 2016 and will result in both cancellations and timetable slippage. This will directly affect the remaining much smaller vessel[[4]](#footnote-4) operating throughout the season, and the relief vessel[[5]](#footnote-5) proposed to be added during the peak season from 24th June to 27th August
* Reducing the rotations of the ‘Lord of the Isles’ from 4 to 3 throughout the duration of the timetable WILL have a major effect on the coach tour market and the ability of tour operators to create diverse itineraries that have proved so popular in the past. This is especially the case in visitor attractions such as Armadale Castle and Gardens whose business is significantly dependent on the coach travel market. If tour operators cannot obtain the capacity on the vessels and **at the times** that fit their long established programmes, then it is possible that many of them will withdraw from visiting Armadale Castle and seek alternative options for tours to Skye. Once confidence is lost at this ability to match demand with schedule and capacity, then it would be some time before the situation could be recovered. CalMac’s own figures show that more than 3,000 coaches used the Mallaig-Armadale ferry services in 2015, a rise of more than 9% over 2014. This will have a serious impact on the group tour market for Armadale Castle, something that was illustrated in the presentation given by the CEO of the Clan Donald Lands Trust, Jan Wallwork Clarke, at the CalMac Travel & Tourism Conference in October, 2015. CDLT, who own and run this five- star attraction, is the second largest private employer on Skye and Ms Wallwork Clarke warned of potential job losses should there be a significant reduction in group visitors caused by less coach traffic which would be a direct and immediate consequence of the proposed Summer 2016 timetable. The first and the latest planned schedule shows a massive reduction in capacity on Sunday sailings, despite CalMac’s own predicted increase in demand following RET. **Remarkably when this was put to Mr Dorchester at the same conference he stated that he would be prepared to consider compensating CDLT by supporting three seasonal posts in order to mitigate the impact on the business and to forestall any job losses. Despite being astounded by this off-the-cuff offer, it is certain that CDLT’s CEO may well be calling in this generous offer if the proposed summer timetable is adopted.**
* CalMac continues to confirm that the Company is not yet in a position to quantify un-met demand on its ferry services. We assert, as suggested in the VRDP, that this will be an even greater issue this summer

The Forum is in no doubt that the overall reduction in capacity offered in this latest version of the timetable will be detrimental to the economic prosperity of the communities that are served by the Mallaig-Armadale route and those further afield. The use of untested vessels, operational restrictions caused by tidal conditions, a total lack of customer facilities on two of the three vessels, potential lack of appropriate Passenger Access facilities at Armadale, slower journey times and the potential disruption caused by the non-arrival or delay of the ‘Lord of the Isles’ all contribute to a much downgraded summer service in 2016. Furthermore, we continue to call for a much improved winter service on the route with a dedicated vessel and enhanced timetable to meet the growing demand created by the introduction of RET.

Martin Dorchester claims on Page 5 of the David MacBrayne Ltd Group Annual Report & Consolidated Financial Statements[[6]](#footnote-6) for the year ended 31st March 2015. Supporting Tourism and Local Economies that *‘CalMac recognises that, in addition to providing vital ferry links, it has an important role in driving tourism business to the islands and other remote parts of its network. We* *believe, however, that this must be more than simply promoting ferry services and routes and can be best achieved by working in partnership with local tourism bodies and visitor attractions’.* We agree with these sentiments but our experience has been that he and his colleagues have signally failed to do that in respect of the communities and businesses served by the Mallaig-Armadale route.

We urge Minister Derek Mackay, CalMac Ferries Limited and Transport Scotland to fully consider the issues involved and withdraw the current timetable proposals before irreparable damage is done to this long-established and highly-acclaimed route that so many people, organisations, businesses and visitors have worked so hard to promote, support and use.

Roddy Murray, Chair, Sleat Transport Forum

Professor Boyd Robertson, Principal, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig

Jan Wallwork-Clarke, CEO Clan Donald Lands Trust

Anne Gracie, Owner, Sonas Hospitality Limited

Rob Ware, Secretary, Sleat Transport Forum and Chair Visit Sleat

5th January 2016

1. Interim General Manager Operations [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See attached FOI response from CFL [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. James Mclean, Mallaig Harbour Authority [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. MV Lochinvar [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. MV Loch Bhrusda [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. http://www.david-macbrayne.co.uk/Downloads/Annual-Reports/Annual%20Reports%202014-15/David%20MacBrayne%20Limited%20Group%20Annual%20Report%20and%20Consolidated%20Financial%20Statements%20201415.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-6)