

To: Cleland Sneddon, Chief Executive Argyll & Bute Council; Aileen Morton, Argyll & Bute Council Leader

CC: Every A&B Councillor; A&B Council Infrastructure and Harbours Management; CalMac Management including Chief Exec; Transport Scotland Ferries Department; Paul Wheelhouse MSP (Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands); Michael Matheson MSP (Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity); Michael Russell MSP (Argyll and Bute constituency MSP)

30/01/2019

Dear Mr Sneddon

Thank you for your response to our joint letter.

You have accepted that the Council have been aware of the detailed requirements of Caledonian MacBrayne since the first VRDP in early 2014. It is now 2019. In those five years there have been no positive steps taken to meet those needs.

In fact the only investigative preparatory work that has occurred in those five years has been prompted not by the Council planning for the future, but by the local community campaigning for improvements to the ferry service.

Since 2015, the Ferry Committee have been meeting with your officers and representatives of Transport Scotland and Caledonian MacBrayne, pressing for improvements that would enable the MV Isle of Mull to over-night all-year round. This was so that an island-focussed service could be delivered, regardless of how many vessels were allocated to the route by CMAL. These discussions led directly to the Arch Henderson inspection report of November 2017. This report helped to inform the view that over-night berthing on the North face of the pier was not possible without structural improvements. At the suggestion of the Mull & Iona Ferry Committee that the South Face of the pier could instead be used for over-night berthing, the subsequent detailed engineering report by AECOM was commissioned. It looked narrowly at our South berth suggestion only (rather than answering the needs of the VRDP more broadly), and concluded that the cost of works and age of the structure was such that a STAG report should be the next step.

In that STAG report, there is no reference to the Ferries Plan nor the deadline requirements of the Vessel Replacement and Deployment Plan. It is disingenuous to claim that the Council have been planning for the VRDP since 2014 – there is no evidence of it in any of these reports. The reports were commissioned in response to local lobbying, NOT as a result of Council planning for the future.

In the 2018 AECOM engineering study, the estimated cost of preparing the South berth for the largest of CalMac's vessels was put at £4.2 million, including a 60% optimism bias. The round-head extension and fendering improvements detailed in that report would enable overnight berthing on the North face of the pier, as well as enabling the MV Hebrides to serve the route. (However it would not require the South-side dredging that is included in that cost, so there could be savings on that figure). This detailed engineering report could be developed quickly to create a cost-effective interim solution. In the five years since the 2014 VRDP was published, Craignure Pier has netted a profit for the Council in excess of £5 million. In just those five years, sufficient revenue has been generated to fund the modest works that would be required to meet the needs of the VRDP, and the cost-benefit of investing that moderate sum in a pier that must serve the island for around 10 further years is plain. (it would be naive to imagine that an entirely new replacement pier could be designed and built in a significantly shorter period than that).

Argyll and Bute Council were gifted Craignure Pier in 1964 thanks to a combination of private donations and central government funding. It was built with a 50 year design-life, and as stewards of the asset it should not be a surprise that now in its fifty-fifth year, improvement and replacement is needed. Unfortunately, despite it being a significant revenue-generator and an essential life-line piece of infrastructure, it has suffered from chronic neglect. This is demonstrated by the poor state of the fendering; the bodged-together passenger access system; the linkspan without refurbishment plans and the silting of the South berth. It is compounded by your Council's apparent surprise that it is past its design life and five years of inaction in response to the VRDP.

The Council now have a clear deadline by which to recover from this history of neglect. In 2020 the MV Hebrides will be available to work the route, and should it be unable to, it will only be as a result of poor management and planning on the part of the Council. We therefore re-state that anything short of a commitment to interim works that will enable this redeployment will be unacceptable to the community, and a final indicator of chronic neglect of an essential asset on the part of Argyll and Bute Council. We therefore await the outcome of the STAG report and your response to the interim options, upon which the performance of the Council will be judged.

Yours,
Elizabeth Ferguson,
Chair, Mull & Iona Ferry Committee.