

Sent to key Scottish Government Ministers, Michael Russell MSP, Transport Scotland and senior CalMac management.

Dear All,

Further to the survey and email below, I am writing with the operational and policy requests mentioned previously. I appreciate this is a long and multi-layered mailing list (!), but full sight of the detail at every level can only help. Thank you all for everything being done to manage circumstances through this difficult time.

Residents on Mull and Iona are looking forward to the progressive relaxation of ferry use rules, and the re-opening of our tourist-dependent economy from July 15<sup>th</sup> as announced by Fergus Ewing. For the CalMac ferry network however many challenges remain, and new ones are emerging. This letter seeks to guide decision-makers by offering user-focussed recommendations for our part of the network.

## Communication and speed of decision-making

It is imperative that advance decisions are made clearly, and communicated well so that businesses and residents have certainty about the coming months and can plan accordingly. We are appreciative of all the efforts being made in a difficult and fast-moving landscape, but the decisions being made are critical to island residents and businesses. Uncertainty is damaging, and must be replaced with clarity as quickly as possible.

Since it may take some time for CalMac to staff-up for a busier period, it is essential that clear forward planning decisions are taken at government level as quickly as possible, so that CalMac have time to respond and the islands do not lag behind the rest of the country due to understandable organisational inertia.

## Vessel Capacity under Coronavirus restrictions

**This is the central issue for the islands and passengers.** The proposed passenger capacity for the MV Isle of Mull is just 104 – that's just 10.8% of her certification. **Figures as low as this could keep the islands in effective economic lockdown long after the rest of the country.** Just to indicate the scale of the problem: a) just 26 of the 65 car capacity of the MV Isle of Mull could fill that entire 104 passenger quota. b) Even under lock-down, passenger carryings can be close to this limit – frequencies may increase, but as a typical load it leaves little room for an increase in trips by island residents, let alone a modest resumption of tourism.

**Every effort** should be found to maximise capacity, so that decisions are made based on **epidemiology**, not available ferry space. As a matter of island-mainland equity (as protected by the Islands Act) we must be enabled to recover at the same pace as the rest of Scotland. **Every effort** means:

1. **Allow groups traveling together to sit together**, and be treated as a unit for the purposes of social distancing. It has been suggested that travellers in the same vehicle or family group would be asked to separate from one another whilst on board. **All European ferry companies we have been able to reference allow groups to sit together**, and only ask that distance is maintained between those not travelling together. This same approach **must** be adopted on CalMac ferries.
2. **Add screens to internal passenger spaces to sub-divide seating areas**, to enable people to sit close together safely. The first and most obvious place for this is between the seat backs in the cafeteria of major vessels. Given that some social distancing may well still be in force through 2021 (perhaps beyond), minor physical modifications are particularly justified.
3. **Make full use of outside space for carrying foot passengers.** We understand that outside space is not being included in capacity estimations – **it must be**. It can be seen from the attached survey that passengers are willing to sit outside, at least on the short crossing to Mull. Prioritise inside space for those that need it most, and prepare all passengers for the possibility that they might have to sit outside – ie tell them to bring a coat.
4. **Make outside space more comfortable** with the fitting of temporary shelters and windbreaks.
5. **Do not give CalMac crew the burden of 'policing' on-board social distancing.** The public will generally act responsibly and self-regulate behaviour, just as they do in all public spaces such as pavements and shops. If outside deck space is not being included in the available capacity of the ferry because of the pressures this may put on the crew to police it, the solution is to remove that burden, not to remove the deck space.

## Two metre social distancing rule

It is clear that the rigorous application of the 2 metre distancing rule is having a devastating effect on vessel capacities. This appears to be impacting not just the density of seated passengers, but also the speed at which the vessels will be unloaded and loaded. Given the heavy impact of this blanket rule, we believe that it should be **carefully and scientifically re-examined specifically for a ferry setting.**

- **Can the spacing be reduced on outside decks?**
- **Re-examine the risk posed at the key pinch point of the stairway between car deck and upper passenger decks.** Passengers are all facing the same direction – does this reduce the risk? The time spent in close proximity ascending or descending the stairs is very short, at around 1 minute – does this reduce the risk?
- **Would the wearing of face coverings mitigate risk,** and enable a distancing reduction? Face coverings are now mandatory on ferries in England – would the same policy here mitigate risk and reduce the 2m rule?
- Is the risk of transmission on a ferry, where passengers sit together for 45 minutes in family / traveller groups (without any food service or other reason for mingling), the same as it is in (say) a pub or club? **If the risk and circumstances are less, then is there scope for the distance to be reduced?**
- **Consider other hygiene measures** that may mitigate for a reduction to 1 metre, for example:
  - Issue hand sanitiser wipes or bottles to every vehicle queuing to board, also offer free face coverings for those that do not have them.
  - Place hand sanitiser stations at the top and bottom of car deck access stairs, at each end of passenger access gangways, and enforce their use by all passengers in both directions.
  - Continuous roving onboard cleaning staff – either performed by catering crew with little to do (on the assumption all catering will be closed), or recruit additional staff for the purpose. (note – this may also speed turnaround time)

## Foot Passenger arrangements

It has been suggested that foot passengers will have to pre-book in the same way that vehicle passengers currently do. Depending on the magnitude of the capacity reductions, **we have significant misgivings about this suggestion,** shared by our communities as demonstrated in our Coronavirus Survey (attached). In order to make best use of scarce passenger space, the system must be as **flexible** as possible – pre-booking foot passengers would impose strictures and inflexibility that will lead to underutilisation and possibly, unfair allocation of spaces.

- **Pre-booking favours pre-planned visits** – ie tourist travellers. Local users need flexibility and to be able to make short-range decisions. If all spaces are taken by tourist traffic long in advance, it will be highly prejudicial to local users.
- **How will competing demands from vehicle passengers and foot passengers be allocated?** If pre-booked foot passengers have taken all the available passenger allocation, will it mean that vehicles and their passengers will be unable to book or travel? Or vice versa... The vessel will have to continually short-ship vehicles in order to leave passenger spaces, or foot passengers will rarely get an opportunity to travel. If there are so few bookings available, they will have to be prioritised in some way – how will that be administered and decided using an online or telephone booking system? Is it feasible that some kind of online ‘application for a space’ would have to operate, with the outcome only known shortly before sailing? **Pre-booking foot passengers will be fraught with difficulties, and could produce more administrative and customer-management difficulties than turn-up-and-go.**
- How will foot passenger capacities be determined? The priority is to maximise available space, which is why it is imperative that groups be allowed to sit together. However this will mean that the passenger limit may vary from sailing to sailing. A group of four people from one car will occupy the same space on board (eg one cafeteria table) as a couple or even a lone traveller. **If a prescriptive passenger limit is set for the purposes of managing bookings, it will have to work to the worst case scenario** of every passenger having to separate themselves from each other by 2 metres. It will not be able to adapt to the varying mix of individuals and groups that will present for a sailing. **It may result in massive under-utilisation of the ferries.**

**The only workable, flexible and equitable system is to work to turn-up-and-go, but with prioritisation at the port as necessary.** So – first priority is to ensure that capacity is adequate so that (booked) vehicle passengers do not take priority over foot passengers (by following the recommendations above). Then, if demand still outstrips supply, prioritisation can be managed at the queue – simply call island residents, school children, those with public transport connections, those with medical appointments, workers, and commuters to board first if the number waiting exceeds the available space.

Depending on demand this may result in low-priority foot passengers being ‘bumped’ to the next sailing – but this is far preferable to pre-booking an arbitrary low passenger number, and denying travel to those who can’t book. Large numbers of foot passengers (predominantly day-trippers) are very unlikely on our service this summer anyway – coach tours will not be operating, and wildlife boat trips will be at much reduced capacities. It is highly unlikely that a significant ‘crowd management’ issue would arise on services to / from Mull and Iona, and therefore the first primary objective must be to flexibly maximise carrying capacity, rather than plan around an unlikely and minor ‘crowd’ issue at departing ports.

## **Vehicle Booking arrangements**

If capacities are significantly reduced and demand outstrips supply, then it may be necessary to modify the booking system once it is re-introduced. As evidenced by our survey, if booking is re-introduced whilst capacity is very limited, those travellers who can plan in advance will be prioritised over those who cannot. Local travellers require more flexibility than holiday makers, and therefore to avoid prejudicing their ability to use the service, a small proportion of car spaces should be reserved on major routes to be taken on a ‘turn-up-and-go’ basis.

## **MV Coruisk on the Oban-Craignure Route**

The Coruisk is currently tied up and idle in Craignure. **It must be brought back into service on the Oban-Craignure route as soon as possible.** In a situation where the island economy is at the mercy of ferry capacities, any crewing shortfalls or other issues must be resolved urgently and the Coruisk prepared for full operation, at the very latest in time for the resumption of tourism on July 15<sup>th</sup>. Particularly because the MCA have given permission for passengers to remain in their cars on passage, she will be an essential asset when tourist travel resumes.

## **Priority testing of CalMac crew**

The prospect that an entire ferry would be taken out of service should one crew member show Coronavirus symptoms is as alarming to users as the operator. Given their essential role, Coronavirus testing of CalMac crew should be a priority, to avoid the need for mass-isolation of crew.

## **Prioritisation by passenger / vehicle type**

Depending on the outcome of efforts to maximise vessel capacity, varying levels of prioritisation may be necessary. Our survey shows that coach parties, day trippers and campervans are lowest on the community’s priorities. There is reasonable logic to it – these groups generate high demand on the ferry system, but generate less income for the island economy. The longer the visit, the higher the priority. It may prove necessary to restrict ferry bookings only to longer-stay tourists, and only allow those shorter-term / lower value travellers to travel on-spec if space allows.

## **Minor Vessel Routes to Mull**

We understand that the open loch-class vessels such as those operating Lochaline to Fishnish will be little-affected by social distancing regulations (since all travellers remain in their cars). In order to compensate for reduced capacity on the major vessel route to Oban, **capacity on Lochaline-Fishnish should be maximised**, and travellers (particularly those unfamiliar with the ferry network) be encouraged to use it.

If necessary, this should include additional crewing so that the sailing day can be lengthened and maximum frequency maintained throughout the day. Services should keep running until any backlog is clear (as is normal policy) – so travellers can be sure that if they present at either side, they will be able to travel.

Consideration should also be given to bringing the reserve loch-class into service on the route as a second vessel. If all efforts were made to maximise Lochaline-Fishnish capacity in this way, it may make it possible to re-deploy the MV Isle of Mull on occasion to other islands, where the option to boost capacity with a minor vessel does not exist.

We are thinking here particularly of Coll and Tiree. Our survey demonstrates a willingness to share capacity among the islands, and this could be a practical way of maximising capacity across the network.

Tobermory – Kilchoan should also be promoted and utilised to the full.

**We would strongly urge that Lochaline-Fishnish and Tobermory-Kilchoan remain as turn-up-and-go, and are given flexibility to shuttle as necessary.** Neither route will feasibly face a foot passenger queue, and staff are well used to managing a queue of vehicles.

### **Fionnphort - Iona Service**

Iona is has unique challenges as an island-off-an-island. As far is as possible in the hours of work regulations every effort must be made to align the Iona timetable with that that of Oban – Craignure so that people travelling by public transport can make connections to the train and buses on the mainland. It is not going to be as seamless as previous timetables due to the long turnaround required on the O-C route but liaising with West Coast Motors is vital in making sure we do not unnecessarily punish those without vehicles. High priority must be given to Iona residents on the sailings they can connect with. Finding accommodation on the mainland may be hard if a sailing is missed. There are around 40 school children travelling from the Ross of Mull and Iona to Oban for education and it is vital that they are given top priority.

The number of passengers on the Loch Buie is understood to be 28 (not counting car passengers) and this is compared to the usual 250. Obviously with the restricted capacity on the IOM the Loch Buie may well cope, but it may be necessary to allow it to shuttle as necessary.

### **Contract variation**

We would support CHFS contract variations that enable CalMac to meet the current challenge. Specifically, it may be helpful to suspend financial penalties for late arrival of services, if this gives CalMac confidence to attempt quicker turnarounds or operate 'off schedule' without risking a financial penalty.

Once again, thank you all for the support, the hard work and the difficult decisions being faced at all levels. These are difficult times, and I hope this email is constructive and helpful in helping to deal with them.

Best regards

Joe Reade

Chair, Mull & Iona Ferry Committee.