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Mr Joe Reade
Chairman of the Mull & Iona Ferry Committee

By email:
joe@islandbakery.co.uk

Our ref: 2019/0029689
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Dear Joe,

Thank you for your email of 12 May 2020 regarding the Mull winter timetable. I apologise for the delay informally responding as we had to factor in your email to our wider consideration of timetable requests for the Winter timetable across the full CHFS network. I hope you are keeping well in the meantime,

I would like to thank you for all your hard work and considerable effort that you and the Mull and Iona Ferry Committee have put into the winter 2020-21 timetable request. I have conveyed this to my officials and to Michael Russell in the context of our Covid-19 recovery work. I appreciate your continued positive engagement, and, as you know, I greatly sympathise and support what you are trying to achieve for the community on Mull.

Although the cost of the timetable changes have been reduced by some degree, and I appreciate the effort that has gone into this, unfortunately it has not been possible to implement the requested timetable changes for Winter 2020/21 as it remains unaffordable at this time of significant resource constraint. As you can probably imagine, the ferries budget for 2020/21 is already under heavy pressure even before the additional costs of responding to the Covid emergency are considered. We therefore cannot propose any new expenditure on this scale at this time. Timetable changes agreed in one consultation round then become the base for consultation in later rounds, and so there are implications for future contract years, not solely for the round under consideration.

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However, I want to emphasise that this is not a decision I have taken lightly, and rather it reflects the stark fiscal reality that we are working to, but I am keen to keep working to deliver on the community's aspirations if we can do so.

I understand my officials have discussed moving forward with this important issue through the Islands Connectivity Plan which I think is a positive move and perhaps gives up more latitude to frame what is a strategic issue. Given the nature of the current MIFC request, and as it is not a simple, broadly cost neutral timetable change, it is not best suited to the current, more narrow timetable process and so will be much better suited to a longer term strategy piece of work, given the close attention and resources required to assess future options. It also gives me an opportunity to look at how such a change might support wider government policy in regards to population retention and migration and to look at the fit with the Government's aims to deliver an economic recovery and to improve economic resilience as well. I realise the position in terms of the Winter timetable consultation will be disappointing, but I hope that you find the offer of an alternative approach encouraging as a way to allow for the ongoing and continued assessment of the Mull winter timetable, and the service which you are advocating for.

As is the case with the rest of the Scottish Government, Transport Scotland resources have been pivoted to respond to Covid-19 and the challenges that it presents. That has resulted in a significant reprioritisation of work within the organisation that will have an impact on a range of policy areas. However rest assured that I value the engagement we have had, which has had a positive impact and the work to find a solution for Mull's needs will be given the full focus of the team as we move forward with the Islands Connectivity Plan.

Kind regards



Paul Wheelhouse

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