

Mull and Iona Ferry Committee AGM

27th August 2020

7:30pm

(Via Zoom)

Present: Douglas Wilson, Morven Gibson, Finlay MacDonald, Hylda Marsh, Colin Morrison, Jim Lynch, Andy Knight, Ben Wilson, Helen MacDonald, Heather Hill, Adrian Fitness, Denise Baxter, Keith Robbie, Sam Jones, David Galbraith, Claire Simonetta, Joe Reade

Chairs Report [text as delivered]

This is my first AGM as chair, having taken over from Elizabeth in September last year. I would like to begin by thanking her for her diligence, hard work and principled leadership, and to congratulate her on her new position as our representative on the CalMac Communities Board. Thanks also to everyone on the committee, particularly second-in-command Finlay, who is an essential component in our committee machine. Also to everyone who contributed financially to met office data and other costs this year.

I have enjoyed getting stuck into my role, and have made myself busy. Here are some numbers to quantify it:

In the past 12 months I have posted 43 website news posts

I've sent 909 emails on Ferry Committee business

253 different documents added to my ferry committee folders

I've made 30 Freedom of information requests

And we have £67.85 in the bank account.

Every island in the Hebrides has unique circumstances, and different challenges for their respective ferry committees. To highlight some of Mull & Iona's particular challenges and particular circumstances:

Unlike any other island, we are fortunate to have three different direct ferry routes to the mainland.

Unlike any other major island in the Hebrides, our major vessel is the only one unable to berth reliably on the island it serves.

Unlike any other island group, we have a genuine ferry 'network' – that's a network in the sense that residents on an island-off-an-island rely on co-ordination and connection with ferries serving their neighbouring island. It's not just a network defined by a shared ticketing system and common branding.

Operating our main service we have one of the oldest vessels in the entire CalMac fleet. She arrived 32 years ago, and in the intervening time 11 new major vessels have been delivered, and they have all gone elsewhere.

Together with Mallaig-Armadale, we have the most congested route in the entire network – in other words, our ferries are more full, and spaces more scarce than on any other route.

With a total of 800,000 passengers carried annually, Mull is the third busiest island in the CalMac network, after Bute and Arran who have far higher populations. This reflects the huge popularity of our islands with tourist visitors – on that score, Mull routes have the top spot in terms of visitor carryings, and by quite some margin – nearly half a million visitor passenger journeys are taken each summer to Mull, with Arran in second place with 350,000. This means that not only are we the most popular tourist island, but we have the biggest carryings variation between winter and summer of all islands in the network.

As a ferry committee, we have within our purview more routes and vessels than any other ferry committee.

As a ferry committee, we also have a unique relationship with CalMac – at least, that’s what a senior member of CalMac management told me recently. I think he meant it to be a criticism – in short, that we give them more grief than other ferry committees. But I take that as confirmation that we are doing our job well – our job is to make sure that the interests of users are fully considered in all decisions. We will do that most effectively if we are professional, well argued, fair, honest, objective, evidence based, knowledgeable, persistent and courteous. So I am content to be a source of ‘grief’, so long as our manner is correct and the purpose clear.

Perhaps the other reason we may have a unique relationship with CalMac is that we argue from an informed position, take the responsibility of the role seriously, and we will not shy away from any appropriate subject, no matter how large or apparently intractable. I have had conversations with office bearers in other ferry representative groups, and they have made the conscious decision to steer away from issues they feel they have no power to correct. To paraphrase – “we can’t change the way things are – that’s political reality. We’ll always have expensive boats that cost too much to buy and run, we’ll always have over-crewed ferries, because we don’t have power to change it. The unions, the company – they have way more power than us. We’re just happy to get a new boat, even if we know its not really the right one”.

I don’t agree with that one bit. We must not shy away from any subject, if we know we’re on the right side of the argument. And some of the biggest, most intractable issues in the ferry system are likely to come to the fore on our islands in the next few years.

We should have the first major vessel replacement where the decision-making and procurement process takes place in what you might call a post-801/802 environment. If you listened to The Islands’ Minister in the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee this week, you will have heard the promise of a more accountable and community-focussed procurement process in the future. We must make sure it delivers the best outcome for users here.

Our main pier is nearing the end of life, and the assumption by decision-makers is that we will get a £50 - £70 million replacement, just as Brodick recently had. Is that the best use of funds, and will it deliver the best outcome for island users? Do we really have a pier problem, or do we have a ferry problem? We need to insist that when money is spent, it is directed to the best interests of those who rely on our ferry lifeline.

After many years of campaigning for an island-focussed service, it is not just the poor state of Craignure Pier that has been exposed, but the huge cost of operating the MV Isle of Mull and other major vessels in the fleet, built and crewed for double the passenger numbers they rarely if ever encounter. Those huge running costs make a marginal increase in operating hours unaffordable – so clearly the barrier to service improvement is the cost-base. For the benefit of users, we need to find more productive, more efficient, simply cheaper ways to run a ferry service if improvement can be afforded.

We have demonstrated, with clear and incontrovertible statistical evidence, that our ferry service is becoming dramatically less reliable in windy weather – this is a truth that users know from their own experience. We must ensure that government and decision makers first at least acknowledge the problem, and then do something about it.

Next year, work on the next ferries plan, or Islands Connectivity Plan will begin in earnest. Together with our island neighbours on Coll and Tiree, we are the least-well inter-connected islands in the Hebrides – perhaps in the whole of Scotland. The Islands Connectivity Plan is our opportunity to do something about that. It is wasteful, inefficient, just plain stupid, that we can see the ferry to Coll and Tiree cruise past Mull every day, yet we have no direct link with our neighbours.

Progress on all of these big issues is slow, and will take time. Like dung beetles, we have several big balls to push up a big hill – we haven't got any of them to the top this year, but we have started rolling and pushing. The decision-makers can at least see the balls we are collecting, and are slowly, persistently being pushed uphill toward them.

As well as pushing at the big issues, our job is also to play whack-a-mole with problems and issues as they arise. The biggest one, perhaps a whole family of moles, popped up this year in the shape of Covid 19 and all the problems it created. Those issues are sure to continue for many more months – and will probably still be with us next summer.

Our current crisis is the imminent restriction of services to Iona to the hours of daylight only – a decision that has come without prior consultation, without warning, and without apparent logic. Together with Finlay, Morvern and others from Iona we will aim to give that mole a big whack next week .

The Iona service is threatened because of the perceived risk in transferring crew to and from the Loch Buie in hours of darkness. In this issue, as in many – the problem and the solution both lie with management; and in arguing for safety improvements we are not just protecting the lifeline ferry service, but we are also working in the interests of the crew. I'm particularly making that point here, because it is an illustration of how the Ferry Committee are not just 'CalMac bashers' – we are decision interrogators. CalMac is comprised of many crew and shore staff who work hard, conscientiously and often demonstrate dedication to maintaining service in all conditions.

Finally, back to the dung beetle metaphor –

We can be the most effective mole whackers and dung rollers if we have a solid constitutional foundation, a broad and balanced membership, and approach the job of representation in the fairest, most balanced, open and principled manner. So I am really pleased that we now have a new

and more rigorous constitution teed up, and such a strong and capable bunch of people who want to contribute to what we do.

New Constitution

- 2/3rd majority vote is needed to adopt new constitution.
- No objections
- New constitution unanimously adopted.

New committee formation under new constitution

a) Confirmation of prospective committee list and co-optees

- E.F suggested co-opting all members interested in joining instead of voting in.
- All in agreement.
- E.F proposed. D.W seconded proposal.
- 3 co-optees and 25 members

b) Allocation of delegated positions

- J.R asked if all members happy with new list of delegated positions.
- No objections.
- J.R to draw up spread sheet and circulate after meeting to specify each members term. 1, 2 or 3 years.

Election of Office Bearers

- A secretary would be beneficial to committee.
- J.R requested that anyone with interest in becoming committee secretary to e-mail after meeting.
- J.R happy to stand as chair as no other applicants.
- J.R nominated Finlay MacDonald to return as Vice Chair.
- No objections.
- Finlay MacDonald accepted.

Catamaran Opportunity for Mull

- Benefits of catamaran procurement; Energy efficient, low emission, cheaper to build, inherently stable, shallow draught, don't have same high crewing level of mono-hull. On commercial grounds good choice.
- Key practical benefits specific to Mull; New vessel of which we are in desperate need and no prospect of new vessel any time soon. Should be more weather resilient service. Less vulnerable to wind, more manoeuvrable.
- It can berth at Craignure Pier all year round, with pier in its current state. It could provide island focused timetable and take up capacity that is lacking in the summer.
- In order to go forward with catamaran purchase, full backing of committee and wider community is necessary.

- C.S suggested that care would need to be taken while promoting new vessel to community, that the increased capacity would benefit islanders and commuters, not just increase tourist traffic.
- J.R in agreement.
- One disadvantage with catamaran, is that motor homes may be restricted as there are height restrictions on car decks.
- Policy principle is established, MIFC make argument and demonstrated that technical issues can be overcome.
- E.F stated that the government policy states that vessel must be inter-changeable.
- J.R stated that the vessel that is in build would not cope with conditions of regular scheduled passage to outer Hebrides, but would be able to fill in where necessary.
- F.M stated that MIFC need to continue pushing government to procure the vessel we want and need.
- S.J enquired as to whether a prioritisation list will be needed for commercial traffic if less space on car deck.
- Also how will unions react to lower crew level.
- J.R stated that there is an RET and fares review which will attempt to resolve any issues surrounding having to prioritise traffic. J.R it may be perceived as a deliberate attempt to reduce crew, and in this instance it is likely that union would object.
- It is more important that the service is user friendly and this is an argument the MIFC is willing to make.
- B.W enquired as to whether CMAL position on procurement has moved forward in recent weeks.
- CMAL are in discussion with STS. STS have sent CMAL a proposal.
- J.R stated importance of MIFC consulting with wider community to ensure it is something that the community would want.
- J.R suggested inviting Prof. Alf Baird to do an online presentation advocating the use of catamarans.
- No objections.
- General consensus from all members is that catamaran should be pursued.

Any Other Current Business

- Calmac suddenly announced that early and late sailings to and from Iona are being cancelled.
- Sound of Iona Harbour Committee is meeting with Calmac, Calmac Health and Safety Representatives and Argyll and Bute Council on Monday to challenge decision.
- Half hour turn around will still be in place during winter time-table which means one sailing per day will be lost as a result.
- Proposed 2021 Summer time-table will soon be available for MIFC to view. Any desired changes will then be submitted and reviewed.
- J.M stated that they have managed to persuade Calmac to make minor changes to current winter time-table which improves connectivity between various modes of public transport on island and in Oban. This could be beneficial if the winter time-table is offered as a Summer time-table next year if reduced sailings are required through Covid-19