Mull & Iona Ferry Committee

Press release – 5/10/21

Mull and Iona welcome the Utne.

Mull and Iona Ferry Committee welcome the news that the MV Utne is being bought second-hand from the Norwegian ferry operator Norled. We have long campaigned for a ferry that can be based on Mull rather than on the mainland in Oban. The Utne can do exactly that, thanks to being around half the length of our current main vessel, the MV Isle of Mull.

In the winter months, the Utne will make significant and long-sought improvements to our ferry service. We will be able to catch the first train of the day from Oban to Glasgow on any week day. Our school children will be able to get to Oban any day of the week before 9. We will have several more useable hours on the mainland every day. It will make travel connections easier and work more practical. It may even make regular commuting to jobs on the mainland possible. There is no doubt that this is a welcome and much-needed development.

The Utne is far from ideal however, and the fact that such a second-hand purchase is even necessary is a symptom of how delayed the arrival of new-build vessels is. She is also a much less capable vessel that the catamaran we had advocated for over this past year – the one that CMAL turned down. The Utne has less than half the vehicle and passenger capacity of the catamaran, and is much slower at just 12knots. She can only operate on more sheltered routes, so therefore cannot act as a relief to our neighbours on Coll, Tiree or Colonsay as the catamaran could have done. And at £9 million (after modification) she comes out at £265,000 per vehicle space, as opposed to £150,000 for the catamaran.

One of the reasons cited for refusing the catamaran was the lack of live-aboard crew cabins. The Utne is the same – she is designed to be crewed by staff who return to their own homes each night, rather than sleep onboard. It is deeply frustrating that what was presented as an obstacle in the case of the catamaran, seems not to hinder the Utne.

On the other hand, this is a much preferrable crewing regime for any vessel operating the short hop to Mull, and may provide the means for this vessel to overcome some of her shortcomings. CalMac's major vessels have very restricted operating hours because of the need to allow on-board crew to sleep. Most short-distance ferries elsewhere don't operate like that, and instead the crew live locally and return home each night. This not only leads to more local employment, but enables a shift system to operate that can offer a longer timetable each day. Just like the majority of Norwegian ferries, the Utne was built for this kind of regime. As a result, the ferry route that she worked prior to being sold operated for 18 hours every day. We very much hope this is a practice that will transfer to Mull, together with the vessel itself. It will not only overcome her capacity limitations, but open up employment opportunities on the island.

Joe Reade, chair of the Mull and Iona Ferry Committee said "We look forward to the arrival of the Utne onto the service next summer. She may be small, but she'll be the equal youngest vessel in the fleet and if used well, will bring real improvements to the Mull service."

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