

Scottish Affairs Committee

[Oral evidence: Connectivity in Scotland: Fixed Links , HC 167](#)

Wednesday 17 June 2026

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Patricia Ferguson (Chair); Maureen Burke; Lillian Jones; Mr Angus MacDonald; Douglas McAllister; Susan Murray.

Questions 60 - 102

Witnesses

I: Ranald Robertson, Partnership Director, HiTrans; Nicky Sobey, Senior Policy Manager, Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE); and Moraig Lyall, Chair, ZetTrans.

II: Duncan Mackison, Chief Executive, CalMac; and Louis de Wolff, Fleet Director, CalMac.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Ranald Robertson, Nicky Sobey, and Moraig Lyall.

Q60 Chair: Good morning and welcome to this meeting of the Scottish Affairs Committee. Today we are looking at connectivity in Scotland: fixed links. This is a follow-on to a session we had previously, where we took evidence from local authorities in the Highlands and Islands.

I welcome the witnesses to our Committee this morning. I will begin with a question to all three of you. I think I know the answer to the first part of this question, but just to get it on the record, can you tell me why robust and reliable transport connectivity is important for island and remote communities? Can you also explain what impact current transport connectivity is having on the region, both socially and economically? Would anyone like to volunteer to start?

Moraig Lyall: I am happy to do so.

Chair: Thank you, Ms Lyall.

Moraig Lyall: I live on an island where there are very few services available, and I do not have a resilient, reliable link that has the capacity to meet the demand. That means I am not getting to work today, I am not going to college, I cannot get to the supermarket, I can forget about that dentist appointment. Equally, the man who is coming to service my boiler, the person delivering my online purchases, the person who is coming to assess me for social care, they are not getting there either. It is a two-way thing. For businesses, the inability to get materials and staff and product to where they need to be is a huge drain.

To give a couple of quick examples, I had a phone call a couple of weeks ago from one of our local truck hauliers, who said, "I have four lorries sitting in Unst. They have finished the work they came to do. I can get one out at 6 o'clock this evening, one out at 10 o'clock tomorrow morning, but the other two not until tomorrow evening." That is all cost for that business, which adds to the cost that he has to then charge the people he is working for. It is a complete drain on our economy and a limitation.

The current situation with our ferries is causing the problems. We have ageing vessels and infrastructure, which leads to higher maintenance costs and more regular breakdowns. We have escalating operational costs that, as a small local authority, we find difficult to meet. We get funding from the Scottish Government to help with that, but we have to find the staff to fill all the roles. With our demographic issues, finding staff is becoming more and more difficult, so we are relying more and more on agency staff, who have an additional cost to them. We have weather vulnerabilities, so with increasing winter storms, delays become more regular.



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The constraints on our economy and the difficulties that it creates for our communities are beginning to cause depopulation to accelerate. I will leave it at that just now.

Q61 **Chair:** Thank you, that was very comprehensive. Mr Robertson, would you like to add anything?

Ranald Robertson: Yes, and I will try not to repeat what has been covered by Moraig already.

Our island and peninsular communities are diverse in population, rich in culture, and important in their economic base. They are important to the rest of the UK, but they face regular ongoing challenges with their connectivity. That connectivity is not just a fixed link solution; it is a real, ongoing challenge and that is leading to the situation that Moraig outlined in terms of the demographic change in those areas. Reliable, resilient and affordable connectivity gives us an opportunity to address that and, hopefully, to reverse the trend of population change that we have seen in recent decades in the region.

Q62 **Chair:** Thank you. Mr Sobey, do you have anything to add?

Nicky Sobey: Yes, a few points, Chair. For our region, transport is crucial. We have over 90 inhabited islands, and the importance of reliable transport for them cannot be overstated. It is critical to the resilience of our communities—this has been touched upon—but transport is also a key enabler of economic growth across the region, with businesses reliant on effective transport for sourcing raw materials, selling to national and international markets and, as has been alluded to by my colleagues, accessing labour.

Likewise, robust transport will be key in supporting major developments in the islands. It has been estimated that across the Highlands and Islands there will be investment of just over £100 billion by 2040. To put that figure into context, between 1965 and 1980 total capital expenditure in oil and gas resources on the UK continental shelf equated to around £78 billion in 2023 prices. Renewable energy-related activity will account for the bulk of this, but there will also be substantial investment in other areas, such as space.

Across island areas in the region, there will be tens of billions of investment in the coming years. The scale of development will increase demand across sea, road and air services to transport people and equipment. As my colleagues have alluded to, there are significant challenges with ferries in the region. Resilience and reliability have been a major challenge on the CHFS network, as they have been in many parts of the network. There are ongoing issues around capacity and being able to meet demand. From your trip to the Outer Hebrides—I believe you visited Barra and Uist—you will be aware of the impact that that is having on communities in accessing medical services and visiting friends and families. It also has a significant impact on tourism and is affecting that



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sector's income. It has also affected the movement of freight in various respects as well.

The replacement of the ageing local authority fleets in Orkney and Shetland is a major challenge, as are air services. The cost of air services can be significant. The air discount scheme helps, but even with that discount the cost to families of travelling by air can still be significant. For SMEs, the cost of travel by air can be a barrier to using those services.

Thinking about transport to our islands more broadly, it is a question of the cost of doing business. There are significant cost of living issues in our remote communities, but there is the significant cost of doing business issue as well. Business costs, including transport costs, increase, and this eats into margins and profitability.

Chair: Thank you very much. Angus MacDonald has a supplementary.

Q63 Mr Angus MacDonald: Mr Sobey, can I just push you on that £100 billion? I was at the presentation where that figure was announced. I wonder if you think it really is a true figure, because the money is from an overseas manufacturer; it is owned by an infrastructure fund or a utility abroad. It is not actually real money being put into the communities of the Highlands, unless you think otherwise.

Nicky Sobey: A range of figures have been attached to it. There is a low estimate as well, which is potentially £70 billion of investment. The real challenge, I think, is the amount of money that is actually felt in our communities and what that means for developing opportunities in our local supply chains.

Q64 Susan Murray: I think you have all touched on this, but I am interested to hear your opinions on the key issues in reliance on the current ferry services and what improvements are needed. What improvements are needed to ensure that ferry services meet the needs of the island communities?

Ranald Robertson: Aspects of our ferry connectivity have been well covered in the media of late, but we are probably seeing the impact of decades of underinvestment in our ferry fleets. That is something that we have been aware of for a long time. It is not just the CalMac fleet that has suffered, and I know that the Committee has heard evidence already about that.

The ferry fleets that provide lifeline connectivity for our island communities are ageing. Indeed, the Clyde and Hebrides ferry service fleet is probably the youngest by average age. Despite that, when you are relying on assets that are, in some cases, older than me, something is amiss. The MV Belnahua has been serving the Argyll Islands since 1971. We have others like the Isle of Cumbrae that is my age. This is a problem that has been developing over a long period of time. Efforts are being made to address that, so we have some green shoots at least in certain respects.



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What that means is when ferry services go wrong, it can be catastrophic for communities. I think Moraig is better placed to talk about that, as she is at the sharp end of it. One just needs to look at ferry replacement. I know the Committee has touched on that already, and I know one of the Committee members has it in his constituency. We saw with the Corran ferry—Scotland's single busiest ferry—and its loss from service for the best part of a year that the impact was severe. That was to a peninsular community where a workaround was available and a road around was available, but in an island context, it was a catastrophe for Mull and Morvern, but Morvern in particular, and Ardnamurchan. That underlines the impact and the fragility of ferry services.

In that example there are issues in terms of the inability to get another ferry, which you can at least do in many other areas, but it is that single point of failure. It is the resilience issue that is the most critical. When it goes wrong is when we hear about a ferry service. When they go right, as they often do—I know that you have evidence later today from the largest operator of ferry services in Scotland—you do not hear about it. When it goes wrong we do hear about it. That has a wider impact and a secondary impact where people lose confidence in the ferry service, so they lose confidence to do business. It is that day-to-day impact on key sectors of business that is the key point.

I appreciate that we can talk to the numbers, and one of the key issues with these transformational projects that are in the pipeline is how we can ensure that local people and local communities benefit. We are currently seeing investment in the billions and an interconnector to the Western Isles. Let's try to understand how we can have more people living in the Western Isles, which has suffered decades of depopulation.

I am an immigrant Hebridean myself, so I can talk as one of those people who was born and bred and grew up in the Western Isles who does not live there now. Lack of economic opportunity is why people do not stay. That is why school rolls drop, and that is an area where the population has remained static—just looking at the marker of what the overall population is does not tell the whole story. We may come back to that. The Skye Bridge is an example of a fixed link. Post that, we have seen a 20% growth in Skye's population, but the Portree High School roll has fallen dramatically in that 31-year period.

Moraig Lyall: In my initial answer I tried to talk more about the impact on individuals, but the current ferry service is really constraining our economy. Unlike some other parts of the Highlands and Islands, Shetland really punches above its weight in economic terms. Our gross value added is above the UK average, but our key sectors—fishing and aquaculture, tourism, energy, oil and gas—depend on having a reliable and resilient network of people who are able to move back and forth to get the things to where they need to be, in particular to get the labour needed.



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Over the last 50 years, Shetland has developed into a cohesive set of islands where our transport links, the ferries, are used in the way that other areas use buses. People commute daily—sometimes more than once a day—on these ferries. Our economy has developed in a way that people need to be able to get from A to B very readily. A lack of investment in the last couple of decades has meant that we are now in a very strong race against time. As has been pointed out, the vessels in our area, as well as in other areas, are ageing; we have some that are over 40 years old. The infrastructure also needs significant investment. We are talking hundreds of millions of pounds required in the next two or three decades not for fixed links, although that is what we are looking towards, but just to maintain the ferry network that we have at the minute. If we are to grow and thrive as an economy, if we are to stabilise our population and if we are to retain younger people in our island communities, that is vital.

While the oil money was flowing into Shetland, we were able to regularly build new vessels for our routes. That has not been the case for the last two or three decades, so there was a pause in the building of new vessels. That is now coming back to bite us.

I can mention that there is a little bit of a historical anomaly in terms of the settlement for devolution to the Scottish Parliament. Because traditionally we had built our own ferries, there was no allowance made in that settlement for replacement of our vessels as there was for the West Coast, which had always been under the control of the state-owned CalMac. While we do get revenue funding for our ferries, we get no capital funding for our ferries from the Scottish Government and that has been a big issue.

In the Budget last year for the very first time we got a small allowance that has allowed us to move towards the tendering for a relief vessel to help improve the resilience of our route, but that is the first capital money that we have ever had from the Scottish Government, because traditionally we did that ourselves. I think that little historical anomaly is an important fact.

Nicky Sobey: To add to my colleagues' points, Councillor Lyall mentioned the need within the island as well. Connections to the mainland on the NorthLink NIFS service will be critical. We are already seeing a big increase in freight from various developments. Looking forward, there will be a new freighter coming in—I believe that is expected in early 2029—which will provide a lot of extra capacity. In the meantime, there may be capacity pressures associated with increased demand within the route, which is something that we have seen previously with the requirements of aquaculture and so on.

Looking forward, there will be the new vessel coming in, but there will also need to be monitoring of whether capacity is sufficient. I know



NorthLink has good engagement and lines of communication with its commercial customers, and that will be key in monitoring the situation.

Q65 Maureen Burke: What are the main challenges to delivering improvements to the current ferry service and to what timescales could these improvements realistically be achieved? I know you are talking about lack of investment. Could you give us a wee bit of information on that?

Moraig Lyall: Lack of money to make the investment is one of the key things. For a small local authority like us, it is way beyond our ability to find the resources required to upgrade all our piers and replace all our vessels. One thing that we need to make clear is that even were we to find that resource, continuing to run the network in the way that it has done over the last few decades is not sustainable.

We could end up putting in hundreds of millions of pounds to replace our vessels and upgrade our piers but still find ourselves with many of the issues that we face in terms of the capacity of our vessels to support our economy and finding the staff we need to run them. We are still going to be open to the vagaries of the weather, and with climate change storms are becoming more frequent.

The council has the direct responsibility for carbon emissions. Over half of those are related to our ferry fleet. There are not yet suitable replacement vessels that are suitable for our open water crossings that do not have diesel engines. Those are still in development; they are not available as yet. So there are many issues around why we cannot move forward with renewing the fleet as is currently envisaged.

The work we have started to do with fixed links shows that, for a similar amount or even less, we could end up with something that overcomes many of the barriers of the current ferry service. Links would be open 24 hours a day. We would not have the constraints on capacity that we face today. We would not have to worry about whether we can staff them. We would not have to worry about the weather conditions. Many of these barriers that the ferry network has would remain even if we were able to replace them all. That is why we have been looking towards a fixed link option for some of our routes.

Ranald Robertson: I will try not to repeat too much of what Councillor Lyall has already covered, but it is important to reiterate that funding is the primary challenge. After that, the deliverability question and the nature of what you are providing comes along. The aspiration should be to decarbonise but there are not always the technological solutions for that. If it is an electric fleet, there are challenges in finding shore-based power that can meet the charging requirements of the fleet. That is something that colleagues in CMAL are working on at the moment for the small vessel replacement programme.



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Finance is the primary challenge, but it is worth noting that the do-nothing option has to be set against that as well. Doing nothing—as we have seen in the last 20 years or so—has meant that cost inflation and increases in the ferry replacement bill rise very quickly over time. In that period we have seen costs imposed on communities, and it is important not to lose sight of the costs of ferry reliability or technical issues.

There are absolutely challenges, but ultimately it is the financing option. Also people's expectations change. Moraig talked about some of the ferry services in Shetland, which operate more frequently than they may do, say, in Orkney, where routes and services methodologies have been looked at. Now we are going through a community needs assessment process in partnership with Transport Scotland, which tends to suggest that communities are looking for better connectivity, not the same connectivity.

These communities want to move forward in the same way as every other community, which is the basis of the fixed link inquiry. That is why you look at the difference between the fixed link relative to the ferry, but better connectivity does not need a fixed link. It can be improvements in ferry services, but there can be challenges with getting staff if you try to do more.

I know that you have CalMac here later today, but we have seen a planned increase in ferry services across the Sound of Barra, which I know is one of the mooted fixed link opportunities. That has not been able to progress at this stage of the summer timetable and may not progress. It may progress at the end of the summer timetable because getting staff who comply with all the regulations and all the qualifications to operate the service is challenging, and you need to do it for the long term so that people have job security if they are going to move back to our community.

Nicky Sobey: I will not repeat any of my colleagues' points, but in terms of the improvements and timeframes, I note that over this spring there were a lot of vessels that were out of action due to technical issues or annual maintenance that all happened at the same time. There are new vessels that have started to come in, major vessels, and more of them are expected during 2026 and into early 2027. I believe as well that with the small vessel replacement programme for the CHFS network, the first of those vessels will be coming in in 2027. CalMac will be able to provide a more detailed view on that in your next session.

On the CalMac network, the major issue in recent years has been the lack of tonnage and the technical issues with tonnage. There is some light at the end of the tunnel in that regard but, in the meantime, there have been some significant issues.

Moraig Lyall: Could I add one point? One of the downsides of having a very buoyant economy, much of which is marine-based—aquaculture and oil and gas and offshore energy—is that as a ferry network we are in



competition with those sectors for the same staff. Being private companies in the main, they are able to offer better conditions. Therefore, trying to retain our ferrymen when we are in such competition with much bigger operators can be a real challenge.

Q66 Douglas McAllister: I want to move us on to discuss fixed links, and perhaps we could start with Nicky this time and work our way along. I want to ask about existing or previous fixed links. I do not want to stray into potential new fixed links because one of my colleagues may ask you that after my question. Can you provide concrete examples from your respective regions where a fixed link reversed a negative trend in the area?

Nicky Sobey: Thanks very much for the question. In particular on the Skye Bridge, I think a negative trend within the area was unmet demand for travel. Following the introduction of the bridge the levels of traffic increased to and from Skye. This was islanders and visitors travelling to and from the mainland. It opened up job opportunities and increased the local labour market. We saw something similar when bridges and causeways were introduced in the Outer Hebrides. Looking at the examples of Scalpay, Berneray and Eriskay, those similarly expanded job opportunities locally and made it more straightforward to commute for work. It impacted in terms of reversing the negative trend, if you like, of people being detached from employment opportunities.

There is clear evidence that there has been a positive population impact. We have seen that in Skye, with the bridge having helped retain and attract people to the island. Likewise, in Scalpay, Berneray and Eriskay, it helped to stabilise or certainly decreased the long-term depopulation trends. In terms of employment and population, there have been positive trends associated with fixed links in those examples.

Ranald Robertson: I support everything Nicky has said, and I would add to that some of the more historic fixed links that we have in the area. I know that the Churchill Barriers have been mentioned; the South Isles of Orkney are connected to the Orkney mainland by those interventions necessary for the defence of the realm, which have allowed those islands to perform well in line with the Orkney mainland.

In slightly more recent times, imagine the economy of Inverness and the Inner Moray Firth had we not bridged the Beauly, the Cromarty and the Dornoch Firths. These crossings and fixed links have been transformational. You just need to look at the success of the Inverness area to understand the impact that they have had.

Jumping back a little bit, in the Western Isles, where I know you were at the beginning of the month, the North Ford and first the South Ford Bridge and then the South Ford Causeway made Uist—the archipelago of Uist—into a single connected landmass, without in any respect changing the tradition and the culture and the feeling. I am a Tuathach, and I know you have heard from a Deasach and Councillor Steele at a previous



session, so you know the identity of each of those islands remains quite distinct.

Since then, we have seen and properly measured the impact, and this is the difference. We have not really measured the impact of the Kessock Bridge. We just assumed where we would be without it. If we did not have it, we would be building a Queensferry crossing type of intervention. It would be a non-debatable subject.

As Nicky has mentioned, in more recent times we have had an evaluation of the Skye Bridge. Therefore, we understand its impact, and we understand the impact of the tolls being removed. For the Scalpay Bridge and the Eriskay and Berneray Causeways, we have evidence that suggests populations will grow on those islands, albeit it is in the context of the wider island population and the demographic issues that exist. However, we know we have achieved population growth, which in peripheral areas is really positive.

Moraig Lyall: Speaking from a Shetland perspective, back in the 1970s we linked three of our islands, Muckle Roe, Trondra and Burra, to our mainland and all have seen significant population growth in the 40 years since. If we were to look at the island of Burra in the 40 years before the bridge coming, its population had fallen from around 800 to about 560. It has now bounced back to 850. Trondra had gone from 91 down to 17; it is now up to 135—a 700% increase in population since that fixed link was put in. All our connected islands have seen significant population growth. It has enabled improved labour mobility, access to education and services, and economic integration with the rest of Shetland, and it has stabilised demographically. Emergency response access is also an important aspect: for example, an ambulance getting in and out is much cheaper and quicker, so there is a significant impact there as well.

Q67 **Douglas McAllister:** Population and economic growth are the benefits. Have there been any downsides, any unintended consequences to these connections?

Moraig Lyall: In the Shetland context it is very hard to find downsides and unintended consequences because unlike, for example, the Skye situation, where it linked into the mainland of Scotland and opened the floodgates for mass tourism, which may have had some negative impact, in the Shetland context we still have the Pentland Firth and a lot of water between ourselves and the mainland. Our ability to get people into Shetland in the first place is limited by the capacity of our NorthLink and Loganair services so, there is a natural barrier there to over-tourism and things that might have happened in other places. These links have principally been positive for all the islands that have had them and I believe they would be for other islands within our network.

Nicky Sobey: In the Skye example, as I mentioned overall, the economic and social benefits have been incredibly strong for Skye. Some of the downsides may have been around the volume of traffic on the road



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and the pressures that can put on the road network, particularly around attractions. One of the lessons from that is to have a long-term view, looking 20 to 30 years ahead, and to ask whether the capacity is there to support growth following unmet demand being met.

Other projects that might connect existing islands might be less of an issue than connections from the mainland to islands, but certainly pressure on the road network is something that will have to be carefully considered for any new project, particularly if it involves a connection from the mainland to an island.

Q68 Douglas McAllister: Do you think that is the lesson to be learned, then, with any new fixed link infrastructure—that there has to be that mitigation built in to begin with?

Nicky Sobey: Absolutely, yes.

Ranald Robertson: On that point, Skye is a different example. I think Skye had a 24/7 ferry service that operated through the night, with two ferries operating back to back as well. It was Scotland's busiest ferry service when it was withdrawn and maybe that growth would have continued. We have seen some of that growth rerouted through the still being able to sail over the sea to Skye option via the Mallaig to Armadale option.

In the context of discussions around potential new fixed links, I am not sure that it is the same issue. In the Western Isles you have The Minch and the Sea of Hebrides between that issue and in Shetland you have the North Sea between the Scottish mainland and that issue, so you are servicing a different market. The issue is about connecting these communities to where maybe the economic opportunity might sit, and the Western Isles economic opportunity is emerging around Stornoway.

To focus on the initial point, what would people tell you about whether there have been downsides? You will probably find more people finding the downside about Skye but I think you will still find very few people who would not want that bridge. They would not want to see the queues at Kyle and Kyleakin return, and by God I can imagine what those queues would have been like with today's demand, because Skye is one of Scotland and the UK's go-to places.

People go to the Highlands. They want to go to Inverness and Loch Ness and they want to go to Skye, yet we see similar numbers of people going to the Aviemore area as are going to Skye and it has coped; because it is a different network, you do not see it. The bridge I think has become a bit totemic for that debate around the demand to go to Skye. I do not think it is quite the same. I am sure if you dug around in Berneray and Eriskay you will find somebody who would tell you that they wish that causeway had not been built, but they will be a very small minority voice.

Q69 Lillian Jones: We are moving now to areas that would benefit from fixed links. What regions, if any, would benefit most from new fixed links and in what ways? We will start with Councillor Lyall.



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Moraig Lyall: You are probably aware that we are in the process of completing a network study looking at all our islands and the future of their connectivity. Within that, we have identified four islands that we believe could benefit from a fixed link. Principally, these are the ones that have higher populations, high levels of significant freight and logistics. In our context that is the islands of Yell, Unst, Bressay and Whalsay. These are the ones that we have been investigating in terms of potential fixed links.

To give you an example from the island of Yell, we have there the port of Cullivoe, which is one of the largest fish landing ports in the country. Millions of pounds worth of both white fish and salmon is landed there but currently they are dependent on what is a very constrained ferry service to get down to the mainland to reach the NorthLink to get on to the ferry south. These are obviously highly time-pressured cargoes that need to be able to move very quickly, and that is why we believe that an island such as Yell would benefit very significantly.

We have the spaceport up in the island of Unst. We have a delegation of German visitors, including politicians, high businesspeople and some people I believe from the Government going there today. They are having to leave Lerwick at 5.30 in the morning because the Yell Sound, which normally has two ferries, is down to one ferry. The high level of bookings means that the coach that they are going up on is going to have to go on a very early morning ferry to get through Yell on to Unst in time for the appointments that they have there. That gives you one insight into the impact. If they could leave Lerwick and drive straight through it would be hours of saving in their programming. That is true for all businesses that operate there and for all individuals who live there at the minute.

Ranald Robertson: Ambitions remain. The strategic transport projects review identified three potential future fixed links: the Sound of Harris, the Sound of Barra and some form of crossing to Mull. Each is due to have some work undertaken and I know there are plans now to do some consultation events in the Western Isles in the autumn around those two and the potential replacement of short sea crossings. In the past, there has been a strong demand and lobby for a fixed link to Luing to connect to the island of Seil, which would provide better connectivity for that island.

There are a number of quite short sea crossings as well including, as I mentioned earlier, the Corran Ferry. If one was to think about anything happening, it seems peculiar to talk about a fixed link to Mull without talking about a much more feasible-looking connection across the Corran Narrows as well, which would relieve pressure on the Oban to Kerrera ferry service potentially as an example and would also serve a proven need. However, we are currently investing heavily in the ferry service for that because there is an urgency and a need. If you do not start planning early enough, then what we will have to do is just renew and replace ferry services. It is maybe looking to that, accepting that some of this has to be a very long-term view.



For the Sound of Harris and the Sound of Barra, there has also been the long-standing ambition to improve the spinal route, the trunk road through the Western Isles, to better connect those islands. That remains an important aspiration. There are opportunities. There are short sea crossings. I do not know how blue-skies I should be in this without raising concerns, but there are a number of short sea crossings. Colintraive-Rhubodach to Bute is a very short crossing—five minutes sailing time. There are crossings like that that perhaps would be worthy of some consideration.

Nicky Sobey: My colleagues have comprehensively discussed the potential projects in the region and the ones being looked at presently. I can expand on a couple of them in terms of the potential benefits for those communities.

Thinking about the Sounds projects in the Outer Hebrides and the activity that will be happening in the Outer Hebrides in the coming years in the renewable energy sector, much of that activity will be centred around Lewis. There will be some major projects within Uist but the bulk of activity will be in Lewis and Harris, so the introduction of fixed links that join the whole of the archipelago will make the opportunities associated with that much more accessible for supply chain businesses and for workers from across the archipelago to see benefits from that as well.

Councillor Lyall mentioned the projects being looked at in the North Isles and in Shetland. Given the range of industries that are active there, we are already seeing that capacity on the ferries network struggles at times to meet demand from all those industries combined with the travel needs of residents. New tunnels in those areas would help to remove those constraints.

We have also mentioned that fixed links can have a positive impact on population trends. The examples that were highlighted by Councillor Lyall looking at Yell, Unst, Whalsay and Bressay for potential fixed links, those are all island communities that have seen a steeper level of population decline than the Shetland average. Similarly, there have been population challenges in Uist. For those particular examples, connecting fixed links would have a positive impact in helping to address those trends.

Q70 **Lillian Jones:** If these projects might bring any downsides to the areas, how would they be mitigated?

Ranald Robertson: We are talking about a consultation exercise just now around the Sound of Harris and Sound of Barra. I think it is important that the wider community is supportive of the direction of travel. That is probably the key thing that should bring in a lot of these concerns around what the impact might be, what it can do for the community. Will it lead to depopulation, which we have already been seeing? Orkney's population has sustained relatively well but there has been depopulation in the outer North Isles of Orkney into Kirkwall and that would, I think, continue to be a concern.



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It is a matter of how you approach it and how you ensure that it is about providing and sharing the economic opportunities that might exist across a wider area. That is probably the key, just being very careful in how it is delivered, and communities will soon speak up as well.

Moraig Lyall: In the Shetland context it is hard to find downsides. I had a message this week from someone in the North Isles that basically said, "Your ferry service is killing my business." I know they would not be the only person to say that, but we would have to look at putting in solutions for people who currently travel as foot passengers and cyclists on our interisland ferries because the tunnels that we would envisage would not be able to allow for them. We would need to ensure that we mitigated with a good public transport service in the form of buses. We already have a bus network that travels on the ferry, but we would have to ensure that that ran regularly enough to ensure that these people were not left disadvantaged. That would be one of the few downsides that I can see to what would in the main be a much bigger positive.

Nicky Sobey: No downsides really stand out for me, but I agree with my colleague's points around, in particular, ensuring that public transport will be adequate following the introduction of fixed links and that people who do not have a car do not see their ability to travel deteriorate and that appropriate mitigation is in place.

I agree with Ranald's point that community voice within this will be crucial for any community that receives a fixed link. It would be a significant change to that area, so community voice will be key.

Q71 **Susan Murray:** If the fixed links were introduced, and Councillor Lyall has highlighted one of the issues that might crop up, is there still a role for the ferries in the regions?

Moraig Lyall: There will always be a need for ferries for some of our islands. They are either too far out or have populations that are so small that it would not ever be economically—or even for other reasons, even geographical reasons—possible to have fixed links, so there will always be a role for our ferry service in Shetland.

What the move towards fixed links would do is let us focus our resources on the routes that remain while we go through the process of introducing fixed links, which we would envisage happening over the next 20, 30 years if that is what the council decides to go for and we are able to find the finance to make it possible. We would need to continue investing in our ferry network because, as we have already said, our vessels and infrastructure are already old. As fixed links came on stream, those new vessels could be repurposed on other routes to ensure that they do not become extraneous but would be able to fill the gaps as the others move on out of the network.

I see there is quite a complicated piece of work to be done here because obviously you need to keep a ferry service running while you are constructing fixed links so at that point you have double the costs. You are paying for your ferry but you are also paying for your new links. We



would have to work out the sequencing of which tunnel we do, which ferry we build and so on very carefully. That piece of work is hopefully about to be commissioned. We have spent the last couple of years building the business case. It has not quite come to council yet—it is due at the end of this month—so I cannot prejudge what decision the council will make. However, in case it should go ahead, we are now looking at a short piece of work on the sequencing of all this that will show how the ferry and fixed links would work in parallel until we get to the end, where hopefully every one of our islands has the service that it requires.

Q72 Susan Murray: Is public transport in your calculations? You say public transport is currently going on ferries. If it were to go over a bridge or through a tunnel, is it adequate or is that another area that needs to be invested in?

Moraig Lyall: Our bus service in Shetland Islands is very good relative to other parts of the Highlands and Islands. It operates through small local operators and it has been well invested in through the council, which contracts them. Would there need to be a slight uplift in the number of services into our northern islands? Potentially, yes, but given that it would literally be an extension of the road, it would mean that the services that on the mainland currently stop when they get to the ferry terminal could just drive the few extra miles to get through on to the island, so the increase in what would be required would not be, in my mind, significant.

Q73 Susan Murray: Mr Robertson, do you feel that there is still a role for the ferries, or what is the role for the ferries now?

Ranald Robertson: There is definitely still going to be a role for ferries and the need to invest in them and improve them will remain as well. Indeed, we still have in operation the ferry that was replaced by the Kylesku Bridge. We recycle and we reuse, sometimes to the extent that that really should not still be happening, but anyway, we are where we are. There will definitely be a role for ferries.

I did not mention this before so I will mention that blue-skies opportunity now. Looking at Orkney, you could, for example, look to fixed-link connect Westray to Eday but you will still need a ferry from Eday to Kirkwall. You just increase the efficiency of the ferries that you have and are better able to serve the communities that need to be served.

You will still have those longer crossings. Even in the case of discussion that will be taking place about the Sound of Harris, one of the options would be a partial fixed link, not a full fixed link, which would free the route from some of the restrictions it has in its daylight operating hours and tidal restriction. You can still do more with ferries potentially as well with an element of tactical fixed links, too.

In short, yes, there will still be a role for ferries. The nature of some of the crossings do not lend themselves to being replaced, but we are looking to take a whole systems approach.



Susan Murray: Mr Sobey, do you have anything to add?

Nicky Sobey: I don't have much to add that has not been covered by my colleagues on this one, but certainly ferries will continue to be important parts of the network and connections. Public transport connections to ferries will also continue to be important following the introduction of fixed links.

Q74 **Susan Murray:** Do you think there is a possibility that having the fixed links will increase pressure on ferry services in the areas where the ferries are still operating?

Nicky Sobey: In the case of the Outer Hebrides, thinking about the Sound of Harris and Sound of Barra, and during peak season in particular, there are capacity issues on those services. Probably internal connections would help to resolve that problem, which can be a frustration for islanders during peak summer season. It will certainly help to relieve pressures for inter-island travel. Similarly, of course, for Orkney and Shetland, if fixed links were introduced there, that would relieve capacity pressures on the internal network.

Morag Lyall: Even those islands that do not get a fixed link could have positive benefits. For example, if you live in the island of Fetlar, you have to take a ferry to Yell and then a ferry to get to the mainland. If a fixed link was introduced on the Yell Sound, then that would leave us with no islands having to take two ferries to get to the mainland. At the minute, both Fetlar and Unst travel through Yell. If they could be connected, then there would only be one ferry ride away from services rather than two ferry rides.

Q75 **Mr Angus MacDonald:** I was going ask about London's or Westminster's role in funding transportation, seeing as it is a devolved subject. The more I looked into it, the more I came up with a major issue. After the Brexit vote, the UK Government promised their UK shared prosperity fund would replace EU funding in full. The EU funds provided over £1 billion in structural funds in the region since 1994. Over the nine years since the 2016 vote, that points to a cumulative shortage of hundreds of millions of pounds for the Highlands and Islands; that is, we had the EU money and it has not been replaced by Westminster. Could you give me your thoughts on how impactful that could be and what could be done to address it?

Ranald Robertson: I agree that that has had an impact. I think it has been an impact even latterly in EU terms as well. For a time, the Highlands and Islands enjoyed Objective 1 funding, and that was transformational. It was transformational in that it was laser focused on the areas that needed investment in particular. It was guided by the Highlands and Islands sitting at 75% of the EU's GDP. I think it is important when you talk in GVA or GDP terms to also recognise that the cost of living in the Highlands and Islands is also higher. Just taking that as a metric, there needs to be thought around that, but we had some transformational projects and we saw some positive outcomes and



impact. Indeed, I think if you look at what happened post-objective 1, when the accession countries became the focus because of where EU's average GDP sat, if you look at those countries today and where their GDP sits relative to the rest of Europe, and indeed to the Highlands and Islands, that funding works. That funding can work and it has worked in the Highlands and Islands. The Berneray and Scalpay bridges were supported by objective 1 funding. Improvements in the spinal route through the Western Isles were supported through objective 1 funding. The roads in Wester Ross that have better connections around Achnasheen were supported through it. We have a long list of examples of what that funding has done. We have not really seen the same since.

It possibly tapered a bit when we moved away from the Highlands and Islands Partnership Programme approach that we enjoyed over that period in any case, where a fund was focused and targeted on meeting the needs of the Highlands and Islands, I think even in the Scottish context. The Highlands and Islands population sits broadly, in average terms, at about 8.5% of Scotland's population. That is also where Scotland sits against the UK average and we will soon say that in Scotland we know what we need for Scotland better than anybody else will tell us as well and I think the same applies. In the post-EU exit world, I think a focus on the UK's cohesion, allying that with the important economic opportunities that the Highlands and Islands is delivering in food, drink and renewable energy, and as has been mentioned earlier, to ensure that the benefits are felt locally from what we are exporting in terms of our energy supply to the rest of the UK, it is important that we better connect and provide better access to communities in the area to those opportunities as well.

Q76 Mr Angus MacDonald: Mr Sobey, HIE was key in the distribution of the EU money. Is this a subject that comes up with HIE about the non-availability of funds that the EU used to provide?

Nicky Sobey: Absolutely. In relation to transport infrastructure and the projects that were put in place through ERDF funding, as Ranald has alluded to, a variety of transport investments were made that were of significant scale around harbours and ferry projects, roads and fixed links, and substantial investment in air services and infrastructure. That gap, that level of funding at that scale, simply has not been filled.

The social factors that led to the Highlands and Islands receiving that funding—issues around peripherality and economic disadvantage—are still issues for our region; in particular, with the cost of living crisis, the cost of doing business in the region and, as we have discussed, issues around population trends. Those social factors remain a key rationale, and the loss of EU funding has been felt. There is also now a strong economic rationale for investing in the Highlands. Whereas before it was around peripherality, now it is around where the economic opportunities are for the UK. The Highlands will be making a huge contribution not only to the UK Government's net zero ambitions but also to the wider



economy. In short, the Highlands are going to be an engine of growth for the Scottish economy, and transport is going to be critical to that.

Q77 Mr Angus MacDonald: As a variation on that question, the Westminster Government are responsible for defence and the security of the UK. Do you think Shetland can make an extra case for funding to Westminster based on, for example, the Greenland Gap or your oil and gas?

Moraig Lyall: It is for defence specialists to identify the needs, but I do think that Shetland sits in a very strategic location in the North Atlantic Gap and we are already aware of activity around our waters. We now have the space centre going in there, the SaxaVord station that is already monitoring activity in that area of the world. I think that the current world situation means that the strategic nature of our location will increase.

If you would permit me to just answer a little bit to what you asked in your previous questions, we did benefit significantly from that funding in the past. Of two most recent funds that have been opened up, Shetland is one of only a couple of local authority areas in the whole of Scotland that have not benefited at all. We did, of course, benefit from one tranche of funding from the levelling up fund, which was partly supposed to replace the European money. That started out as a £30 million project in which the UK Government were providing £27 million and the local authority £3 million. As the project got to market the cost of it exploded. It was having to be de-scoped and de-scoped but even then it still landed at £45 million. The UK Government contribution was still only £27 million, so as a local authority we are now having to put £18 million into that. That is a six-fold increase and a pressure for our local authority.

That is all aligned to what was mentioned by Mr Sobey. The cost of doing business in a remote area like ours is much, much higher than doing it in other parts, so that is one of the things that we really struggle with. The investment that we get does not go nearly as far.

Chair: Thank you very much. That concludes our questions to you this morning, you will be relieved to hear. Thank you very much for your time and for your contribution. It has been very helpful and very useful to us.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Duncan Mackison and Louis de Wolff.

Q78 Chair: Good morning and welcome back to this meeting of the Scottish Affairs Committee. We thank Mr Mackison and Mr de Wolff for joining us virtually this morning. It is good to have you along, thank you for that, and thank you for your time.

We know that ferry services are very important to the communities that you serve and CalMac's corporate plan sets out an ambition to be



consistently safe and reliable by 2031. Do you believe you are on track to achieve this goal?

Duncan Mackison: We are at present. We have had significant issues over the last couple of months with ferry reliability; primarily that has been a function of the age of our fleet. The average age of the 37 vessels that we operate is just under 26 years. Our objective is to bring the average age down and reliability will increase as an output of that.

We have two new vessels, larger vessels, in our fleet, which arrived relatively recently; three more are due to arrive between July this year and February next year, and a further vessel that is due to arrive at the back end of this year is being built in Scotland. So we have new vessels on the way and that will bring the average age down, which will improve reliability and stability. Key to us is maintaining new vessels coming into our fleet, and roughly speaking, because of the size of our fleet, the average operating age needs to be about 30 years. We need a new vessel every one year to 18 months to maintain that reliability.

In short, for the next few years there is a lot of catch-up. If we can maintain that reinvestment, things should stabilise to deliver against that statement in the plan.

Q79 **Chair:** Have the two new ferries delivered as you expected and been able to operate as you had hoped?

Duncan Mackison: Yes. There are always issues with new ferries. If you speak to any ferry company or shipping company around the globe, you will hear that there are always teething problems, but we are very pleased to have the two new ones, Glen Sannox and the Isle of Islay, both operating in the fleet. Glen Sannox came in at the end of January last year and the Isle of Islay has been in service for a couple of months now. They are a very welcome addition.

Q80 **Susan Murray:** I would like to talk about CalMac's customer feedback. Mr Mackison, the latest data shows that CalMac failed to hit all its customer feedback KPIs. What are the main reasons for that?

Duncan Mackison: The main reason is that we have had significant disruption over the last couple of months. We are in a more stable place now, but at one point across April and May we had 10 vessels out of service. The disruption to customer journeys and customer experience was extremely negative. That is why we are in that position at the moment. We are in a more stable place now so we are expecting that to improve, but it has been a difficult last few months.

Q81 **Susan Murray:** Has customer compensation for delays and cancellation increased or decreased over the past year?

Duncan Mackison: The scale of pay-outs has increased. We have industry standard compensation that is paid to customers who are unable to travel or whose journey is disrupted based on standard criteria. That will have increased this year over last year because of the scale of the disruption.



Q82 **Susan Murray:** Are you aware of the impact on the community when CalMac cannot provide a service that the local people need and expect?

Duncan Mackison: Yes, we are. We engage with local communities through a series of community ferry committees based in the islands and communities that we serve. We engage with them frequently and I personally engage with them. As you can imagine, we are made very aware of local issues as they arise.

Q83 **Susan Murray:** What priority are you giving to make sure that you hit KPIs in the future?

Duncan Mackison: The main issue that we are addressing at the moment is trying to get younger vessels into the fleet and improve reliability, which will improve the service. Partly that is due to new vessels but it also relies on the maintenance regime that we operate and the ability to identify issues in older vessels before they cause problems. We have introduced an approach around condition monitoring that is designed to try to detect in advance likely issues, so that we can avoid unexpected disruptions.

Q84 **Lillian Jones:** Mr Mackison, during the Committee's visit to the Western Isles, we heard how locals felt about CalMac services, that they were not meeting the demand and more services were needed. Some of the comments were about the booking system: despite services regularly being stated as fully booked, the vessels appeared to be around two-thirds full, which suggested that the tolerance margins for larger vehicles may be overly restrictive. It also raised questions about a possibly inadequate booking system. They were just some of the comments that we received. Do you believe there is unmet demand in some of the areas that you operate? What do you say to some of the residents' comments?

Duncan Mackison: Unmet demand is difficult for us to see and track but I am sure that on occasions, especially in peak season, there will be unmet demand.

One of the big drivers of concern is around disruption caused by ferry breakdowns or a ferry being out of service. That often means that we have to replace a ferry or remove a ferry and therefore people who are booked to travel either as a foot passenger or with a vehicle need to be moved on to a different vessel. That requires us to close the booking system for a time for that particular route so that those people can be moved from one to the other. That is often the experience that causes the most frustration.

There have been issues with our booking system in the past. We have recalibrated the vehicle deck space measurements to try to avoid that. I believe that that is better than it was but that has certainly been a problem in the past.

Q85 **Lillian Jones:** What are the challenges in having more services? Do you think that having fixed links would alleviate the pressures on your services or would it pose challenges for your business model?



Duncan Mackison: The challenges in operating more frequent services ultimately come down to the number of vessels that we have, the ability of those vessels to operate for longer periods and for the crew on those vessels to be able to operate for longer. Not surprisingly, we are constrained by law around working days and the numbers of crew that we have available at any given time. They are constraints that we have to operate within.

With older vessels, we have to think about maintenance periods as well, because we are required by law to take passenger ferries out of service and put them into dry dock every year. That means that we have a significant maintenance cycle that we have to work through each year. If you look within the constraints that we have and compare them with those of fixed links, I think you would have to conclude that in many respects and where appropriate a fixed link would offer more flexibility or more unlimited capacity than we can for those reasons.

Q86 **Lillian Jones:** Locals felt there was a disconnect between CalMac and the needs of your customers. How would you respond to those comments and what could you do to improve the service?

Duncan Mackison: We work hard to listen to our customers, gather customer feedback, and wherever possible put services in place that meet the requirements. There is no doubt, though, that there is frustration with the quantity and scale and reliability of the services that we can sometimes offer. Certainly, when we are, as we do, offering lifeline services that at times are critically required, we are probably never going to be in a position where we can meet all the requests of customers or communities. However, I do think a younger fleet with more reliability would be a very good place to start from to provide a stable service and environment.

Q87 **Chair:** Mr Mackison, recent FOI requests have found that the proportion of ferry cancellations caused by technical problems had risen from 10% in 2015 to over 50% in 2025. Given the long lead-in times that you have for procuring new ferries and putting them into service, how long would you expect that trend of cancellation issues to continue?

Duncan Mackison: Ultimately, technical issues increasing as a percentage of the reasons for cancellations should reduce if we have younger and more reliable ferries. I can take the example that in less than a year from now we will have another four large ferries in the network. That should start to make a difference to the average age and reduce disruption and reliability-related issues.

In addition, we have a further seven small vessels on their way, the first one of which is due in the first quarter of 2027, next year. Seven of those will be coming through until 2029. Over that period from now until mid-2029 things should improve with that new tonnage arriving. The ongoing reduction beyond that point, Chair, will be to do with the continued provision, because we operate some 37 vessels and we will have only renewed about a quarter of the fleet over that period. To maintain that



trend, hopefully, we need to keep up that drumbeat of new vessels coming into the fleet.

Q88 **Chair:** So the commissioning of new vessels is going to be very important. Have you modelled what those cancellation rates might look like with and without new vessels coming through?

Duncan Mackison: Not specifically, but we can see from the data that the number of technical issues that we have had has increased dramatically in recent years. We could retrospectively look at that increase over time and then go back and say, well, if the fleet were younger, what proportionately would be the reduction of technical cancellations. Technical cancellations account for about half of our cancellations. The remaining cancellations are to do with weather or environmental factors such as the sea state and those things. Those factors obviously will continue to be present.

Q89 **Chair:** Indeed. Does CalMac have a level of cancellations due to technical faults that it feels is acceptable?

Duncan Mackison: I think we will always have cancellations. As we stand today, our current cancellation rate across all sailings is about 9% and about half are because of technical reasons. I would suggest that figure should be significantly less. It is in the high 40% at the moment. It should probably be down at about 20% to 25%, something like that.

Q90 **Chair:** Okay. When do you expect the technical faults to return to a more acceptable level? I understand what you are saying about programming the new vessels in. Is there a point at which you think that will begin to bring those levels down to what is acceptable?

Duncan Mackison: I will ask my colleague to take that question, if I may.

Louis de Wolff: I think the main benefit from new tonnage will be that the vessels are more reliable and more capable in weather. The old tonnage is much more difficult to repair. Repairing very simple technical defect on an old vessel can last several weeks while we hunt the world for parts that simply are not available any more and often have to be made from scratch. That is a main contributor to how much lost time that a fairly basic technical defect causes. Not only will new tonnage coming in be more technically reliable, but the vessels will be easier to repair with parts that are available. I fully expect with the arrival of the new tonnage, both in the major fleet and in the small fleet, to see that significant reduction in technical defects.

Q91 **Maureen Burke:** Mr Mackison, I know you covered technical faults there but my question is to what extent the weather-related cancellations are becoming more frequent. Do you have any data showing whether weather-related cancellations are increasing?

Duncan Mackison: I will pass to Louis de Wolff on that one, too.

Louis de Wolff: Weather is a major factor. There are probably two reasons for that. First, the prevailing winds to which our infrastructure



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was built are from south-west. With climate change having an effect, we see more and more easterly winds affecting our network, so that is a factor.

The other weather factor is that, like any other area in the world, we are becoming more aware of the risks associated with the sailings. We are, I suppose, a bit more risk averse on sailings than perhaps we were 20 or 30 years ago, for all very good reasons.

As well as ferries, we have infrastructure, and in many cases the infrastructure is also at the end of its life. Any incident occurring at that infrastructure could knock out that infrastructure for a long period of time, stopping the ferry service altogether, so we have to take that into account.

Q92 Maureen Burke: Given that the network's exposure to weather is unavoidable, is it realistic to expect ferry services to ever be consistently reliable?

Louis de Wolff: I think so. The new vessels, Isle of Islay and Glen Sannox, are much more capable vessels and built to higher standards for weather resilience. We have already seen that with Isle of Islay coming online. She is more resilient in all sorts of weather.

Duncan Mackison: However, there are always occasions or weather conditions where we are unable to sail for safety reasons. There will always be a proportion of our sailings that are cancelled or affected by weather, just because we cannot operate in those conditions.

Q93 Chair: As you are probably very well aware, the Scottish Government have set a target to reduce the average fleet age by about 15 years by the end of the decade. Based on current progress, how achievable do you think that target is for CalMac?

Duncan Mackison: I think we are on track to do that but we need, Chair, to see beyond the shopping list of new ferries, which are making their way towards us as we speak. One of the challenges is that that is a long-term view. We are, as you have indicated, talking 10 years and further ahead, so it is important for us to have a long-term financial commitment that goes beyond the lifetime of a Parliament and obviously that is difficult from a budget perspective.

To answer your question, however, if we maintain the replacement rate that we are on and the frequency, that is a realistic target, yes.

Q94 Chair: That is good to know. Are your proposed new investments on track against the milestones that Transport Scotland has set out in its investment plan?

Duncan Mackison: The investments in vessels, Chair? All the vessels that we are receiving are late to varying degrees. The four major vessels that are coming from Turkey, one of which we have already received, were delayed and have been delayed by a year or so. That obviously has an impact on us because we have to keep our current fleet going. The two vessels, the Glen Sannox that was built at Ferguson's and her sister



ship, the Glen Rosa, which we are expecting to get later this year, are very much more late, in the region of six or seven years. Those delays are having a material impact on the conditions in which we operate at the moment because they mean that we are keeping older vessels for longer. For me, the priority with new vessels is being able to get them on time because we need them into the fleet in a timely fashion.

Q95 Chair: My colleagues have already mentioned the inconvenience, the difficulties and the problems that delays and cancellations cause for residents using the ferry services, but I presume that the cost of constantly servicing and doing running repairs and having to source parts, as Mr de Wolff referenced, is also a very expensive process for CalMac. Is that something that has had to be factored in to your own business plans and models?

Duncan Mackison: Yes.

Louis de Wolff: Yes, it has, Chair. We spend a significant amount of our budget on maintenance. It is the second highest cost in our organisation, and the bulk of that cost is in the annual overhaul periods. Each of our vessels has to be dry docked every year. That is a matter of law. The 36 vessels that we operate have to be dry docked and we try to squeeze it into the winter period. So not only is it costly, it is also operationally challenging, because every vessel that comes off a route has to be replaced by another vessel. We have to continue to meet the service requirement.

Then there is the ongoing repair, the defect budget. The planned stuff is in the overhaul period, but throughout the year vessels break down and have to be repaired. There is a significant cost to all that.

Duncan Mackison: Yes, and the nature of the repairs, as vessels get older, changes. It becomes more structural. It becomes to do with the steelwork and the frame of the hull, as opposed to replacing fixed items within the ship—engines, gearboxes, drive shafts, what have you. That increases the complication of the maintenance, because to replace steel on a hull or work on the frame you have to remove a lot of the machinery within the vessel. Then when you put it back in, it takes a while to reconfigure it. That often means that things have to be tested and adjusted more times. It is not just about the cost, it is about the length of time that it takes with an older vessel to get it back into shape because of the complexity of the maintenance required.

Q96 Mr Angus MacDonald: Gentlemen, the MV Alfred, as far as I am aware, was the first time there has been a catamaran. For a long time the ferry operator, whether it is CMAL or you guys, have favoured a mono-hull. I know that MV Alfred is proving very successful. Can you let us know whether you think there is a complete new model for ferries coming through in the shape of catamarans?

Duncan Mackison: As you know, we influence the procurement; we are not responsible for the procurement. My personal view is that we are open-minded about hull types.



We would like to be driven by what the requirement is and setting a scope and then let that inform an appropriate vessel, and that, indeed, is the discussion that we are having with communities. Alfred works well on that route and there are other routes where different hull types could also work well. My view is that moving forward we need to be open-minded about that. My focus primarily is getting the right new vessels into routes and making sure that they are feasible and reliable and keeping our customers happy rather than getting locked into debates about what is an appropriate vessel or not.

Louis de Wolff: Perhaps I can add that it is important for us, first of all, to get new vessels but also to build standardisation into our fleet. Standardisation gives us easier training for our crew, easier management of our supplies, easier management of our parts, better resilience in the fleet. While we have no view as to whether it should be catamarans or mono-hulls, what we do not want is a fleet of 37 bespoke vessels that are all different. We would like a standardised fleet.

Q97 **Chair:** Presumably, that would have to take into consideration the harbours and the docking areas that you have and they would have to be flexible to that extent.

Duncan Mackison: Yes, Chair, and of course, as you have just alluded to, all the harbours and ports are slightly different. Some of them are owned by CMAL, others by trust ports or local authorities. Again, standardising the means by which a vessel connects with the shore, either for foot passengers or vehicles or both, is a key part over time of making a more efficient and reliable ferry service.

We have a huge variety of different systems at different ports that we have to operate into and that limits our ability to redeploy vessels at times of struggle or breakdown because not all the vessels fit in the same places. That is a layer of complexity that we could do without.

Q98 **Mr Angus MacDonald:** CMAL and CalMac were separate organisations set up as a result of EU regulations in 2006. Could you let us know whether you think it is still appropriate to have two organisations and what you believe the Scottish Government's thinking on this is?

Duncan Mackison: My own view is that you could bring those two organisations together structurally following the direct award of the three Clyde and Hebrides ferry service contracts to us from 1 October 2025. We are now transitioning from being a private limited company wholly owned by Scottish Ministers, to remain as that but we will be technically a non-departmental public body. CMAL will also become a non-departmental public body over the same period so we should both be in that category by 1 April 2027. In that regard, and the fact that EU procurement legislation or the UK equivalent does not apply to us now because we are fully in the public sector, that means that the previous barrier to keeping those two organisations has been removed.

In terms of the Scottish Government's intent, not surprisingly I cannot speak in detail to that. However, I think it was in all the manifestos at the



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recent elections that the structure around ferry governance would be looked at, so my expectation is that that is something that is going to be investigated more closely.

Q99 **Mr Angus MacDonald:** Mr de Wolff, what do you think the benefits of making it one organisation would be?

Louis de Wolff: The benefits of being one organisation are that we would collectively own the end-to-end process from concepts of ferries and infrastructure all the way to delivery of those. Currently, we can deliver that together with the partners in CMAL by working together, but it is true that if we were one organisation that would be easier.

Q100 **Chair:** There have been suggestions in the press this last week or so that Transport Scotland itself may not be long for this world in its current form and that it may in fact be subsumed in some way into Scottish Government structures. Would that be a good or a bad thing for CalMac?

Duncan Mackison: I am aware of that speculation. I would speak in general terms. I am in favour of efficiency and clear decision making and anything that enables that and supports that I think would be a good idea. Quite how that is achieved administratively and structurally is one for the Scottish Government, Chair. I am sure you will understand.

Chair: Indeed, thank you.

Q101 **Lillian Jones:** Mr Mackison, the Scottish Human Rights Commission has told us that without significant investment in transport infrastructure, island communities will face disproportionate barriers that may undermine their human rights. Do you agree with this assessment?

Duncan Mackison: A significant investment goes into CalMac to deliver this service. Over the lifetime of the 10 years, the total subsidy that will go into CalMac is approaching £4 billion. We operate the timetable that is given to us and agreed with Transport Scotland. We are aware of those concerns and they are part of running a lifeline ferry service.

When there are emergency situations or priorities required by islanders in that lifeline context, we try to be as flexible as we possibly can be. We do have measures and pilots running at the moment around prioritisation for islands in certain schemes and a reserved deck space in that regard, holding it until a certain period before the sailing. We do try to accommodate that within the timetable that we operate.

Q102 **Chair:** Mr Mackison, finally, I am certainly not a regular ferry user. I do use the ferries occasionally and enjoy visiting the islands that they serve. However, the Committee has visited the islands on a number of occasions, various islands at different times, and consistently people tell us that they understand where there is an issue, they understand that you have issues about the age of the fleet and so on and that not all that is under the control of CalMac, but they also experience real problems with ticketing, communication and being told that ferries are full and then finding that actually they are not when they see them. Would you accept that CalMac needs to do a better job of communicating with people on



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the islands? If you do accept that, what would you do to make that whole scenario better? I think it would be in CalMac's interest not least to have a better relationship with the people it seeks to serve.

Duncan Mackison: I would agree with that, Chair. We have put in a number of measures. I have instituted a model of area managers, individuals who have a specific responsibility to spend a significant amount of their time engaging with local ferry committees and user groups, and we track that amount of time. That has improved in recent years. The scale and frequency of disruption has meant that the intensity of communication has dramatically increased because things are changing all the time, and I completely accept that sometimes we have to communicate faster. It is not always possible. As you will probably understand, many of the people in our communities have significant expertise in maritime matters and many of them will either be employees of ours or relatives. Sometimes we really cannot communicate quickly enough.

That said, in the background, outwith the desire for new vessels, we have a significant programme of change taking place within the organisation that I have instituted and the primary focus of that is to improve those areas that you have alluded to, Chair.

Chair: If you would not mind writing to us to explain what those mechanisms might be, I think the Committee would find that very helpful and very useful in terms of pulling together a report.

Mr Mackison and Mr de Wolff, thank you very much for being here with us this morning virtually. We wish you well with the new vessels that are coming on stream. We hope they all go to time at least, if nothing else. We are grateful to you for your contribution this morning, so thank you very much.