

From the Leader

Councillor Heather Woodbridge



Date 12 June 2026

Patricia Ferguson MP
Chair, Scottish Affairs Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Sent by email to scotaffcom@parliament.uk

Dear Patricia Ferguson MP

Thank you for the invitation extended to myself and my fellow islands authority Leaders to give evidence to the Scottish Affairs Committee on Wednesday 20 May 2026 on the subject of fixed links within island communities.

During the session, I addressed a number of key issues; however, I offered further detail on some points which are set out in greater detail in the appendix to this letter.

I reiterate the invitation I extended to the Committee during the oral evidence session to visit Orkney to experience our transport infrastructure first hand and explore both the opportunities and challenges that exist.

Such a visit would provide Members with the opportunity to visit our historical fixed links: the Churchill Barriers (which connect South Ronaldsay and Burray to Mainland Orkney) as well as to experience our complicated network of ferries and the internal air services which serve our island communities.

Yours sincerely

Heather Woodbridge
Leader

APPENDIX A – Orkney Islands Council supplementary information to Scottish Affairs
Committee session held on Wednesday 20 May 2026

ISLAND POPULATION LEVELS WITH FIXED LINKS

Within Orkney, there are two inhabited islands connected to Mainland Orkney by fixed links: South Ronaldsay and Burray. These are joined via the Churchill Barriers, which were originally constructed for military purposes and subsequently adapted to function as permanent road connections.

The population of South Ronaldsay is 985, while Burray has a population of 455. By comparison, the two most populous islands in Orkney served by ferry connections to the Mainland are Westray and Sanday, with populations of 588 and 494 respectively.

In terms of landmass, Westray (18.2 square miles) and Sanday (19.5 square miles) are broadly comparable in size to South Ronaldsay (19.2 square miles). Notwithstanding this similarity, South Ronaldsay sustains a notably higher population. Burray, by contrast, is significantly smaller - at approximately 3.5 square miles, around five to six times smaller than either Westray or Sanday - yet supports a population broadly comparable to both.

While a range of factors will inevitably influence these population patterns, including the ferry link to Mainland Scotland at St. Margaret's Hope (South Ronaldsay) it is reasonable to conclude that the presence of the Churchill Barriers - effectively integrating South Ronaldsay and Burray with Mainland Orkney - have played a significant role in supporting and sustaining population levels on these islands.

CHURCHILL BARRIERS MAINTENANCE AND TECHNICAL SOLUTIONS TO REDUCE CLOSURES OF HISTORIC FIXED LINKS

The Churchill Barriers, while forming an essential component of Orkney's transport connectivity, present a number of operational challenges. In particular, periods of adverse weather can necessitate closures where wave overtopping - most notably at Barrier 2, which is highly exposed - gives rise to public safety concerns.

Although such closures are relatively infrequent over the course of a calendar year and generally last only for a few hours, they can have a significant impact on affected communities. Individuals may find themselves unable to return home at the time expected, or may be required to cancel appointments, miss work, or be unable to attend school or college that day.

A further consideration is the effect of precautionary reviews. Even where these do not ultimately result in closure, the uncertainty can lead residents to alter or cancel planned activities in order to avoid the risk of becoming stranded for a few hours.

While the direct financial cost associated with staff involvement in monitoring, reviewing, and implementing closures is likely to be modest on an annual basis - and is difficult to quantify, as much of this work is undertaken within existing working hours - it nonetheless represents a notable demand on staff resource, potentially displacing other duties.

In terms of infrastructure, the causeways require ongoing maintenance, including patching, sand clearance and light resurfacing in recent years. These activities form part of the routine management of the road network, with defects assessed and prioritised in line with standard practice. At present, there are no significant concerns regarding the structural condition of the Barriers, and no major works are planned in the immediate term.

Separately, the Council continues to explore opportunities to enhance communication and monitoring arrangements during periods when closures are under consideration.

Below are the number and total duration of closures of the Churchill Barriers in recent years:

	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
No. of closures	6	10	16	6	1	0
Total duration of closures (hours)	23.15	44.8	53.95	24.7	2.15	0

In 2014 work was carried out to progress technically viable solutions to address the wave overtopping and to develop them to a conceptual level. These potential solutions are outlined below.

Option	Estimated cost (2014)	Estimated inflated cost (2024)
Reface Barrier (rock armour)	£16.5m-£18m	£26.4m-£28.8m
Reface Barrier (concrete block)	£23m-£25m	£36.8m-£40m
Reface Barrier (Xbloc)	£17m-£18m	£27.2m-£28.8m
Nearshore breakwater (rock armour)	£30m	£48m
Nearshore breakwater (concrete block)	£47m	£75.2m
Nearshore breakwater (Xbloc)	£22m	£35.2m
Offshore breakwater (concrete block)	£81m	£129.6m
Offshore breakwater (Xbloc)	£60m	£96m
Bridge	£23m	£36.8m
Beach Recharge	£17m	£27.2m

The above costs are for estimated construction only and do not include project development costs. In addition, none of these solutions would lead to a scenario where their closure would not be required – they would merely reduce the frequency.

The Council is not in a financial position to fund the above works and so has an agreed position which is that:

1. That no further studies be undertaken at this time in respect of wave overtopping at Barrier Number 2.
2. That the Corporate Director for Neighbourhood Services and Infrastructure (now Director for Infrastructure & Organisational Development) should explore financial support from the Scottish Government for potential engineering solutions, failing which the Council should determine what action to take.

3. That the Corporate Director for Neighbourhood Services and Infrastructure (now Director for Infrastructure & Organisational Development) should undertake to continue to review options to enhance current safety arrangements with regard to wave overtopping at Barrier Number 2 where possible.

In regards to point 2 above, the Council has engaged with the Scottish Government via the Strategic Transport Projects Review 2 (STPR2) process, making the case for centralised funding for a number of projects, including the management and maintenance of the Churchill Barriers. However, as the STPR2 process included only those assets under the direct control of Transport Scotland, all projects in Orkney were sifted out.

In addition, the Council has also sought to have the Churchill Barriers included in both the Transport Scotland Island Connectivity Plan and Scottish Government National Islands Plan.

FERRY REPLACEMENT PROGRESS

It is important to highlight the strong partnership between Orkney Islands Council and the Scottish Government in progressing the renewal of the internal ferry fleet.

This positive relationship has developed over a number of years, with key work commencing following the establishment of the Orkney Ferries Taskforce in 2022 by John Swinney, then Cabinet Secretary for Finance, to commit to a process to address the renewal of the Orkney internal ferry fleet.

The Taskforce first met on 31 January 2023 and has since been engaged in considering the business case for fleet replacement, exploring funding sources, delivery models and options, and contributing to the Scottish Government's annual budget-setting process.

In October 2024, Scottish Ministers provided the Council with £3 million to support the development of a business case for ferry replacement, alongside the advancement of two pilot projects for electric ferries.

In January 2025, it was announced that the Scottish Government would provide the Council with greater flexibility in how ferry funding is allocated, including additional revenue funding to support inter-island connectivity. This has afforded the Council a broader range of options, both in terms of how funding may be deployed - encompassing ferries, aviation, or landing craft - and the timeframe over which it may be utilised.

In May 2025, the Council provided the Taskforce with an update on progress relating to Phase 1 of the Ferry Replacement Programme, progress which was enabled by the increased flexibility in funding arrangements.

In August 2025, the Council confirmed that it had utilised the financial flexibility provided by the Scottish Government to support a number of key investments in inter-island connectivity. These included the procurement of a much-needed third aircraft to serve the Outer North Isles, the acquisition of a landing craft - MV Toplander - to provide flexible support across the internal ferry network, and the purchase of a runway roller/compactor to enhance the maintenance of island airfields.

As part of the Scottish Government's Budget in January 2026, the one-off £8 million revenue allocation for 2025/26 was incorporated into the baseline of recurring funding. In addition, the

£2 million of capital funding provided in 2025/26 was continued into 2026/27, with an indication that this level of support would be maintained for the duration of the current Spending Review period.

Collectively, these developments have resulted in a funding position which allows the Council to proceed with confidence in delivering Phase 1 of the Ferry Replacement Programme, which was outlined within the previously mentioned business case. This, in turn, enables future Taskforce discussions to focus on the next phase of delivery.

Phase 1 seeks to replace the ferries which service the routes between Kirkwall in Mainland Orkney and the islands of Eday, Sanday, Stronsay and Westray.

The increase in revenue funding over time is set out below, reflecting the period since the establishment of the Ferries Taskforce; this is reflective of the increased cost of running ferry services and the impact of operating with vessels that are at the end of their economic life.

Financial year	Revenue funding
2022/23	£12.847m
2023/24	£15.829m
2024/25	£15.829m
2025/26	£20.804m

FERRY FUEL

It is also important to highlight the current financial pressures faced by Orkney Islands Council in meeting increased ferry fuel costs arising from ongoing geopolitical instability in the Middle East.

There is no requirement placed on the Scottish Government to provide support for such additional costs, resulting in a significant financial burden falling directly on the Council.

This places considerable pressure on local resources, necessitating the reallocation of funding that would otherwise support the delivery of other essential services. As ferry operations are a unique and unavoidable responsibility of island authorities, it raises a question of equity that these additional costs must be absorbed locally.

Fuel costs have risen sharply, currently adding approximately £117,000 per month above budgeted levels. This figure is expected to increase further during the summer timetable period, when fuel consumption rises in line with higher service levels.

Responsibility for fuel policy and pricing is, of course, reserved to the UK Government, which therefore has an important role to play in mitigating the impact of price volatility. In this context, consideration should be given to how the UK Government might work with island authorities to help manage and stabilise fuel costs during periods of international market disruption.

It is important for context to note that ferry services which link Orkney's islands within the local authority area are run entirely by Orkney Ferries, which is owned by Orkney Islands Council. This is in contrast to CalMac services which link many of the Inner and Outer Hebrides to each other and to Mainland Scotland, which are accountable to the Scottish

Government through Transport Scotland. This means that our ferry services are far more exposed than other areas to international market disruption.

Managing 29 piers and harbours, and a fleet of 11 ferries servicing 14 islands, makes Orkney one of the largest local authority-run ferry operations in the UK.

HOW THE UK GOVERNMENT COULD HELP

As noted during the Committee session, the Orkney Islands Council works collaboratively with the Scottish Government in the procurement of new transport assets - such as ferries and aircraft - to support and enhance inter-island connectivity.

Historically, prior to the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, substantial financial support was also available through European funding mechanisms, notably those designed to support remote and island communities. This European investment played a significant role in the development of our current ferry infrastructure and ferry fleet.

Following the exit from the EU, Orkney could no longer access the European Regional Development Fund and has instead sought to secure support through successor UK Government funding arrangements. However, these replacement schemes do not operate on the same basis and have not, to date, delivered equivalent outcomes for island areas.

In the current financial year, neither Orkney nor any local authority within the Highlands and Islands has received funding through the relevant Local Growth Fund allocation. Rather, funding awarded within Scotland has been directed exclusively towards local authorities within the Scottish Central Belt area. This outcome raises significant concerns regarding the extent to which such schemes recognise and respond to the needs of remote and island communities, particularly given that previous EU funding programmes explicitly prioritised these areas. Furthermore, the methodology used to determine allocations does not appear to adequately account for the additional costs and challenges associated with island geographies.

There is a clear need for a funding approach from the UK Government that more effectively reflects the original intent of European regional funding, namely to provide targeted support to areas such as Orkney, where geographic circumstances give rise to unique and unavoidable challenges.