

PE1862/O: Introduce community representation on boards of public organisations delivering lifeline services to island communities

Beatrice Wishart MSP written submission of 8 October 2024

Thank you to the members of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee for considering this petition and to committee staff for their work in the background. I also thank the petitioners for raising this important issue.

The addition of community representation on boards of public organisations delivering lifeline services to islands would be a small change in terms of making necessary requirements and adjustments to the boards themselves but would have a great impact on boards to better understand the needs of those using lifeline services.

I note the Cabinet Secretary for Transport outlined in her statement of 3rd September 2024 that she agreed with such calls, and it is her aim to achieve this. She highlighted that CalMac and CMAL (Caledonian Maritime Assets Limited) now have islanders on their boards. The aim is that the new CHFS (Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Service) contract will have the requirement for a ferry community board set out. These are welcome developments.

Guaranteed seats on boards would help empower local communities and local decision-making. Lifeline transport plays a significant and critical role in the everyday lives of people who live in island and rural communities. Our islands cannot survive and thrive without good transport connectivity, whether it be external or internal transport. They allow, for example, people to visit family, go to a wedding or funeral, and attend a hospital appointment and business meetings. They allow an engineer to come to an island to repair a vital piece of equipment, or a haulier to move goods, or crofters and farmers to export livestock. Represented by people who live and work in these communities, who have local knowledge and understanding of how their area functions socially and economically, will help to inform decisions that board members have to take and crucially to understand the impact of such decisions.

Similar principles could be applied to other organisations that have a dominant public service role in the lives of islanders. Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd (HIAL) is another example of an organisation where having an island voice on the board would be beneficial.

Constituents continually contact me with their, usually negative, experiences of lifeline services. It is clear that staff do all they can to make travel possible. It is, however, vital that those at the top of an organisation purporting to serve island and rural communities fully understand the needs of those communities. Having local representation built into the decision-making system would help address those needs and give communities confidence in decisions made on their behalf.

I hope the Committee will give every consideration to how those who live in our islands can be better represented on the boards of the lifeline services upon which they rely.