

## From the Leader

Councillor Heather Woodbridge  
**Chair of The Orkney Partnership Board**

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Health, Social Care and Sport Committee  
The Scottish Parliament  
Edinburgh  
EH99 1SP

Via email: [hscs.committee@parliament.scot](mailto:hscs.committee@parliament.scot)

Dear Member

### **First Responders on Orkney's Ferry-Linked Isles**

I am writing to you as board chair of The Orkney Partnership, our local community planning partnership, with regard to our ongoing challenge in seeking to secure resilient and equitable First Responder provision in Orkney's ferry-linked isles.

Emergency First Responder provision in our isles is patchy and, in some islands, non-existent. We have a disparity between paid First Responders on some islands and others where volunteers are expected to provide a comparable service with no recompense. The training, support and backup offered to isles volunteers does not match that offered to paid staff, making their role even more challenging.

Unsurprisingly, in some of our isles, whole teams of volunteers have stood down, leaving those islands with no local provision and dependent on an air ambulance service from Inverness or Edinburgh – an ineffective, costly, and potentially dangerous option.

First Responder services are the statutory responsibility of Scottish Ambulance Service (SAS), which is directed by Scottish Ministers to provide an equitable service to all communities in Scotland. Following representations from Orkney's isles communities, the Orkney Partnership has engaged with SAS for nearly two years in support of this shared aim. A working group of partner agencies has met repeatedly with SAS and explored every possible avenue in an attempt to resolve the situation.



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Engagement with the former Chief Executive Officer of SAS, Pauline Howie, was initiated by John Mundell in his then capacity as Interim Chief Executive of Orkney Islands Council, and the Council's current Chief Executive, Oliver Reid, has communicated in similar vein to the current CEO of SAS, Michael Dickson. Unfortunately, we have reached an impasse, and there is no realistic prospect of progressing the matter any further through partnership working alone.

My predecessor, Councillor James Stockan, raised this issue in correspondence with Humza Yousaf MSP on 14 December 2022 and with Michael Matheson MSP on 23 May 2023. I too wrote to Mr Matheson on 3 November 2023, following my succession to the Chair of The Orkney Partnership. On every occasion, we have been advised that First Responder provision is the operational responsibility of SAS. Ministers have declined to engage with the matter and we have yet to receive a substantive response from Scottish Government. SAS originally committed to developing a plan to ensure there is adequate provision on all the isles, but, despite requests from myself and others, have yet to share that plan with partners.

The situation is serious not only because of the risk to life and limb but because this type of uncertainty exacerbates the trend towards depopulation already evident in our ferry-linked isles. These are some of the most vulnerable communities in Scotland and their population is older than most, putting residents at higher risk in the event of an incident. As you will know, the National Islands Plan 2018 prioritises the reversal of depopulation and a healthy demographic balance.

I urge you to give this matter the attention it demands and support the resilience of our most fragile isles communities before it is too late.

Yours sincerely



**Councillor Heather Woodbridge**  
Leader, Orkney Islands Council  
Chair of The Orkney Partnership Board

cc: Mr Neil Gray MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care  
cc: Mairi Gougeon MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands  
cc: The Orkney Partnership Board



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