



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee

Tuesday 28 June 2022

Session 6



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NET ZERO, ENERGY AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE
22nd Meeting 2022, Session 6

CONVENER

*Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Natalie Don (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)

*Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)

*Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con)

*Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Sam Bourne (Arran Ferry Action Group)

Garry MacLean (Islay Community Council)

Margaret Morrison (Harris Transport Forum)

Laurence Odie (Yell Community Council)

Joe Reade (Mull & Iona Ferry Committee)

Paul Riley (Stronsay Community Council)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Peter McGrath

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee

Tuesday 28 June 2022

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:07]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Dean Lockhart): Good morning, everyone. Welcome to the 22nd meeting of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee in 2022. This is our last meeting before the summer recess.

Agenda item 1 is consideration of whether to take items 4 to 8 in private. Item 4 is consideration of a draft report on our energy price rises inquiry. Item 5 is consideration of the evidence that we will hear today. Item 6 is consideration of our work programme. Item 7 is consideration of a draft report on a legislative consent memorandum for the High Speed Rail (Crewe-Manchester) Bill. Finally, item 8 is consideration of evidence that we heard last week as part of our inquiry into the role of local government and its cross-sectoral partners in financing and delivering a net zero Scotland. Do we agree to take those items in private?

Members indicated agreement.

Ferry Service Inquiry

09:08

The Convener: Item 2 is our first evidence session in relation to our inquiry into a modern and sustainable ferry service for Scotland. The new inquiry aims to seek out how best to secure ferry services that are future proofed, are compatible with Scotland's net zero goals and meet the needs of all service users, especially the island communities that depend on them.

We open the inquiry with a scene-setting evidence session. We will hear from a panel of people from islands around Scotland about their experiences of ferry services and their views on the remit of the inquiry. We have published a draft remit for feedback from the public. That remit is subject to the views, opinions and feedback that we will receive today.

I welcome our six witnesses, all of whom join us remotely: Sam Bourne, chairman of the Arran Ferry Action Group; Garry MacLean, vice convener of the Islay community council ferry committee; Margaret Morrison, chair of the Harris transport forum; Laurence Odie, chairman of Yell community council; Joe Reade, chair of the Mull & Iona Ferry Committee; and Paul Riley, transport representative for Stronsay community council. I thank them for joining us. We look forward to them sharing their views in this first evidence session for the inquiry.

We have about 90 minutes for the session. Because we have a large panel of witnesses, I suggest that we keep questions and answers as concise as possible. We are interested to hear the witnesses' feedback and to explore as many issues as possible.

We go straight to questions. My first question is a general one. There have been significant disruptions to ferry services over the past few years, but I would like to understand better the real, day-to-day impact that that disruption has on island communities. I ask each of the witnesses, starting with Sam Bourne, what day-to-day impact they have had to manage as a result of the constant disruptions that they have experienced with ferry services.

Sam Bourne (Arran Ferry Action Group): Good morning, committee. I commend you for taking on this inquiry. I think that we would all agree that we are now at a critical juncture in Scotland's ferry service provision and that this inquiry is vital in trying to understand the issues and how we may be able to solve them.

Let us think of some of the day-to-day impact that an island such as Arran suffers. It cannot be

overestimated or overstated how dependent Arran is on a reliable ferry service. Examples cover a range of circumstances, including residents attempting to get to medical appointments at mainland hospitals. That is a fairly common tale and it is particularly difficult during the winter when disruption is inevitably higher through weather and technical issues due to overhaul. That has a huge knock-on effect for us.

Our nearest major hospital is Crosshouse near Kilmarnock. To make it to an appointment you need to get one of the earlier ferries of the day and to get home again you need to ensure that you get on the afternoon or evening ferry. If any of those is disrupted, you will either not make it to your appointment, with all the knock-on effect that that will potentially have, or you will need to stay overnight. It is not unusual to hear stories of residents having to go a couple of days early to make sure that they can make their appointment—for which, in the current climate, they may have been waiting six months or more—including, occasionally, very important appointments.

That is just one small example. The impact stretches through to island producers not being able to get their products to market reliably and farmers not being able to get their animals to market. Going the other way, for goods and services coming on to the island, suppliers are less keen to make deliveries on the island because of the risk of their drivers and vehicles getting trapped for a day or more. During January, we had one occasion when there were, I think, five Co-op lorries stuck on the island for a couple of days. That has a huge knock-on effect for the Co-op delivery system.

There are so many effects throughout the whole community and economy, and we have not even got on to talking about the effect on the tourism and hospitality industry, with people being unable to reliably plan to come and go on their holidays. In the modern economy, it is an essential economic fact that the islands are tourism reliant, especially the likes of Arran.

It really cannot be overstated how many and varied the impacts are. I am sure that the other panellists will echo very similar experiences.

The Convener: Many thanks, Sam. That was a very helpful introduction. You have raised a number of issues that I am sure the committee will explore when we get to other questions.

I put the same question to Garry MacLean.

Garry MacLean (Islay Community Council): Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. It is a very apt question that you have asked, because the MV Hebridean Isles is broken down at the moment, so Islay has been without three round-trip sailings for the past two or three days, if memory serves.

09:15

The crux of the matter is that capacity and reliability are so important to our island community because, at the end of the day, it is very much a lifeline ferry service for the local community. It is very difficult to assess the impact, day to day, other than to echo what Sam Bourne said about the local community trying to go to the mainland to fulfil appointments, go shopping, see family and basically live a normal life that is not impeded by our slightly more remote location.

As for business, we have nine functioning whisky distilleries on Islay, which require goods coming in and going out that are all quite time sensitive. Therefore, we require a large freight capacity. If any little cog in the machine breaks down, that has a disproportionate effect on everyone else. In our case, it happens to be the ferries—all too regularly, unfortunately.

With the whisky industry comes tourism, from which a lot of people derive their primary income either directly or tangentially. If people have a bad experience, they are less likely to come back. If they try to book and there is no availability at a time that is convenient, they will go elsewhere.

The disruption is something that really cannot be overestimated. That is all that I will add just now.

The Convener: Thank you very much, Garry. You mentioned a couple of important points about the impact on tourism and business, which we want to follow up on later. Let me bring in Margaret Morrison on the same question about the overall day-to-day impact in terms of disruptions.

Margaret Morrison (Harris Transport Forum): Good morning, committee members and fellow panellists. In Harris, we are absolutely beyond anxious, with a constant stream of service withdrawals that is undermining island life hugely.

I have lived here since 1987, I run a business and I am also an essential worker who has travelled through the islands. I have never seen such anxiety among the population, and visitors coming to the island have said to me that they will not return because of the situation with the ferries, which, to be perfectly honest, is utterly chaotic at the moment. We have had service withdrawals in the past fortnight on several of our ferries, which has resulted in visitors either being stuck on one island and not able to get to another, or there have been problems with accommodation being cancelled.

To be perfectly honest, I feel that we have met, discussed and talked about the situation, and we are at a total impasse with CalMac Ferries and the Scottish Government. We get nowhere. We will never see young people coming to our islands to

set up businesses as long as we have this problem. We are also facing a six-month closure of our main ferry terminal in Harris, and the impact of that will be significant.

We feel that something has to be done, because, at the moment, even to go off island you become anxious about booking your ferry because you cannot book one. Then you get told that there is the MV Loch Seaforth in Stornoway. When you try to book that, you get told that it is full, but when you ask locally you are told that you can get availability. We have the chaos from the booking system added to the unreliability of the vessels, which are now so old that they are breaking down frequently. As I said, I came here in 1987 and I do not remember ever having those issues with the ferries.

Yes, they were weather dependent—we have always accepted that—but the situation was now reached an all-time critical point. I feel that, in the islands off the Western Isles, our businesses are really at the point of extinction; our morale is so low; and we have no confidence left in CalMac and the Scottish Government. They ask us what we want; we tell them; and absolutely nothing is done about it.

I cannot stress just how dreadful we are all feeling about the situation with the ferries on Harris.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that introduction. I am sorry to hear about the impact on the community.

Joe Reade, can you respond on the same question about the day-to-day disruption resulting from ferry services?

Joe Reade (Mull & Iona Ferry Committee): Good morning. I echo everything that has been said so far, but it is important to remember that every island is different and has different problems. Sometimes the ferry services themselves are different. We are lucky in that Mull is relatively close to the mainland and has a relatively frequent service, while our near neighbours on Coll and Tiree have only one service and a handful of sailings each week. If there is disruption due to breakdowns or weather, particularly in the winter, those islands can be completely isolated for days at a time. Indeed, their shelves go bare. The disruption is having a really severe impact on all islands, but particularly on those small and vulnerable islands. As you have been hearing, the problem is widespread.

There are, if you like, two crises. In the winter, we feel the reliability crisis the worst, because that is when people try to do all the dry docking. They try to squeeze in this huge dry-dock schedule, which often overruns, and in the winter we have a logistical Rubik's cube that never runs to plan. We

have increasing weather cancellations and winter reliability is declining really badly, to the point at which people can no longer depend on a service that they used to be able to depend on.

We just cannot rely on the service any more—it is often a guessing game, particularly in the winter. We look at the weather forecast and wonder, "Will the ferry sail or won't it? Which ferry is on? What is the likelihood that it will go? Should I go on that service or another? If I have an important appointment, should I go a day early, just to be sure?" It all adds to the cost of life; the quality of life deteriorates; and it is all really appalling.

As well as the awful situation in the winter, we have reliability issues in the summer, too. However, the summer problem, particularly on the busiest islands, is one of capacity; there is a complete lack of capacity in the system. In the winter, it is a guessing game whether the ferry will sail, but in the summer we just know that, unless we book weeks in advance, we will not get a place on a ferry, because they are all full. There is insufficient capacity. Demand was stimulated by the road equivalent tariff, but absolutely nothing was done to prepare for it.

These are not fleeting problems or operational issues; they are the result of strategic failures to plan over decades. There was a strategic failure to plan for the impact of RET and a strategic failure to plan for vessel replacement and to ensure that it happens timeously. The system has been lacking proper governance and planning for decades now, and it is crumbling. The 801 and 802 situation is a symptom, not the cause, of a failing system.

The situation is pretty dire, and it needs to be assessed with a blank sheet of paper. How can the service be better delivered? We need to look abroad at exemplars of the best ferry services, take the best things from them and apply them to Scotland. Scotland has one of the worst public ferry systems in the world, given the amount of money that is spent on it.

That is the other point to make: this is not necessarily about needing more money. Eye-watering sums of money are being spent on ferry services, but the money is being spent appallingly badly.

The outcome for the money that is being spent is terrible. If you were to look at the public money that is being spent per head of population or per passenger carried and compare it with near neighbours such as Norway, you would find that it is a shockingly high figure. We need to spend our money better, and that is of critical importance to the islands, for all the reasons that the other witnesses have given.

The unreliability of the ferry service is eroding the quality of life, making business on the islands

far riskier and leading to depopulation. People are leaving the islands because of the unreliability of the ferry service. Life on the islands is no longer sustainable, because of the uncertainty and risk around whether they can get on and off the islands. That is particularly so for the most vulnerable, including the elderly and the ill. People who are going for regular cancer treatment cannot get to their appointments. Those people are the worst affected, but there is a continuous erosion of the quality of life for us all.

I could go on, but I think that that is probably enough from me for the moment.

The Convener: Thank you for that overview, Joe. You raised a number of very serious issues there, which the committee will want to explore further. I will bring in Laurence Odie on the same question.

Laurence Odie (Yell Community Council): I have missed most of the meeting so far, because my broadband was cut off for a wee while, which is—*[Inaudible.]*—in a rural area.

In Yell, it is a bit different, because we have had a very good service up until recently. We have weather problems in the winter, but the main problem that we have is unreliability because of staffing or maintenance problems. That has a big effect on the island where I stay. Most of the younger people who are under 50 have left to go to the mainland. They had been commuting on a daily basis to their work, but now they just move out.

The other thing is that we have a large fish processing factory that puts out almost 20,000 tonnes of salmon per year. However, at times, the factory has difficulty getting the goods out and has to catch the second ferry, which is a NorthLink ferry, in order to get them to mainland Scotland. Therefore, the whole thing is almost at crisis point here as well.

The Convener: Thank you, Laurence. I am glad that we were able to get you back online. Your connection was good there, so thank you very much for that introduction.

I will bring in Paul Riley on the same opening question about the impact of ferry disruptions on day-to-day life.

Paul Riley (Stronsay Community Council): Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you, as well as the opportunity to express the views of, I think, most of the northern isles in Orkney. I am the transport representative on Stronsay community council and, today, I will also speak on behalf of community councils on the other islands of Eday, North Ronaldsay, Sanday and Westray. Populations on each island range from 50 to nearly 1,000.

The main problem for us is that local ferries and planes in Orkney are akin to the bus and rail services in northern Scotland—they are essential, not just convenient.

In our particular section of Orkney, three vessels serve—*[Inaudible.]*—islands. All three vessels were built before 1990 and are all past their use-by dates. They are still fairly sound, but they go away for maintenance and, when they come back, within a few weeks, one, two or all three vessels have to go back for further work.

That shows that the reliability of the service is compromised. As far as we can—*[Inaudible.]*—provision for the supply of any ferries. There is nothing in the pipeline. As far as we are aware—*[Inaudible.]*—nothing is being done by Orkney Islands Council or by the Scottish Government to take the matter further, even though I would have thought that that was fundamentally essential.

09:30

As well as our ferries, we have a plane service, but that raises a question for anyone with mobility issues, because the planes are small—they are eight-seaters. They are very reliable; the pilots are very good and the service is as good as it can be for most of the islands. However, of the three ferries that we use, only one has some sort of disability access. Sometimes, that is not working, because it involves a lift that apparently cannot be used every now and then. Therefore, anybody with any mobility issues faces a serious problem in getting to the islands by plane or by sea.

Overall, although the quality of life on the islands is generally good, it depends very much—not only for the current population, but for the future of the islands—on the sustainability of the service, and we think that that needs to be addressed urgently.

The Convener: Thank you for that important introduction on the impact of ferry disruptions. We move to questions from Fiona Hyslop.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): Good morning, and thank you all for your powerful statements about the current situation. We want to hear from you to help to shape and scope our investigation. It is important that we hear your views not only on the short term, but on the medium and long term. What should the committee be looking at? What are your main priorities?

Joe Reade, you talked about the need to start with a blank sheet of paper. If we are to inform the next islands connectivity or ferries plan, what should be put in place? What medium and long-term measures should we consider? I would like to hear from the other members of the panel, too, if

there is time—the convener will keep me right—but I invite Joe, who raised the issue, to go first.

Joe Reade: At the core of the issue is the quality of the decision making and how those decisions are influenced. The system that we have at the moment is giving us poor decisions and very poor outcomes. We need to look at the fundamental structure of how the system is organised, how the service is delivered and what is the best way to deliver a ferry service.

Scotland's system has the bizarre separation of vessel owner and vessel operator, which is completely artificial. On top of that, Transport Scotland and the Government often try to micromanage operations that are done by those other two organisations. There are three organisations involved, without it really being clear who is in charge and who makes the strategic decisions.

I will give an example of how the artificial relationship between vessel owner and vessel operator works. We apparently have a system in which the service is tendered every six years. On the face of it, that should result in a competitive tendering situation that ends up with the best operator offering the best value for money.

The driver of cost in the ferry service is the vessels. That is where the huge majority of the operating costs are. However, when the tendering happens, the operator who is tendering has absolutely no control over those operating costs, because they are obliged to use the vessels that Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd gives them.

The flip side of that is that when a vessel is being replaced, as is happening in Islay now, the decisions that go into the vessel design and bake in the operating costs, such as vessel size, the number of crew on the vessel, whether the crew live abroad or ashore and how much fuel the vessel burns—all those decisions about the operating costs of the vessel—are being taken by CMAL, whose success or otherwise is completely unrelated to the financial success of CalMac. If CMAL specifies a high-cost vessel, it makes no difference to its business or personal outcomes.

In addition, CalMac can specify a vessel, but there is no opportunity for a competitor to offer a different vessel, because CalMac knows that the vessel that it specifies now is the same vessel that any competitor will be obliged to use, so it has no incentive in that regard.

I am not saying that those are the explicit thought processes that go through management's mind in CMAL or in CalMac; I am talking about the implicit pressures on management. There is no commercial pressure on them and no incentive for them to make good decisions as far as the vessels are concerned. Whether a vessel needs a crew of

12 or 27 makes no difference to the bottom line of CalMac or CMAL, because whatever the operating cost is, we pick it up.

The operating deficit of CalMac is currently about £150 million a year—that is operating costs alone, before anyone buys vessels or spends money on piers. That is because there is massive inefficiency and waste in the system, because we have crews that are far bigger than is typical in the rest of the commercial world and we have vessels that are far more complex. The vessels are bespoke, one-off designs that are time consuming and expensive to build and very fuel thirsty. All those decisions are baked into the design at procurement because no one has an incentive to make better decisions.

The question is this: how do you incentivise the decision makers to make better decisions? If the system remains a public one, what structures do you create that incentivise better decision making? Or—

Fiona Hyslop: Okay, right—

Joe Reade: Sorry. Alternatively, you have a truly competitive situation, as is the case in Norway, which has one of the best public ferry services in the world. In Norway, the operator of the vessel is also the owner of the vessel and people compete for the right to Government subsidy to operate a service on the basis of their efficiency and productivity. Therefore, their decisions are linked to their financial and business performance.

Fiona Hyslop: Thank you. I understand that your committee has looked at the international experience, so perhaps you will indicate to our clerks where we should look to in that regard—I am conscious that we need to hear from everyone. I know that we started late, and I apologise for that.

May we come to Margaret Morrison next? Weather issues and climate change are with us and will have to be factored in. You talked about the need for sustainability for businesses. We also want repopulation. What would you like this committee to look at? What things do we want to see from our ferry service, about which we can advise and inform the Government, and hold the Government to account? What are your key priorities?

Margaret Morrison: From a Harris perspective, our key priority, and what we are asking for—we think that this is a simple ask, although I appreciate that it might not be—is a Western Isles network that is made up of six large ferries, with two deployed to serve in Stornoway and a dedicated ferry on the routes from Tarbert, Lochmaddy, Lochboisdale and Castlebay, plus two smaller ferries to serve the Sound of Harris

and the Sound of Barra. Those dedicated ferries would provide greater capacity and frequency in normal times, and resilience would improve with the ability to cover breakdowns, which happen now with monotonous regularity, and when the vessels go to dry dock.

The operation and management of the network should be based in the Western Isles, because we need to manage our service locally. The management is based many miles away, and the management structure is confusing. We feel that the opportunity to charter an overnight freight service on the Ullapool to Stornoway route would immediately help the situation. We have talked ad nauseam about that, but we get told by CMAL that the freight ferries—the MV Pentalina springs to mind—are not fit for purpose. What would it take to make them fit for purpose?

The direct service to Harris will close down for six months in October, which is not far away. We were told that we would have extra sailings on the MV Loch Seaforth, but have had no word on whether that will become a reality. We fear that what will happen is what is happening at the moment, which is that there is no availability on the Loch Seaforth: people from Harris will leave home very early in the morning to sit in a queue and then watch the ferry door close and make their way back home.

We have a mezzanine deck on the MV Hebrides, so you would think that capacity should not be a huge problem, because the mezzanine deck adds extra capacity. However, we are told that it cannot be used on all sailings because there are issues with crew, and that CalMac needs money to open the mezzanine deck to allow the extra capacity, but the Scottish Government refuses to give Transport Scotland the money. All those layers of bureaucracy are making our lives intolerable. The mezzanine deck on the Hebrides should be reinstated as soon as possible.

We are asking for the postponement of the closure of Uig pier for 12 months until we can find alternative sailings or additional capacity can be secured. We get told that additional capacity is a problem. We have had meetings with Kevin Hobbs, who has told us that acquiring the appropriate vessels for our route is very difficult. We understand that, and we know that he is trying his best, but we hear “Nothing is available” or “It cannot be done” so often and we are in a desperate situation. We need to have scrutiny of those decisions. Why can we not get additional capacity? Why is that not happening?

It is interesting that there is no island representative on the CalMac board, and I wonder where it gets its advice from. If people on the CalMac board have never sat in a car waiting to get onto a ferry or been extremely anxious to get

back home or come to the mainland, they do not have that lived experience. I am a national health service worker and have stood in the rain having been told that the ferry is full to capacity, then found that it was half empty and walked on. I applied to join the CalMac board and was told that I was not suitable; I do not know what makes anybody more suitable than somebody who has had that experience.

I come back to the design and implementation of a new simpler management structure with fewer decisions taken in Gourock or the central belt. Like any experience in life, you have to be there to understand how dramatic it is to be told that you cannot get on a ferry and there is nowhere for you to stay wherever you are.

A clear set of tangible milestones for the launch of vessel 802 is needed, because we are extremely concerned that it is going to become a Cinderella vessel. Huge efforts will go into completing the Glen Sannox in an attempt to salvage reputations, and only then will attention be given to 802. We worry that the vessels for Islay and Jura, which have been ordered recently and are due in 2024, will be in service before vessel 802.

I do not want to miss this opportunity to explain the importance of the ferries to Harris and all our Hebridean islands, the severity of the current crisis and the collapse in our confidence. My fear is that we will see an island full of elderly people who do not want to travel; our young will not come back and work here unless the situation is resolved. I hope that we are listened to, but nothing ever gets done. I hope that today the committee will take on board our concerns and try to help and support us.

09:45

Fiona Hyslop: Your MSP, Alasdair Allan, has, indeed, raised the Uig issue. Highland Council owns the ports there. Decision making and distance of management is an interesting issue. All policies should incorporate lived experience. I think that we should look at the repopulation of the islands, too. Your comments are very helpful. I note that we have also heard from others that crewing and staffing is an issue.

I want to ask Sam Bourne about community decision making. I understand that a number of different organisations and businesses on Arran want to inform what happens with ferries. What does good community consultation look like? How do you work with all the other groups on Arran, including the very vibrant, award-winning tourism sector? How do we build that aspect into the medium and long term?

Sam Bourne: That is a good question. I echo what the two previous witnesses have said about

the scope of the inquiry and what it should focus on. I suggest that there should be a fundamental root-and-branch review of operating models, vessel types and service provision. The review has to be wide ranging—you must look at every element, because they are so interlinked. It should also look at representation on the boards of CMAL and CalMac, in particular.

We are wondering when the project Neptune report will be published. We believe that that has sat on desks at Transport Scotland and at ministerial level for some time. The report is essential to help inform options, so we urge the publication of it as soon as possible.

How can we improve community representation? One step would be to have representation on boards. The ferries community board, which is hand-picked by CalMac, is prevented from discussing issues that are not network wide, so it does not really hear—or it is not allowed to communicate—some of the fine detail. As Joe Reade pointed out, all the islands are slightly different, with slightly different challenges and service levels. One suggestion is to change the ferries community board from a CalMac entity into an independent entity that would have the ability to feed into the discussion.

If I move down to island level, multiple bodies are involved on many of the islands. Speaking from our experience, many of them exist because there is a level of frustration with the current system—that is why Arran Ferry Action Group exists—as we do not seem to be making progress and we are still talking about the same problems without seeing any solutions.

The issues up the river at Ferguson Marine are disastrous in many ways, including for the taxpayer. We are paying £300 million-plus for two vessels, which is unaffordable. The vessels are five years late, which has a knock-on effect on the network.

One of those vessels should have been operating on Arran five years ago, which would have allowed the old MV Isle of Arran vessel to be redeployed through the network. That additional vessel would have helped to fill some of the gaps. If vessel 802 had come online as planned, that would have allowed MV Hebrides to cascade down, and, by now, according to the original vessel replacement and deployment plan, vessels five and six would not be long away from delivery and we would already have four new vessels in the fleet. What appears to be a small delay to some vessels in Port Glasgow is having a huge knock-on effect on the whole network.

Fiona Hyslop: Sorry, Sam, but I am conscious that my colleagues will want to ask questions and

that we still need to hear from the other witnesses about the medium and long-term priorities.

I come to Garry MacLean. I am sorry, but I must again ask you to be brief. What are your medium-term and long-term aspirations? What issues should the committee look at?

Is Garry MacLean still with us? If he is not, I will come to Paul Riley. We do not have Paul Riley, either. I can definitely see Laurence Odie on screen. What would you like us to look at in the medium and long term?

Laurence Odie: My connection was lost quite quickly earlier, and I might not have fully heard your question. I have just spoken about interisland ferries, but we also have ferries between Shetland and Aberdeen.

On interisland ferries, we see fixed links as the answer. That would help with net zero, because there is tremendous pollution from ferries. It would also deal with the connectivity problem. We should look at fixed links in relation to interisland ferries.

In addition, we need more capacity on NorthLink Ferries services between Shetland and Aberdeen, because there is a lack of capacity. We need to think outside the box. We need to see whether we can get data evidence. The ferry runs every evening from port to port, but we could consider having additional runs throughout the week or having larger vessels. We need to do something to improve the service.

Fiona Hyslop: Those are important aspects in relation to interisland ferries, and I know that other representatives at today's session have those issues. On your point about fixed links, I cannot say exactly where the committee will go. We are looking at wider connectivity, but a key focus is ferries. It is helpful to hear that evidence.

I suggest that I hand back to the convener so that other members can ask questions. I am sure that those whom we have not heard from, including Paul Riley and Garry MacLean, will be able to give their views on what the committee should look at in the medium and long term as the session progresses.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I have one question, which I will direct to Margaret Morrison and Joe Reade, but I am conscious that, based on his submission, Sam Bourne might want to come in at the end. Where do you believe decisions on ferry service provision, vessel specification and procurement are best taken? Should they be taken by national organisations such as CMAL and Transport Scotland, by local authorities or, indeed, by something else, such as a transport forum?

Margaret Morrison: I believe that such decisions should be taken by the local council in

consultation with a chief engineer or somebody else who actually knows about boats. The crux of the problem relates to when you hear people who are not hands-on practitioners—I was going to say men or women in suits, but that is not fair—talking about the design of a boat. If a chief engineer, a retired captain or a current officer hears that, they will say, “Actually, that’s not right.” It is a bit like driving a car with somebody who does not have a licence. You have to know your subject, and I do not believe that the people who are making decisions know their subject. We all need expert advice from people who are an authority on whatever the issue is. You would not take your car to a plumber to get it fixed; you would take it to a car mechanic.

However, those people are not the ones who are sitting round the table making decisions on the type of vessels, on sailings and on what locals need. As I have alluded to, we do not even have an island representative on the CalMac board, so who on the board knows what it is like to live in a community where you are told that your ferry is cancelled within a few hours of your trying to go anywhere? If you are an essential worker who is trying to get to Barra, where there are two ferries, you might be told that the ferry is full but then find out that it is not.

We need round the table somebody local who actually knows what they are talking about, somebody who has been in an engine room and knows about engines, and somebody who has steered a ferry into Lochmaddy, Ardrossan or wherever. Those are the sorts of people who we need to listen to.

Of course management needs to be there, too, and of course there are financial constraints—we all understand that; we really do. I think that, over the years, we have been very flexible and have worked so well with CalMac. CalMac’s front-line staff and its immediate management are amazing; the local staff—the crew on the ground—will do everything that they can to help you get on the ferry, but their hands are tied, too. Let us get our chief engineers and captains round the table.

Liam Kerr: Thank you very much for that.

I will throw the same question to Joe Reade, as he made some comments earlier about vessel size and capacity. Joe, is Margaret Morrison right that decisions on service provision and capacity should be taken at local authority level with chief engineers and others who know about those things?

Joe Reade: As I have said, the key issue is the quality of the decision making and the influences on those decisions. We need to spend our money better, not because we need to cut costs but because we need to improve services. The only

way in which we can afford to improve services is to do more with the money that we already have. There is plenty of money; a huge amount of money is being spent, but it needs to be spent better.

The question is: who is best placed to make those decisions? Government should not be making operational decisions; it should not be making decisions on what type of ferry to buy, what fuel it should use or how many crew members it should have. Government should be setting strategic policy objectives and the operator should be challenged with meeting them. If it is challenged in that way, it will find the technical and operational solutions.

For example, on our island of Mull, we are just engaging on a vessel replacement process for our main vessel, the MV Isle of Mull. The process, which involves public servants, CMAL, CalMac and community representatives, is very much focused on what the vessel should be. That is not what we should be asking. Instead, the questions should be: what service do we want? What service does the island need? What capacity, frequency, length of operating day and, critically, emissions are we talking about? Those are the key strategic policy objectives that should be set, and then it should be up to the operator to find the technical and operational solutions to meet them. You can do that through a process within a public framework, but I have to say that that would be very difficult to achieve. It is difficult to get the best spending decisions out of a public system.

If we had operators competing for those services, they would have an interest in finding the best way of meeting those strategic objectives. Our main vessel, MV Isle of Mull, does 10 return trips a day, with a crew of nearly 30; if you set a policy objective of maximising frequency, you could use the same number of people to run three vessels. In other words, you could have three vessels with 10 crew on each. You could therefore triple the frequency and more than double the capacity with the same number of crew, and you would be doing it much more cost effectively.

Unless we have people who are searching for cost effectiveness, productivity and efficiency, we will not be able to afford to improve our service. The service has not improved in decades; every time that we look for improvement, the cost is huge, because of the massive operating costs that are baked into the system. We need decision makers who have a vested interest in running a productive and efficient ferry service.

The question is: how do you incentivise decision makers to make those good decisions? Obviously, one answer is to have private operators competing against each other to get a public service contract and to meet those public policy objectives as cost

effectively as possible; another is to have a structure within a public framework that encourages that sort of thing.

At the moment, for example, Transport Scotland has no shipping professionals in its team and the one group of advisers that it had has been disbanded. The team members might all be capable, intelligent people, but they do not have shipping experience. Despite that, those people are making operational planning decisions for a shipping business. We need more professionalism, knowledge, experience and incentivisation to get the right decisions. I do not know whether that answers the question.

10:00

Liam Kerr: Like Margaret Morrison's answer, that was a useful summary.

Finally, I will throw that question to Sam Bourne, because I thought that the submission that came in from the Arran Ferry Action Group had some fascinating points on that area. Do you want to add anything to the two answers that we have already heard about where decisions on provision, procurement and specification should be made?

Sam Bourne: I will echo both previous speakers. Fundamentally, Joe Reade is right to say that we should separate the specification into two elements. We should not specify the vessel at Government level, but we should specify the service requirement at that level. That is a robust and clear definition of the principal requirements that the vessel must meet. For example, how many people and cars must it move from A to B each day? How long should its operating day be? Obviously, with regard to the path to net zero, it also critical to ask about the vessel's emissions.

That outline specification should then be given to the operator, who is motivated to meet those criteria in the most cost-efficient way. That might mean multiple vessels, because there are many benefits to having a multiple-vessel route. The key benefit is increased frequency, but another significant benefit is increased redundancy. If there are three vessels on a route and one breaks down, the operator still has two vessels so has lost only 30 per cent of capacity.

There have been recent examples of that throughout the network. Up in Stornoway, when MV Loch Seaforth goes down, 100 per cent of capacity is gone. There is no redundancy, so vessels have to be moved round the network. That takes vessels off other routes, which impacts their capacity and has knock-on effects everywhere. It would be more manageable to have multiple smaller units. However, those questions should be for operators—on long-term contracts, so that they have time to get a return on their investments—to

deliver the specification as described by the clear and robust service requirements.

The problem is that it is such a huge area, and there are so many interlinked aspects. Again, the fundamental service requirement needs to be informed by what the island communities and businesses require from the core lifeline service. From there, it will kind of look after itself.

Liam Kerr: I understand. Thank you all very much for your answers.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): Good morning. The evidence so far has been very helpful and informative. A few of my questions have already been answered, but I go back to the issues of vessel size and capacity.

In its submission, Harris transport forum says:

"We are ... of the view that medium-sized vessels will provide a more resilient and more convenient service in the long term."

Margaret, can you explain that further?

Margaret Morrison: Yes. We feel that having two smaller vessels would be far more efficient and effective than having one large vessel. If the Loch Seaforth were to have an engine malfunction, the service would be off but, if we had two smaller ferries, we would have more resilience. Had we been consulted about the new build, that is what we would have opted for, rather than what is being built at the moment at Ferguson's. Two ferries of the style that are being built for Islay would be very suitable for our crossing over the Minch.

Monica Lennon: Thank you. I am sorry—a window is banging behind me, which is a bit distracting.

I cannot see the rest of the witnesses on my screen. Would anyone like to add to what Margaret has said? Does anyone have a different view on vessel size? Just give a wave if you want to come in.

Joe Reade: I was told that there was a button to press when I wanted to speak, but it is easier to wave, is it not?

If you speak to people in the Hebrides, they will say, "Why are the ferries so big? We don't need these behemoths." The fact that the vessels that are delivered are ever-increasing in size is another baffling strategic failure. They are inflexible and they lack redundancy—when a vessel breaks down, a boat has to be pinched from another service.

Another issue is the shore facilities that are needed. Every time a vessel is replaced, the pier needs to get bigger and deeper. Vast sums are being spent on so-called pier improvement. The

802 will sail to Uig and across the Minch. If you go back to the time of the procurement, you will see that the ferry industry advisory group, which was advising Transport Scotland, argued strongly that it should buy two medium-sized vessels for that service. At the moment, one vessel—the MV Hebrides—is, in effect, shared between two routes. The procurement of two vessels was strongly advised on the basis that it would improve the service and improve frequency, capacity, redundancy and resilience. Instead, one large vessel—the 802—was ordered. That will add capacity, but the service will still be highly vulnerable because it will be reliant on one vessel. In addition, there will be no improvement to the timetable.

Uig is having a six-month shutdown to accommodate that vast vessel. If two smaller vessels had been bought, none of that work, or the huge capital expenditure, would have been necessary, and the service improvement would have been far greater.

Why are such decisions made? Another example is the MV Loch Seaforth, which provides the Ullapool to Stornoway service. At the time, experts and locals strongly argued that they wanted a multivessel service, in the interests of frequency, redundancy, resilience and capacity. Instead, one large vessel was chosen. Despite it having the newest vessel, that service shares with the Oban to Craignure service the title of the most congested service in the entire network. If anything is a demonstration of a failed strategy, it is that—there is a new vessel and it is already at capacity. Furthermore, as we saw last year, if it breaks down, utter chaos ensues, because there is no back-up on the route.

It is a fundamental strategic error that we are relying on a small number of large vessels. We should have a large number of small vessels that are more flexible and redundant, and can be moved around more easily. Of course, if there were more of them, it would not be necessary to move them around as much.

Vessel size is key, but the issue comes back to the questions of why such decisions are being made and on what basis, and how the decision makers—CMAL, CalMac and Transport Scotland—are incentivised to arrive at the best decisions. The evidence of recent procurement is that the wrong decisions are being arrived at. Vessels 801 and 802 are prime examples of that. Those massive vessels are far too big and complex. The decisions to build them were really bad and hugely expensive ones. Even if those vessels had come in on budget, they would have been twice the price that they ought to have been.

Monica Lennon: That is really helpful—thank you.

Sam, we have just heard about the potential benefits of a multivessel service. Joe mentioned flexibility. I am keen to hear your thoughts.

Sam Bourne: The choices that are made on vessel type and size are critical to the long-term sustainability of the service. The advantages of multiple smaller vessels and having the ability to adjust capacity to demand are critical.

We have already touched on the Stornoway route. Another good example is the Wemyss Bay to Rothesay route, which has two medium-sized, matched vessels that run a long operating day. Capacity can be matched to demand. You do not hear many complaints about capacity from Bute. If you look a bit further up the river, Western Ferries has a fleet of up to four vessels that it can turn on and off, depending on demand, to match its available capacity. It is very efficient in that way.

One of the problems of the current large-vessel option is that, although it offers capacity in the summer, it means that, in the winter, the ferry company operates a huge vessel that is virtually empty and there is a high cost for each passenger unit moved. That gets to the root of some of the decision making.

Let us use the analogy of the railways, which is a popular subject these days, and consider trains between Edinburgh and Glasgow. Do you run a 10-carriage train every hour or four four-carriage trains every 15 minutes? Obviously, the latter offers the best service level. We need to consider that model for our ferry service.

Monica Lennon: Joe Reade talked about crews and the number of staff on ferries. Do the panel members have a view about whether crews should live onshore, either at home or in staff accommodation, or on board their vessels? I would also welcome any other comments or views on workforce issues that the committee should consider.

I invite Laurence Odie to comment on that. We have not heard from him yet.

Laurence Odie: We are in a slightly different situation. With interisland ferries, the crews stay on board only when they are required to at night. However, with the Aberdeen service, which sails overnight, the crews have to sleep on the boat during the day, depending on which site they are at. To have additional runs would mean having additional crews who could command the vessel and take the boat back from Lerwick to Aberdeen while the northbound crew was sleeping. That would be one way of increasing capacity.

Monica Lennon: Thank you. Garry, do you want to add anything?

Garry MacLean: It is a difficult one. At the moment, although we are delighted to have two

new ferries coming to Islay, we still have to operate within the constraints of the current service. We have only four boats that are capable of coming into Islay, and their average age is over 30. That creates issues.

Given the large amount of commercial traffic that comes off the island—it is second only to the Stornoway to Ullapool route in that respect—we are asking for additional sailings, which falls into the tripartite issue. We ask CalMac, which says that it is not its responsibility but Transport Scotland's, because it is a contract variation. We go to Transport Scotland and, when it comes to crewing, it says, "Running additional sailings is expensive. We're out of crew hours and we don't have anywhere that the crew can stay, because some of the vessels don't have overnight accommodation that is suitable for the crew to sleep in while the vessel is in operation."

It does not seem that the system is working at the moment. If crews are going to sleep on vessels, that needs to be supplemented by onshore accommodation. Alternatively, recruiting locally is an absolutely excellent way of providing a good job for local people. A strategic decision needs to be taken about what we want to achieve with our ferry service.

10:15

Monica Lennon: Thank you. That was really helpful, including the point about local recruitment. I see that no other witnesses wish to add anything, so I will hand back to the convener.

The Convener: I believe that Mark Ruskell has a supplementary question, but he will come in later. Jackie Dunbar is up next.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Good morning. I am finding this morning's evidence session very interesting. A lot has been said today about the passenger services, but I have not heard so much about the freight services or the effects on business, although Sam Bourne touched on that briefly.

Are there representatives in your groups who feed in to let you know about the problems that freight and business services might have? If so, how can we ensure that we hear those voices in the inquiry? Garry, I can see you nodding, so I will come to you first.

Garry MacLean: Our local ferry committee tries to involve all aspects of island life, including hauliers, and particularly the main haulier that is responsible for the vast majority of goods and services that come on and off the island. We are alive to the issues that they face but, in some ways, the situation is ameliorated by the block

booking system that is in place on our service, although that creates its own issues.

Breakdowns and so on affect the hauliers most—they are the ones that are asked to juggle things around, because that frees up the most space to allow people to get on and off the island. They then have to deal with their customers, who have an expectation of delivery. The more disruptions there are, the closer we get to shutting down a whisky distillery and stopping it operating. As soon as a business like that shuts down, there are massive costs. The distilleries are big employers, so that affects everyone.

At least we are all in it together here. We try to take account of everyone's views, which, often, are not competing. We all strive for a more reliable service that has the capacity to meet the needs of the island.

Jackie Dunbar: You mentioned the block booking service. I am afraid that I am a bit of a novice. Will you explain further what that entails and what problems it can throw up?

Garry MacLean: The block booking service is basically a deviation from the first-come, first-served mantra that we hear from Transport Scotland. It allows commercial ferry bookings to be made on a yearly basis—hauliers will say how many sailings per week they want, and how many lane metres. The issue comes with how that is managed. If someone cancels at the last minute, that frees up quite a lot of deck space.

I am not entirely sure how that operates. There is a business-to-business team in CalMac, which seems to be very secretive, due to commercial sensitivity and confidentiality. If a lot of block bookings are cancelled at the last minute, with no financial penalty, there is no space for anyone else to book. In addition, not everyone has access to that system. I do not know how it is decided who is allowed to have block bookings—or, indeed, who has them.

Jackie Dunbar: That was extremely helpful. Convener, I am aware of the time, so maybe other witnesses could feed in their answers to the committee.

The Convener: Thank you. Next up is Mark Ruskell.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): We have heard some razor-sharp evidence this morning. It has certainly been educational.

Joe Reade said that there was not really a strategic plan when it came to the introduction of road equivalent tariff. I can see witnesses nodding. How should a strategic plan for road equivalent tariff have been introduced? What would its key

features have been? Sam, you were nodding, so I will come to you first.

Sam Bourne: It is a big question. An inevitable consequence of RET was a reduction in the cost of ferry travel; an inevitable consequence of that was an increase in demand. That, allied with the shift to more tourism-based island economies, meant that demand was always going to grow.

The problem—this has echoes with the previous question about freight and commercial traffic—is that we face increasing demand while having broadly static capacity. We can fit only so many vehicles on a ferry, and if there is more demand, less space is available. That is part 1 of the issue.

Part 2 is the increasing unreliability. When there is a cancelled sailing, that now-full boat needs to be accommodated on other sailings that are already full. There are two streams to the issue: capacity and reliability, which were both predictable. The reliability question was predictable because the fleet was getting older. The increased demand was predictable because of the growth of tourism on the islands and because it was driven by RET.

Mark Ruskell: Thank you. What do the other witnesses think? Garry, do you want to come in?

Garry MacLean: Certainly. I can speak only about Islay. In the past, local people were able to buy books of tickets, which allowed them cheaper transport to and from the mainland, but when RET was introduced, that was done away with. The costs remained largely the same for island residents, but RET drove down the price for non-residents.

That was obviously a great boon for our tourism industry but, as Sam Bourne said, there is increased demand while capacity has not changed at all—indeed, it has probably decreased, due to the age of vessels lowering the deadweight tonnage. I think that we are all on the same page in thinking that there does not seem to have been an impact assessment to consider how RET would affect demand for local services.

Mark Ruskell: I find that surprising, because there were a number of pilots on road equivalent tariff, over a number of years. However, such things are difficult to predict.

Margaret, would you like to comment?

Margaret Morrison: Yes. RET for the masses was not a well-thought-out plan. It means that the Scottish taxpayer is subsidising the fares of many foreign tourists, among others. The additional lost revenue would have contributed to the running costs and might have allowed us to have had some flexibility with funding. RET has not benefited the locals; it has benefited visitors to the island. I think that something should be done

about it. It should definitely be reviewed, and it should perhaps be stopped completely.

Mark Ruskell: Joe Reade raised the issue initially. Do you think that RET should go?

Joe Reade: No. RET is a fantastic thing. That is not to say that it might not need some adjustment around the edges, but as a principle RET has been hugely beneficial. It has made the cost of travel much lower—it has been wonderful.

It has had some negative consequences. There are arguments for adjusting it and maybe not applying it universally to all traffic. It is worth pointing out that RET applies only to passenger vehicles and foot passengers. It does not apply to commercial vehicles. We have been promised that change for years, but it has not happened. Pro rata, commercial vehicles travel much more expensively than any other type of vehicle, which is stifling to business and basically unfair.

RET has been fantastic. The uplift in demand was entirely predictable and was predicted, but nothing was done to prepare for it. The “Scottish Ferry Services: Ferries Plan (2013-2022)” has not been implemented. At the time of planning for RET, there was a vessel replacement programme, but basically that has not happened. If you look at the vessel replacement programme in the ferries plan and tick off the number of vessels that have been replaced, you will find that it is only one or two out of a list of six or eight or so. The MV Isle of Mull was supposed to be replaced two or three years ago, but that has not happened, because there is real short-termism in decision making. We are looking at individual vessel replacements rather than a fleet plan. There should be a whole-fleet plan and not just a piecemeal approach to one vessel after another in which we say, “Oh, this vessel’s getting old. Can we scrape together the budget to replace it?” It is entirely short-termism.

That reluctance towards capital spending leads to continuously high operational costs. For example, we have the MV Isle of Lewis running to Barra. The Isle of Lewis used to run between Ullapool and Stornoway and it is the second largest vessel in the fleet. However, it had to be replaced with a smaller vessel, and it was at a kind of redundant level. People asked what we could do with it and said, “The only two places where it can fit are Barra and Oban, so we’ll put it on the Barra to Oban run.” It is a vast vessel to use on one of the smallest islands and quietest routes. For half the time in the winter, the crew equal or outnumber the passengers on that vessel, steaming backwards and forwards between Barra and Oban. That is because no one got Barra a new boat. It has that cast-off, which is utterly inappropriate for the route and is costing vast sums to crew and run because it is utterly inappropriate.

In short, a much longer-term view is needed.

Mark Ruskell: Laurence, do you want to comment from a Shetland perspective?

Laurence Odie: RET does not really affect us. We are stuck with the situation.

Mark Ruskell: Okay. Thanks, Laurence. Paul, do you want to comment? [*Interruption.*] We are struggling to hear Paul.

10:30

Paul Riley: Can you hear me? According to a message on screen, I am on audio only.

Mark Ruskell: Yes. That is fine. We can hear you.

Paul Riley: I apologise to my audience.

The basic thing that I would point out is that in Orkney—I appreciate that this does not apply everywhere—there are three companies running ferries. Orkney Ferries serves the smaller islands and the northern isles of Orkney; NorthLink runs a service from Aberdeen through Kirkwall to Lerwick and back, and from Scrabster to Stromness and back; and Pentland Ferries, which is a privately owned company, operates between Gills Bay and St Margaret's Hope.

I have already told you about the boats that Orkney Ferries has that are more than 30 years old. NorthLink gets a subsidy of around £7 million a year just to run the services, which are supposedly classified as a lifeline service. Pentland Ferries runs the most stable vessel of them all, because it is a catamaran-type vessel, and it is the most cost-effective operation. Interestingly, being privately owned, it makes a profit. The Pentalina, which is at present languishing unused in Kirkwall harbour, is another catamaran vessel. It is of excellent quality, but it is totally unused because it is apparently unsuitable for use with other islands.

I find it extraordinary that, of the three companies that run ferry systems in the area, the only one that works and is profitable is the privately owned one, and it has a spare vessel that—surprise, surprise—Scotland apparently cannot use. That is pretty bad. That is all that I have to say.

The Convener: Natalie Don is joining us remotely.

Natalie Don (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP): Good morning and thank you for your helpful comments so far. I am interested in the role of community organisations in service provision. I appreciate the comments that have been made so far about service requirements and the fact that communities are best placed to help to shape the

thinking on that issue. However, I want to expand on a point that Fiona Hyslop made about community representation and how it can best be achieved in the medium and long term.

How can we ensure that full communities are represented? For example, the inclusion of young people is important because they have specific needs. How are young people represented in each of your areas?

Sam Bourne: Having as wide a representation as possible across the community is important. As you suggest, that includes all the stakeholders from old to young, all sectors of large and small businesses, healthcare and so on. All those elements need to be catered for in a structure that has an effective voice.

I mentioned the ferries community board that sits as part of CalMac. It strikes me that that vehicle could be a lot more effective if it was a more independent voice, as representatives from pretty much every island across the network feed into it. The structure probably needs development to allow that community board to become a much more effective network-wide voice.

I am unfortunately the youngest member of our committee. Part of the problem with a lot of our islands is that the population is generally ageing. The representation of young people is a huge issue. For example, the Young Scot card, which gets under-22s free bus travel across the whole country, does not apply to ferries. Why not?

Joe Reade: The greatest opportunity for younger people's interests to be reflected in the system lies in the fact that we all share the same interests. Better-connected islands and a more reliable service will benefit everyone. We all have the same needs for reliability, dependability and a lack of anxiety. Everyone wants to carry on a normal life, whether that involves a business getting a tradesman in when they need one or a school getting spaces on the ferry for young people to compete in a sports event.

In that respect, I would mention Iona, which is an island off an island. When the children there reach secondary school age, they have to go to Oban. Last winter, they lost about 25 per cent of their school hours. The ferry was so unreliable that the kids had to leave school early just to get home for the weekend. That is a direct and explicit example of how an unreliable ferry service is impacting on education. That kind of thing is happening all over the place, and it is to do with not just the technical reliability of the ferries, but the service's increasing vulnerability to poor weather. Across the board, we are about 10 times more vulnerable to such weather than we used to be.

We certainly need more community representation. We have to remember that the various agencies that are involved are, in a great sense, vested interests. CMAL, CalMac, the trade unions and the users are all vested interests. Naturally, we all want to look after our own interests, but the fact is that the users are the vested interest with the least power. Even though we are the ones who actually depend on the service, we seem to be the ones with the least power and influence.

Could the structures be better? Absolutely. Could the ferries community board be different and not be handpicked by CalMac? Could the agencies that are responsible be less fragmented? Yes. On Mull, we have a pier that is owned by the council, a vessel that is owned by CMAL and a service that is run by CalMac—and then we have Transport Scotland, too. We have four different agencies to talk to and four different representative structures—the local council, the ferry committee, the community board and so on. It is a total mess.

All of that needs to be cleaned up, but doing so will be meaningless unless the agencies consider and recognise themselves as being accountable. There is a real deficit in that respect. If I were to point the finger at one of them, it would be CMAL, which is utterly unaccountable. It does not consider itself accountable in the decisions that it takes. I can send you lots of written evidence in that regard. There is just no accountability. We can have all the structures that we want but, unless the agencies that are involved consider themselves to be accountable and respect the people to whom they are accountable, it will be pointless.

Natalie Don: Thank you. I am keen to hear Margaret Morrison's views.

Margaret Morrison: We all agree that it is notoriously difficult to get the young to engage on committees. We have to go and get their views. You make a very good point; the young are our future, and we really need to look at the issue.

It is important to have good engagement with the local authority, because it speaks to the young constantly through the schools, through sports and so on, and it also works with teachers. In the Harris forum, we hear about these things through our council representatives, because they are involved with the young people. We also hear from the youth development worker on Harris. Because it is a relatively small community, we do hear views and it is much easier to collate them.

The young are the future and it is so important to involve them however we can. We do not want them to feel that this is a hopeless situation. We have to be cautiously optimistic that things will

improve, because life in the Western Isles is generally wonderful and we want the young to stay here and come back here. Without them, we have no future. That is the stark reality, so engagement with the young is imperative.

Natalie Don: Thank you for your comments. Those were thorough responses. I am conscious of the time. I am happy for anyone to come back in if they have anything to add, but otherwise I will hand back to the convener.

The Convener: Thank you, Natalie. Monica Lennon has a follow-up question.

Monica Lennon: It is for Paul Riley. Paul, you mentioned at the beginning of your remarks some of the challenges around equality of access and accessibility issues for people with disabilities. Some members of the committee visited Orkney recently as part of a separate inquiry and we got some insight into the issues that you mentioned. Will you elaborate on what that means, not just in Orkney but in relation to Scotland's ferry fleet? What should we be looking at in our inquiry in relation to disabled access and accessibility issues?

Paul Riley: The basic problem with all our transport is to do with mobility. Nobody with mobility issues can leave their vehicle on two of the three ferries, and it is very difficult for people with mobility issues to get into a small plane with restricted access. It is difficult enough for able-bodied people.

The problem with the ferry is compounded by the fact that, in theory, nobody should remain on the car deck while the ferry is moving between ports, but obviously people have to stay in their vehicle if they cannot get out or cannot get upstairs, and in some cases a carer has to stay with them. As far as I am aware, that is true for all the ferries. The only one that I can think of that has ramps is the MV Alfred, which is part of the Pentland Ferries fleet. NorthLink has lifts on its larger vessels on both its routes, so people can get around to some extent in that way. However, interisland, it is virtually impossible.

Of course, this is not just about people with direct mobility issues; it is also about people who have come back from hospital after serious operations, people who need to be accompanied to make sure that they get home okay and so on.

Monica Lennon: It is really helpful to get that on the record. I am sure that the committee will want to explore those issues and the points that other colleagues have made today about the fact that these are lifeline services that people need in order to access the national health service, healthcare and so on. The points that you have raised are really important.

The Convener: That brings us to the end of our allocated time. Thank you for joining the committee this morning and sharing your views and concerns. We have covered a lot of ground. If there are any other issues that you want to bring up, please feel free to write to the committee by email or send follow-up supplementary evidence to the clerks.

Our evidence session this morning will help to inform our final remit, which we will sign off shortly. I thank you again for joining us. We very much appreciate your time and the serious issues that you have raised with the committee.

10:45

Meeting suspended.

11:02

On resuming—

Petitions

Satellite Tags on Raptors (Monitoring) (PE1750)

The Convener: Welcome back. Our next agenda item is consideration of three petitions. I refer members to paper 3, which provides some background information on each petition, each of which we have considered before as a committee.

The first petition that we will consider is PE1750, which was lodged by Alex Hogg of the Scottish Gamekeepers Association in August 2019. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce independent monitoring of satellite tags fitted to raptor species in order to assist the police and courts in potential wildlife crime cases and to provide data transparency.

On 15 March, we agreed to keep the petition open and to write to NatureScot and Police Scotland for views on the implementation of the new data-sharing protocols in the first year and on the robustness of the data that is being gathered. We also agreed to write to the Scottish Government to ask for its views. All three have replied. I also note that we have received a late submission from the Scottish Gamekeepers Association.

I invite the views of committee members on how we should take the petition forward, and I refer you to paragraph 11 of the meeting papers.

Mark Ruskell: Obviously, the satellite tagging of raptors is hugely important—not least because it enables us to detect wildlife crime—but the process needs to be robust and transparent and have the confidence of all stakeholders, so I am pleased that we got a submission back from NatureScot identifying that new data-sharing protocols are now in place that perhaps were not in place when the petition was originally submitted. It believes that the data provides important oversight and that tagging is being done competently, professionally and in an open way. Police Scotland is also happy with the protocols that are in place. On that basis, I suggest that we close the petition.

We want to keep an eye on how satellite tagging is progressing in Scotland, so we might want to raise that question with NatureScot when the opportunity next arises.

The Convener: I agree with that. As no other members want to contribute, and based on what Mark Ruskell said and the very helpful replies that we have received, I think that we can conclude that the petition can be closed but also agree that,

in future, we will invite stakeholders to the committee to monitor the subject matter that is covered by the petition.

Protected Beavers (Translocation) (PE1815)

The Convener: The next petition for consideration is PE1815, which was lodged by Steve Micklewright, on behalf of Trees for Life, in August 2020. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to initiate a programme to translocate protected beavers to suitable habitats outside the existing beaver range in order to minimise the need to kill animals that are adversely impacting arable farmland.

We last considered the petition on 15 March 2022, when we decided to write to NatureScot and the Scottish Government to seek further information and clarification about licensing and relocation. We also agreed to write to the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee to draw the petition to its attention in the context of any future work on new rural support schemes.

I invite views from members on how to deal with the petition and ask them to note paragraph 24 of the meeting papers.

Mark Ruskell: The petition was very timely. We have seen some progress from the Government in relation to translocations; the first licensed translocations have taken place, which is very welcome. However, there will be on-going issues with the national beaver strategy that need some scrutiny. I suggest that we close the petition but also that we keep one eye on the national beaver strategy. If there is an opportunity to scrutinise that when it is launched, it would be very useful for us to do so, because it will bring up a lot of questions about the management of beavers, including translocations. I think that that is the best way to proceed with the issues that the petition raised.

The Convener: As no other member wishes to come in on that, I will say that I agree with Mark Ruskell. It is important to note that the Scottish Government has changed its position on translocation and that NatureScot has stated that it now expects to see a much greater proportion of the animals that need to be removed being trapped and translocated, and a much smaller proportion being removed by lethal control. On that basis, we will close the petition and look to hear from stakeholders on the national beaver strategy at a later date.

Island Ferry Services (PE1872)

The Convener: The final petition for consideration is PE1872, on ferry services, which was lodged by Liz Mcnicol in May 2021 and calls

on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to urgently ensure that all islanders have access to reliable ferry services. We last considered the petition on 15 March 2022 and agreed to postpone consideration to a later date because we anticipated that we would start a ferry-related inquiry that would deal with the issues that are raised in the petition. We have now started a ferries inquiry that will cover the issues that are raised in the petition and, based on that, I suggest that we close the petition. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: That concludes the public part of the meeting. We will now go into private session.

11:07

Meeting continued in private until 12:34.

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