



Michael Matheson MSP  
Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity  
The Scottish Parliament  
EDINBURGH  
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11 June 2020

Dear Mr. Matheson,

### **COVID-19 – PROVIDING A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD TO THE ISLANDS**

Dear Mr. Matheson,

I write to you concerning the Outer Hebrides, one of the most special but economically fragile parts of our country. Given its beauty, it is no surprise tourism is pivotal to the economy. The sector accounts for 10-15% of the economy directly, but is easily double that in the rural areas out-with Stornoway and underpins much of the broader infrastructure of day-to-day life on the islands, accounting for up to 40% of turnover for restaurant and retail outlets as well as a significant proportion of construction trades. Crucially for the islands, it is a growth industry supplementing agricultural incomes which are squeezed more each year.

We have become very concerned in recent weeks that decisions being taken in your department and its agencies, about capacity for ferry transport for the remainder of 2020 will decimate the island tourism industry. It is imposing a de-facto extended lockdown on the islands. If this is allowed to happen it will wipe out many successful tourist businesses, create a local recession of a scale unimaginable at a national level and lead to depopulation from which it is too hard for island communities to bounce back.

These were confirmed by yesterday's announcement. We urge you to review decisions taken on ferry capacity to align with the plans of your Cabinet Colleague, Fergus Ewing for the industry for the national tourism industry, and allow the islands to benefit from any national re-starting from 15<sup>th</sup> July. We are neither asking the government to endorse unsafe practice, nor for special treatment. We do expect a level playing field, and need to avoid discriminating against island businesses in a way that the Islands Bill was designed to enshrine. As the person representing the islands at the Cabinet Table, we look to you to act as custodian of our interests.

Although COVID has so far largely spared our island communities, it hit at a cruel time for our industry. Investments had been made over the winter, cashflows were at their low ebb and the usual arrival of visitors driving the reversal in cash-flow did not materialise. Like businesses across the country, we have acted to protect the health of our communities and comply with the guidance given. Much work has gone in during lockdown with Fergus Ewing, Fiona Hyslop and Kate Forbes to deliver a support package that would avoid hardship and closures, and then put in place the necessary procedures that will allow businesses to operate as virus levels fall, with the aim of getting some revenue to businesses by the end of the season.

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Developing, Promoting and Sustaining **OUR** Industry

At a national level, this hard work is now bearing fruit, and as the government's route-map progresses, we hope some sectors of the national tourism industry will be able to restart in the coming weeks, once it is declared safe, as outlined by Mr. Ewing. Our concern is that the islands will be excluded from this vital relaxation as a result of inadequate ferry capacity. There is little point in a business opening if government regulation prevents their customers from reaching the islands. The effect of this will be to extend the lockdown on the islands, and impose an extended drought on businesses that are the least well positioned to endure it. We are told our actions to date have been successful in saving lives – but going forwards it is crucial our actions will save livelihoods as well.

We expect more of our government than a simple mathematical exercise, which any of us could do. We are worried your officials are focused on the much more procedural "How much does COVID reduce the capacity of ferry travel?". The question they should be focused on is "How can we design a ferry service in times of COVID that maintains jobs and livelihoods on the islands?"

We were especially disappointed in the approach taken to the recent Outer Hebrides Ferry User Stakeholder Group. This is the main vehicle for the agencies related to ferry travel to engage with the communities for whom the services exist. Given the importance of the topic, we expected a thorough briefing (presumably this sits with Transport Scotland and Calmac are contributing data) but so little detail was included as to be almost worthless.

- no data was provided for our routes,
- no dates were presented when a decision would be reached,
- no process was outlined highlighting accountabilities for the decision (Calmac did make it very clear that they were simply following orders)
- no consultation process was outlined.

In particular these questions were raised which seemed not to have been considered:

- What is the de-facto impact of capacity reduction, given the car deck limits passenger numbers on most routes?
- Given the widespread speculation, what would the reduction of social distancing to 1.5m (or even 1.0m) do to the capacity?
- Why are other travel modes being allowed to operate while failing to comply with the 2m social distancing rule, while imposing it strictly on ferries?. Air travel and minicabs seem to operate independently of the rules, Based on Scotrail's announcement today it appears that they too do not need to comply with social distancing rules. The proposals in your note suggest the passenger capacity on the Loch Seaforth reducing from 700 to around 100. If British Airways gave each passenger the same area on a 747, it's maximum capacity would be 30 (and this excludes outdoor space on Seaforth!).
- Are there other safety practices which can support safe travel while reducing the reliance on engineered social distancing (e.g. face-masks) travel on car deck, etc?
- Who is tasked with preparing a plan for safe ferry travel? What is the process for consultation to agree how to use any available capacity prior to the policy being implemented, given the tight timescales?
- Why is the proposed number of sailings not higher given the expectation that capacity per sailing is to be rationed? We were told to expect a frequency in line with a Winter timetable rather than a full Summer Timetable once travel resumes. Fewer services and capacity restriction simply exacerbate the existing lack of capacity. Turnaround times may be longer, given boarding procedures and cleaning, but this doesn't seem to account for such a drastic reduction in frequency of sailing.

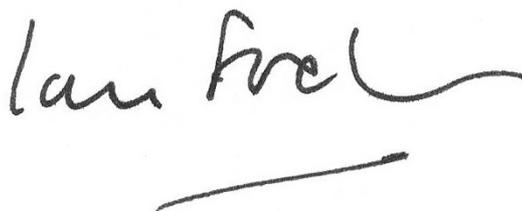
As the Cabinet Secretary with responsibility for the Islands, we would ask for your urgent assistance in protecting the economic future of our island communities by committing to the following:

1. Ensuring ferry transport will be treated in the same way as other transport modes as lockdown is relaxed, particularly in relation to social distancing
2. Maximising sailing frequency to limit the net effect of capacity constraints on individual sailings and ensure as much demand as possible is met.
3. Fully consider alternatives to promote safe travel that enable capacity ceilings to be lifted to some extent
4. Ensure that a proper consultation takes place with all sections of the community on how to implement capacity constraints
5. Providing a support package for island businesses which reflects the de-facto extension to lockdown on the islands caused by the lack of ferry capacity for visitors.

Le gach deagh dhùrachd

Rob Mckinnon

Ian Fordham



**Chief Executive**

**Chairman**

**Outer Hebrides Tourism Community Interest Company**

Cc

Fergus Ewing, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy & Tourism

Angus Brendan MacNeil, MP Na h-Eileanan an Iar

Dr Alastair Allan MSP Na h-Eileanan an Iar

Roddie MacKay, Leader, Comhairle na Eilean Siar

Uisdean Robertson, Transport Committee Chair, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

Alistair Dodds, Chair, Highlands & Islands Enterprise,

Charlotte Wright, Chief Executive, Highlands & Islands Enterprise,

Robbie Drummond, Chief Executive, David MacBrayne Limited,

Angus Campbell, Chair, Calmac Communities Board

Marc Crothall, Chief Executive, Scottish Tourism Alliance

Riddell Graham, Chair, STERG

Chris Wilcock, Head of Ferries Unit, Transport Scotland