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# **Action Plan – Northlink Ferries Communication Paper**

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## Foreword

The Scottish Government is committed to maintaining and improving lifeline ferry services that play a key role in supporting the economic, social and cultural development of island and remote mainland communities. From my own engagement with communities, I am aware of current pressures on the ferry network and the impact that has on people's lives and businesses in our island communities.



Notwithstanding that level of commitment to, and investment in, Scotland's lifeline ferry services, capacity in peak periods can be a challenge for our ferry service users and any resilience issues can be particularly disruptive. That challenge is, clearly, greatest for visitors and local residents and businesses in the summer months when visitor numbers to our islands are at their highest and demand is at its highest.

This Government commissioned this Action Plan to help improve the performance of our ferry services, in light of concerns raised, and I have asked Transport Scotland officials to work together with operators to get this right for passengers.

The Action Plan is not a substitute for addressing challenges with fleet capacity and resilience, which require longer term action, and we are working with stakeholders to deliver the action that is needed in the medium and longer term, through development of, among other actions, the next Ferries Plan and the forthcoming updated Vessel Replacement and Deployment Plan. The Action Plan itself complements investment in proactive maintenance, other resilience measures and aims, principally, to improve the customer experience and will include the following measures:

- communication strategy to passengers when there is service disruption
- clear guidance on how customers should engage with operators if they face difficulty travelling for emergencies, such as medical appointments or funerals
- a programme of commitments which ferry operators must adhere to

My aim is to ensure that everyone involved in the provision of ferry services is aligned in pursuing the Scottish Government's objective of using transport connectivity to support the socio-economic sustainability of our island communities and to maintain and enhance the quality of life for those communities served by Scotland's supported ferries operators.

*Kind regards*

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Paul Wheelhouse'.

**Paul Wheelhouse MSP**  
**Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands**

## **Northlink ferries**

Serco NorthLink Ferries (SNF) operate three passenger vessels on the Orkney and Shetland routes: the MV Hjaltland, MV Hrossey and MV Hamnavoe. In addition they operate two freight vessels: the MV Hildasay and the MV Helliar. The company has offices and terminals in Stromness, Lerwick and Aberdeen, and terminals at Scrabster and Hatston and a town centre office in Kirkwall.

NorthLink Ferries sail daily from Aberdeen to Lerwick with frequent calls at Kirkwall, and from Scrabster on the north coast of Scotland to Stromness in Orkney. The service operates 363 days per year providing lifeline connections to the Northern Isles, with islanders, visitors, goods and freight all travelling by NorthLink Ferries.

NorthLink Ferries publish a range of operational data on their website capturing performance statistics, these can be found at:

<https://www.northlinkferries.co.uk/information/publications/statistics/>

## **What have we achieved?**

The Scottish Government has invested over £1.9 billion in ferry services, vessels and infrastructure across Scotland since 2007. That includes investment of over £1.5 billion in operational costs, over £255 million in ferries and £113 million associated with piers and harbours infrastructure.

On the Northern Isles ferry services the Scottish Government is continuing to provide significant levels of revenue support and recently purchased the three Ro-Pax vessels and both Freighter vessels to secure their use on the services.

Reducing fares on all ferry services on the Northern Isles ferry network remains a top priority and we will continue to pursue all avenues to deliver our Road Equivalent Tariff policy.

Regrettably, given a formal State Aid complaint has been made to the European Commission, we need to await the outcome of that process.

As an interim measure, we were able to reduce passenger and car fares on routes to Shetland by 20% on 30 June 2018.

To continue supporting the economies of Orkney, Shetland and Caithness, The Scottish Government announced a £2 million investment for the Northern Isles Ferry services in November 2018. Improvements include:

- introduction of 66 new sleeping pods, a new cinema, shop, games area, and entertainment zone on the Aberdeen vessels
- spare fin stabilisers have been purchased, thus reducing the risk of disruption and providing improved resilience to services

- invested in nine new port tractors to improve shore side operations and reduce maintenance costs of the freight operation
- installation of an electric charging system which will meet the power needs of the MV Hamnavoe when the vessel is docked in port overnight, thus reducing our carbon footprint and improving the local environmental impact – both air quality and noise

SNF received funding through the Ferries Accessibility Fund to include the provision of Changing Places facilities on board the MV Hjaltland and MV Hrossey. These services are now fully functioning.

These improvements allow ferries to be fully accessible, offering the best passenger experience possible to everyone.

## **In the event of disruption**

### **Masters' decision**

The decision to delay or cancel a sailing is never taken lightly. The importance of ferry services to island and isolated rural communities is fully recognised by SNF. However, the Master of the ship is required to always put the safety of passengers, the crew and the ship first. The Masters' right to cancel a sailing on the basis of safety is enshrined in law, principally in the Merchant Shipping (Masters' Discretion) Regulations 1997. Notwithstanding any aspect of this action plan or Public Service Contract, the Masters' decision to sail is entirely their own and no individual has right or obligation to influence this. All Masters have full backing of Serco NorthLink and Scottish Ministers to discharge their responsibilities in a manner in which they see fit to ensure the safety of passengers, crew, cargo, ship and harbour.

### **Communications**

SNF have a range of Local Operating Notices which are designed to identify and address weather disruption. As part of these SNF introduced the option of delaying or bringing forward scheduled departure times. This provides the operator with the ability to navigate round or ahead of certain areas of forecasted adverse weather. When this is the case proactive communication to customers is provided and again this requirement is captured in their Local Operating Procedure.

SNF endeavour to provide early notice as to anticipated departure/arrival times as much as possible when this happens. Given the duration of their services, frequency of connections and the North Sea operating environment safety will always be the primary concern.

The operator and Traffic Scotland provide full service details via their websites:

Traffic Scotland:

<https://trafficscotland.org/publictransport/>

Serco Northlink Ferries:

<https://www.northlinkferries.co.uk/opsnews/>

Disruptions will be communicated directly to customers via:

- email
- webpage
- social media
- sms and recorded phone message

### **Customer assistance**

In the event of disruption to services terminal staff will assist passengers in making alternative arrangements and ensure they have access to facilities.

SNF will do everything they can to assist passengers with disabilities or those requiring assistance whilst they are in the terminals and on board the vessels. Information is available on-board, shore-side and on the two special assistance web pages:

<https://www.northlinkferries.co.uk/information/accessibility-policy/>

These advise of all transport links to and from the terminals and the major transportation providers.

### **Serco NorthLink's complaints procedure**

<https://www.northlinkferries.co.uk/information/contact-northlink/customer-feedback-procedures/>

If customers are unable, for whatever reason, to receive feedback locally, or for any reason are not satisfied with the response they receive prior to boarding, on board or at any SNF terminal, customers are encouraged to contact the operator at the address below:

**Customer Services  
Northlink Ferries  
Stromness Ferry Terminal  
Ferry Road  
Stromness  
Orkney  
Scotland  
KW16 3BH**

Tel: **01856 885500**

e-mail: **[CustomerServicesDepartment@northlinkferries.co.uk](mailto:CustomerServicesDepartment@northlinkferries.co.uk)**

When written feedback is received, an acknowledgement shall be sent to the customer by the Customer Care Team within five working days of receipt.

Customers will receive a final reply from the Customer Care Team within 21 working days of initial receipt. Where more detailed investigation is required, or investigation cannot be completed due to shift patterns, the Customer Care Team will inform the customer in writing that additional time will be required prior to the 21 day threshold and the likely timescale for resolution.

## **Compensation**

Compensation is available in certain circumstances if a sailing is cancelled or delayed due to a technical fault or an operational reason, as per EU Regulation 1177/2010.

All operators have a duty of care to their customers and proactively advertise the rights of passengers travelling by sea and inland waterways, informing them of their rights for compensation under the Regulations.

Serco Northlink Ferries – Passenger Welfare Guide details the options and circumstances available for compensation:

<https://www.northlinkferries.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/19851-nlf-passenger-rights.pdf>

## **Future commitments**

Transport Scotland will continue to closely monitor operator performance under our public service contracts, including when it is in place, the measures in the Action Plan.

Reducing fares on ferry services on the Northern Isles ferry network remains a top priority and we will continue to pursue all avenues to deliver Road Equivalent Tariff, but given a State Aid complaint has been made to the European Commission by a private business regarding the introduction of RET we need to await the outcome of that process.

We are fully engaging with the Commission to establish the way forward. Officials had a positive meeting with the Commission in Brussels in November 2018 and in May 2019. The Commission will be considering this and contacting the Scottish Government for further information, clarification and discussion.



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