Dear Ian,

Thank you for your letter of 29 December, which we received on 4 January.

As you will be aware, Transport Scotland have now approved our proposals for the Mallaig-Armadale service for summer 2017 and the route is now open for bookings.

I do not propose revisiting the issues of summer 2016 which have been well-aired and discussed and would prefer instead to focus on the future.

While we recognise Sleat will be disappointed not to have the MV Coruisk, we believe there is still a lot to be positive about:

- The planned timetable with the MV Lord of the Isles and MV Loch Fyne will provide additional capacity, frequency and improved reliability as requested by the Sleat community and more sailings and capacity than in summer 2015 when the MV Coruisk operated alone.
- The two vessels are scheduled to operate 9 return sailings per day (versus 8 in 2015) or 3287 sailings over the summer season (versus 3126 in summer 2015).
- The route will be able to take 23,300 more cars than in 2015 and around 11,400 more than 2016. MV Loch Fyne can carry up to four coaches dependent on size compared with two on the MV Lochinvar and we have specifically planned the timetable to benefit coach traffic.

It is also worth stressing that the timetable has been planned around tidal fluctuations so barring any major weather or other issue, there will be no disruptions in the conventional sense, ie the timetable is the timetable. Yes, the timetable will not be the same every day for the duration of the summer, but we are confident ferry travellers will be able to plan around that and most will be totally unaware of any issue and will travel as planned.

Please let me assure you a very large team of people have been working hard to find a solution which addresses the key local concerns and the Minister’s instruction to avoid a repeat of summer 2016’s issues, but it is not as straightforward as it might appear as not all vessels fit all ports, nor are all vessels suitable for the differing traffic levels on all routes. We must therefore balance the needs of the different communities and make decisions based on the best interests of the network as a whole.

Much as we would like to give every community the service they want, this is rarely possible and some compromise is necessary, although we will do what we can to provide the best we can with the resources available to us.

The needs of the Sleat community are well known to us and we understand that their geographical location and distance from the Skye Bridge and main road route from the mainland brings challenges.
19 January 2017

Mr I Blackford, MP

In regards to Mull, we cannot ignore the fact that it is experiencing huge increases in ferry traffic (up to 40% last summer) which was anticipated by the Government’s Ferries Plan as far back as 2012 when it committed to putting two vessels on the Oban-Craignure route. In order to meet this demand and our contractual requirements to provide a two vessel service to Mull, we have no choice but to deploy the MV Coruisk which is the only vessel to fit at both linkspans.

This brings me on to your point about the need to provide suitable vessels.

As previously stated we are not responsible for procuring new vessels for the fleet, but in any case all attempts by Transport Scotland and CMAL to identify additional tonnage have so far proved unsuccessful. We will continue to look and should anything become available we will ask TS and CMAL to secure it but I feel I must temper your expectations that something will be found soon, as we routinely monitor the shipping market for potential additions to our fleet and experience shows that there is very little which can operate in our waters with the suitable UK classification. It is worth bearing in mind that every one of the 32 ships in the CalMac fleet was built to order precisely for this reason.

Our only options have therefore involved using vessels in the existing CFL fleet, and, other than the vessels deployed on the route last year, MV Loch Fyne is the only vessel with a comparable carrying capacity to the MV Coruisk.

All the signs are we can look forward to a busy summer in Skye and we would ask that everyone gets behind this decision, which has much to commend it, and works with us to make the very best of the additional sailings and capacity.

We have offered the Sleat community assistance with marketing and other promotional activity to encourage more people to come to the area. We know people are disappointed but unless everyone with an interest in the route gives the same message that the Mallaig-Armadale ferry route is open for business then the predictions of a drop in tourist numbers could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. As an elected member for the area I would ask that you do everything in your power to encourage the community to put any personal disappointment they may have to one side and work positively to bring visitors to the area.

Finally, much has been said about consultation on timetable changes with the communities we support with the claim that somehow this has been insufficient and it may therefore be helpful to clarify the process. The starting point is that we operate services according to the terms of a contract set out by Transport Scotland and it is Transport Scotland as the legal procurer of those services that has the final say on timetables and other aspects of service. Twice a year we are required by Transport Scotland to engage with local communities to identify potential alterations to the summer and winter timetables, and following this extensive and time consuming exercise, we provide Transport Scotland with a note of these requests and information on the operational and financial implications of these changes. If the changes are minor; to accommodate a change to a bus timetable for example, then they will be made, but if there are significant costs implications or there is a major impact on another part of the network then we will discuss these further with Transport Scotland whose approval must be given and recorded as a formal change to the contract.
19 January 2017

Mr I Blackford, MP

We are continually reviewing these procedures to see how we might speed up or improve the process and we are happy to listen to any suggestions.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

Martin Dorchester
Chief Executive