Protest erupts after ferries report talks of service as not being essential

The draft Scottish Ferries Review, prepared by Transport Scotland and published in December 2011, caused outrage on both sides of the Sound of Sleat with its section on the Mallaig to Armadale ferry service. The major problem lay with the misguided assumptions underlying the report. The relevant paragraphs are as follows:

96. The Skye service from Mallaig to Armadale operates a seven-day service during the summer season, with a typical operating day from early morning through to early evening. There are normally around eight return services per day. The service is largely used by tourists and this is reflected in the service provision during the winter months, which reduces to a six-day service with around 2-3 services per day.

TSM comment: The phrase “largely used by tourists” sets the tone for a viewpoint which would not be applied to, say, the work done over the years and planned for the future to make the Perth-Inverness A9 into a dual carriageway. That need is almost entirely due to the numbers of visitors in the summer. No one said or says: “We won’t spend anything on the A9 because it is largely used by tourists.” As for the winter service, as with all ferry services, supply limits demand. Anyone who visits Mallaig or Armadale during the months of the CalMac winter timetable will find significant numbers of people in both places every day who would use a lunchtime ferry service if this was available. No system exists for measuring such unmet demand.

97. A key issue for this Draft Ferries Plan is to make a distinction between routes that are absolutely essential to the community they serve (i.e. if these routes were removed the community would either cease to exist altogether or be seriously harmed as a consequence) and a discretionary service often linked with local tourism. The reliance that residents of Skye have for the ferry service has changed substantially with the construction of the Skye Bridge. The ferry service is now mainly about providing tourists with the opportunity to travel via Skye and the mainland in a different way from the road connection.

TSM comment: The concept of a route being “absolutely essential to the community they serve” which is used here seems to be a subsistence one. That is, would removing the ferry cause people to starve? It goes on to talk of “discretionary service often linked with local tourism” as if removing tourism would have no effect on the local economy. Looked at both from Mallaig and from Sleat, the effect on local businesses would be catastrophic if the ferry was removed. One aspect that Para 96 failed to mention was the ferry on the summer timetable is far larger than the winter one - mv Coruisk can take 40 cars compared to 14 on the Lochnevis so not only are there eight return trips a day, compared to two, but the capacity is far greater and the summer ferry is still often full. How can this flow of traffic and people be regarded in any way as a “discretionary service?” As for the Skye Bridge option, that adds 140 miles and about

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three hours to the Mallaig to Armadale journey and with the new roads to both Armadale and Mallaig, the ferry route from Skye to Glasgow and beyond is quicker and more environmentally friendly than the Skye bridge route.

98. We considered a range of options for Mallaig to Armadale. We could remove the service on the basis that it is not an essential service. This would result in a saving that could be reinvested in the network. However, we want to find a solution that retains the service. Because of the tourist trade, removing the service altogether might have implications for the local economy. So we have therefore rejected this option.

TSM comment: It is almost impossible to understand how the national transport authority for Scotland could come up with this paragraph. The phrases “it is not an essential service” and “might have implications for the local economy” simply show the report’s authors had no grasp of the way the link works. Anyone who knows anything about Mallaig, anything about Sleat and anything about traffic flow cannot avoid the absolute certainty that removing the traffic and people carried by a 40-car ferry crossing the Sound of Sleat 16 times a day would be totally catastrophic for the local economy. How could any serious national report contain the words “might have implications for the local economy” in this context?

99. Our preferred way forward is to continue to have a summer and winter service. For the summer service, recognising the revenue potential, we will offer minimum subsidy only. The winter service will continue to receive a subsidy. We may be able to achieve this change during the next CHFS contract (2012-2019).

TSM comment: Once again, alarm bells were rung by this wording. “Our preferred option” very much leaves open the opportunity for the Government to choose another one. The wording “minimum subsidy” is equally alarming. Looking again at the A9 as a comparison, no one says that the A9 should be reduced to a “minimum subsidy” local access route and all traffic diverted via Aberdeen once the city’s new bypass is built! Bizarrely, the report’s authors recognise the revenue potential of the high level of summer ferry traffic at the same time as saying only that the withdrawal of the service “might” have an impact on the local economy.

100. The community is asked for their views on this proposal.

TSM comment: As meeting after meeting has been held in Mallaig and on Sleat and documents submitted, Transport Scotland certainly has been made aware of local views. The alarming thing about this is that Transport Scotland consulted BEFORE they produced the report and still managed to say what they did. More views may be needed to force the point home. The Ferries Review states that comments can be made via an online questionnaire at http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/0Z25CFT. Alternatively, responses and comments can be sent to: Colin Grieve, Transport Scotland Ferries Unit, Victoria Quay, Edinburgh EH6 6QQ Tel: 0131-244-1539 Email: colin.grieve@transportscotland.gsi.gov.uk