

Letter to Transport Minister

14th November 2022

Ferry Crisis in Mull & Iona

Dear Ms Gilruth,

I write in respect of the deployment of the newly acquired ex-Norwegian vessel 'MV Loch Frisa' as the 'core vessel' on the Oban –Craignure route.

We now have 2 weeks' experience of this vessel operating as our sole ferry on this route, and the news is not good. The boat is simply too small, too slow and too unstable to provide us with an adequate service.

The crossing time has been extended from 40 minutes to a full hour (and the only refreshments available on board are hot drinks provided by a vending machine).

The vessel cannot accommodate all of our vital delivery vehicles etc in one sailing, which has meant some lorries have had to come over on the very early 0515 sailing (no, that is not a typo by the way!). On Thursday 3rd November there was only room for one of our 2 post vans, meaning the South of Mull and Iona had no post and no newspapers on that day. On another occasion the Co-op truck could not return to Oban the same day, meaning the driver had to go back to Oban on foot and return for the lorry the following day. Food deliveries to our shops arrived at random times. These are just a few examples of how our services have been affected already, and how the delivery drivers are being unfairly impacted.

Furthermore in strong winds many passengers are actually becoming seasick, something I have never heard of before in all the 33 years I have lived here (during all of which time MV Isle of Mull has been our core vessel).

Finally the timetable that has been drawn up for the Loch Frisa when operating alone is an absolute disaster for those of us who live here. I don't believe this is an exaggeration. It is true that MV Loch Frisa has a longer operating day, but for reasons I have yet to fathom, she sits idle for long periods in between sailings.

With MV Isle of Mull (which had a crossing time of 40 minutes, with full cafeteria service) we were used in the winter to a system in which the boat sailed in general every other hour from each side – 8am from Oban, 9am from Craignure and so on. This meant if you missed one sailing, you usually had less than 2 hours to wait for the next one. Under the Loch Frisa only timetable, on most weekdays you can leave Oban at 0515, 0750, 1200, 1540, 1820 or 2100 – as you can see, during the middle of the day when most of us need to visit Oban (eg. for the dentist, the optician or hospital appointments), the gap between sailings is around 4 hours. The same is of course true in the opposite direction, where we have sailings at 0630, 1030, 1325, 1700, 1945 and 2220. This means that anyone needing to be in Oban for a morning appointment needs to catch the 0630, arriving in Oban 7.30am when nothing is open! I could go on...

All of the above is unacceptable, especially in light of the oft-used term 'lifeline service' on which we are supposed to be able to rely.

MV Loch Frisa was always unsuitable for this crossing, but for her to be designated as our core vessel without so much as a by-your-leave is an absolute scandal. Neither the community nor our hard-working Mull & Iona Ferry Committee (MIFC) were consulted on the matter, it was presented by CalMac as a fait accompli.

There are two issues here – the purchase of an unsuitable vessel on the part of CMAL, and the designation of this boat as our core vessel by CalMac.

We need a bigger and more efficient vessel for the Oban-Craignure sailing – for example the catamaran which was being built in Indonesia, identified as an option by MIFC – this vessel would only have cost £12 million, whereas £9 million in total has been wasted on the Loch Frisa. When it was decided that this very busy crossing needed 2 boats in the summer months, MV Coruisk was ‘borrowed’ from Skye and we were told this was only temporary until a larger, more suitable vessel could be acquired. Instead of which we are lumbered with MV Loch Frisa - smaller and slower than the Coruisk, without catering facilities and as we have seen, prone to rolling causing seasickness.

During the summer of 2022 there were many instances when the car spaces on this route were totally booked up – thank goodness we still have the option of leaving the island via the Fishnish-Lochaline crossing, although this often entails more driving and is of no use to foot passengers who need to be in Oban. I note also that the vessel used currently for this crossing has a lower capacity than the one used until 2017.

CMAL and CalMac between them are letting the islands of Mull & Iona down. Since both are wholly owned by the Scottish Government, by my reckoning, as Minister for Transport the buck stops with you. Ms Gilruth, I appeal to you to let the people of Mull & Iona know what you intend to do about our dire situation.

I will be very happy to print your response in our local paper.

Janna Greenhalgh, Editor, Round & About Mull & Iona

PS. I have copied in the First Minister in case she can be of some help, and Jenni Minto our local MSP to keep her in the loop.