

## **Report to Partnership Meeting 4 April 2014**

### **RESEARCH AND STRATEGY DELIVERY**

#### **Ferry Online Booking Availability Study**

#### **Purpose of Report**

To report to Members on the findings of the 2013 Ferry Online Booking Availability Study, the resulting dialogue with key stakeholders on the issues it identified and to consult Members on a proposal to undertake similar research in 2014.

#### **Background**

In 2011 and 2012 the Outer Hebrides Tourism Industry Association (OHTIA) carried out research on the availability to book car spaces on the CalMac website on selected routes to and from the Western Isles.

In 2013 a similar research project was carried out, and included routes to Coll / Tiree and Islay. The research in 2013 was financially supported by HITRANS, CnES and Argyll and Bute Council.

A copy of the 2013 report is included for information with the Board papers and is also available on the HITRANS website at the following link,  
[http://www.hitrans.org.uk/Documents/Ferry\\_Online\\_Booking\\_Availability\\_Review\\_-\\_Summer\\_2013.pdf](http://www.hitrans.org.uk/Documents/Ferry_Online_Booking_Availability_Review_-_Summer_2013.pdf).

#### **Report Findings and Next Steps**

As outlined in the report, the research shows consistently high numbers of sailings in the peak season that are unavailable to book online often from several days or even weeks in advance and there is widespread concern that this may be discouraging potential journeys to the islands.

The data for this report was collected by the daily routine of querying the CalMac online booking system between June and October for each route as listed below. This involved checking through all remaining sailings from the day of assessment through to the end of October.

##### Route / direction

- Ullapool - Stornoway
- Stornoway – Ullapool
- Uig – Tarbert
- Tarbert – Uig
- Uig – Lochmaddy

- Oban – Lochboisdale
- Oban - Castlebay
- Oban – Coll / Tiree
- Kennacraig – Port Ellen / Port Askaig

Sailings that appeared 'NA' (not available) on the system were noted on a master spreadsheet. Therefore the data included not only if a sailing was unavailable but also the date from which it became unavailable.

If a sailing appeared as 'NA' and customers hovered over the 'NA' the following message popped up "Sorry, this sailing is not available for booking currently on the Internet. Please contact Caledonian MacBrayne on 0800 066 5000 for more information on availability".

The data recorded highlights a number of specific issues in relation to each route. For example, as many as 57 of the 69 sailings between Stornoway and Ullapool in July became unavailable to book online in advance of the day of sailing. The study also highlights the sailings and days when demand for services is highest. On the majority of routes peak demand was focused around the weekend period.

Since the publication of the report, HITRANS and its partners have positively engaged with CalMac, Transport Scotland and other stakeholders to address the various issues which the report identifies. This has included presentations of the findings by the OHTIA to the Comhairle in December and a Ferry User Group in Stornoway on 12<sup>th</sup> March.

In responding to the study findings, CalMac have highlighted that its findings did not show the true position of capacity at the time of departure. For example, on the Stornoway to Ullapool service identified above, CalMac's own data recorded only 16 of the 69 sailings in July at over 85% of capacity which they use to measure as 'full' albeit that they are still often able to allow additional vehicles on the vessel.

However, CalMac acknowledge that the while operational issues often dictate how much space of any sailing can be made available to book online they are currently making a substantial investment in their booking systems in order to address the discrepancy between the online information available to the public and the actual availability on each sailing.

At the recent Ferry User Group CalMac representatives made a commitment to work with key stakeholders including HITRANS, the local authorities and OHTIA in developing their new booking systems which is to be welcomed.

The study and subsequent dialogue also highlighted the need to extend this review to consider where there may be opportunities to improve timetables and encourage demand away from peak periods so as to free up availability for those journeys which are more time constrained.

### **Proposal for 2014 Study**

The work undertaken by the OHTIA on behalf of HITRANS, CnES and A&BC in 2013 and in previous years has helped highlight serious concerns over the lack of online booking availability for vehicles on several routes operated by CalMac. It is proposed that work of a similar scope is undertaken this summer and HITRANS officers have engaged with the OHTIA in order to develop a suitable proposal.

In addition to the study, HITRANS will continue to work with all stakeholders over the coming months in order to address the wider issues which the work to date has highlighted.

**Recommendation**

Members are invited to support a proposal to fund a study of a similar scale in 2014 to that undertaken in 2013 in order to help identify the trends in demand but also to help engage with CalMac to improve the service available to potential customers booking their sailings online.

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Impact</b>	<b>Comment</b>
<b>RTS delivery</b>	√	<b>This work supports several strategic objectives of the RTS.</b>
<b>Policy</b>	√	<b>This work supports the development of the RTS Delivery Plan</b>
<b>Financial</b>	-	<b>Funding is identified in the 2014/15 Business Plan.</b>
<b>Equality</b>	-	<b>Improvement of public transport services helps reduce social exclusion by improving access to employment and services for those living in our most remote areas.</b>

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