



# Little Minch

## Timetables Consultation Response

# Intro duction

This paper considers the case for three sailings per day by new vessels between Uig and Tarbert and between Uig and Lochmaddy during the summer timetable.

The research has comprised:

- Desk research, including the review of the specimen draft timetables produced by CalMac. These, along with the current summer timetables, are shown at the end of this paper.
- Consultations with a range of businesses and other organisations based in Uist or Harris or operating in one of those areas. Most consultees were based in Uist.

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# Timetables

The two new vessels for the routes would have a larger capacity than the current one (MV Hebrides). They would have vehicle deckspace for 100 PCUs (passenger car units) compared to the 86 PCUs of the MV Hebrides. It appears that when MV Hebrides entered service in March 2001 “it had the ability to carry about 98 cars”<sup>1</sup>. Since then the ship’s capacity has decreased and all the new vessels will achieve is a very slight increase in the car capacity available in 2001.

The first timetable (termed **“the 2 sailings timetable”**) has 2 return sailings per day on six days and 1 return sailing on the seventh day. For the Tarbert service the one return sailing is on a Tuesday, while the Lochmaddy service would have the one return sailing on a Sunday.

The second timetable (termed **“the 3 sailings timetable”**) has 3 return sailings per day on six days and 2 return sailings on Sunday.

The number of return sailings per week are:

- Current summer timetable: mostly, 11 on the Tarbert service and 12 on the Lochmaddy service.
- Two sailings timetable: 13 on each of the two services.
- Three sailings timetable: 20 on each of the two services.

Under the three sailings timetable there would be a large increase in the number of sailings compared to the current summer timetable. The increase would be 66% on the Lochmaddy service and around 80% on the Tarbert service.

There is also a significant increase in the number of sailings between the 2 sailings timetable and 3 sailings timetable. There

would be one additional sailing per day, giving an increase of more than 50% in the number of sailings.

CalMac have produced figures for forecast utilisation of the two vessels’ vehicle deckspace. No information is given as to how the figures were arrived at. The way in which the data are presented could suggest that the volume of traffic forecast for the 3 sailings timetable is identical to that which would be carried under the 2 sailings timetable. However, this cannot be discerned from the information shown.

CalMac have stated that the 2 sailings timetable will provide approximately two more sailings per route compared to the current timetable and offer a 42% increase in PCU capacity. However, it is not clear from what is presented how the 42% figure has been derived. The same applies to the stated 111% increase in capacity under the 3 sailings timetable.

A clear and transparent explanation of how the PCU capacities have been calculated should be provided. That would provide confidence in the information that CalMac has presented.

<sup>1</sup><https://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/4730928>

# Previous growth on the Uig-Tarbert-Lochmaddy route from increased capacity

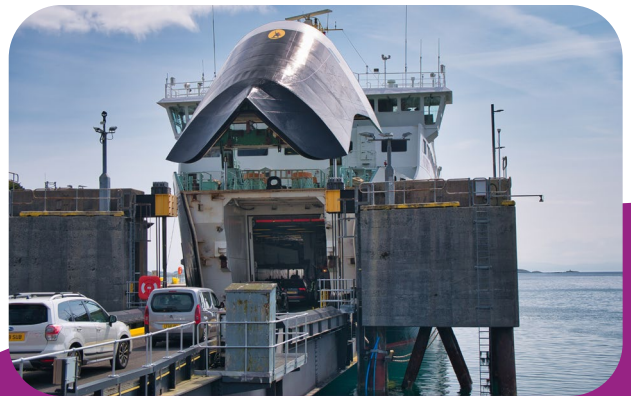
The potential for growth on the Tarbert and Lochmaddy services was evident when a new single vessel (MV Hebrides) was deployed on the route in March 2001. Between 2000 and 2002 there was a significant growth in traffic was as follows:



**Passengers:**  
from 128,000 to 143,000 (+12%)



**Cars:**  
from 38,000 to 45,000 (+18%)



# Freight

Unlike the Tarbert service freight is a key component of traffic on the Lochmaddy service, and particularly for exports from Uist.

The export and import of goods and repositioning of vehicles will benefit more from an a 0700 ex Lochmaddy sailing six days per week rather than just the three days under the 2 sailings timetable.

The Lochmaddy sailing is the first leg in a transport chain that delivers shellfish and seafood across Europe.

Fish and shellfish businesses want to get their products to sales points as soon as possible in the day.

Three sailings per day could allow trailers to be spread across sailings rather than being concentrated on particular ones. That would help to reduce capacity constraints at times of peak demand.

A 1930 ex Uig sailing is seen as useful. This third sailing of the day would encourage business on both sides of the route as vehicles could come and go faster and more efficiently, speeding up delivery times.

Consultees told us that:

*Three sailings will be more flexible in being able to send goods away*

*If there is not the right connections to send their goods businesses will reduce production*

*There is a need for perishable exports to get to the market as soon as possible - otherwise they will lose some of their value of premium products*

**The 2 sailings timetable would have a shorter sailing day than under the current timetable while providing only two more sailings per week.**

The 2 sailings timetable has an earlier last sailing ex Uig than in the current timetable. This could mean that it would take longer to get freight vehicles back to Uist and then loaded to go out to the mainland again. One consultee said that this would mean “having to remodel our operations and incur additional costs. These could be significant and could mean employing extra drivers. Costs would then be passed on to customers and then end purchasers (i.e. the local community)”.

# Visitor Trips

The 3 sailings timetable would provide a day trip of:



## 5 hours and 45 minutes in Harris.

Arrive in Tarbert at 12.15,  
depart Tarbert at 18.00.



## 5 hours and 45 minutes in Uist.

Arrive in Lochmaddy 11.15,  
depart Lochmaddy at 17.00.

That compares with the 2 sailings timetable providing just 4 hours and 15 minutes in either Harris or Uist. That does not seem viable for a day trip.

The 3 sailings timetable would help to tap into the great potential of the estimated 1 million visitor market in Skye. It would generate both day trips from Skye and encourage more visitors to Skye to travel onwards to stay overnight in either Harris or Uist.

One business consultee said that *“one of our main objectives is to increase our visitor numbers this year and should there be additional sailings next year this would give the opportunity for visitors to make a day trip”*.

A number of those consulted see more frequent and later sailings as likely to increase demand for short breaks.



# Residents' Travel

The 3 sailings timetable would also increase time on the mainland for residents' trips. It would allow Harris residents around 11 hours on the mainland before travelling back on the last ferry of the day from Uig at 2030. That compares to only 6 hours 45 minutes under the 2 sailings timetable.

Uist residents would have around 11 hours on the mainland before travelling back on the last ferry of the day at 1930. Again, that compares to only 6 hours 45 minutes under the 2 sailings timetable.

It was reported that there is increasing demand for resident's travel from Harris and Uist to Skye and the mainland. That is to access a range of purposes - e.g. health appointments including specialist treatments, holidays and short breaks, car servicing.

More and later sailings will save residents time and money by being able to return to their home in a single day. That will avoid their having to spend money and time (including time away from work or a business) because they are unable to make the last sailing of the day on at least some days of the week. This is in a context where accommodation on Skye can be fully booked and/or very expensive.

It was also reported that the current 1845 ex Uig sailing is well used by residents looking to get back home in a single day.

That is also the case for **visitors**, with one consultee stating that *"for most guests it will be a full day's drive to reach Uig"*. One consultee made the point that *"the less need to overnight on the mainland the more time/night/days/visitors can stay with us/with other providers and the more they will be able to spend in our wider visitor economy"*.

The time and financial costs associated with off-island travel makes living on Harris and Uist less attractive to existing or would be residents. This is in a context of falling population and an aging demographic. It was also reported that the time and financial costs associated with businesses visiting the islands to undertake jobs could make it increasingly difficult to attract these companies to undertake jobs there.

The additional sailings under the 3 sailings timetable will improve residents' ability to get off the island at short notice. This issue is seen as key to attracting/retaining young people. It could also attract other residents who would work in Uist if there was sufficient ferry capacity to get off the island as and when required.

# Underemployed Assets

Under the 2 sailings timetables on six days of the week the last sailing departs at either 1530 or 1730. That is earlier than the last sailing of the day under the current summer timetable - which is between 1830 and 1900.

Most of the last sailings in the 3 sailings timetable are later than under the 2 sailings timetable as follows:

- Harris: ex Tarbert 1800, ex Uig 2030.
- Uist: ex Lochmaddy 1700, ex Uig 1930.

The early timings of the final sailings - and not having viable day trip options from Uig - in the 2 sailings timetable are likely to constrain demand.

We understand that the cost of the two new vessels for the Little Minch services will be £115 million, which has been accompanied by major investment in the piers at Uig, Tarbert and Lochmaddy. It can be argued that **operating only 2 sailings per day would represent poor utilisation of what is critical and expensive infrastructure.**

A frequency of three sailings per day would be in line with what is provided on, for example, the Ullapool-Stornoway route. It can be seen as an essential step towards unlocking the full economic potential of the areas served.





# Ongoing and Future Developments

- It is anticipated that there will be pockets of renewables investments in both Harris and Uist.
- The construction of Spaceport 1 in Uist is underway.
- Cnoc Solleir is a significant project in South Uist. It aims to create a world class facility that will deliver high-quality professional performances, showcase Gaelic arts and attract people to Uist.
- HIE are building more business units at Balivanich, where the previous ones over-subscribed.
- Forthcoming significant investments in roads and causeways.
- Repopulation Zone - repurposing of housing in Balivanich with £1.3 million of expenditure.
- Presence in Uist of distinctive worldwide defence infrastructure (MOD Hebrides Range, Qinetiq).

In the next few years SSEN will be making a major investment (over £8 billion) in electricity generation and distribution across the Outer Hebrides, and particularly in Lewis with the announcement of a 1.8GW HVDC subsea cable connecting the Outer Hebrides to the north of Scotland. At this time, clarity is awaited on the potential role that the Uig-Tarbert ferry service might play in facilitating the movement of significant volumes of materials, equipment and workers.



# Strategic Alignment

One of the aims of **Sealladh: Outlook Tourism Strategy for the Outer Hebrides** is “working with transport to ensure capacity does not hinder our industry, nor islanders’ travel plans”.

The case for three sailings per day on the Little Minch ferry services aligns with the Highlands and Islands Regional Economic Partnership Regional Economic Strategy Draft June 2024. That is, specifically, alignment with one of the Strategy’s seven goals:

**Goal 2:** Transform the region’s transport infrastructure into an exemplar of efficient rural mobility:

Sub Goal 2a refers to “improve transport connectivity for local residents, businesses and visitors by increasing the availability, reliability and affordability of public transport across the region”.

In March 2023, the Scottish Human Rights Commission delivered a report to the United Nations on how economic, social and cultural rights are being experienced in Scotland. It highlighted a number of issues as examples of particular human rights concern in rural areas of Scotland including Transport connectivity to essential public services and supplies.



# Summary

The case for the 3 sailings timetable and the potential growth in traffic is as follows:

There was significant traffic growth on the Tarbert and Lochmaddy sailings when capacity was previously increased.

A 0700 ex Lochmaddy sailing six days per week will offer a solid base on which to build freight traffic. The third sailing of the day would encourage business on both sides of the route, speeding up freight delivery times.

**The 2 sailings timetable has a shorter sailing day than the current summer timetable** - while providing only two more sailings per week, despite the major investment in new vessels and pier infrastructure. Under the 2 sailings timetables on six days of the week the last sailing would depart at either 1530 or 1730. That is earlier than the last sailing of the day during the current summer timetable. The current 1845 ex Uig sailing is well used by residents looking to get back home in a single day.

The early timings of the final sailings in the 2 sailings timetable are likely to constrain demand. This could mean, for example, that it would take longer to get freight vehicles back to Uist and then loaded to go out to again. That would mean additional business costs.

The 3 sailings timetable would provide day trips from Uig to Harris and from Uig to Lochmaddy. The 2 sailings timetable is unlikely to provide sufficient time to make those day trips viable.

The 3 sailings timetable will:

- Tap into the great potential of the estimated 1 million visitor market in Skye.
- Generate both day trips from Skye and encourage more visitors to Skye to travel onwards to stay overnight in either Harris or Uist.
- Have the potential to support the development of renewable energy investment of over £8 billion in the Western Isles between 2025 and 2040.

It was also reported that more frequent and later sailings are likely to increase demand for short breaks to Uist and Harris.

It appears that there is increasing demand for residents' travel to Skye and the mainland. The time and financial costs associated with off-island travel makes living on the islands less attractive to existing or potential residents. This is in a context of a falling population and an aging demographic.

The additional sailings under the 3 sailings timetable will improve residents' ability to get off the island at short notice. This issue is seen as key to attracting/retaining young people. It could also attract other residents who would work in Uist if there was sufficient ferry capacity to get off the island as and when required.

Increasing the population = more people = an expansion in availability of labour for island businesses = more people in employment = more demand for use of the ferry.

Operating only 2 sailings per day would represent poor utilisation of what is a critical and expensive piece of infrastructure.

Current and forthcoming developments include:

- Renewables investments in both Harris and Uist.
- The construction of Spaceport 1.
- Cnoc Solleir's significant project which aims to attract people to Uist.
- Investments in business units, housing and roads.

In the next few years SSEN will be making a major investment in electricity generation and distribution across the Outer Hebrides. Clarity is awaited on the potential role that

the Uig-Tarbert ferry service might play in moving materials, equipment and workers.

The 3 sailings timetable aligns with the objectives of the Outer Hebrides Tourism Strategy and the Highlands and Islands Regional Economic Partnership's Regional Economic Strategy.

It represents a major opportunity to grow the ferry traffic and support the islands served, by providing the timetable that businesses, residents and visitors need.



## Current (2025) Main Summer Timetables: (April 25 to September 1)

UIG-TARBERT				
	Uig Depart	Tarbert Arrive	Tarbert Depart	Uig Arrive
<b>Monday</b>	0515	0655	0720	0900
	1410	1550	1620	1800
<b>Tuesday</b>	0930	1110	1140	1320
	1840	2020	-	-
<b>Wednesday</b>	-	-	0710	0850
	1420	1600	1630	1810
<b>Thursday</b>	0930	1110	1140	1320
	1840	2020	-	-
<b>Friday</b>	-	-	0720	0900
	1410	1550	1620	1800
<b>Saturday</b>	0950	1130	1210	1350
	1900	2040	2110	2250
<b>Sunday</b>	1405	1545	1625	1805

UIG-LOCHMADDY				
	Uig Depart	Lochmaddy Arrive	Lochmaddy Depart	Uig Arrive
<b>Monday</b>	0930	1115	1145	1330
	1830	2015	-	-
<b>Tuesday</b>	-	-	0715	0900
	1410	1555	1625	1810
<b>Wednesday</b>	0920	1105	1145	1330
	1850	2035	-	-
<b>Thursday</b>	-	-	0715	0900
	1410	1555	1625	1810
<b>Friday</b>	0930	1115	1145	1330
	1830	2015	2040*	2225*
	2240*A	0025*A	-	-
<b>Saturday</b>	-	-	0730	0915
	1430	1615	1645	1830
<b>Sunday</b>	0915	1100	1140	1325
	1830	2015	2040	2225

# New Summer Timetables following new vessel deployment:

## 2 sailings per day six days per week, 1 sailing per day

Tarbert-Uig			
	Port	Arrive	Depart
Monday Wednesday Friday	Tarbert	-	0700
	Uig	0845	0930
	Tarbert	1115	1300
	Uig	1445	1530
	Tarbert	1715	-
	Port	Arrive	Depart
Tuesday	Tarbert	-	
	Uig	MAINTENANCE	
	Tarbert		1430
	Uig	1615	1700
	Tarbert	1845	-
	Port	Arrive	Depart
Thursday Saturday	Tarbert	-	0900
	Uig	1045	1130
	Tarbert	1315	1500
	Uig	1645	1730
	Tarbert	1915	-
	Port	Arrive	Depart
Sunday	Tarbert	-	0700
	Uig	0845	0930
	Tarbert	1115	1300
	Uig	1445	1530
	Tarbert	1715	-

<b>Lochmaddy-Uig</b>			
	<b>Port</b>	<b>Arrive</b>	<b>Depart</b>
<b>Monday Wednesday Friday</b>	Lochmaddy	-	0900
	Uig	1045	1130
	Lochmaddy	1315	1500
	Uig	1645	1730
	Lochmaddy	1915	-
	<b>Port</b>	<b>Arrive</b>	<b>Depart</b>
<b>Tuesday</b>	Lochmaddy	-	0700
	Uig	0845	0930
	Lochmaddy	1115	1300
	Uig	1445	1530
	Lochmaddy	1715	-
	<b>Port</b>	<b>Arrive</b>	<b>Depart</b>
<b>Thursday Saturday</b>	Lochmaddy	-	0700
	Uig	0845	0930
	Lochmaddy	1115	1300
	Uig	1445	1530
	Lochmaddy	1715	-
	<b>Port</b>	<b>Arrive</b>	<b>Depart</b>
<b>Sunday</b>	Lochmaddy	-	-
	Uig	<b>MAINTENANCE</b>	
	Lochmaddy	-	1430
	Uig	1615	1700
	Lochmaddy	1845	-

# New Summer Timetables following new vessel deployment:

3 sailings per day Monday-Saturday, 2 sailings per day on Sunday

Tarbert-Uig			
	Port	Arrive	Depart
Monday-Saturday	Tarbert	-	0800
	Uig	0945	1030
	Tarbert	1215	1300
	Uig	1445	1530
	Tarbert	1715	1800
	Uig	1945	2030
	Tarbert	2215	-
	Port	Arrive	Depart
Sunday	Tarbert	-	
	Uig	MAINTENANCE	
	Tarbert	-	1430
	Uig	1615	1700
	Tarbert	1845	1930
	Uig	2115	2200
	Tarbert	2345	-



<b>Lochmaddy-Uig</b>			
	<b>Port</b>	<b>Arrive</b>	<b>Depart</b>
<b>Monday-Saturday</b>	Lochmaddy	-	0700
	Uig	0845	0930
	Lochmaddy	1115	1200
	Uig	1345	1430
	Lochmaddy	1615	1700
	Uig	1845	1930
	Lochmaddy	2115	-
	<b>Port</b>	<b>Arrive</b>	<b>Depart</b>
<b>Sunday</b>	Lochmaddy	-	
	Uig	<b>MAINTENANCE</b>	
	Lochmaddy	-	1330
	Uig	1515	1600
	Lochmaddy	1745	1830
	Uig	2015	2100
	Lochmaddy	2245	-



## Consultees

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar  
(Anne Murray, Uisdean Robertson, Mustapha Hocine)

DFDS

DJ Buchanan Haulage

Harris Transport Group (Chair)

Isle of Harris Distillery

Isleshotelgroup

Langass Lodge

Namara Hebridean Catch

Outer Hebrides Tourism

SSEN Transmission

Uist Forest Retreats

Uist Asco