Item:
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HI TRANS
THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS TRANSPORT PARTNERSHIP

Report to Partnership Meeting 6 November 2026

PARTNERSHIP

Ferry Stakeholder Consultation and Engagement Arrangements

PURPOSE OF REPORT

The purpose of this report is to update Members on the replacement of the three Ferry Stakeholder Groups under the Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Services arrangements and to recommend a constructive HITRANS position on the emerging stakeholder engagement model. The report also considers the opportunity created by the Programme for Government commitment to explore a single ferries body for the Clyde and Western Isles routes. It concludes that structural reform and stakeholder reform should be developed together, with community influence, transparent accountability and a meaningful organisational presence in the communities served.

BACKGROUND

The Ferry Stakeholder Groups have provided a network-wide forum for local authorities, Regional Transport Partnerships, businesses, community representatives and other stakeholders to engage directly with Transport Scotland, CalMac and CMAL. The three groups covered the Hebrides; Clyde and Kintyre; and Argyll, Lochaber and Skye.

In spring 2026 Transport Scotland advised that no further meetings were envisaged in the groups' existing form. The emerging landscape was described as a strengthened CalMac Area Manager model, local ferry committees, the Ferries Community Board and a new Senior Stakeholder Group. At that point there was limited clarity about the respective roles, membership, accountability or escalation routes.

On 5 May 2026 the three Ferry Stakeholder Group Chairs wrote jointly to the Cabinet Secretary. They did not argue that the former arrangements should be retained unchanged. Their concern was that an established independent strategic forum was being removed without prior discussion with its membership and before a demonstrably stronger replacement had been agreed.

The Chairs proposed essential features for any successor: a defined strategic role; independent chairing; appropriate regional, elected, community, business and economic representation; senior participation from the tripartite partners; transparent papers and reporting; a formal escalation route; meetings at least quarterly; and meaningful influence over timetables, route priorities, strategic direction and contract change.

CABINET SECRETARY RESPONSE AND NEW STRUCTURE

The Cabinet Secretary replied on 9 June 2026. He explained that the requirement for the operator to engage with Ferry User Groups, previously included in CHFS2, is not part of the new CHFS agreements. CHFS3 instead places greater emphasis on strengthened local engagement through CalMac's Enhanced Engagement Model and Community Engagement Strategy.

The local model is expected to be led by CalMac teams and to use existing structures such as community councils and ferry committees. CalMac intends to empower local staff to communicate with authority and to ensure that local intelligence is carried back into central operational decisions. This is positive in intent and should improve route-level relationships if local staff have the authority, information and resources required.

CHFS3 also requires CalMac and Transport Scotland to establish a Senior Stakeholder Group. The Cabinet Secretary indicated that this would comprise the tripartite partners and the four local authorities served by CalMac: Argyll and Bute, Highland, Na h-Eileanan Siar and North Ayrshire. He confirmed that the remit, composition and scope had not at that stage been settled and would be subject to Ministerial consideration.

Transport Scotland has subsequently confirmed that Regional Transport Partnerships will be included in the membership of the new Group. This is welcomed. RTPs bring statutory regional transport planning responsibilities and expertise in integration across ferry, bus, rail and air services, together with an understanding of the relationship between transport connectivity and regional economies. HITRANS in particular have played a significant role ijn previous arrangements and our focus on ferry policy has been substantial over the years.

LESSONS FROM EARLIER ARRANGEMENTS

The immediate task is not to recreate the former groups unchanged. It is to retain what was valuable - breadth, independence and a direct line to the organisations responsible for policy, assets and operations - while correcting the weaknesses that limited their impact.

Experience of the previous arrangements demonstrates that local engagement structures are effective only where communities are involved before significant service decisions are taken. The existence of a local forum does not, by itself, ensure meaningful influence. The new arrangements must therefore provide a clear expectation that relevant communities and stakeholders will be engaged while options remain open, rather than being informed after decisions have been made.

Local and strategic engagement perform different but complementary functions. Local bodies provide route knowledge and immediate customer and community evidence. A strategic forum identifies recurring and network-wide issues, tests policy and investment choices, considers interactions between routes, and holds the responsible organisations to account for their response.

The new structure will command confidence only if information and influence move in both directions. Local matters must have a defined path to the Senior Stakeholder Group; the response, decision and accountable owner must then be reported back. Where matters remain unresolved, there should be an explicit route to Ministers.

PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM OPPORTUNITY

The Programme for Government 2026 to 2031, published on 1 September 2026, commits the Scottish Government to explore the establishment of a single ferries body for the Clyde and Western Isles ferry routes and to consider further reform options that best benefit communities. This sits within a wider commitment to simplify public bodies, clarify accountability, move resources towards frontline delivery and empower regions and communities.

This is a significant opportunity to consider the ferry system as a whole rather than treating stakeholder engagement as a stand-alone consultation exercise. The governance structure, the location of decisions and staff, the information available to communities and the formal means through which communities shape services are interdependent.

A single body could reduce blurred responsibilities and duplication between policy, asset and operational functions and make accountability clearer. However, central consolidation alone would not meet the Government’s stated reform objectives. The model must combine a clear national framework with delegated regional and local authority, so that decisions are taken at the level closest to those affected wherever practicable. There is also an argument that the better merging would be that of the CMAL and Transport Scotland functions across the entire ferry network leaving the operator as standalone for both CHFS and NIFS stengthening the contract management function and keeping this the same for both CHFS and NIFS irrespective of the ownership of each contractor.

Reform also creates an opportunity to align governance around the outcomes that matter to communities: reliable lifeline connectivity; year-round access to work, education, healthcare and essential services; freight capacity; tourism and local economic confidence; integration with onward public transport; and timely, honest communication during disruption.

PUTTING COMMUNITIES AT THE HEART OF FERRY SERVICES

HITRANS should support the development of a model which is more effective, influential and accountable than all that has gone before. The following principles should guide both the Senior Stakeholder Group and the wider reform of ferry governance:

- Community first - arrangements should be co-designed with island and peninsula communities, with evidence published showing how community views have influenced decisions.
- Empowered local arrangements - area managers and route forums should have clearly delegated scope to resolve operational issues and adapt services to local circumstances.
- An effective strategic voice - the Senior Stakeholder Group should have broad membership, including RTPs, and preferably an independent Chair.
- Clear escalation - there should be a documented route from local committees to the Senior Stakeholder Group and, where necessary, to Ministers.
- Transparency - the Group should meet at least quarterly with papers, consistent route and regional performance information, minutes and action tracking published.
- Influence before decisions - engagement should be required while choices remain open on timetables, route priorities, investment, resilience and material contract changes.
- Learning and review - the model should be independently reviewed after its first year and periodically assessed against community confidence.

Finally should a Board of non Executive Directors remain part of the Governance process a commitment should be made that those appointed to such a Board would have at least 50% of appointments made on the basis of residency on an island served by the ferry network.

LOCATING JOBS AND CAPACITY IN THE COMMUNITIES SERVED

A visible test of reform will be whether the bodies responsible for ferry services are prepared to locate decision-making capacity and employment within the communities whose needs are the purpose of the service. Officers understand that the present organisational footprint is concentrated in Glasgow, Port Glasgow and Gourock. Information provided through correspondence also indicates that around 60 staff in Transport Scotland's ferries function are based in the central belt and none on an island. These figures and the full geographic distribution of posts should be confirmed transparently as part of the reform process.

This is not an argument that every national or specialist function can be dispersed, nor should reform disrupt valued operational employment already based at ports and on vessels. It is a proposal that suitable corporate, leadership, planning, engagement, procurement, data and administrative roles should be actively designed for island, west coast and north coast locations rather than assumed to require a central belt base.

Locating a meaningful share of posts in the areas served would bring practical benefits. Staff would gain daily understanding of weather, reliability, onward connections and the economic consequences of disruption; communities would have more accessible relationships with decision-makers; skilled public employment would contribute to fragile local economies; and the organisation would demonstrate that community-centred reform is reflected in its own choices.

The new body should publish a baseline of posts by function and location, set measurable objectives for distributing suitable posts, make remote and hub-based working the default

consideration for new and replacement vacancies, and report progress annually. Island and peninsula hubs could use existing public estate and be developed with councils and RTPs. The design should be co-produced with staff and trade unions and protect operational effectiveness.

NEXT STEPS

HITRANS should approach the new arrangements positively and offer to help develop a model that works. The confirmation of RTP membership is a welcome starting point. Early engagement should now focus on the Group's remit, independence, authority, information requirements and relationship with local ferry committees and the Ferries Community Board.

HITRANS should seek early discussion with the Cabinet Secretary and relevant senior officials, together with the Ferry Stakeholder Group Chairs and partner councils, to consider the Senior Stakeholder Group and wider public service reform as connected programmes. Community representatives should be involved in the design process and draft terms of reference should be published for comment.

In parallel, the case for a single ferries body should include an Islands Communities Impact Assessment from the outset. Options appraisal should test not only efficiency and structural simplicity but also subsidiarity, accessibility of decision-makers, regional distribution of employment, resilience, integration and community confidence.

RISK REGISTER

RTS Delivery

Impact - Positive

Comment - A more effective strategic engagement structure and clearer ferry governance would support delivery of the Regional Transport Strategy, particularly its objectives on resilient connectivity, reducing inequalities and inclusive economic growth.

Policy

Impact - Positive

Comment - The proposed approach aligns with the Programme for Government commitments to empower regions and communities, simplify accountability and ensure that reform benefits the communities served.

Financial

Impact - Neutral

Budget line and value - There are no immediate direct financial implications arising from this report. Officer and Member participation can be met from existing resources. Any future resourcing proposal will be reported separately.

Equality

Impact - Positive

Comment - More effective engagement and locally informed decisions should improve consideration of the disproportionate effects that unreliable or unsuitable ferry services can have on island residents, including access to employment, education, healthcare and essential services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Members are asked to:

1. Note the change from the former Ferry Stakeholder Groups to strengthened local engagement and a new Senior Stakeholder Group.

2. Agree the principles set out in this report as the basis of HITRANS engagement on the remit, operation and accountability of the new arrangements.
3. Support independent chairing, quarterly meetings, published papers and performance information, meaningful involvement before decisions are taken, and clear escalation from local committees to the Senior Stakeholder Group and Ministers.
4. Agree that reform of the wider Clyde and Hebrides ferry structure should include a transparent review of where functions and posts are located, with a presumption that a meaningful share of suitable roles will be based within ferry-dependent communities.
5. Request that an Islands Communities Impact Assessment, including the regional distribution of employment and accessibility of decision-makers, is embedded in the appraisal of options for a single ferries body.
6. Authorise the Partnership Director to pursue these matters with the Scottish Government, Transport Scotland, CalMac, CMAL, partner councils and community stakeholders, and report back as proposals develop.

Report by: Ranald Robertson
Designation: Partnership Director
Date: 14 September 2026