

News Release

Public input into Scotland's ferry services "inadequate," says Consumer Council

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Proposals to change the way users are consulted about Scotland's vital ferry network, and the limited scope of the consultation process which resulted in the new proposals, have been criticised as inadequate by the Scottish Consumer Council.

The SCC is concerned that the proposed changes are weighted too much in favour of business users and do not take sufficient account of the needs of individual ferry passengers.

It supports the need for local user involvement to ensure that local issues of concern can be identified and addressed but does not believe the proposed changes will prove to be effective. Instead, the SCC recommends that a different model of user involvement should be adopted to include wider representation and greater public accountability and transparency.

The SCC's views are contained in a formal response to the Scottish Executive's review document *Clyde and Hebrides and Northern Isles Ferry Services: Future Consultation with Ferry Users*. It says the proposals contained in the report are flawed because they are based in the main on the views of public service bodies (including local authorities, enterprise companies and tourist boards) and ferry operators. There was no attempt during this exercise to seek the views of the general public or ferry passengers.

The failure to consult widely with passengers and the public is criticised by the SCC which itself received no formal notification of the review's conclusions. It found out

about it from its own sources and has decided to table a formal response because of concern at what is being proposed.

The review recommends using existing shipping services advisory committees as the model for new local arrangements. However the SCC says that these appear to have limited representation of the views of individual consumers and passengers.

“The proposals do not contain enough detail to convince us that the committees will be effective or efficient in representing passengers’ views. Moreover, the consultation provides no evidence that these bodies will be publicly accountable, transparent or representative of the interests of individual ferry users.”

Instead, the SCC recommends that the Scottish Executive should consider the model that has already been developed for the water industry and for the postal service. Postwatch Scotland, for instance, operates a range of local committees with a shared secretariat and a joint Scotland-wide committee to examine issues of common interest.

“We believe that the establishment of a similar model – Ferrywatch – would ensure that the committees receive the support they need to be effective and, at the same time, ensure that common issues of consumer concern are identified and articulated by an independent consumer body with a voice at a strategic level,” says the SCC’s response.

Graeme Millar, chairman of the SCC said: “Ferry services are an essential lifeline for many people in Scotland and the way these monopoly services are provided can have a very significant impact on consumers’ access to mainland services.

“Businesses that make regular use of ferry services have the buying power to make their voices heard in the way services are run. However their interests are likely to vary from, and may be at odds with, those of individual passengers. It is vital that individual consumers have a means of making their views known and be listened to by the ferry operators. The proposals as they currently stand do not provide any confidence that this will be the case. We urge the Executive to reconsider these proposals which we believe will be ineffective in representing the interests of individual ferry users.”

Ends

For further information please contact Bryan Christie media adviser to the SCC on 0131 653 2750 or 07788 583037 (mobile).

About the Scottish Consumer Council

The Scottish Consumer Council was set up by the government in 1975 to promote the interests of consumers, particularly those who experience disadvantage in society. While producers and suppliers of goods and services are usually well organised when protecting their own interests, individual consumers very often are not. The people we represent are consumers of all kinds: they may be council tenants, patients, parents, solicitors’ clients, public transport users, or simply shoppers in a supermarket. We speak up for them by communicating with the professions, industry,

business, local authorities and central government, using careful research and persuasive lobbying.