

Submission to NZET Committee Inquiry on 'A Modern and Sustainable Ferry Service for Scotland' from Beatrice Wishart, MSP for Shetland Islands, regarding shared cabins on NorthLink services

I would be grateful if this could be taken as a further submission to the NZET committee inquiry on 'A Modern and Sustainable Ferry Service for Scotland'. It follows the evidence session on 21st February 2023 and an exchange with Jackie Dunbar MSP and Serco Northlink Ferries (extract below for ease of reference).

The answers Ms Dunbar received fall short of explaining the full situation regarding shared cabins on the Northern Isles service and I hope the following information will be useful to the committee in its deliberations.

Sharing cabins have been a feature on the Aberdeen-Lerwick-Aberdeen route for decades, and I am old enough to remember doing so in the days when P&O ran the Northern Isles service. The reasons for doing so for passengers has been to keep travel costs down, and it ensures that the berths within cabins were utilised.

Serco Northlink stopped this practice at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020 for health and safety reasons and have not reinstated the shared cabins option, continuing to cite health and safety as the reasons for not doing so. This is at odds with all other forms of public transport where you can travel sitting next to complete strangers. To give an island example, a Shetland passenger could travel from Unst to Lerwick via public transport consisting of several buses and two inter-island ferries, sitting in close proximity to other passengers. They could then board a Northlink ferry, and if they decide to use a pod with its fixed position plane-type seating for the overnight crossing, then they will be in a lounge with other random strangers in pods next to them. If, however, they wish to have a cabin with a berth, and the ability to lie flat for the 12-14 hour journey, and are travelling alone, then they no longer have the option of booking a shared cabin through the Northlink booking system. They can, as indicated in the evidence, find other means to share a cabin, most notably through a Facebook page created by private individuals in response to this problem. So, the position is that while Northlink won't allow shared cabins through their booking system, they are content for individual passengers to get together and share a cabin.

The answer to the question Ms Dunbar posed indicating that the number of people who can get a cabin has gone from 362 to 117 is interesting. If one person is occupying a 4-berth cabin and cannot share with strangers, then it obviously reduces the number of cabin berths available to other passengers. A pod is not an alternative to lying flat for an overnight journey and getting some sleep, and many people have onward travel, as demonstrated by the number of cars carried on the service.

One important point that did not come out in the evidence session is about those travelling on concessionary vouchers and who wish to use a cabin. Islanders with a National Entitlement Card receive two free return ferry journeys to Aberdeen. The information on the ZetTrans web site demonstrates how this used to work pre-pandemic. It states:

"Each ferry voucher entitles the card holder to foot passage and a berth (in a shared cabin). Berths will only be allocated on overnight services. Exclusive use of a cabin is not included within the entitlement, however it may be possible to upgrade to an exclusive cabin by paying the difference or using a second ferry voucher for the single journey, subject to cabin availability. Two ferry voucher holders travelling together can request to be allocated berths in the same cabin, this should be done at the time of booking."

Since the pandemic restrictions came into force and shared cabins have not been allowed, anyone travelling on their own in a cabin and using their concessionary vouchers has had to either pay extra or use a second ferry voucher for the single journey. In effect, their entitlement to two free journeys per year has been halved to one per year, but not by their choice of going solo in a cabin. While this particular point has been raised several times with the Scottish Government there is no movement on trying to resolve it.

As one constituent put it to me, for concessionary voucher users who are over 60 years of age or disabled, their *“reason for wanting a cabin might be to do with their age or ill health which means they can’t sleep comfortably in a pod; that they are female and feel unsafe in a public space.”*

There is no explanation as to why shared cabins, having been acceptable for decades, are no longer an option for islanders. The pandemic is no longer a logical reason for not re-introducing them. Both the shared cabins and concessionary vouchers issues need to be addressed by the Scottish Government.

NZET Committee evidence session, 21/02/23 – extract regarding shared cabins

Link here: [Meeting of the Parliament: NZET/21/02/2023 | Scottish Parliament Website](#)

Jackie Dunbar

Share

On cabins, we heard that ferries of course are part of a journey for most folk. Some folk were finding it difficult that they could not get a cabin because they might have had a long journey after the ferry crossing. You were speaking about Covid and a previous witness said that cabin sharing had been stopped during Covid.

Stuart Garrett

Indeed, that is no longer available.

Jackie Dunbar

Is that still the case?

Stuart Garrett

We have withdrawn cabin sharing from our offer. It is no longer bookable.

Jackie Dunbar

Completely?

Stuart Garrett

Completely, yes.

Jackie Dunbar

That will reduce the number of folk who are able to get a cabin from 362 to 117, or am I picking you up wrong?

Stuart Garrett

Share

No, you are certainly not picking me up wrong, but I think there is a bit of a fallacy that suggests that having cabins available to share provided better berth utilisation. Mr Dow may wish to come in on that. We introduced the three pod lounges, and you will have seen from my submission that we have an 80 per cent satisfaction rating for the pods. In 2022, we sold more than 20,000 pod tickets, equivalent to a front of the plane-type seating arrangement. We have tried to be as creative as we can be in providing opportunities other than cabin berths. What we have certainly seen post-Covid has been a willingness on the part of passengers to travel more regularly with their car and passengers seeking to have a cabin with their car. Very high satisfaction ratings are achieved from passengers who can get a cabin, but we have only 117 cabins to sell. That is why I say that the only way to address capacity is with tonnage. Jim Dow, do you have a comment?

Jim Dow

People can still book the cabin—they can get together with another two or three people and book the cabin themselves. It is just they are not able to go in and book a berth in the cabin.

Jackie Dunbar

They can book a cabin together with someone else if they know them; you are just not putting strangers in together.

Stuart Garrett

Yes, that is correct: we are not putting strangers together.