

Urgent Item

Special General Meeting of the Council: 30 June 2020.

Social Distancing – Localised Approach to Transport in Orkney.

Report by Executive Director of Development and Infrastructure.

1. Purpose of Report

To request political direction and support for a localised approach to the level of Social Distancing to be implemented on transport modes within Orkney.

2. Recommendations

The Council is invited to note:

2.1.

That 2 metres social distancing has been implemented and enforced on public transport in Orkney since the start of lockdown.

2.2.

That carrying capacity with 2 metres social distancing on public transport is currently at 20% or less of normal capacity.

2.3.

The Scottish Government's desire to increase both frequency and capacity of public transport to assist in the economic regeneration of Scotland.

2.4.

That the current capacity, even with increased timetable changes, on inter-island routes is only just sustainable for 'life-line' services and provides little additional capacity for economic expansion in Phase 3 and Phase 4 of the Scottish Government route map.

2.5.

That inter-island ferry routes are constrained by geographic limitations that prevent increased service frequency alone being a viable option for additional travel capacity.

2.6.

That social distancing of 2 metres in relation to transport, is guidance and not prescribed in legislation and moreover, current guidance already allows for a relaxation of the 2 metres separation in certain aspects of public transport where such social distancing is neither possible nor practicable.

2.7.

That the Scottish Government continues to review social distancing on a three-weekly basis with a further statement on these matters expected on or shortly after 2 July 2020.

2.8.

That a move to Social Distancing of '1 metre plus' will only provide an increase to 40% of normal capacity and might not be sufficient to meet increasing travel demands through Phase 3 and Phase 4 of the Route Map.

It is recommended:

2.9.

That the Council establishes a policy position of supporting a localised approach to social distancing on public transport within Orkney, with effect from 6 July 2020, where determined by public transport operators, including Orkney Ferries Limited, in order to support the ongoing long-term health, wellbeing and economic recovery of Orkney

3. Background

3.1.

At the present time, in accordance with the Scottish Government's COVID-19 Route Map and Transport Scotland's guidance for transport operators, social distancing is being applied at a 2 metres separation where possible on all forms of transport. This has been rigorously applied on Orkney throughout lockdown and Phase 1 and 2 of the Route Map. However, strict application of this guidance has had a serious detrimental impact on both the social and economic wellbeing of the island communities.

3.2.

Implementation of these measures means that both internal bus and inter-island ferry capacity has suffered a drastic reduction to 20% or less of normal operation. Consequently, a ferry capable of carrying 150 passengers has been reduced to 33 passengers, and a bus seating 64 reduced to carrying 12. In both cases this very limited capacity has routinely been filled by those legitimately engaged in essential travel.

3.3.

The impact on inter-island aviation has been less pronounced, given the early adoption of European Union legislation by regulators and operators. These, along with additional measures, such as increased cleaning routines, changes to ventilation systems and the wearing of face coverings, means air travel has been able to maintain full capacity throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.4.

Given the 'life-line' nature of services that the inter-island ferry routes fulfil for those living on the outer islands of Orkney, this capacity has barely been sufficient to provide the basic necessities in terms of food and supplies and medical travel let alone support wider economic activity. Put simply, the "benefits" enshrined in the move to Phase 2 in terms of a restart to the economy, and some level of respite to the social isolation of individuals have had very little if any impact on individuals reliant on inter-island travel in Orkney's most remote and fragile communities.

4. Transport Capacity

4.1.

The Scottish Government has a stated desire to increase both frequency of and capacity on ferries. The aged ferry infrastructure, limited ferry crews and geographic nature (length of journeys) of the Orkney inter-island routes make increasing capacity alongside retaining 2 metres social distancing impossible. Revisions to timetables are being implemented but provide limited additional capacity. This makes the Orkney inter-island ferry service the limiting factor on delivering the additional transport capacity that the Scottish Government policy to move through the lockdown release phases presumes to deliver.

4.2.

If frequency of service increase is not possible and does not provide the required additional travel capacity, logically the only alternative is increasing the physical capacity on vessels and in vehicles. This means a change in social distancing. Approaches to Scottish Government regarding such changes have met with little success or acknowledgement of the issues on Orkney.

4.3.

In order to deliver additional capacity to meet this demand and stimulate economic and social wellbeing regeneration an alternative 'Orkney' specific approach needs to be explored.

5. Health Status

5.1.

NHS Orkney has confirmed that Orkney has not reported a local transmission of COVID 19 since 20 April 2020. Surveillance testing continues in care homes for residents and staff, representing a proportion of the Orkney population as a whole with all results to date being negative. This provides further confidence in the extent of COVID-19 within the community. The "R" rate in Orkney is therefore demonstrably zero. These points have been communicated to Public Health Scotland and a request for a geographical variation to the Scottish approach to better reflect Orkney circumstances for social distancing has been made to the Scottish Government. A formal response has not yet been received.

5.2.

The Scottish Government is engaged in an ongoing three-weekly review of the recommendation to maintain social distancing at 2 metres. It is understood that the Scottish Government will be receiving scientific advice on this subject by 2 July 2020 and that an announcement of the Scottish Government position may then occur on that date or shortly thereafter.

6. Social Distancing Options

6.1.

Two alternative social distancing options to the current 2 meters regulation are available for consideration:

- Option 1 – Orkney can adopt the ‘1 metre plus’ standard being implemented in England from 4 July 2020.
- Option 2 – Considering the current Health status on the island completely remove the requirement for public transport and inter-island travel.

6.2.

Option 1 – the ‘1 metre plus’ standard – reduces social distance to 1 metre provided additional measures are in place, such as the wearing of face coverings by passengers and increased cleaning routines. For both bus and ferry travel this option only opens travel to, at most, 40% of normal capacity. Whilst certainly an improvement it would be insufficient to meet the projected Phase 3 Route Map requirement without even factoring in tourism, a vital and central part of the island economy.

6.3.

Option 2 would be a complete lifting within Orkney of the social distancing requirement, coupled with rigorous public messaging on the usual hygiene measures, use of face coverings as now generally required in terms of the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions) (Scotland) Regulations 2020, and a very vigilant Test and Trace response service. This would provide access to the full capacity of the current bus and ferry fleet, providing the ability to service both usual economic activities, the rising social needs and give Orkney the best chance to respond to the Scottish Government’s intent to restart tourism after 15 July 2020 , a sector on which the islands’ economy is so reliant.

6.4.

It is recommended that, in order to support the ongoing long-term health, wellbeing and economic recovery of the islands, the Council establish a policy position supporting a localised approach to social distancing on public transport within Orkney from 6 July 2020. The final provision for the level of social distancing to be applied should be determined by public transport operators, including Orkney Ferries Limited, following consideration of specific operational factors, including the use of face coverings.

7. Links to Council Plan

The proposals in this report support and contribute to improved outcomes for communities as outlined in the Council Plan strategic priority of Connected Communities, Caring Communities, Thriving Communities, Enterprising Communities and Quality of Life.

8. Links to Local Outcomes Improvement Plan

The proposals in this report support and contribute to improved outcomes for communities as outlined in the Local Outcomes Improvement Plan priority of Strong Communities and a Vibrant Economy.

9. Financial Implications

9.1.

By reducing social distancing from 2 metres to either '1 metre plus' or completely, operators can return to more viable passenger levels, generating an increase in revenue. This will subsequently mean less recourse to the Council for financial support and a boost to the local economy.

9.2.

The Council insurers have been contacted regarding COVID-19 and a claim is not currently perceived to be an issue.

10. Legal Aspects

10.1.

It should be noted that the current 2 metres social distancing measure for public transport is not prescribed in legislation. Moreover, the current guidance already allows for a relaxation of the 2 metres separation in certain aspects of public transport where such social distancing is neither possible nor practicable. In the context of the Zero "R" rating, this degree of discretionary application within the guidance, along with its non-statutory nature, provides a firm basis to adopt an alternative strategy to delivering inter-island ferry capacity within Orkney.

10.2.

Subject to limited exemptions, the wearing of face coverings on public transport became mandatory in Scotland from 22 June 2020 under the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions) (Scotland) Regulations 2020.

11. Contact Officers

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