

Dear Mr Dorchester

Thank you for your reply.

We do not dispute that bad weather may impede your ability to maintain a service. The question is whether the trend in weather conditions in the Firth of Lorne can entirely account for the collapse in reliability.

We are raising this with you out of a frustration with a deteriorating service, that we are sure must be shared not just by your passengers, but by your staff also. The port and ships' staff that we all deal with on a day-to-day basis do a great job, and We're sure they don't like letting people down or dealing with their complaints. There is a problem however, and for the sake of passengers and staff, we need to find the solutions.

Firstly, we need to assess what exactly is happening to our weather. In order to be clear about what we are asking you, we will number our questions in turn for ease of your reply:

1. You say that deteriorating weather is 'scientifically proven' to be changing for the worse. We ask you to provide the wind speed and direction data you are using that will enable us to objectively assess whether the sailing conditions in the Firth of Lorne have deteriorated with the same pace and pattern as the cancellation rate has done. Presumably you hold such data as part of your recording of cancellation statistics; perhaps it is recorded in the ships' logs at the time of cancelling a sailing. If data from the ship is not available, please tell us what source your Masters regularly use for the Oban-Craignure route.

As well as objectively establishing whether there is a correlation between weather and reliability trends, it needs to be acknowledged that the weather is the circumstance, it is not the reason. If I get wet walking to work in the rain, is the reason the weather? No. Rain is the circumstance. The reason is that I didn't wear a coat.

So the following questions deal with the reasons for poor reliability, ie they all concern your ability to deal with the circumstance of the weather conditions.

2. It seems that the practice of using the anchor to aid getting on and off the pier in unfavourable winds has ceased. It used to be a frequently used procedure in poor weather, but no longer. Please provide the reasons for this.

3. Can you detail the means by which the Masters' cancellation decisions are audited or supported by management? For example, does the company have 'Activity Specific Operating Guidelines' (ASOGs) that specify each vessels operating capability, with reference to its size, power, equipment, windage and so on, in given sea and weather states? Whilst no-one would question the Master's responsibility as the final decision maker and authority on board, it would be expected that the decisions made would be reviewed afterward, to ensure that no Master was either taking undue risks or conversely failing to sail when conditions were within the operating envelope of the vessel. In circumstances where a particular Master was found to be making cancellation decisions the wrong side of the operating guidelines, good management would intervene to either provide the support or guidance that the Master required. Are monitoring procedures or anything similar to ASOGs in place? How frequently are Masters' decisions reviewed?

4. Can you detail any incentives or dis-incentives that apply personally to the Ships' Masters that might discourage them from sailing in inclement weather? For example, are they subject to any

penalties (financial or otherwise) if they damage a vessel or pier? Or do they receive any kind of bonus if they sail without damage? We have heard that damaging a boat is now 'a sacking offence'. Is there any truth in this? Would the company really discipline a Master for minor damage done in the course of operating the vessel within its operating envelope?

5. It has been suggested on several occasions that the MV Isle of Mull is not 'fit for purpose', and although you do not offer this as a defence in your letter, it needs clarification. She maintained good reliability from entering service in 1988 until relatively recently, so perhaps changes have been made to affect her seaworthiness? Can you please detail the technical deterioration that this previously-reliable vessel now suffers from, if any?

6. Can you detail the changes that have been made to the assignment of Masters over the past 10 years? Is it correct that in response to a low speed clash of ships in Oban harbour in 2004 (where weather was not a factor), Masters are now rotated between vessels, rather than remaining with one ship? Is it possible that this frequent shuffling from one vessel to another has resulted in Masters who lack the intimate knowledge of individual ships, routes and ports they once had?

7. You cite poor piers as a cause of cancellations. Can you detail any deficiencies in Craignure or Oban pier – particularly recent deteriorations or changes that could have caused the decline in reliability?

8. You say that deteriorating weather in the Firth of Lorne is scientifically proven, but we have not yet seen empirical evidence to support that. A ten-fold increase in cancellations cannot have gone unnoticed by management. If you have concluded that weather conditions are changing, what are the company's plans to deal with it?

Next, the issue of how Calmac communicates service status, and the very moderate weather conditions that seem to trigger an amber warning. This repeated practice unnecessarily inconveniences travellers and deters visitors. We will not repeat the circumstances of January 2nd cited in our previous letter, but ask you to read it again. We'll add one further instance that occurred just this week, on January 12th. The weather forecast was for winds of between 19 and 21 miles per hour; a wave height of 0.9 metres and a swell of 0.2 meters. Yet the 18:00 and 19:00 sailings remained on amber alert all day, in what anyone could clearly see were not inclement conditions. The amber warning was re-affirmed as late as 16:10, and was only lifted at 17:59, 60 seconds before the scheduled departure time.

9. Was Tuesday's cancellation decision really so very marginal that it had to wait until such a late stage? Is it really such a finely-balanced decision as to whether our 4700 tonne ferry can sail in winds of 20 miles per hour?

10. Please detail the criteria that determine if an amber warning should be issued for the Oban-Craignure route, and if particular wind speeds/directions are the trigger, from where are the measurements taken? Which data feeds are you using? How frequently are these warnings reviewed during each period they are in force?

These are the questions raised by the community of Mull and Iona who rely on our lifeline ferry service, on whose behalf we speak. We hope that you can answer them in detail. They are fair and reasonable.

We would also like to make clear that we are not critics of CalMac, we are critics of bad service. We raise these issues because they have reached a crisis point, and our previous less public attempts to

get answers have not been successful. Whoever the operating company is, it is our duty to ensure they maintain and improve services.

We are being very specific in the questions we are raising with you, on the one crucial area where the service is failing, because we feel strongly that it is an issue for management, not staff. Within your company you have a great many dedicated, skilled and conscientious members of staff both onshore and afloat. All of the small vessel routes serving Mull and Iona appear much more reliable, thanks to the perseverance of the crew. We have no complaints about the crew on the MV Isle of Mull. Your indignation on behalf of the ships' Masters that we should refer to 'timidity' missed the point. We are not making any criticism of any individual Master. We suggested that there is a culture of timidity in the company. The decision to cancel is finally the Master's – but what is influencing his decision aside from the weather? Risk of sacking? Financial Penalty? Lack of support and training? Poor equipment? All of those things are the responsibility of management; the management who by their decisions create the culture of the company. We would not criticise a Master for making an overly cautious decision if it was out of fear of the disciplinary consequences, but certainly would question why anything other than passenger safety and service would bear on his mind. The Ships Masters need support in making tough decisions, but we remain to be convinced that they are receiving it.

We are looking for answers; but above all we are looking for solutions. We will work constructively to address any reasons for the failing service that you can identify that we can help with. Is there some regulatory restriction that means the anchor can no longer be used? We will lobby for it's removal. Is the MV Isle of Mull worn out? We will lobby to have the replacement brought forward. Do other agencies need to spend money on shore facilities? We will lobby for that too. But first we need you to acknowledge that there is a problem and engage positively to find a solution.

We look forward to your detailed response. We would encourage you to visit our Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/mullandionaferrycommittee> where not only are we publishing this correspondence chain, but you will be able to see the comments of users.

Yours,

Neal Goldsmith
Chair, Mull & Iona Ferry Committee.