

SCOTLAND'S ADVENTURE COAST



By email:

Fergus Ewing, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism
Michael Russell, MSP Argyll

Cc Robbie Drummond, Calmac
Brendon O'Hara, MP
AITC Directors
A&B Economic Resilience Forum
A&BC Councillors

6 June 2020

Dear Fergus and Michael

AITC ISLAND COMMUNITIES & SOCIO-ECONOMIC RESILIENCE IN LIGHT OF SOCIAL DISTANCING RESTRICTIONS ON FERRY TRAVEL

Argyll & the Isles Tourism Cooperative is the strategic destination marketing and management organisation for the entire Argyll & Bute region and its 23 inhabited islands each of which has tourism as one of its primary sectors. We represent in the region of 1000 business interests and tourism is one of Argyll's most important sectors with an economic impact nearing £500m/annum in 2018.

As Chairperson I am writing today on behalf of the industry to firstly thank you and your colleagues for the actions taken to date and clarity of messaging in responding to the unprecedented challenge of the Covid 19 pandemic - but to also highlight what is a rapidly escalating concern relating to our island members and the island economies.

Our industry has been hit hard as you are both fully aware and through our active involvement in the Scottish Tourism Alliance we have been ensuring our destination specific challenges are flagged to government and we are supporting our business community as best we can.

However the concern we need to highlight today is the massive issues now facing our island communities with the social distancing restrictions being imposed on ferry travel as announced last week which is restricting capacity to 18% in some cases, and for the foreseeable future until social distancing measures can be relaxed. This in effect wipes out any tourism season for 2020 on each island and leave tourism businesses with no realistic source of income and ability to operate, employ local people and sustain local supply chains.

Consistency in actions across the country has been the core government message and yet with these restrictions on ferry travel, islanders themselves cannot enjoy the freedoms that mainlanders have (to visit mainland family and friends) and in business to know they can open their doors soon and attempt to earn a living. The suggested restrictions are completely unsustainable for island life and business resilience.

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These restrictions are severe and place Scotland's island communities and tourism enterprises out of kilter with the rest of the country. It will not be financially viable to open most tourism businesses with no tourism customer base and we have ready examples to share of businesses that will be forced to make island staff redundant and that will collapse/go into administration and not survive this pandemic. Many of these businesses are not 'just for tourists' – they play a key part in the life and health of locals year round, are community hubs and/or support other businesses through local supply chains. The tourism income makes them viable, and without it they will struggle to survive as business entities - with all the serious socio-economic implications this will bring for the individual island economies.

It is not yet clear if island businesses will be able to access additional support when the inability to be viable is a direct consequence of government imposed travel restrictions rather than uniform national lock down lifting processes. Many of these businesses have fallen through the cracks in support being made available to date. They are fearful that they will get further into debt and collapse. We cannot overstate the anxiety being experienced as a consequence of these new circumstances.

The islands are being penalised and we believe unnecessarily. We accept the restrictions reflect social distancing requirements but travel on rail and plane seem to be out of kilter with what is being imposed on ferries. What can be done to make this fair across Scotland?

Michael, I will be meeting with yourself and Robbie Drummond from Calmac (cc'd) on Monday at the Argyll & Bute Economic Resilience Forum (also cc'd) and wish to focus on this matter. I will have examples of the very real implications and trust we can have a very open and frank discussion on this topic and seek to understand what can realistically be considered to ensure our island interests are not being penalised.

I look forward to having a constructive discussion on Monday and following up as appropriate.

Ultimately I hope we can quickly offer our island colleagues the reassurances they need and fundamentally ensure that they are not being penalised for living and operating on one of our prized tourism assets – our outstanding west coast islands.

My best regards
For and on behalf of Argyll's tourism industry

Iain Jurgensen
Chairperson
Argyll & The Isles Tourism Cooperative