Islands Transport Forum – 29 September 2016

Fixed Links in Rural/ Island Regions of Scotland – (paper provided by ZetTRANS)

Introduction

Fixed links have been a feature of transport infrastructure in Scotland for many years.

Predominantly they have been a means by which the barrier created by rivers, estuaries and sea has been overcome by bridges and tunnels to create more effective transport links.

This in turn has supported the national and regional economies as well as local economies and communities.

As our economy and society becomes more interdependent on relationships between discrete communities and areas of business activity the need for high frequency, reliable, efficient and affordable transport links is becoming increasingly important to island and peninsular communities as well as nationally important economic sectors such as food, drink, fishing, aquaculture and agriculture.

This paper briefly sets out the learning acquired from exploring fixed links in the Shetland Islands provides a proposal for exploring and developing a national policy position on fixed links.

Detail

Although it isn't the intention, this paper will tend to be "Shetland-centric" reflecting the fact that the author is articulating the experience of ZetTrans and Shetland Islands Council over the years of developing ferry services and exploring fixed links in Shetland.

However, the experience is likely to be broadly relevant across Scottish islands and peninsulas insofar as it provides an insight into the effects of developing highly effective maritime transport links between communities, the limits they eventually reach and the challenges of reaching the "next level" needed in sustaining communities into the future.

ZetTrans and Shetland Islands Council are in the final weeks of concluding the Shetland Inter-Island Transport Study and over the course of the last year or so have explored in some depth and detail what is required in terms of inter island transport services and infrastructure over a 30 year planning horizon (and a 60 year appraisal horizon).

The emerging conclusions of the study highlight that the economies of the individual islands as well as the overall Shetland economy is underpinned by the effective transport links between the islands.

The nature of the inter island ferry service, i.e. high frequency, generally high capacity, long operating days and general (although not universal) affordability for the user has led to strong island economies with generally vibrant communities which in turn have supported a strong Shetland economy and inclusive society.

Despite the quality and reliability of services, study observations tell us that there are now indicators of population decline and challenges to island industry that in turn are leading to feelings of insecurity and threat in the island communities as well as significant barriers to business investment in the islands.

This paper is not intended to cover the detail of this on the basis that the Shetland Inter-Island Transport Study and parallel work with Scottish Government will further develop these issues.

The following, however, attempts to summarise the issues.

Historically, islands and peninsulas were almost totally self-contained with shopping, health, education and employment all essentially available at a very local level. Also, the social needs were entirely centred around individual communities.

Looking particularly at the Shetland experience, as links to the mainland have improved over time, four phases emerge:

- 1) Part Day Connectivity: Essential services are accessed on the mainland (part day visits) and supply chain
- 2) Working Day Connectivity: Employment (standard 'office hours')
- 3) 'Extended' Connectivity (e.g. 18 hours, 7 days): Employment (standard & shift) and much Social / Sporting / Recreation
- 4) 'Total' Connectivity (e.g. 24 hours, 7days): All benefits of phase 3 but additional connectivity to external transport links as well as unlimited access (other than cost constraints to the user) to social/ leisure opportunities.

So why do those with the best ferry links feel fixed links are so important for the future?

As these phases have proceeded over time, the islands have become less of an island (although they remain physically unconnected with the mainland) and essentially have become highly integrated with mainland and are in effect an extension of the mainland. Many services and opportunities which were on islands are now based on the mainland and therefore need to be accessed by island communities.

Furthermore, those businesses that have successfully grown in the island (e.g. aquaculture) become more and more reliant on effective transport connections to

sustain and grow their business, which in turn has a positive impact on local employment, support services, population retention, etc.

In addition to this, those that provide services to the islands (both public and private sector) also become more reliant on ferry service provision.

So, by the time you get to Phase 4 the island becomes so enmeshed with the mainland that the natural next step is a fixed link – hence the reason that those islands with the best ferry connections have the greatest feeling of need for a fixed link.

Next steps that don't rely on fixed links?

It is recognised that living and working on islands brings constraints that don't exist in urban and many rural communities on mainland Scotland.

However, as society has developed and continues to develop, the transport interventions for island and remote peninsular communities must consider how to address the needs of greater social, business and service integration (even in a scenario where decentralisation is a policy imperative).

For those communities currently served by ferries the following ideas are worthy of further development/ consideration and would bring many of the benefits that would be derived from fixed links.

- 24 hour services of higher frequency
- RET fares without the Fixed element
- Annual season tickets at highly discounted rates
- Eventually free fares

Clearly there would need to be a relationship established between the economic and social needs of islands and the nature of any interventions.

However, there seems to be strong signals that the limitations of ferry services (varying combinations of capacity, length of day, capacity, reliability, and cost to the user) are leading to declining confidence in island communities and businesses and is being cited as the single most significant reason for population decline and threat to the future of islands sustainability.

Recommendation – It is recommended that these issues are developed through extant studies and Local/ Regional Transport Strategy Development and reported back to the Islands Transport Forum in due course.

The Development of Fixed Links Rural/ Island Regions in Scotland

Recognising that fixed links are major infrastructure projects in their own right, their scale, complexity and potential cost raise fixed links to become matters of national significance and interest. Local authorities simply do not have the financial or

technical resources to develop and deliver fixed links without support from Scottish Government.

Looking to colleagues in Scandinavia and other areas of Europe, Governments have established national policy approaches to the development and provision of fixed links throughout their countries and there is perhaps much to be learned for their experience.

With Scottish Government committed to undertaking a review of the National Transport Strategy and the Strategic Transport Projects Review the conditions currently exist to address this key area for policy development.

Recommendation – It is recommended that Scottish Government includes fixed links in rural and island areas in its review of the National Transport Strategy and the Strategic Transport Projects Review.

Furthermore, it is recommended Scottish Government establish a specific working group comprising members representing island and other authorities as well as appropriate technical experts to thoroughly explore issues specific to fixed links in rural/ island contexts (e.g. standards, environmental issues, costing, etc.).