

Public Consultation for the next Northern Isles Ferry Services Contract 4 (NIFS4)

Capacity and demand

During 2025 and 2026 we will be carrying a Community Needs Assessment. This project will provide evidence and ferry service options for the future Northern Isles Ferry Services (NIFS4) contract, as well as for planned capital investments in vessels and port.

Q1a. Overnight accommodation on ferry services consists of different types of options. If you have used overnight accommodation on a service, please provide your views on overnight cabins.

Q1b. Overnight accommodation on ferry services consists of different types of options. If you have used overnight accommodation on a service, please provide your views on overnight pods.

Q1c. Overnight accommodation on ferry services consists of different types of options. If you have used overnight accommodation on a service, please provide your views on overnight reclining seats.

Q2. On occasion, vessels showing as fully booked sail with empty spaces because some booked cars, lorries and/or cabin users do not show or fail to cancel. We are considering implementing a late cancellation fee for pre-booked tickets, in order to incentivise customers to cancel bookings with reasonable notice so that spaces can be made available to others.

Do you agree with this idea?

Yes

No

No opinion

Please explain your answer

Unplanned and essential travel

We understand that on NIFS most journeys are booked in advance but that sometimes pre-booking a ticket isn't an option, and that last minute booking might be required.

Q3. What do you think the operator could do to support those who need to travel urgently?

Fares

Currently there are seasonal and islander fares (a discount of 30% year round), however we understand that travel on Northern Isles Ferry Services can be expensive for some, and we are interested to hear views on future fares policy.

Q4. Would you like to see the introduction of Road Equivalent Tariff (RET) fares for islanders on the Northern Isles Ferry Services routes, with fares changed to be directly proportional to distance?

Yes

No

Please explain your answer

Q5. The recently published Islands Connectivity Plan Strategic Approach said that we will consider changes to how the RET formula will be applied on longer routes, for example Aberdeen – Kirkwall - Lerwick. This could include reducing the mileage rate or capping at the current mid season fare.

Do you have comments on these options or further suggestions?

Q6. Would you like to see more dynamic pricing for visitors, aimed at managing demand and supporting RET for islanders?

Yes

No

Please explain your answer

Community voice, transparency and accountability

We would like to ensure that there is meaningful engagement with the community on the operation of NIFS services.

Q7. Would you like to see any changes in how the NIFS operator communicates with you, for example in relation to service changes or cancellations?

Q8. The NIFS Operator and Transport Scotland regularly engage with the Orkney External Transport Forum and Shetland External Transport Forum.

Do you think these transport forums reflect community views effectively?

Yes

No

If no, please explain your answer?

Understanding connectivity needs and integration

Looking at how integration with onward and connecting travel can be promoted will enable us to provide opportunities for better connectivity and ferry user access via active travel, public transport, and other more sustainable transport modes.

Q9. How satisfied are you with the public transport (bus/rail) and active travel infrastructure (walking, wheeling and cycling) to or from the NIFS terminals?

Please give us your views indicating which terminals you use.

10a. What do you think could be done by the NIFS ferry operator to improve integration with public transport (bus/rail)?

10b. What do you think could be done by the NIFS ferry operator to improve integration with active travel infrastructure (walking, wheeling and cycling)?

Accessibility

Community feedback suggests that some equality groups face additional challenges when traveling on NIFS. Equality groups include those who have protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010; age, gender reassignment, married or in a civil partnership, pregnant or maternity, disability, race (including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin), religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation.

Q11. How do you think services could be improved in the next NIFS contract to help with accessibility throughout the ferry journey?

Reliability and resilience

Feedback provided by the community has highlighted that freight bookings can impact available vehicle spaces on vessels.

Q12. Looking at the list below, what would you consider to be the top 3 priorities for the next NIFS contract?

Reliability

Punctuality

Quality of on-board accommodation

Quality of on-board catering

Ease of booking a ticket

Ease of changing a booking

Customer service by staff on board

Customer service by staff in ferry terminals

Signage at and enroute to ferry terminals

Other (please add)

Environment and low carbon

Recent feedback on how we can work towards reducing emissions has been helpful.

Q13. Do you have any other suggestions on how NIFS can reduce their overall environmental impact against the following environmental factors identified in the Environmental Assessment (Scotland) Act 2005 including: air quality, population and human health, noise, material assets, water environment, biodiversity, and cultural heritage?

Freight

Q14. Are there ways to improve how the Northern Isles Ferry Services contract operator works with hauliers and businesses to more effectively plan commercial traffic volumes?

Q15. Noting the procurement to introduce replacement freight flex vessels into the NIFS fleet in future, do you have any suggestions to better manage or reduce the demand on routes which experience high freight volumes in the interim or longer term?

Q16. Do you have any additional comments or recommendations regarding how to improve ferry freight services?

Q17. How could the current charging processes on freight for NIFS services be enhanced or changed in the future?

General

Q18. Do you have any other suggestions on how the NIFS services could be improved?

Yes

No

Please explain your answer.