

Improving every journey



Fleet Interoperability Strategy

Joint Strategy of Caledonian
MacBrayne and Caledonian Maritime
Assets Limited

Published 8 September 2026



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Executive summary

Scotland's ferry network provides lifeline connections for island and remote communities, supporting access to employment, education, healthcare, business opportunities, tourism as well as other leisure and life activities. Customers rightly expect these services to be reliable, resilient, accessible and easy to use.

Caledonian MacBrayne (CalMac) and Caledonian Maritime Assets Limited (CMAL) have jointly developed this Fleet Interoperability Strategy to support the long-term improvement of ferry services across the Clyde and Hebrides network.

The strategy sets out how greater standardisation and interoperability across vessels, harbours and supporting infrastructure will help improve customer outcomes by:

- Improving reliability and reducing disruption.
- Increasing resilience when disruption does occur.
- Delivering a more consistent customer experience across the network.
- Improving accessibility for all users.
- Supporting integration with wider transport networks and local communities.
- Supporting progress towards Scotland's environmental ambitions.

Historically, vessels and ports have often been developed to meet the specific needs of individual routes. While this has delivered route-specific solutions, it has also reduced flexibility across the wider network and limited the ability to move vessels between routes when required.

This strategy establishes a long-term vision based on standardised vessel classes, standardised port infrastructure where practical, common customer experience standards and improved network flexibility. Through joint planning and investment, CalMac and CMAL will work to create a ferry network that delivers greater value for communities.

1. Introduction

CalMac and CMAL work together on behalf of Transport Scotland to provide and support ferry services connecting Scotland's island and remote communities.

CalMac operates ferry services across the Clyde and Hebrides network, delivering lifeline connections that support community wellbeing, economic activity and social connectivity. CMAL owns the majority of the vessels and many of the harbours that support these services and is responsible for their long-term development and stewardship.

Together, CalMac and CMAL are committed to ensuring ferry services continue to meet the needs of customers, communities and businesses both now and in the future. This strategy sets out the joint approach both organisations will take to delivering a more interoperable ferry network, supporting Transport Scotland's Islands Connectivity Plan and its priorities of reliability, resilience, accessibility and integration.

The Clyde and Hebrides ferry network has evolved over many decades. Harbours have developed in response to local needs, while vessels have often been designed for individual routes. Although these route-specific solutions have served communities well, they have also created a network where only certain vessels can operate at certain locations. As vessels and infrastructure have aged, this has reduced operational flexibility and increased the challenge of maintaining service continuity during planned maintenance periods and unexpected disruption.

Customers experience the effects of these constraints when vessel substitutions are limited or when disruption takes longer to recover. Improving reliability and resilience is therefore a key priority identified within the Islands Connectivity Plan.

This strategy provides a long-term framework for future vessel, harbour and operational development. It explains how greater standardisation and interoperability can improve network flexibility, strengthen resilience, support a more consistent customer experience, and deliver better value from public investment. It complements the CalMac Strategic Asset Management Plan for Vessels and the CMAL Harbour Asset Management Strategy and has been developed jointly by both organisations and approved by Transport Scotland.

While greater interoperability will help address many of the current challenges facing the network, the Strategy also recognises that excellent customer service, effective communications, robust operational planning and responsive disruption management remain essential to delivering successful ferry services.

2. Strategic context

This strategy forms part of a wider framework through which Transport Scotland, CalMac and CMAL work together to deliver ferry services for Scotland's island communities.

The strategic direction for ferry services is established through the Islands Connectivity Plan and associated policy documents. And this Fleet Interoperability Strategy supports those objectives and provides the framework through which vessel and harbour interoperability can contribute to their delivery.

The strategy is also informed by wider Scottish Government policy, asset management best practice, transport strategy, infrastructure investment principles and public value requirements.

3. Transport Scotland's vision and strategic priorities

Reliability and resilience

Reliability means providing services that customers can depend upon and operating planned timetables with minimal disruption. Reliable assets, supported by effective maintenance, inspection and renewal programmes are fundamental to delivering this outcome. New vessel and harbour infrastructure should also reduce vulnerability to technical and weather-related disruption wherever practical.

Resilience is the ability of the ferry network to recover quickly and effectively when disruption occurs. A resilient network minimises impacts on passengers, communities and businesses and restores normal services as quickly as possible following technical, operational or external events. Greater interoperability and standardisation are central to achieving this objective.

Accessibility

Accessibility means providing ferry services that are safe, inclusive, affordable and easy to use. Customers should be able to book and undertake journeys with confidence and receive a consistent experience regardless of where they travel. Future investment in vessels and ports provides opportunities to continuously improve accessibility for all passengers.

Integration

Integration means ensuring ferry services work effectively alongside wider transport systems, support local communities and contribute to economic development. Ferry services should reflect local needs while supporting sustainable travel choices and community wellbeing.

Environmental impact and low carbon

CalMac and CMAL are committed to supporting Scotland's net-zero ambitions through fleet modernisation, infrastructure upgrades and the adoption of future low-carbon technologies. Standardisation will help simplify the transition to lower-emission operations by creating common approaches to shore power, vessel design and future fuel solutions.

4. Standardisation

Standardisation is the primary means by which interoperability can be improved across the ferry network. Greater commonality in vessel and port design can improve flexibility, simplify operations and maintenance and provide customers with a more consistent and dependable experience. The key improvements that directly link to the Island Connectivity Plan (ICP) priorities are:

Reliability and resilience

Standardisation supports reliability through common design, operation and maintenance practices. It simplifies supply chains, reduces complexity, supports crew training and creates greater consistency in service delivery.

Standardised vessels and ports supports resilience by improving the ability to move vessels around the network when necessary, reducing the complexity associated with vessel substitutions for planned maintenance periods and helping maintain services during disruption.

Accessibility

A more standardised network creates a more consistent experience for passengers, helping to simplify journeys and support accessible travel across multiple routes.

Integration

Common infrastructure supports the wider development of ferry services and enables future improvements to be delivered more consistently across the network.

Environmental Impact

Standardisation will help support the transition to net-zero operations through common approaches to charging infrastructure, future fuels and low-carbon vessel design.

The strategy recognises that some routes will continue to require bespoke solutions due to local geography or operational constraints. Standardisation should therefore be adopted wherever practical, while accepting that a limited number of exceptions may continue to be required.

It also recognises that the transition to a more standardised network may require increased investment in infrastructure and potentially additional vessels in some circumstances. These challenges are considered acceptable when balanced against the long-term benefits of improved reliability and resilience.

Vessel standardisation

The long-term vision is for the fleet to be standardised around three principal vessel classes:

Small vessel class

Based on the small vessel replacement programme, these Euro B certified Ro-Ro vessels will operate primarily to slipway infrastructure.

Intermediate vessel class

A future standardised Euro B vessel class designed for medium-distance routes operating to linkspan infrastructure.

Major vessel class

Based on the Islay class design, providing a standardised Euro B vessel for longer-distance routes operating to linkspans.

Where exceptions are necessary, the objective will remain to maximise commonality of equipment, systems and customer facilities wherever practical.

Port standardisation

The strategy supports the development of two primary harbour infrastructure types; a common slipway port for small vessels, and a standardised linkspan port for intermediate and major vessels.

Aspects of the port that need to be considered when it comes to standardisation:

- Vessel-port interfaces.
- Passenger access arrangements.
- Mooring systems.
- Fendering systems.
- Shore power connections.
- Data connectivity.
- Customer facilities.
- Vehicle marshalling.
- Passenger management
- Staff facilities.

- Operational and layby berths.
- Harbour design standards and manoeuvring requirements.

The objective is to create greater flexibility while maintaining safe and efficient customer operations at every location.

Retail offering

A more standardised retail approach will help provide consistency for customers while ensuring services remain financially sustainable.

The four standard retail levels remain:

- No service.
- Vending service.
- Coffee Cabin service.
- Full-service food and beverage offering.

Retail provision will continue to be matched to route length, customer demand, available facilities and value for money considerations.

Standard specifications and designs

CalMac and CMAL will jointly develop standard specifications covering vessels, ports, accessibility requirements, customer facilities, crew facilities, retail standards and operational infrastructure.

These specifications will provide a common framework for future investment and enable new infrastructure to be delivered in a consistent manner across the network.

Provision of resilience vessels

Dedicated resilience vessels play an important role in protecting services during planned maintenance and unexpected disruption. This strategy supports the continued provision of resilience capacity within the fleet and the ongoing review of resilience requirements to ensure an appropriate balance between customer benefit and value for money.

As interoperability increases, resilience vessels will be capable of supporting a wider range of routes and delivering greater benefit across the network.

5. People and operational support

People are fundamental to the delivery of safe, reliable and customer-focused ferry services. The Fleet Interoperability Strategy therefore considers how vessel crews, harbour staff and technical support teams can best support an interoperable network while ensuring value for public investment.

Vessel crewing

Vessel crews provide safe navigation, vessel operation, engineering support, passenger care, emergency response and customer service functions. The exact composition of crews is determined by regulatory requirements; vessel design and the service being delivered.

The introduction of more standardised vessels is expected to deliver benefits through:

- Simplified training requirements.
- Improved operational flexibility.
- Easier crew familiarisation.
- Greater consistency of customer experience.
- More efficient deployment across the network.

Small vessels will continue to be supported primarily through locally based crews where possible, supporting communities and local employment. Intermediate and major vessels will continue to be designed with onboard accommodation to maximise flexibility and resilience.

Technical shore support

Technical shore support teams provide specialist maintenance and engineering support to vessels throughout the network. Standardisation of vessel classes will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of this support by reducing complexity and increasing commonality of equipment and systems.

CalMac will continue to review its engineering support arrangements to ensure they remain aligned with fleet development, emerging technologies and customer needs.

6. Principles and action plan

The vision of this strategy is a network of interoperable vessels and ports that delivers improved reliability, resilience and customer experience across Scotland's ferry network.

Strategic principles

We will:

- Focus on the priorities of the Islands Connectivity Plan.
- Improve resilience and reliability through standardisation.
- Move progressively towards three standard vessel classes.
- Move progressively towards standardised slipway and linkspan ports.
- Define common service and infrastructure standards.
- Support the transition to net-zero by 2045.
- Maintain appropriate resilience capacity.
- Provide vessel designs that support operational flexibility.
- Maintain and review technical support arrangements to meet future needs.

Strategic actions

Over the life of this strategy we will:

- Implement a modern asset management system.
- Continue developing business cases for vessel replacement.
- Collaborate on fleet and infrastructure decarbonisation.
- Develop three standard vessel classes and two standard port classes.
- Produce common specifications for vessels and ports.
- Increase commonality of vessel and harbour systems.
- Review accommodation requirements that support ferry operations.
- Continually review resilience vessel requirements.
- Develop a more standardised retail offering.
- Continue vessel condition monitoring and reliability-centred maintenance.
- Support long-term fleet renewal planning.
- Develop shore power arrangements across the network.
- Continually review engineering support arrangements.

Measuring success

Progress against this strategy will be measured through action delivery and improvements in key performance indicators, including:

- Reliability.
- Actual capacity compared with scheduled capacity.
- Reduction in technical cancellations.
- Customer satisfaction and trust.
- Islander satisfaction and trust.
- Reduction in Scope 1 carbon emissions.

7. Conclusion

This Strategy sets out a shared long-term vision for a more interoperable, resilient and customer-focused ferry network.

By increasing standardisation across vessels, harbours and supporting infrastructure where appropriate, CalMac and CMAL aim to deliver a network that is more reliable, more flexible and better able to respond to disruption. This will help provide customers with greater confidence in the services they rely upon and will support the sustainable future of Scotland's island communities.

We recognise that every route and community is different and that some locations will continue to require tailored solutions. However, wherever practical, greater commonality of vessels, infrastructure and operating approaches will help create a network that delivers better outcomes for customers and communities.

Working together with Transport Scotland and other stakeholders, CalMac and CMAL will use this strategy to guide future investment and decision-making, ensuring Scotland's ferry network remains reliable, resilient, accessible and fit for the future.

Our goal is simple: to provide ferry services that customers and communities can depend on, supported by vessels and harbours that work together as one integrated network.