

ROUSAY, EGILSAY, WYRE & GAIRSAY COMMUNITY COUNCIL

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Dear Sirs,

I write to you on behalf of the Rousay, Egilsay, Wyre, and Gairsay (REWG) Community Council, and in regards to the proposed changes to the ferry tariff for Rousay, Egilsay, and Wyre (REW).

The deadline for comments on the proposals to be submitted was extended so as to accommodate REW residents who had seen the original meeting cancelled. This was a good and necessary solution, which was then ruined when the Council proceeded to hastily set the deadline for the 4th January 2012; this date follows the Christmas and New Year period, when the Council has been closed.

Considering our tariff review meeting was only held on the evening of Monday 19th December and the council offices closed on Friday 23rd December this gave our community only four days to contact, and get a response, from council officials about any concerns that arose during the meeting, leaving very little time to send in any completed questionnaires following the rearranged meeting.

Did the Council simply pick a date without thinking?

The online survey can only be completed once per computer. In a household with two or more adults, there may be different attitudes towards the ferry tariff, as well as different amounts of, and reasons for, usage, e.g. three adults may select three different preferred options. If the Council intended to make the survey only be completed once per computer, perhaps they should have geared the survey towards households, rather than individuals, enabling multiple views to be submitted within one survey.

But perhaps the Council doesn't want to hear the opinions of the service users, as sending out a questionnaire with three options to choose from *prior* to the 'consultation' meeting suggests that the Council had already decided on those three choices, with no room for negotiation or consultation with the communities that would be affected. It suggests that one of those options *will* be implemented, and we *must* choose our favourite – or, should we say, 'least worst' – option. The community is

concerned that we are being forced to vote for one of these options, and that the Council will take the choosing of this option as what we would like to happen, and thus the Council may make a change to the ferry tariff that nobody actually wants.

In addition, none of the three options enabled the community to vote to “maintain the current tariff”, something which should have been considered as an integral part of the Council’s consultation, especially since the options are said to be “cost-neutral” – meaning that there is no effect on the Council should the present tariff be maintained, instead of choosing one of the options presented to the community. The Council never seemed to consider that perhaps the community is content with the current system, and only simpler changes are required in order to provide a better, more cost-efficient service.

Our opinions have continually been disregarded, even in the commissioned report. Despite *The Spyria Partnership* claiming that it had consulted our community, the REWG Community Council knows this to be a false claim. Neither it, nor members of the wider REW community, were asked their opinions, or consulted in any way. This casts doubts on the validity of the research that *The Spyria Partnership* has ‘done’, and therefore questions the whole consultation process.

Throughout the report, it is evident that the Outer North Isles are favoured over the other islands (i.e. both the Inner North Isles and South Isles). The preferential treatment towards these islands (namely, Eday, Sanday, Stronsay, Westray) may suggest that the underlying motive for *Spyria*’s research was to create a cheaper service to these people, at a cost to all the other communities, which is both very unfair and blatantly bias, especially when the Council already subsidises these islands far more than it does the others, on the present tariff.

In any case, it would be beneficial for all if the Council took a more ‘individual’ approach to the consultation, recognising that each island has different needs. For example, here on REW, we have no alternative method of transport should we wish to go off-island; unlike the Outer North Isles, we do not have access to air travel. In addition to this, our ferry does not travel directly to Kirkwall (again, unlike the Outer North Isles). This means that we have an additional cost to our journeys, whether that is public bus, taxi, or our own vehicles. Whilst this does not directly concern *Orkney Ferries*, it should be noted that in an effort to over-subsidise the Outer North Isles travel to make these peoples’ travel to Kirkwall cheaper, perhaps the Council should then consider over-subsidising the public bus route between Tingwall and Kirkwall, so as to make our overall journey to Kirkwall cheaper too.

So, once again the community of REW finds itself getting treated unfairly. As it is, we do not get any Sunday sailings during the winter months; we are the largest island (by population) in Scotland that does not get this service. The REWG Community Council has continually asked for consultation on the lack of Sunday sailings, whilst also pressing for free travel between our three islands. The residents of Egilsay and Wyre must spend an increasing amount of money just to access the essential services, such as the doctor, shop, school and pre-school/nursery, and many other services that are located on Rousay. On top of this, they now face the Council increasing the cost of the next stage of their journey, to access more of the essential services on the Mainland of Orkney.

Whilst the report claims that all three options would be ‘cost-neutral’ (bizarrely, we were continually prompted to call this ‘revenue-neutral’ during the meeting), they would all have an adverse effect on our community; in each option, significant fare increases *would* occur to our community. But even if our residents reduced their off-island travel due to the increased expense, our local businesses will still face increases as they source supplies, etc. Presently, there is no requirement for a distinction between personal and commercial travel on our ferry. Under the Council’s three options presented to us, such a distinction would exist. However, in these ‘tough economic times’ in particular, it is paramount that the Council encourages local business development, and does not choose to penalise

local businesses through higher rates of travel. This would result in spiralling costs for local businesses, a shrinking local economy, and a falling population for our currently thriving three islands. Furthermore, there is a fine line between what would be classed as personal and business travel on our ferry, e.g. combining a business meeting with a personal shopping trip, or doing both business and personal shopping simultaneously, which may also result in similar businesses being charged differently from each other.

As an example of how the options would affect a REW business that makes one return journey per week with a 5 metre van and driver, under the present tariff system the cost to the business would be £16.48 per return journey, the cost under the three options presented to the community would be anything from £25.00 to £52.00! This would potentially increase the businesses cost by almost £1800 per year, based on just one return trip per week. This will have a negative effect on all local businesses, and in turn the local community will suffer.

By increasing the cost, the Council would also appear to be actively encouraging less vehicle travel. Whilst this is not necessarily a bad idea – as a society we aspire to be increasingly eco-friendly – this would penalise those for whom taking a vehicle is a necessity. Additionally, not all sailings are met by public buses. For those that are, some are clearly not timetabled with users in mind, and often one finds the bus does not bother turning up (worryingly, *Stagecoach in Orkney* provides a poor, unreliable service to both the Tingwall-Kirkwall route and Orkney as a whole). In addition, the public bus service on Rousay is available only one day per week (Thursday), thereby further limiting vehicle-less travel. It should also be noted that the car park at the Tingwall Ferry Terminal is often full throughout the year, and particularly during the busier, summer months. If the Council wishes to limit vehicle travel on board its ferries, it is vital that it somehow addresses the increasing problem of no vacant parking spaces.

Unbelievable perhaps, but there are some positives to take out of the review into the ferry tariff; for example, a SMARTCARD system could yield benefits for both the Council and the ferry users, and is broadly welcomed by the REWG Community Council. It is an interesting proposition that the Council could implement *before* tampering with the fare structure. This would also enable any potential issues to be 'ironed out', without the additional disruption that a new ferry structure would undoubtedly bring to both the community and the Council.

Scrapping the 50-book system in favour of a 'discount-at-source' approach is also a potentially positive proposal, enabling the most-reduced fares to *all* residents, including low-income families and less frequent users, resulting in increased usage of the service, improved access to sports, etc. for children and adults, and encouraging local businesses to trade. However, in order to maintain the higher (50%) discount to our residents, we believe visitors to the island could continue to be charged the standard rate (i.e. no discount). The Council could achieve this by operating a SMARTCARD system (with an automatic, 50% discount) that is only open to residents of Orkney. Visitors, or indeed those without a card, would then be charged the standard rate, with no discount allowed without the presentation of a valid card.

As the consultation period comes to a close, and the Council finally visited REW on 19 December 2011, it was disappointing that no representatives of either *Orkney Ferries* or *The Spyrria Partnership* were present at the meeting. The latter, in particular, would have proved useful; after being present at all other isles' meetings, perhaps they could have explained the embarrassing inaccuracies in the presentation given throughout the meeting? The complete lack of preparation that went into the meeting was evident when the sole speaker for the meeting, Shona Croy, was unable to answer our questions, clearly didn't understand our islands, and wouldn't even admit that there were errors in the presentation.

The Council must be very foolish if they truly believe that one of those options presented can be *successfully implemented* across the islands by April 2012. It is a *very* ambitious timescale, considering that the consultation process and report were done the wrong way around, and have not worked concurrently as they should have done. The report itself is nothing more than a wish list from the Eday-based, *The Spyrria Partnership*, and much more effort needs to be done before the report achieves what it should have set out to do in the first place.

It should also be noted that our own Community Council Clerk was unfortunately unable to minute the re-arranged meeting due to other commitments, but we were assured that the Council would provide somebody to take the minutes in her place, and that these minutes would be available for distribution within the community. However, during the meeting, Shona denied that official minutes were being taken, referring to them as 'notes' instead, and suggesting that they were not for the wider public to view. The Community Council, and in turn the community, is yet to be given any minutes or notes of the meeting by the Council.

Our ferry services are such a vital life-line for the islands within Orkney, and our present ferry tariff has evolved over the past 20+ years to fit in with the way that our communities use the ferry service. In view of all the above concerns, and numerous other irregularities within the whole ferry tariff review process, and given the recent news that the Scottish Government are looking into the possibility of taking responsibility of our internal island ferry services, and discussing the introduction of Road Equivalent Tariff, we would recommended that the Council, without full and proper consultation, avoid rushing into changing something that, as far as we are aware, no member of the island communities – i.e. the people who actually use the ferries – has actually asked for.

The REWG Community Council is open to meet with OIC before any decisions are made, in order to discuss how the ferry tariff can be further developed to the benefit of all stakeholders.

Yours faithfully,

Richard Tipper
Chairperson
REWG Community Council