

# **ORKNEY'S PASSENGER TRANSPORT INITIATIVES SUPPORTING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM**

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## **1. ABSTRACT**

Tourism inputs around £27m each year to the Orkney economy, and with around six times more visitors each year than there are residents, there is considerable demand for visitor transport to, from and around the Orkney Mainland and isles. In order to reduce the carbon emissions from car trips around the isles, Orkney Islands Council (OIC) has developed a basket of initiatives to assist tourists and locals to access the area's attractions in the most sustainable way possible, as part of a commitment to the County's heritage, Orkney's future and the global environment.

The implementation of Orkney's passenger transport information strategy will ensure public transport information is up to date and readily available in a variety of formats for all travellers. Multi journey ticketing initiatives have also been developed and currently travellers make use of explorer tickets for ferries and integrated ticketing is available for travel between the Scottish Mainland and destinations across Orkney; a ticket can be purchased from any rail station in the UK for travel via Aberdeen or Thurso/Scrabster to Orkney.

A new pocket sized integrated passenger transport timetable has been introduced with positive feedback from the public, and OIC's new initiatives stem from this. A family of public transport information leaflets has been developed to provide information on specific routes, as well as recommended days out by multi-modal public transport opportunities. The leaflets and an online resource suggest an itinerary which serves as a self-guided package tour providing public transport timings, visitor attractions, and things to see and do en route. A pilot integrated bus and ferry ticket will be available for these days out in Summer 2008.

## **2. INTRODUCTION**

This paper will show how sustainable transport can be developed to meet tourists' needs, whilst protecting the natural heritage which attracts visitors to Orkney in the first place. After presenting a profile of Orkney, this paper gives an overview of the current transport provision within Orkney and the policy framework within which transport initiatives are developed. The paper then presents specific issues associated with transport for tourism, and the initiatives which are being developed to tackle each issue.

## **3. OVERVIEW OF ORKNEY**

Orkney covers an area of 974 square kilometres, with more than half being taken up by the Orkney Mainland. The islands are about 85 km from north to south and 37 km from east to west. Orkney is located off the north of Scotland, and is made up of a main island, "The Orkney Mainland" and 16 other inhabited islands, and the archipelago of Orkney has around 70 islands

in total. The islands are predominantly low-lying, gently sloping and richly fertile with very low population densities.

The 2001 Census identified the population of Orkney as 19,245 residents, making it Scotland's smallest local authority area in terms of population, however the population has been growing over recent years. The two main settlements of Kirkwall and Stromness are home to 6,206 and 1,609 people respectively.

Orkney's geography benefits from a hub and spoke layout, with the Mainland of Orkney at its centre, and the smaller islands surrounding it. For the smaller islands to access the Scottish mainland, residents must first travel to the Orkney Mainland. This differentiates Orkney from many other island communities, which have a direct link to the Scottish mainland.

Visitors are attracted to Orkney for a variety of reasons; stunning scenery, quiet beaches, abundance of wildlife, quality food and drink, genealogy and warm welcoming hospitality encourage visitors to return year after year. Orkney also has a vibrant contemporary culture and throughout the year there are festivals and events ranging from the St Magnus Festival to the annual agricultural shows and sporting events.

Orkney boasts some of the best-preserved archaeological sites in Europe, including Neolithic villages, (most notably Skara Brae) burial tombs and impressive stone circles. Orkney's 5,500 year-old Neolithic Heartland was granted World Heritage status by UNESCO in 1999. This includes the Ring of Brodgar, the Standing Stones of Stenness and the tomb of Maeshowe, which is considered to be one of the finest architectural achievements of prehistoric Europe.

Many visitors are attracted to Scapa Flow for its military history. The Flow is a 50 square mile expanse of deep water, which forms one of the largest, sheltered anchorages in the world and contains relics of two world wars, some of which can be seen above the surface of the water.

### **3.1 Current Transport Provision**

There is a good, and improving level of bus service provision in Orkney, and internal ferry and air services provide lifeline services to residents of the islands. The cost of these services is very high, when compared with the cost in provision of land based transport. In addition to high costs of transport provision, the weather in Orkney is very changeable, and during the winter it is extremely windy and rainy with few hours of daylight. The weather and resulting sea conditions have a considerable impact on the operability of the transport network, including leading to the cancellation of ferry and air services. Walking and cycling far in the winter months is not always realistic.

There are 10 core public bus routes which are operated by Orkney Coaches, who have a fleet of 41 vehicles of which nine are low floor. In the summer months there are in excess of 20,000 bus ticket sales per month on the public bus services, but in winter this figure drops to around 13,000 per month. Six Real Time Information flags are currently being installed on the bus network around the Orkney Mainland and Real Time Information screens are being mounted in Kirkwall and Stromness Travel Centres and Kirkwall Airport.

In terms of ferries Orkney Ferries serves 10 North Isles and three South Isles. It operates nine ferries, ranging from a 34-year old passenger launch, the Golden Mariana, to the 50m Roll On-Roll-Off (RO-RO) Varagen, capable of carrying 33 cars as well as up to 144 passengers.

The internal air services in Orkney are operated by Loganair under a single Public Service Obligation (PSO) three-year contract with the Council. The isles served from Kirkwall are North Ronaldsay, Westray, Papa Westray, Sanday, Stronsay and Eday. Kirkwall Airport is owned and operated by Highlands & Islands Airports Ltd., while the airfields on the six isles served are owned, operated and maintained by the Council. Flying is restricted to daylight hours throughout the year. The sequence in which the isles are served varies from day to day throughout the week, and is designed to meet the particular needs of itinerant teachers, pupils and the community as far as possible. Loganair have three Britten Norman Islander aeroplanes in Orkney and operate up to two of them at any one time.

## **3.2 Policy Framework**

### **3.2.1 Orkney Islands Council Local Transport Strategy: 2007 to 2010**

The Orkney Islands Council Local Transport Strategy, to cover the period 2007 to 2010, outlines the way in which transport can support the overarching vision for all of Orkney, which includes:

- Promoting sustainability – enhancing quality of life over time, whilst at the same time trying to prevent problems being created elsewhere as a result.
- Promoting survival – maintaining fragile communities as places where people can live and work.
- Promoting equalities – ensuring that the most remote communities and hard-to-reach individuals feel included.

The six key delivery objectives of the Local Transport Strategy provide a firm policy framework for the development of sustainable transport options for tourism. These are:

- Ensure travel opportunities meet the needs of the whole community.
- Integrate various means of travel around Orkney.
- Promote accessibility for all.
- Increase levels of active travel.
- Make travel safer.
- Reducing traffic in sensitive areas.

### **3.2.2 HITRANS Regional Transport Strategy**

In March 2006, HITRANS published the Regional Transport Strategy (RTS) for the Highlands and Islands. The strategy was developed to identify

common issues experienced within the Highlands and Islands, and to build consensus on the way these issues should be tackled.

### **3.2.3 Orkney Islands Council Tourism Strategy 2006**

The value of tourism to Orkney's economy continues to grow and opportunities exist to maintain that growth, particularly through employing new technology, combined with training programmes, improved marketing and making the product more user-friendly. The 2006 Orkney tourism strategy has established objectives for the development of the industry that aim to "continue to develop Orkney as a high quality tourism destination by building on its history, culture, environment and the hospitality of its people".

## **4. INITIATIVES**

The following section details the initiatives which have been developed to improve sustainable transport to and within Orkney.

### **4.1 The Orkney Express**

Inverness is considered the gateway to the Highlands and Islands, and for tourists wishing to access Orkney through more sustainable modes than by car or air the overland route between Inverness and Orkney is considered an essential one.

Connectivity by ground access to the Scottish mainland can be limited, particularly if the journey is one without a car. To travel from Kirkwall to Inverness by public transport the first leg of the journey must be undertaken by bus to the Stromness Travel Centre then onto the ferry as a foot passenger, then another bus from Scrabster ferry terminal to the rail station in Thurso for travel by train to Inverness. Alternatively, some boats are met by a coach south from Scrabster, but this still involves an interchange at Stromness and Scrabster. In all these cases, the passenger is required to load and unload luggage between the various different means of transit, all of which adds time and inconvenience to the journey. An interchange requirement is the same if going via one of the South Ronaldsay crossings over to the Scottish Mainland, while the connecting buses are less frequent on both sides of the Pentland Firth.

The journey time from Inverness to Kirkwall via existing bus, rail and ferry services can take in excess of seven hours in one direction, and for a full fare paying passenger will not be less than £30 for a single ticket. A new service, developed by Rapsons coaches, Orkney Islands Council and Pentland Ferries with the support of HITRANS will provide a daily service (Monday to Saturday) between Kirkwall and Inverness, which will allow visitors and residents to travel seamlessly between the two cities. There will be no luggage transfers required, as the same bus will be used for each stage of the journey. The journey time will be cut to just over five hours, and the full fare integrated ticket will cost £40 in total for a return voyage. The savings in terms of journey time, cost and interchange will be highly significant and it is expected that this service, launched on 19 May 2008, will quickly gain popularity with tourists and locals alike. A strong marketing strategy undertaken by Rapsons group

and HITRANS will ensure the service is marketed throughout Scotland to visitors.

## **4.2 Hoy Hopper**

Bus is the only land based mode of public transport in Orkney, and whilst those on the Orkney Mainland enjoy a recently enhanced bus network of frequent services, residents and visitors to the island of Hoy do not yet benefit from a public bus service, despite clear evidence of demand.

Hoy, to the south west of the Orkney Mainland, is the second largest island in Orkney at 57 square miles, with a population of 392 residents (2001 Census). By comparison, Jersey in the Channel Islands which also attracts many tourists is smaller than Hoy at 45 square miles yet has a population of over 85,000.

The north and west of the island are rugged and hilly, unlike the rest of Orkney. Outwith the small settlement of Rackwick on the west side of the island, the remainder of the population are on the eastern coast of Hoy. The only bus operations on Hoy are the school bus and a community minibus which is used for local community events but this is not available for commercial operations.

Yet, in terms of tourism Hoy is the most visited island in Orkney after the Orkney Mainland and with no air service, visitors must access the island via ferry. In the 2006-2007 period Orkney Ferries carried 64,025 passengers between the Orkney Mainland (Houton) and Lyness in the South of Hoy, and 13,408 passengers from the Orkney Mainland (Stromness) to Moaness in the North of Hoy.

Visitors wishing to experience Hoy's extensive but remotely located visitor attractions are currently obliged to bring their own vehicle, take a taxi, or arrange a privately run tour. The mv Hoy Head operated by Orkney Ferries carries passengers and vehicles between Houton on the Orkney Mainland and Lyness and Longhope in the South of Hoy, where many of the visitor attractions are sited. This roll on, roll off (Ro Ro) ferry can carry up to 16 cars (100 tonnes) and 125 passengers, and makes five scheduled sailings per day from Houton to Hoy terminals. Whilst capacity for foot passengers is adequate, the vehicular capacity is insufficient to meet demand, particularly in summer, but also throughout the year. Anecdotal evidence shows that in the height of the tourist season passengers must book up to two weeks and sometimes more in advance in order to book their vehicles on board. This is also the same for Hoy residents, which causes significant inconvenience and annoyance. Most visitors do not have longer than seven days' holiday and up to 40 enquiries a day are received from would be visitors to Hoy who find themselves unable to travel to Hoy due to vehicular capacity constraints on the mv Hoy Head. A smaller ferry, the mv Graemsay operates between Moaness on the North of Hoy and Stromness on the Orkney Mainland, and also serves the small Isle of Graemsay (population 22) but this is a small passenger-only ferry.

A bus service on Hoy serving tourist attractions would negate the need for tourists to take their vehicles across to visit places of interest, and would free

up capacity for service and works vehicles and some locals who need to take their vehicle to the mainland. Orkney Islands Council will this summer trial a bus service which will take passengers through from the new Travel Centre in Kirkwall to and around the attractions, residential areas and services of Hoy via the ferry at Houton, and returning to Kirkwall Travel Centre at the end of the day.

The total distance covered by the service in the day will be 63 miles. The proposed service will run over six weeks in the summer holidays on one day each week as a pilot. A 35 seater Optare midi bus will maximise capacity aboard the bus, whilst still being able to negotiate Hoy's narrow roads and minimise space occupied on the ferry. Ticketing arrangements for the service will ensure that tourists can purchase a day ticket in the region of £15 which will cover the return bus service from Kirkwall Travel Centre to Houton Ferry terminal, a return foot passenger crossing on the ferry to Hoy, and "hop on hop off" on the Hoy bus service throughout the day. For local passengers who wish to travel only one leg of the Hoy bus service, there will be a nominal fare.

With funding assistance from Orkney Islands Council for this trial, the introduction of this bus service will:

- Meet the transport needs of day visitors to Hoy wishing to access the island's tourist attractions;
- Provide transport for Orkney residents wishing to access the main settlements on Hoy by public transport;
- Present an attractive, affordable and sustainable mode of travel around Hoy with a connection from the main Orkney settlement of Kirkwall, which will be a welcome alternative to the private car.

The mechanism for achieving the scheme objective to introduce a public bus service on Hoy is split into the following key actions to:

- Provide a bus service which integrates with the ferry timetable to meet the ferries which have the highest passenger demand;
- Improve the perception of public transport for tourists by serving the tourist attractions and allowing sufficient time for visiting them;
- Provide an integrated ticketing initiative for day excursions to and around Hoy from Mainland Orkney by public transport; and
- Provide accessible and widely available information on public transport services.

To market this service a six panel leaflet will be produced showing the timetable for the bus service, along with timetables for the ferry services which it meets. The leaflet is aimed at day trippers to Hoy and recommends Hoy's attractions, with time guidelines, facilities and other useful information. The leaflet will also give bus times from Kirkwall Travel Centre to the ferry terminal at Houton so that travellers have all necessary information to make a return journey from Kirkwall to the attractions of Hoy within a day.

The leaflet will form part of a family of public transport information leaflets aimed at providing tourists with the public transport information they need to access Orkney's attractions. It will be available from the Kirkwall and

Stromness Travel Centres, Visit Orkney offices and in brochure stands throughout Hoy and Mainland Orkney. It will also appear on the public transport information website as research has shown that more and more tourists are using the web to plan the details of the visits, and the website will be designed to make this as simple as possible.

For locals a press release will publicise the new service and information will be distributed through the community councils and other community groups.

It is estimated that during the trial period the number of road miles saved from tourist vehicle trips will be 3,750. This is based on the assumption that the through bus service will save 11 car trips per day travelling the 63 mile route over the six week, trial period. Whilst this does not sound a large number for a pilot study, in context it is significant: the roads on Hoy are narrow (often less than 4m wide) and in some cases unclassified and not designed to take higher volumes of traffic.

Perhaps more significantly is the reduction in vehicles travelling by ferry to Hoy as a result of the new bus service. Every passenger who switches mode from car to bus frees up capacity for other vehicles where there is no choice to travel by alternative mode or for commercial operations. On a ferry service which is severely over capacity, this initiative is very likely to prove beneficial to visitors, residents, operators and the local authority as well as offering considerable environmental benefits.

#### **4.3 Kirkwall Travel Centre**

On 4<sup>th</sup> April 2008 the new Kirkwall Travel Centre was formally opened. It is located in West Castle Street, sharing the building with the new Tourist Information Centre, Visit Orkney. The Travel Centre facility in Kirkwall provides a step change from the old bus station, with a comfortable and bright waiting area and new and fully accessible toilet facilities. The Travel Centre is staffed throughout the day and there are information points for all modes of transport to and within Orkney, and kiosks for internal ferry information and ticket purchase are also located within the waiting area. This facility along with the Public Transport Guide integrates public transport information for all modes of passenger transport to and within Orkney.

#### **4.4 Core Paths: Linking the Core Paths network with the bus network.**

The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 created a new right of responsible access over most land and inland water. The purpose of the Core Paths Plan is to identify a framework of paths which will provide local residents and visitors with reasonable access throughout their local authority area. Core paths will form the basic network of paths that allow people to enjoy and get around the countryside.

Orkney Islands Council has drafted its Core Paths Plan which is currently out to consultation there is considerable linkage between many of the core paths and the bus network which will allow access to the outdoors for public transport users. For example the core path around the Mull Head Nature Reserve in Deerness, a remote part of the East Mainland is a circular route,

the start/end point of which can be accessed via the Bus Service number 4. Similarly in the West Mainland where many of Orkney's Neolithic sites are found there are a number of core paths linking from bus service routes which have a more frequent service, such as Service 1 and 2.

When the Core Paths plan is finalised and approved, a promotional strategy to link the core paths network and bus network together will be developed, and this is expected for summer 2009.

#### **4.5 Other Active Travel Developments**

HITRANS, the Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership, are funding an audit of Kirkwall's walking and cycling network and facilities which will identify opportunities for the development of the active travel network through either enhancement or the creation of new routes. The audit will be conducted by Halcrow Consultants in Summer 2008. Halcrow have developed a bespoke methodology for prioritising walking and cycling schemes<sup>2</sup>. The applications have also been made to Sustrans for funding for a number of developments, which includes pedestrian crossings, footpaths and sections of the Core Paths network. To date the Zebra crossing on Glaitness Road, Kirkwall has been constructed and we are awaiting decisions on the remainder of the projects.

### **5. CONCLUSIONS**

Orkney's wealth of heritage attracts many visitors each year, yet it's rural environment and low population density presents significant challenges to the public transport network. Joining up existing services and modes, integrating ticketing arrangements and developing promotional strategies to market these initiatives will allow visitors to choose a more sustainable mode of access to Orkney's world class attractions. A reduction in vehicular trips by tourists will reduce the local environmental damage caused by traffic whilst also contributing to reduced carbon emissions in the wider context, preserving the Orkney's heritage for future generations.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Source: Orkney Ferries Ltd.

<sup>2</sup> Methodology for Prioritising Walking and Cycling Schemes, Cathy Hay, Halcrow Group Ltd.