

PE1722/M

Petitioner submission of 3 November 2020

The five community organisations who initiated the above petition make the following submission for the Committee's meeting on 12 November, in which we are pleased to know the Minister for Energy, Connectivity and Islands will participate:

This Petition calls for all island lifeline ferry car parks to be free of charge. The Petition is about principles of fairness and equity for all island residents: unlike mainland residents, islanders have *no choice* but to use these ferry services *and* the car parks on a frequent basis for fundamental lifeline purposes. For example, islanders have *no option* but to travel to the mainland for basic, essential services which mainland dwellers take for granted and can access freely. They have no option but to travel from one island to another (e.g., Mull to Iona) as essential workers. Car parks at ferry terminals are an integral and indispensable part of the lifeline service. Islanders have no choice as to which ferry terminals they use, and no say on the provision or terms of use of car parks. The present 'postcode lottery' is unfair, discriminatory and damaging to islands' sustainability. It is straightforwardly wrong to have to depend on whichever organisation happens to own car parks and abide by whatever charging policy they impose, and to inflict severe and avoidable harm on fragile island communities and businesses – who are now even more vulnerable in the wake of the COVID pandemic.

Our Petition has been under consideration since June 2019. Throughout this period, no substantive argument has been made against it. The fundamental issues and principles it addresses have not been questioned, and these are demonstrably wholly consistent with Scottish Government legal and policy commitments, especially the Islands (Scotland) Act.

As we have stressed throughout this process, we are convinced it is simple, right and financially feasible to redress major demonstrable failures and vulnerabilities for island populations through supporting the substance of this Petition. As our MSP Michael Russell stated (September meeting): *I ... indicate my strong support, as the Constituency MSP for Argyll & Bute, for the proposition you have put forward. Lifeline ferry ports are just that and barriers to local people being able to use the lifeline should not be permitted. The principal needs to be established and then the detailed discussion can take place about particular locations where there are barriers still in place.*

We particularly stress that the following are in no way sufficient as alternatives to supporting the Petition; these are simply matters of process which, although important to resolve, do not address the key principle of unfairness and inequity to island communities which need to be redressed:

- **The fact that Argyll & Bute Council apologised for and retracted its handling of parking charges in these island lifeline contexts in 2019: as**

was recognised at the Committee's September meeting, this apology in no way removes the need for the Petition. In fact, it is evidence of that need.

- **The fact that Islands Team have now published for consultation draft guidance on Island Community Impact Assessments (ICIA):** much of the Committee's consideration has focused on the delay in ICIA's coming into force. ***We cannot stress strongly enough that the fact that there is now some progress on implementation of ICIA's in no way equates to addressing the substance of the Petition, and must not be used as a reason for considering it addressed. Even if ICIA's are competently and consultatively produced with island communities by relevant authorities (and there is no guarantee of this being the case based on the draft guidance, which has significant gaps for meeting these standards, and no quality control or challenge mechanism), the purpose of ICIA's is to identify whether there are significant impacts of any action for island communities. The significant impact of parking charges at island lifeline ferry ports is already resoundingly demonstrated for the reasons set out above and as argued very strongly and consistently by our MSP.***

We believe that our argument is sound, strong and principled. We appreciate the Committee's determination to ensure it is fully informed before it concludes its deliberations.

Following consideration of this Petition since June 2019, we strongly request:

- **That the Committee now supports the Petition;**
- **That it recommends to the Minister for Energy, Connectivity and Islands that he and the Scottish Government accept the principle of free parking at island lifeline ferry ports; that they demonstrate their commitment to 'island-proofing' by acting immediately to address the inequities and unfairness identified through, by whatever appropriate means, ensuring that car parks at island ferry terminals are free to use and that no charges can be imposed, ideally from 1st April 2021.**

This action will achieve positive change for islanders and provide a powerful example of the Scottish Government putting into practice its policy to support island communities, alleviating the challenges of distance, geography, connectivity, demography, and economic and wider well-being.