Unite the Union Scotland represents around 140,000 working people and their families throughout Scotland. Unite is the UK’s largest trade union with 1.4 million members in a range of industries including construction, financial services, manufacturing, print and media, energy, the voluntary and non-profit sectors, transport including ferries, education, creative industries, local government and the NHS.

Do you think the current and proposed level of investment in new ferries and port infrastructure is enough to ensure the resilience of the Clyde and Hebrides ferries network in future years?

No.

1) Unite does not believe that the level of investment has been, or is going to be, enough to ensure the resilience of the services in future years without significant improvements in funding and investment in ferry new build, at the earliest opportunity.

Ferguson Marine Engineering Ltd (FMEL) has recently advised that the first vessel, the MV Glen Sannox (801), will be delivered during summer 2019, and the second vessel (802) in spring 2020.

Following delivery, Calmac Ferries Ltd require around two months for trials and crew familiarisation before each vessel is fully deployed on the Clyde and Hebrides ferry network.

With the lateness of both of these vessels added pressure will be placed on the ageing existing fleet. The Isle of Arran and Lord of the Isles are both nearing the end of their service lives and many of the small vessels are even older. Without major investments at dry dock, of both time and money, the services will become more and more unreliable due to wear and tear.

There does not seem to be any provision for either replacing the Sound of Harris ferry or making it a 2 ferry route, despite the predictions of 90% rising to 97% vehicle capacity utilisation.

There is a programme to re engine some of the small vessels, but this has run into major problems and been halted.Whilst the re engine work is welcome, new ferries would have been more advantageous as they can be better designed for crew and passenger welfare.

Has sufficient investment been made in vessels and port/harbour facilities to handle increased passenger numbers, particularly since the introduction of the Road Equivalent Tariff (RET) fares?

No.
2) Unite does not believe there has been sufficient investment to handle the increased demand placed on the service due to Road Equivalent Tariff (RET). RET is a success with passenger and vehicle numbers up. However, anecdotally, the number of larger vans now coming onto the islands has seen deck space at a premium. A 12 car ferry can be full with 4 motorhomes and with crews hours stretched to the maximum there is no leeway to do an extra run to clear any waiting traffic. This is unacceptable for passengers and leaves crew feeling frustrated. Unite, through the STUC, have long campaigned for the CHFS tendering system to be abolished. We believe that the Government can, and should, use the Teckal exemption to allow CALMAC to run the services for the foreseeable future. This would give a far better return for money by amalgamating CMAL back into the CALMAC group of companies.

How might island life be affected, particularly access to essential services, if Clyde and Hebrides ferry services are not appropriately funded?

3) If the appropriate funding is not in place to allow the services to continue it will have a significant impact on island life. With most supermarkets and some pharmacies now using a triggered replenishment system any delay to deliveries can have a severe detrimental effect to islanders. At least one of the piers requires to be updated to allow safe overnight berthing on the islands to allow people to work on the mainland. This is a council pier but when 802 comes into service then there should be a cascade effect which will allow a bigger ship to operate but with no overnight berth. If ferries become less reliable then it will affect the tourist industry, which is one of the major economies of the islands. Fresh produce like fish, both farmed and caught, will suffer if they are unable to make their markets in time.

Do you have any concerns about the accessibility of ferries and port/harbour facilities, and, if so, what investment might be needed to address these concerns?

4) Unite members have raised concerns regarding wheelchairs utilising very steep gangways when it is high water. There are piers where gangways can be an issue for some less mobile foot passengers who are unable to access them. This requires staff to assist by pushing them up in a wheelchair. This is having a physical impact on pier workers who are required to provide assistance, but also due to cuts, there isn’t always the staff available to provide that level of assistance which causes frustration to passengers and stress to staff.

Unite is aware of at least one office and associated waiting room, in Tobermory, Isle of Mull, which is now required to close 3 days out of 7 which leaves passengers with nowhere warm and dry to shelter whilst waiting for the next ferry; this can be a wait of up to an hour and a half. Unite believes that this is directly related to the tendering process which has resulted in insufficient staff numbers being included in the bid in an attempt to lower the bid costs.

With fuller car decks on the small ferries, mobility impaired passengers can struggle to get passed cars and access the passenger saloons. Further, with no shore support available to identify any wheelchair users in the queue, it isn’t always possible to get these passengers onto the ship safely before the car deck is full. This again is the result of inadequate staff numbers being included at the tendering process stage.

What level of priority should the Scottish Government give to funding Clyde and Hebrides ferry services within the overall transport budget, which also covers
spending on other transport modes, including trunk roads, rail, aviation, buses, walking and cycling and low carbon vehicles?

5) High Priority.

The priority that should be given to the ferries is High. These are lifeline services with, in most cases, no alternatives. If the ferries become unreliable then the whole community suffers. Tourists turn away affecting local businesses that rely on them for their livelihood, islanders lose mainland jobs, island contractors are unable to fulfil either local or mainland work, health professionals cannot travel, islanders miss hospital appointments, supermarkets run out of stock; children are unable to attend school. The list goes on.

In all the other transport examples there are other viable options; for islanders there are no alternatives to ferry services in the vast majority of cases.

Unite is under no illusion. The ferries must have investment now to create a modern, efficient and, importantly, integrated transport structure fit for the future. Scotland cannot afford to wait another 5 or 10 years. Without this investment we could see a drop in the population of Scotland’s island communities. We can already see the strain and pressures placed on staff as they struggle to work with older and obsolete equipment while demands on passenger numbers due to RET increase and importantly with older vessels, the risk of a major incident grows year on year.