

08/03/2022

Evidence submission from Mull and Iona Ferry Committee.

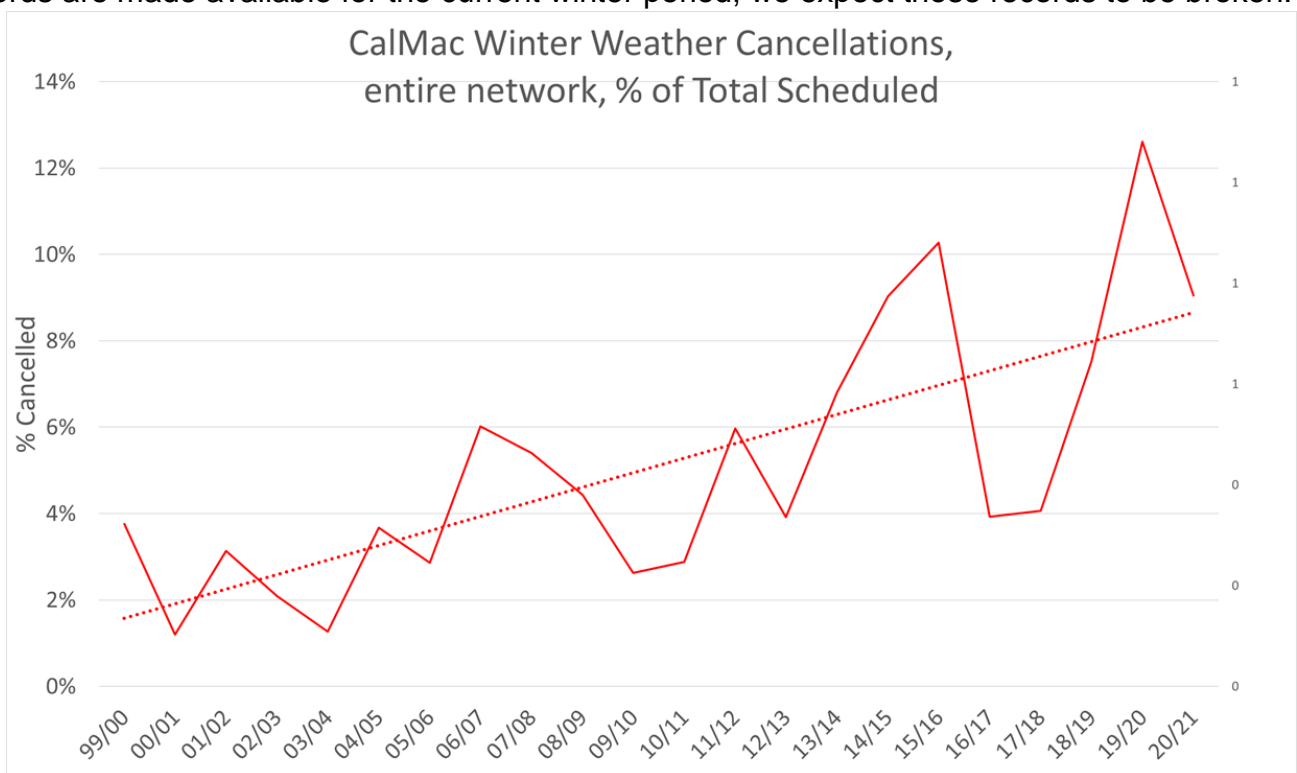
Dear Committee Members

There is one major aspect of ferry reliability that we wish to draw to the Committee's attention that has not been addressed by the responses you have received so far.

The far greater (but least 'newsworthy') cause of unreliability and cancellation is not mechanical breakdown, but the increasing vulnerability of the service to poor weather.

We have analysed weather related cancellations over a 22 year period, using CalMac's own data and wind recordings from the Met Office. I attach a spreadsheet that we have been maintaining for several years now, and below are some key extracts. Across the network as a whole, the number of weather-related cancellations in comparable winters has increased by around a factor of ten. In the graphs below the cancellations are expressed as a percentage of scheduled sailings (thereby removing any distortion caused by the increased number of services operated).

The winter of 2019/20 was a record for the number weather-related cancellations, with 4,664 sailings cancelled due to 'weather', or more than 8% of all sailings on a network-wide basis. Some services had up to 27% of all their sailings cancelled due to 'weather' in that winter. When the records are made available for the current winter period, we expect those records to be broken.



For island residents, the fragility and unreliability of the service in winter is becoming such a negative influence on the quality of island life, that it is becoming a driver of depopulation. People are finding island life more difficult, more frustrating and more restrictive because they can no longer rely on the ferry service like they once could.

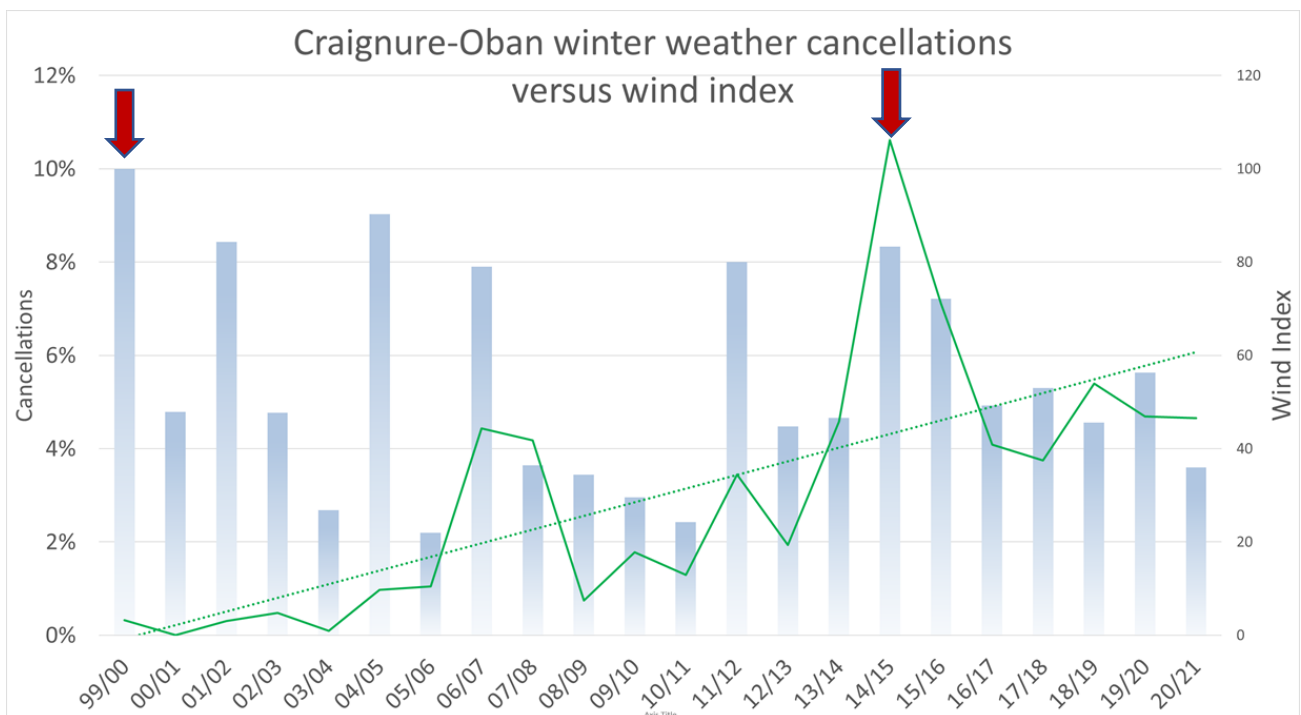
There are numerous ways in which this impacts our lives every day, almost too numerous to mention. As I write, many islanders from Mull and Iona are stuck in Oban overnight, after the last sailings of the day were cancelled in wind speeds of just 26 knots (Force 6, 'Strong Breeze').

Tomorrow morning's sailings are in doubt. Across the islands this will result in missed appointments, added business costs, extended time away from home, forced separations and delayed deliveries. Island life has always been shaped by the ferry service; but that influence has in recent years become far more negative and less tolerable.

The issue is no more impactful and critical than on the education of our children. According to data compiled by Iona Community Council, High School students from Iona who attend high school in Oban missed 30% of their classes between October and December 2021 as a result of weather-related ferry cancellations. They expect the statistics to show the disruption to their education has been even greater this winter.

This is a topic that we have been raising with CalMac for many years. But as yet there does not seem to have been acceptance that the problem exists, let alone any attempt to address it. Initially the response from CalMac claimed that a deterioration in weather patterns was to blame – yet they could offer no evidence of increased prevalence of high winds, and as you see below our evidence suggests no such correlation.

In the spreadsheet attached you will see a 'wind index', which is a measure of the prevalence and severity of winter winds, as measured by the Met Office at Dunstaffnage (the nearest station to Mull). The chart below plots the wind index (Blue columns) against cancellations on the Craignure-Oban service (green line):



As can be seen, in each winter with a high wind index the cancellation response becomes progressively higher. This is most starkly shown by a comparison between the winters of 99/00 and 14/15 (highlighted by red arrows). These were both similarly windy winters, yet only 0.3% of sailings were cancelled in 99/00 and 10.6% were cancelled in 14/15. That's an increase by a factor of THIRTY FIVE. The service is more and more vulnerable to poor weather – it's an empirical fact.

CalMac is in denial that our service is any less reliable (for reasons of weather) than it used to be. When presented with the data attached, their response was to restrict the analysis to the years of the CHFS contract, thus removing the early years of the millennium and avoiding some of the

worst weather winters. We have made efforts to find evidence from other operators in other countries, and have not been able to find any similar decline in reliability elsewhere. It seems therefore that there are factors at work here that are unique to CalMac.

We would urge the committee to ask CalMac how they intend to reverse the worsening trend of winter weather cancellations.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to add this email to the committee's evidence on this important topic.

With best regards Joe Reade, Chair.