



Policy Briefing

2nd February 2026

NZET Committee: Evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Fiona Hyslop MSP

Introduction

The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers organise thousands of workers in Scotland's key transport and offshore energy industries.

We note that members of the cross-party NZET Committee will be taking evidence from Cabinet Secretary Hyslop on the Draft Climate Change Plan and scrutinising the transport elements of the Scottish Government's 2026-27 Budget.

This briefing outlines areas of concern for transport and offshore energy workers which are relevant to both sessions.

Network Rail Scotland – drainage

The Carmont disaster on 12 August 2020 was a tragic lesson in the dangers that the effects of climate change pose to rail workers and to passengers. The Conductor and RMT member Donald Dinnie, the driver, Brett McCulloch and passenger Chris Stuchbury were killed and six people were injured, including train guard and RMT member Nicola Whyte.

The investigation into Carmont found that the track drainage system had failed, leaving debris on the track that the train collided with and de-railed. Network Rail was fined £6.7m for this fatal incident.

Network Rail Scotland and ScotRail have produced its 'Climate Ready Plan'¹ Control Period 7 (CP7 - April 2024 to March 2029). The document forecasts £122m spending on drainage assets on Scotland's rail network, yet it also acknowledges that rainfall is one of the biggest risks:

"Extreme rainfall events could overwhelm the drainage system and culverts, resulting in asset failure and further flooding."

There was progress in CP6 on employing more drainage inspectors on the network but Scotland is currently in the grip of extreme weather events which raise the risk on rail infrastructure assets. Drainage systems are not only dealing with extreme rainfall but on some parts of the network, unusual water flow from thawing snow.

Workers and passengers are therefore entitled to ask the Cabinet Secretary what Network

Rail Scotland's actual spend has been on drainage works so far in CP7, compared to the forecast total figure of £122m to 2029; how many additional Full Time Equivalent jobs have been allocated to drainage works since 2024 to date – including amongst tier 1 and 2 contractors in Network Rail Scotland's supply chain.

Northern Isles Ferry Service (NIFS) contract

The 2026-27 Budget cut the annual NIFS subsidy to the current operator, Serco by 11.8% (£7.1m) to £53.31m. The 2020-28 NIFS3 contract awarded to Serco was valued at £350m, which is an average subsidy of £43.75m.

Jobs were protected at Serco NorthLink during the Covid-19 pandemic but we need to know **the total increase in the value of the current NIFS contract to the operator, Serco**, in addition to passenger revenues which were effectively covered by the taxpayer during Covid-19.

The 2026-27 Budget also gave Serco £1.8m additional funding to support "removal of peak fares for island residents and resource to **support running costs, including crew and fuel for vessels coming into service.**"

Can the Cabinet Secretary shed some light on any additional freight capacity on the NIFS contract?

NIFS communities, livestock businesses and the aquaculture industry regularly ask for additional ferry-freight capacity, including during the recent consultation on the specification of the next contract, NIFS4 from 2028.

There is not only a capacity issue on the NIFS freighters. The thirty seafarers operating the two freighters, *Helliar* and *Hildasay* are recruited internationally by the Clyde Marine agency and are not directly employed by Serco NorthLink. The freighters are owned by CMAL but are flagged in the Isle of Man and are not covered by the RMT agreement for crew on the three CMAL owned passenger ferries on the NIFS contract.

Some crew on the two freighters are only paid the National Minimum Wage. Pay rates were below the NMW on these ships before the RMT's intervention a decade ago.² Since then, the Scottish Government has repeatedly refused to make sure that the skilled seafarers jobs on these freighters are covered by the RMT agreement, despite taking ownership of the vessels in 2019 before the start of the current contract.

Workers and communities cannot wait for the procurement of two new 'flex' freighters with passenger carrying capacity at the start of the next decade.

Disappointingly, the Cabinet Secretary has ruled out direct award of NIFS4 to an in-house operator, despite this being legally permissible, as demonstrated on the CHFS3 contract.

What resources is the Scottish Government providing for an in-house bid to operate the NIFS4 contract and, by so doing, removing private profit from the cost to the taxpayer and boosting employment in Scottish communities across the CMAL fleet on this contract?

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-north-east-orkney-shetland-37798255>