

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 25 February 2026
5th Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

PE2188: Extend the National Entitlement Card scheme to include ferry travel for people aged 60 and over

Introduction

Petitioner Claire Sparrow

Petition summary Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to extend the National Entitlement Card scheme to include ferry travel for people aged 60 and over.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2188>

1. [The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on 26 November 2025.](#) At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Cabinet Secretary for Transport.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received new written submissions from the Cabinet Secretary for Transport and the Petitioner which are set out in **Annexe C**.
4. [Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the petition's webpage.](#)
5. [Further background information about this petition can be found in the SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
6. [The Scottish Government gave its initial response to the petition on 23 October 2025.](#)
7. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 88 signatures have been received on this petition.

Action

8. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerks to the Committee
February 2026

Annexe A: Summary of petition

PE2188: Extend the National Entitlement Card scheme to include ferry travel for people aged 60 and over

Petitioner

Claire Sparrow

Date Lodged

30 September 2025

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to extend the National Entitlement Card scheme to include ferry travel for people aged 60 and over.

Background information

Living in Orkney, my partner and I rely heavily on the ferry services for our daily necessities. Everything from groceries to healthcare services necessitates travel, as our island has nothing and the costs can quickly accumulate. This reliance is not unique to us; countless residents, particularly older adults, experience the burden of these travel expenses.

Recently, it's come to light that the Scottish Government has not allocated necessary funds to support travel for Orkney's older adults on the boats, which is necessary before we can get on the free buses. This situation has left many residents, who are dependent on the ferry services, in a difficult position. Without financial assistance, these individuals face challenges in accessing essential services outside their immediate vicinity.

The lack of funding for Orkney's elderly travel not only impacts individuals but also threatens the social and economic well-being of our community as a whole.

Annexe B: Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE2085 on 26 November 2025

The Convener: Our first new petition is PE2188, lodged by Claire Sparrow, which calls on the Parliament to urge the Government to extend the national entitlement card scheme to include ferry travel for people aged 60 and over. The Scottish Government's response to the petition highlights the publication of "Islands Connectivity Plan—Strategic Approach" in May and the expanded concessionary ferry travel for under-22s only. The response states that the Scottish Government does not consider the ask of the petition to be achievable, as it is not affordable to expand ferry concessions any further to include over-60s at this time, beyond what is already provided.

The petitioner has provided two written submissions, which highlight that ferry travel is essential for older adults living on islands. They sometimes must travel to attend healthcare appointments that are not available locally—I can think of islands even in the west of Scotland where that is the case—to purchase groceries and other necessities, and to maintain social and family connections.

The petitioner states that older island residents are effectively excluded from the same freedom of movement that their mainland counterparts enjoy. She points out that, under the current arrangements, island residents must first pay for ferry travel before they can access a bus service to which free bus entitlement applies. The petitioner states that that is not simply a matter of inconvenience; it is a matter of geographical inequality and social isolation.

Before we consider whether the committee can do anything in the time that is available to us, I ask Mr McArthur whether he would like to offer a few comments.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I am grateful to you, convener, not least for up-ending your agenda to accommodate me.

I echo the petitioner's sentiments. I do not think that I am betraying confidences by saying that she is the resident of an island that does not have a GP or a nurse—and there is no shop. Accessing services is often achievable only by taking the ferry to the mainland. I have long made the argument that, for islanders in Orkney—it is the same in Shetland, the Western Isles and on the west coast—ferries often perform the function that buses perform on the mainland and that, therefore, the extension of concessionary travel on buses for younger people as well as for older people, although very welcome, has led to islanders feeling that there is a growing inconsistency in the way that they are treated.

The Government is right, and is to be commended, for extending free interisland ferry travel to island residents under the age of 22. I made the case for that strongly, along with other colleagues for the Highlands and Islands, across parties. However, the Government now has a problem. As it has accepted the principle in relation to under-22s, it becomes more difficult for it to say that it cannot do the same for those over the age of 60.

I support a great deal of the principle and the argumentation behind the petition. I am pragmatic enough to understand that, in the time that is available between now and the end of the parliamentary session, it might be difficult to make progress. However, the argument will not go away. As I said, as a result of the more recent decision in relation to under-22s, the Government has helped to make the case that Claire Sparrow and other signatories to the petition are fairly making.

The Convener: Thank you very much, Mr McArthur. There is an issue here. Mr Torrance?

David Torrance: I am back on track, convener. I wonder whether the committee would consider writing to the Cabinet Secretary for Transport to ask her to respond to the petitioner's points that ferry travel is essential for older island residents to attend healthcare appointments and maintain social connections, and that older island residents are being excluded from the same freedom of movement that their mainland counterparts have.

The Convener: That is a powerful point and a perfectly reasonable one for us to inquire about. We will keep the petition open and hope that we can get a response that would allow us to at least consider the cabinet secretary's response to that point. Are we agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr McArthur.

Liam McArthur: I will see you in the Conveners Group meeting shortly, Mr Carlaw.

The Convener: Yes, indeed.

Annexe C: Written submissions

Cabinet Secretary for Transport written submission, 20 January 2026

PE2188/D: Extend the National Entitlement Card scheme to include ferry travel for people aged 60 and over

Thank you for your correspondence of 1 December 2025 regarding Petition 2188 which is asking that the Scottish Government to “Extend the National Entitlement Card scheme to include ferry travel for people aged 60 and over.”

I appreciate the concerns raised by the correspondent. The schemes currently in place form part of the Scottish Government’s long-term strategy to ensure ferry services are affordable and sustainable for years to come.

The Scottish Government does provide significant funding to keep ferry fares low for everyone, including over 60s, through Road Equivalent Tariff. Islander fares and funding of local authority ferries are also designed to allow for frequent travel at lower cost for the day-to-day needs of islanders. This funding also supports a number of local concessionary ferry schemes that are tailored to provide older and disabled people with free or discounted ferry travel. For example, eligible residents of Orkney’s outer-lying islands receive 24 free journeys per year for travel to mainland Orkney, and in Shetland older and disabled island residents receive free or discounted inter-island ferry travel.

Further to these, the Scottish Government provides 4 free ferry journeys to or from the Scottish mainland per year for over 60s and disabled people, if you live in Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles.

Fare levels are set by Scottish Ministers for the Clyde & Hebrides and Northern Isles Ferry Services and by the relevant local authority (supported by their Regional Transport Partnership in some instances) or private operators for ferry services they are responsible for.

The Scottish Government is currently providing the full funding requested by local authorities to run their inter-island and internal ferry services in 2025-26, which is around £50 million, and increase of 19.4% from last year.

However, we have looked closely at ferry fares as part of the Fair Fares Review and the Islands Connectivity Plan. On 2 May 2025, we published our Strategic Approach document, which confirmed that concessionary ferry travel will only be extended to under 22s.

We understand the calls to include over 60s, but within current budgets we’re not able to expand concessions further at this time, however, existing discounts and support will continue.

Yours sincerely,

FIONA HYSLOP

Petitioner written submission, 29 January 2026

PE2188/E: Extend the National Entitlement Card scheme to include ferry travel for people aged 60 and over

I thank the Cabinet Secretary for her submission of 20 January 2026 in response to Petition PE2188/D. While I note the explanation of existing schemes, I find the Scottish Government's position deeply disappointing and fundamentally unjust.

The current policy results in clear and ongoing discrimination against older people who live on Scotland's islands. People aged 60 and over on the mainland are entitled to free bus travel for all essential journeys — to hospitals, shops, family, community services, and social connection. Older island residents, however, must pay to access the very same necessities simply because our only road is a ferry.

Ferries are not a lifestyle choice or a discretionary service for islanders. They are essential infrastructure. Treating ferry travel as optional while buses are treated as essential exposes a two-tier system of entitlement based solely on geography. This directly contradicts the principles of fairness, equality, and inclusion that the National Entitlement Card scheme claims to uphold.

The limited number of free ferry journeys offered to some island residents does not come close to providing parity with unlimited mainland concessionary travel. It is a rationed substitute for a right that others receive automatically. This leaves older islanders isolated, financially penalised, and effectively punished for remaining in their communities.

The Scottish Government's decision to extend concessionary ferry travel only to under 22s, while excluding over 60s, sends a troubling message: that the mobility, independence, and wellbeing of older people in island communities is a lower priority.

If equality of access is truly a national commitment, then ferry travel for island residents must be recognised as equivalent to bus travel on the mainland — and funded accordingly. Anything less is indefensible.

I urge the Scottish Government to reconsider this position as a matter of urgency and to end this ongoing inequality for older islanders.