

SHRC response to the Scottish Affairs Committee on its inquiry into ‘Connectivity in Scotland: Fixed links.’

December 2025

1. Executive summary

The Scottish Human Rights Commission (SHRC) welcomes this opportunity to provide evidence to the Scottish Affairs Committee on its inquiry into ‘Connectivity in Scotland: Fixed links.’ The SHRC would like to bring the Committee's attention to the our work on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the Highlands and Islands, published in November 2024. This response is intended to provide the Committee with insight into key aspects of this report and to highlight the importance of understanding connectivity and transport from a human rights perspective. This is critical given the UK's international human rights obligations, particularly in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural rights (ICESCR).

At present, there is evidence of significant transport and connectivity barriers in Scotland's island communities. These barriers risk undermining residents' economic, social and cultural rights. Islanders have reported unreliable ferries, centralised essential services and limited or non-existent public transport. Ageing ferry fleets, frequent cancellations and high private-vehicle costs restrict access to healthcare, education, food and employment. These inequalities disproportionately affect disabled people, young people and low-income households, contributing to isolation and depopulation.

Improved, resilient, and rights-based transport solutions are essential for island communities' long-term viability and the full enjoyment of their internationally protected human rights.

2. Introduction

Transport is a critical enabler of economic, social and cultural rights. For Scotland's island communities, the ability to access employment, healthcare, education, food, cultural life and social participation depends on a transport system that is reliable, affordable, and acceptable. In our work across Orkney, Shetland, Na h-Eileanan an Iar, and the inner Hebrides, the SHRC found that current transport provision routinely fails to meet these standards. As a result, people living in island communities face significant and persistent barriers to the realisation of their rights.

While the SHRC does not take a view of the specific long-term solutions that are required, it calls for these solutions to be human rights-based, including ensuring that local communities are directly involved in their creation and implementation. The SHRC will therefore focus on the following questions asked by the Committee in its inquiry:

- What are the current transport challenges facing Scotland's island communities; and
- How do these challenges impact communities.

The SHRC's response to the Committee's inquiry draws directly from all the evidence collected through our review on the realisation of economic, social, and cultural rights in the Highlands and Islands.

3. Current transport challenges in island communities

3.1 Unreliable, infrequent and insufficient public transport

We have indicated that island residents consistently reported that public transport services – where they exist – are too limited, unreliable and poorly maintained to meet basic needs. In our research, one islander highlighted the issue with the current Government approach in stating “You get a free bus pass. But that’s no use if you don’t have buses.”

On several islands, evening and Sunday services are non-existent, while some routes have been removed entirely over time. Young people and those who cannot drive face near-total dependence on family, neighbours or volunteer-led schemes.

3.2 Over-reliance on private vehicles

Limited bus services mean island residents rely heavily on private cars, despite higher fuel prices and long travel distances. As a local resident said to the SHRC: “If you work, you have to drive. You cannot do anything without having your own transport.”

For those who cannot drive – for example due to age, disability or financial constraints – there are often no viable alternatives. This produces acute social isolation and unequal access to services.

3.3 Ferry disruption, capacity issues and unreliable connectivity

For islands such as Orkney, Shetland, Skye, Na h-Eileanan an Iar, Mull, Isla, and others, ferries are lifeline services. Yet residents reported regular and prolonged disruption. This includes:

- Frequent cancellations due to breakdowns, ageing vessels and adverse weather.
- Limited capacity during tourist seasons, preventing islanders from travelling when needed.
- Significant waits (sometimes weeks) to secure bookings for essential journeys.

These failures have direct consequences for access to healthcare, education, employment and family life. As one resident noted “many island residents struggle to access ferries when they need to, including when wanting to reach basic appointments.”

3.4 Centralisation of health services and long, costly travel

Centralised health services mean island residents often travel long distances to mainland hospitals for routine and specialist care. Reimbursement schemes do not cover the full cost of petrol or compensate for lost work time, placing an additional financial burden on households.

3.5 Impact of weather

Island transport systems, especially ferries, are uniquely vulnerable to weather conditions, which are worsening with climate change. More frequent storms, high winds and heavy seas disrupt travel, cut off communities and delay access to urgent services.

Residents expressed growing anxiety about service reliability: “Climate change and big weather events are affecting transport availability leaving us disconnected even between islands.”

3.6 Barriers for disabled people

Islanders with disabilities face significant accessibility challenges. For example, on Orkney, wheelchair users struggle to access inter-island ferries. Further, on Skye, wheelchair users face great difficulty using buses or travelling even short distances due to inaccessible vehicles and unsafe pavements.

4. How transport challenges impact island communities and their rights

4.1 Right to health (article 12 ICESCR)

Transport failures are currently undermining the right to timely and accessible healthcare. Long travel times, difficult winter conditions, limited ferry capacity and unreliable buses can all prevent or delay treatment. For some islanders, the journey itself is unsafe or unaffordable. As services centralise further, these barriers increase.

4.2 Right to food (Article 11 ICESCR)

Transport constraints limit access to affordable shops and fuel supplies. High fuel costs divert household budgets away from heating, food and other essentials. Residents report making trade-offs: 'Fuel takes priority over other expenses for many.'

For some islands, cancellation of ferries (often due to lack of maintenance or bad weather) means that communities are left with no fresh produce at all, and at times, no sufficient food stock available on the island. Some islands have reported having left without almost any food up to a week given ferry failures or adverse weather affecting inter-island ferries.

4.3 Right to work (Article 6 ICESCR)

Island economies rely on predictable, accessible transport. Unreliable ferries, rising fuel costs and the absence of public transport area all causing a restriction in labour mobility, limited business operating hours for businesses in small isles, a reduction in tourism reliability, as well as hindering recruitment and retention of workers.

4.4 Right to education (Article 13 ICESCR)

Students often face long commutes, unaligned timetables, or ferry disruptions that make attending school or university on the main islands or on the mainland unreliable. This is causing disruption is young people's right to education, and at times, further contributing to the depopulation of smaller isles.

4.5 Right to cultural life (Article 15 ICESCR)

Transport challenges isolate people from community events, cultural activities and social support networks. This particularly affects disabled people, older residents and low-income households.

Further, transport barriers severely limit opportunities for young people on islands. This includes the inability to access extracurricular activities or sports and limited opportunities to explore or connect with other communities.

4.6 Population retention and community sustainability

High transport costs, unreliable ferries, centralised services and a lack of alternatives contribute significantly to depopulation in several island areas. Without improved connectivity, many island communities fear long-term decline.

5. Conclusions

From the SHRC's perspective, the transport and connectivity challenges faced by Scotland's island communities pose serious and ongoing risks to the realisation of economic, social and cultural rights. Transport is not only a logistical concern, it is a precondition for accessing healthcare, food, education, employment, cultural and recreational services, and ensuring vibrant rural communities.

Without substantial investment in transport infrastructure and in human-rights-based transport planning, island communities will continue to experience disproportionate barriers that undermine their human rights.

The SHRC calls on the Scottish Affairs Committee to take into account the current human rights challenges of island communities within the scope of its inquiry.