

# Fury over decision not to extend ferry subsidy plan to all islands

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**ISLANDERS have criticised the decision not to extend a ferry subsidy scheme to all Scottish islands amid claims they are losing out on tourists lured by cheaper fares to other destinations.**

Residents in Orkney and Shetland spoke out after it emerged that the Road Equivalent Tariff (RET) scheme which operates in the Western Isles will be continued for another three years and may be extended, although with less money.

The original £22 million RET pilot ran services to the Outer Isles and Coll, cutting fares by up to half, and was credited with increasing visitor and passenger numbers on those routes. The trial scheme had been due to end in the spring but ministers decided to extend it another year at a cost of £6.5m.

Now they have decided to continue the project for another three years, with £4.5m being spent on it in each year to 2015.

A spokesman for Transport Scotland said officials were looking at rolling out the project to the Argyll and Clyde islands in light of the Western Isles pilot but it is not clear where that would leave the Small Isles of Eigg, Rum, Canna, Muck, or the island of Raasay.

Stephen Hagan, Convener of Orkney Islands Council, said Orkney was being placed at a disadvantage.

He said: "There is already anecdotal evidence that some visitors are choosing to visit the Western Isles rather than Orkney because RET had reduced the cost of travel on west coast routes."

Orkney's LibDem MSP Liam McArthur said: "While there are plans to extend cheaper ferry fares to the Clyde and Argyll islands, the Northern Isles are again set to miss out. We desperately need greater transparency on operation of the RET."