

Ferry Business

In association with **INTERFERRY**



CHANGE IN THE BALTIC SEA

Viking Line's Marcus Risberg highlights the regulatory uncertainties shaping investment decisions in the ferry market



BLUE ECONOMY

Oluwadamilola Emmanuel outlines Lagos State's future



GROWTH

CFA's Serge Buy discusses Canada's ferry system

Upgrading a lifeline service

Stuart Garrett of NorthLink Ferries tells Simon Johnson how the operator is revitalising its service with refurbishments and new vessels

Against a backdrop of sustained demand growth and increasing pressure on capacity, NorthLink Ferries is entering a decisive period of fleet renewal. The operator runs two passenger routes from mainland Scotland to the Northern Isles: Scrabster to Stromness on Orkney, and Aberdeen to Lerwick in Shetland and Kirkwall on Orkney – the longest ferry route in Scotland. Its service is a lifeline for the Northern Isles, essential to residents, businesses and visitors alike.

The current iteration of NorthLink first took on the operating contract in 2012, which was renewed in 2020. Over this period, the route has experienced substantial growth. Passenger numbers

rose from 283,000 in 2013 to 403,000 in 2025, a rise of 42 per cent. Vehicle volumes grew from 62,707 to 109,907, a 75 per cent increase, while freight units increased from 41,526 to 59,326, a jump of nearly 43 per cent. Cabin usage also climbed from 58,209 to 73,628.

“Service delivery and market growth have been our biggest achievements,” says Stuart Garrett, managing director of NorthLink Ferries. “We are operating contracts on behalf of Transport Scotland and the Scottish Government, so market growth translates into revenue, which then leads to reduced subsidy ask.”

The existing fleet has evolved alongside that growth. In 2013, NorthLink introduced pod accommodation, initially

offering one pod lounge on both Hjaltland and Hrossey. Pod usage has since risen from 7,280 in the first year to 26,243 in 2025 – an increase of 260 per cent. During the ships’ 2026 drydock, around 30 traditional pods will be replaced with 18 lie-flat units as part of a trial ahead of future fleet replacement decisions.

Cabins have also been upgraded. Televisions, once limited to premium categories, are now standard across all cabins. Lounges, including the Magnus Lounge, have been refurbished, and pet cabins are being expanded in response to sustained demand. “On the Pentland Firth, we put in another small pet lounge on the upper deck, and it was hugely popular,” says Garrett.





Despite these improvements, capacity constraints are particularly acute during the peak season from May to September. “During these months we are operating generally at about 95 per cent cabin utilisation,” says Garrett. “The only way to address that issue is to introduce additional assets.”

Northlink hopes the answer lies in the FreightFlex programme – a newbuild project led by Caledonian Maritime Assets Limited (CMAL) that aims to replace the ageing freight vessels Helliar and Hildasay with two purpose-built, dual-role ferries. These vessels are being procured specifically for the Aberdeen–Kirkwall/Lerwick route and are designed to deliver increased freight capacity, higher operating speeds and flexible passenger accommodation during peak periods.

Under the current tender process, four shipyards – two in Turkey and two in China – have been shortlisted to progress to the invite-to-tender stage. While NorthLink will not be involved in selecting the final yard, it has played a central role in specifying operational requirements and undertaking port simulations, particularly at Aberdeen, where harbour constraints influence vessel design.

“The two new 200-passenger-certified ro-pax vessels will provide 58 cabins

and stabilised hulls for smoother sailing, with a maximum speed of 20 knots,” says Garrett. “There will be ample space on deck for cars and coaches. At the same time as the two FreightFlex vessels have been delivered, we will also have completed forward planning for the replacement tonnage for Hjaltland and Hrossey, which will be in their third decade of operation.”



Operational resilience has also been tested in recent years. During the Covid-19 pandemic, NorthLink maintained uninterrupted lifeline services. “During Covid we did not miss a beat,” says Garrett. “We provided that lifeline service to Shetland, and that is something we are all very proud of within the business. And with the growth we’ve experienced since, planning ahead has become more important. FreightFlex is

about addressing those pinch points while maintaining the integrity of the lifeline.”

Looking to the future, Garrett emphasises how the FreightFlex vessels will transform the service and prepare it for future challenges. “Once these vessels are delivered, we will have addressed the core constraints in the system and created a platform for the next generation of fleet replacement, which is fundamental to

“Service delivery and market growth have been our biggest achievements”

sustaining lifeline connectivity for the Northern Isles,” he says.

However, fleet investment is only part of the equation when it comes to Northlink’s success. NorthLink holds Investors in People Platinum accreditation, reflecting its approach to staff engagement and organisational culture. “It is a huge credit to the crew, and it reflects on the service our customers receive, both onboard and onshore,” says Garrett. **CFR** is