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## NOT JUST HOT AIR?

### Hovercraft returns to Clyde

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**THIS week Clydefast performed a three day hovercraft trial on the River Clyde with a view to bringing this mode of transport back to these shores for the first time since the mid 1960s.**

The trials were intended to determine what impact, if any, the introduction of such a service would have on other river users. It also gave interested investors and local authorities the chance to experience for themselves what a hovercraft can offer in terms of alternative transport.

Speaking at the Dunoon leg of the trial, on Tuesday morning, Alistair Macleod, Chief Executive of Clydefast, said: "We are very excited about the test and indebted to Glasgow City Council, Riverside Inverclyde and Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (SPT) for making the trial possible. It will hopefully demonstrate the potential for a permanent hovercraft operation to be brought to the Clyde.

"The service will be fast - for example a service from Dunoon to Glasgow will reach the city centre in 52 minutes (during the time trial it took

49 minutes), over 20 minutes quicker than the present journey time of an hour and a quarter, by train and ferry. Rothesay will be included in a permanent operation which would add a further 15 minutes to the journey."

**"It's an iconic attraction for tourists, the public will be bowled over once it arrives."**

He added: "Another bonus in using the hovercraft would be its ability to navigate through bridges which don't open. Some of the current Clyde bridges restrict catamaran ferries getting directly to the city centre, particularly at the Broomielaw.

"It was regrettable, however, that better facilities for landing the craft on the beach at the Coal Pier were not provided. It was planned to run a number of demo trips from Dunoon but

in the absence of a gangway to connect from the pier to the beach this was not possible."

A decision on whether or not the service will be given the go-ahead should be made within six to nine months and, if it gets the green light, then it will be fully operational hopefully within a further year and a half.

Initially, the plan is that there will be two craft, each carrying up to 130 passengers, and these craft would run every hour in the morning, then every hour-and-a-half during the day. In year two, a further craft will be added to the fleet and the service will run hourly throughout the day.

Mr Macleod says that although the hovercraft will be slightly more expensive (approximately £1 dearer) than the current means of getting to Glasgow city centre on public transport he believes that the service will be warmly welcomed. "It's an iconic attraction for tourists, the public will be bowled over once it arrives," he said. "Because there is no wash, the hovercraft can go up river faster than conventional methods, cruising at approximately 25 knots, and will get right into Glasgow city centre in well under an hour. Travelling from



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Dunoon to Greenock will also be quicker, taking only 14 minutes.

"One of the advantages of the hovercraft over a fast catamaran would be its ability to navigate through the Arc Bridge in Glasgow. This would allow a service to reach the city centre at the Broomielaw. The hovercraft planned would have an air draft less than the 5.4 metre restriction at high water."

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communications from a Mr Macleod who I understand is carrying out the trials supported by SPT as part of a wider initiative in their strategy looking at fast passenger services on the Clyde that will link up towns on the Clyde with Glasgow etc.

"I understand that Mr Macleod has had for a number of years now ambitions for running fast passenger services on the Clyde. I am not aware of any of the details between him and the SPT and the survey currently underway other than for the feasibility to establish the suitability of this type of vessel.

"I understand that there are problems with landing facilities and approaches have been made to the council on this. I am awaiting detail on the outcome of discussions with our officers on this."

Cowal councillor Bruce Marshall was upbeat about the idea of having a hovercraft service back on the Clyde after 40 years. He said: "I am really excited with the development this week of the Clydefast hovercraft trials on the Firth and upper Clyde. The fact that these trials are being financed by SPT gives this venture enormous credibility.

"I understand that speeds of 28 knots were achieved last Friday between Port Glasgow and SECC Glasgow without any appreciable wash which might concern the Port

Authority. We are now talking about a time of 52 minutes from Dunoon town centre to the centre of Glasgow, this will be a great boon for commuters and also could be very beneficial for Dunoon town centre retail sector.

"I believe there is huge potential for fast craft of this type to open up our waterways on the Firth of Clyde; we are light years behind our continental neighbours in the efficient usage of this fabulous resource and I wish Clydefast and Alistair Macleod well in this new venture."

On Monday, Dunoon Community Council held its regular meeting, and as the hovercraft trials had featured prominently in news reports that day, the matter was added to the regular agenda.

Gordon McInnes said: "This idea has great potential and could be a great summer attraction. When the Commonwealth Games take place, or if there are major golf championships in Ayrshire, this could open up all sorts of possibilities. It could be of great benefit to the town."

However, Ronnie Smith - a seasoned campaigner on the Gourock-Dunoon ferry issue - sounded a note of caution: "I am not opposed to a hovercraft service as such, but we need to remain focused on the fight for a town-centre to town-centre ferry service."

"This might provide a political excuse to remove a ferry service from Dunoon

used purely for the trials and once the service was up and running all the craft would have a ramp for wheelchairs as well as toilets on board for disabled people.

Argyll and Bute council leader Councillor Dick Walsh said of the plan: "As far as I am aware we, the council, are not directly involved with the trials. I have received

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Pier - and that gives me great cause for concern."

Others at the meeting queried the cost of journeys compared with the existing rail option. In addition, questions were asked about what sort of time saving might be achieved, given the speed limits imposed at some points on the River Clyde and time involved for embarking and disembarking passengers at each of the vessel's ports of call.

Two lucky passengers on the return trip to Ferguson's shipyard in Port Glasgow were retired Loganair pilot Captain Claire Roberts and her husband Chris.

Mr and Mrs Roberts, from Innellan, were invited aboard due to their backgrounds and were extremely impressed.

On their return to Dunoon Mr Roberts said: "It was very smooth, comfortable and quiet. I have worked as an engineer on many hovercraft and was very impressed with this one. I know that this particular craft was being used for trial purposes but I think the service would be a valuable one to the community and I for one, would relish it."

Whether the service is given the go ahead or not, and whether the two year timescale is realistic, depends on a number of factors including the relevant councils, the wrangles over landing locations and funding; who knows public feeling may even have a say in the outcome.