

# Fullers under scrutiny as ferry regulation inches closer

Delays, cancellations and lengthy queues over summer are putting Fullers under intense scrutiny, with further calls to bring it in line with the Public Transport Operating Model, commonly referred to as PTOM.

Fullers' Waiheke ferry route was made exempt by the National Government when it set up the model in 2013. Critics say this has led to Waiheke paying higher fares than any other ferry routes in the Hauraki Gulf, and inadequate oversight on the quality and reliability of the service.

A campaign to remove the exemption has now been going so long it may outlast PTOM itself. Following a 2021 review of the model, the government decided to reform and replace it with the Sustainable Public Transport Framework. The new framework is intended to address several issues, including making public transport more affordable, reliable and integrated while improving the sector's labour market by ensuring decent and fair wages for public transport workers. It will also give local councils more control, by allowing them to directly own and operate public transport services.

Parliament is working on the necessary legislative changes to enable the new framework, as operational reforms are put in place over the coming year, and the transition is expected to be complete by 2024. The issues with Fullers' Waiheke service and its exemption featured prominently in public submissions during the 2021 review. There have yet to be any announcements on how the reforms will affect it - but the Waiheke Local Board expects a report prepared for Minister of Transport Michael Wood to be made public soon, probably at the end of the month or in early March.

Auckland Central MP Chloe Swarbrick says Fullers' Waiheke route is the only public transport operation in the country considered integral by a local council but which national-level legislation exempts from any service, cost or transparency measures - resulting in Waiheke ferry fares being considerably higher than for similar services elsewhere, including around the city itself.

Chlöe has focused on eliminating that exemption since the start of her term as local MP. She and the Waiheke Local Board were able to get the minister to begin the process mid last year.

"I understand some of the crucial components of the process were tabled with him just before Christmas and Cabinet



Waiheke Local Board chair Cath Handley says the lack of a reliable ferry service has been catastrophic for Waiheke residents and businesses. Photo Merrie Hewetson

should be in a position to finally initiate the Order in Council shortly, which will then mean Fullers finally have to come to the table, something they have never had to before because of the Joyce exclusion [Former minister of transport Steven Joyce excluded the ferry service from the PTOM in 2013]," Chlöe says.

Auckland Transport managed to win small gains early last year, giving Waiheke passengers access to a new, cheaper HOP monthly pass and negotiating a Quality Partnership Agreement with new minimum standards that Fullers are held to. "I am investigating with Auckland Transport whether they are using any of these levers of accountability in the meantime," she says.

However, around the same time all other public transport services benefited from the government's half-price fare initiative, Fullers raised Waiheke prices by 9.5 percent.

"All of this highlights precisely why that exemption was never a good idea in the first place and why it's so crucial we finally revoke it," Chlöe says.

Fullers CEO Mike Horne has recently said the number of cancellations affected by maintenance issues is low. "Of the 1,400 Fullers360 services to and from Waiheke in December 2022, 1.3 percent

were cancelled due to general maintenance-related events."

On Tuesday 17 January, five Fullers ferries were cancelled due to maintenance issues and further delays and cancellations have continued to frustrate passengers in the weeks since - including last weekend when lines to board stretched out of Mātiatia terminal and up the road to the lower carpark.

Waiheke Local Board chair Cath Handley says that five breakdowns in one day is not 1.3 percent. Staffing shortages on the ferries are another problem. Cath says: "We were told that it is the shortage of marine qualified staff, not the availability of ferries, causing delays and cancellations, now it would appear it is the availability of ferries combined with staffing shortages."

The lack of reliability has been catastrophic for Waiheke she says. "We were warned it would be incredibly difficult but it has been more unreliable than we thought it would be. As a board we have been advocating for Waiheke to be brought under PTOM. This is a unregulated private service and Auckland Transport can't regulate this service because it is private." • *Olivia Walker and Paul Mitchell*

# Ferry users' crisis in confidence over Fullers' unreliability

Two years of ferry cancellations and confusing communication have left patrons unsure of the reliability of Fullers' ferry services, Auckland councillors and ferry users say.

At the Transport and Infrastructure committee on 16 February, chair John Watson moved a resolution to find solutions to ferry deficiencies across Auckland after users raised issues with the reliability of service.

Gulf Harbour Ferry Users group representative Anna Thorburn, in a presentation to the committee, said ferry users were having a crisis in confidence regarding Fullers.

"Ferry service from Gulf Harbour has been in place for 26 years and in the last two years we have seen that service diminish significantly," Thorburn said.

"We don't trust the data that you will receive as passenger numbers are dwindling and we hold Fullers personally accountable."

"Communications are appalling and we have found as a community that we



rely on each other to collate all of the alert data and bring it together to make sense of (it)."

She said ferry services were not world-class public transport and wanted to emphasise the importance of keeping Auckland Transport's "waka floating".

Auckland Transport's board later made a presentation to the committee and cited a 97 percent reliability rating.

Metro Services group manager Darek Koper said AT did not include cancellations in their reliability rate.

"Cancellations that you see are measured separately, they are not part of our reliability criteria," Koper said.

Chair John Watson said past improvements to ferry services had encouraged a number of people to live on the Hibiscus Coast.

"Since that time, however, the same cannot be said. We know we have a crisis in public transport for a variety of reasons. We have a crisis within a crisis in respect of the performance of the ferry service," Watson said.

He did not believe the level of crisis had been fully expressed by the public yet.

He then read out a testimony of one ferry user who had seen international travellers trying to get to the airport by a cancelled ferry, a mother who had to call family for help after she was stranded and a man subject to disciplinary hearings for continuous issues caused by commuting.

North Shore ward councillor Richard Hills, whose area covers Devonport where ferry services were reported to be one of the worst hit by cancellations, said he was disappointed.

"The issues that the community comes to us about is that it does not feel like an international city at the moment. It

Hundreds packed Morra Hall in a 2019 public meeting as ferry frustrations came to a head.



does not feel like a city that functions," Hills said.

Hills said in 2021 he asked AT whether they needed to bring in the Minister for Transport and whether the public-transport issues were being treated like a crisis.

"We get the abuse. People ringing us up and swearing at us, the comments and the tags on Facebook every single day."

He said he was a proud public transport user but the lack of reliability of public transport meant many people felt they had no options.

Chair John Watson's resolution was supported unanimously and progress will be reported back to the committee in March. • *By Laura Kvistad, Auckland Council reporter funded by New Zealand on Air*

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