



**An assessment the Strangford Lough Ferry
Service**

(July 2020)

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About Imtac

Imtac is a committee of disabled people and older people as well as others including carers and key transport professionals. The role of the Committee is to advise Government and others in Northern Ireland on issues that affect the mobility of Deaf people, disabled people and older people.

Imtac's aim is to ensure that Deaf people, disabled people and older people have the same opportunities as everyone else to travel when and where they want.

Imtac receives support from the Department for Infrastructure (hereafter referred to as the Department).

About this report

As part of its 2019/20 Work Programme Imtac agreed to examine and make recommendations for improvement of the accessibility of the Rathlin and Strangford Lough ferry services. These are services currently operated or supported by the Department for Infrastructure. This report examines the Strangford Lough Ferry service.

In preparing this report representatives from Imtac undertook a site visit on the 27th February 2020. The visit included the opportunity to look at facilities at Portaferry and Strangford and to travel on the MV Strangford II. Staff from the Department were available during the site visit to answer questions.

In compiling this report Imtac has taken into account a number of considerations. These include advice given to the Department by Imtac in 2014 during preparations for the implementation of EU Regulation 1177/2010 relating to rights to ferry travel for disabled people and others with reduced mobility. The Committee has also considered best practice and inclusive design guidance in relation to infrastructure including Inclusive Mobility¹ and BS 8300 Design of an Accessible Built Environment (2018).

About the service

The Strangford Lough Ferry Service is operated by the Department for Infrastructure. The service is vital to the local community, linking people from the Ards Peninsula to Downpatrick and South Down and visa versa. It operates 364 days a year with half hourly services making the 8 minute crossing throughout the day. The nature of the service means there are no

¹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/3695/inclusive-mobility.pdf

requirements for passengers, including disabled people, to book or give advance notice.

Following consultation with Imtac in 2014 the Department published information about the accessibility of the service. This information is available on the NI Direct website² and includes details about:

- Facilities available at Strangford and Portaferry
- Information about vessel accessibility
- Information for specific arrangements for passengers with reduced mobility
- Information about assistance available
- Information about safety announcements

Disabled people and older people, including Blue Badge holders and SmartPass holders, are eligible for discounted fares when using the ferry service. There is a ticket / information office located at the quayside at Strangford. Details of fares and ticketing are also available from NI Direct³.

Site visit

The site visit presented Imtac members with the opportunity to “reality check” the information provided on NI Direct. Members began the visit assessing facilities at Portaferry, before travelling on the ferry to Strangford. Members had the opportunity to discuss the service with officials in the ticket office in Strangford before making the return ferry journey to Portaferry.

Facilities at Portaferry

Information on NI Direct makes clear that facilities are limited at Portaferry with the boarding of foot and vehicle passengers managed by the on-board crew. NI Direct does indicate that an accessible parking bay has been provided opposite the slip way on The Strand for the use of disabled people and a designated meeting point for passengers with reduced mobility is clearly signed at top of the ferry slipway. There are no public toilet facilities close to the slipway.

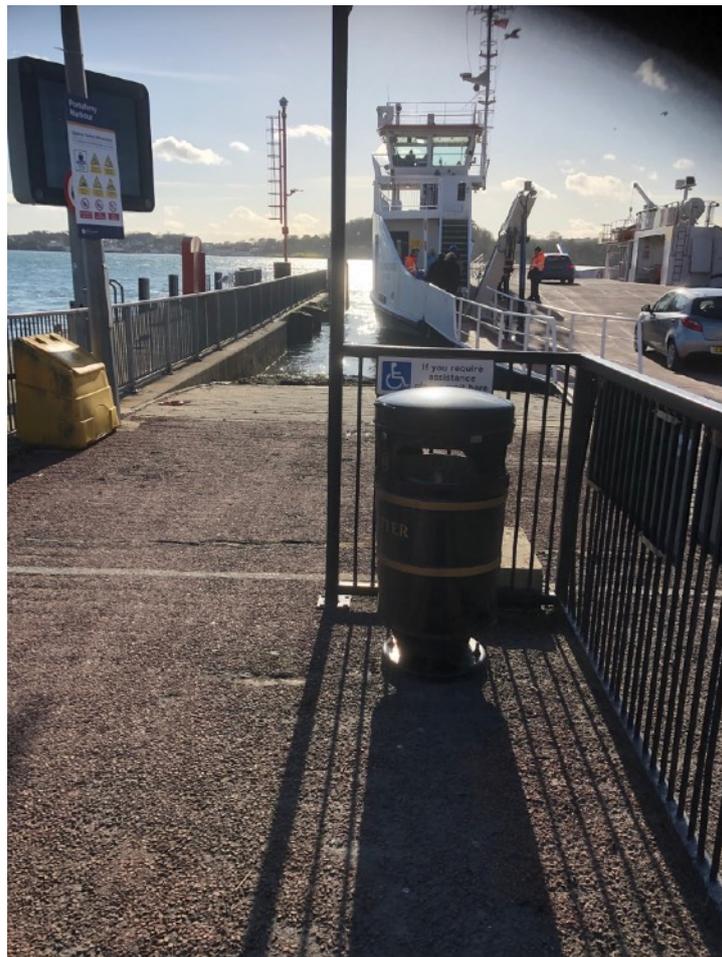
The site visit confirmed that the information provided on NI Direct was accurate. The parking bay markings are, however, worn and would benefit from a refresh with the accessible bay upgraded to meet BS 8300. On the day the designated meeting point signage was partially obscured by a litter bin.

² <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/strangford-ferry-accessibility>

³ <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/strangford-ferry-fares>



(Picture 1 shows the parking bays opposite the slipway.)



(Picture 2 shows the designated meeting point signage at Portaferry.)

On-board facilities

NI Direct has detailed information about the access to and the accessibility of the vessels used to operate the service, including details of slipway and ramp gradients and access to facilities on the vessels including passenger facilities. The accessibility of facilities differ depending on the vessel used. The vessel operating on the day of the site visit was the MV Strangford II. NI Direct makes clear that on-board crew will provide appropriate assistance to foot passengers if required and can make arrangements to support car passengers (short of helping passengers in and out of their vehicle).

One of the Imtac members who participated in the site visit is a power chair user. Access to and egress from the vessel using the slipway and ramp was relatively straightforward, although care had to be taken due to the gradient, ramp lip and surfacing involved. These potential issues were highlighted in the information provided on NI Direct.



(Picture 3 shows a power chair user accessing the vessel via the slipway at Strangford)

The MV Strangford II has a passenger lounge offering shelter from the elements. There is a significant 160mm threshold (advertised on NI Direct) at the entrance to the lounge. A portable ramp has been provided which may be of benefit to some passengers, however the gradient and design of the ramp meant it could not be used by the power chair user on the site visit.



(Picture 4 shows the portable ramp providing step free access to the passenger lounge)

The step at the threshold to the passenger lounge on the MV Portaferry II is significantly less than that on the MV Strangford II (40mm compared to 160mm). Although members did not have the opportunity to view the MV Portaferry, if using a similar ramp it is likely the reduced gradient will mean the access to passenger facilities is significantly better on this vessel.

The passenger lounge includes bench style seating and an area with flip down seating that includes signage indicating it as an area to be used by a wheelchair user. The signage could be made more prominent. Although the extent of seating is welcome there is the opportunity to look at providing a better mix of seating types to improve accessibility for a range of users. Types of seating required include providing a section of seating with armrests and a section of perch style seating.



(Picture 5 shows the interior of the passenger lounge with bench style seating against the two interior walls. Picture 6 shows the priority space for a wheelchair user.)

Facilities at Strangford

On-street parking is not available around the slipway in Strangford although there is some limited off-street car parking on Stella Maris Street close to the slipway. No accessible bays have been provided in this car park. The ticket and information office for the ferry service is located adjacent to the slipway. Stepped and ramped access is provided to the building. Appropriate corduroy tactile paving and handrails have been provided around the steps. Some efforts have been made to provide colour contrasting including paint on the nosings. This would benefit from being refreshed. Access to the ticket office is via a semi-automated door (operated by a push button).

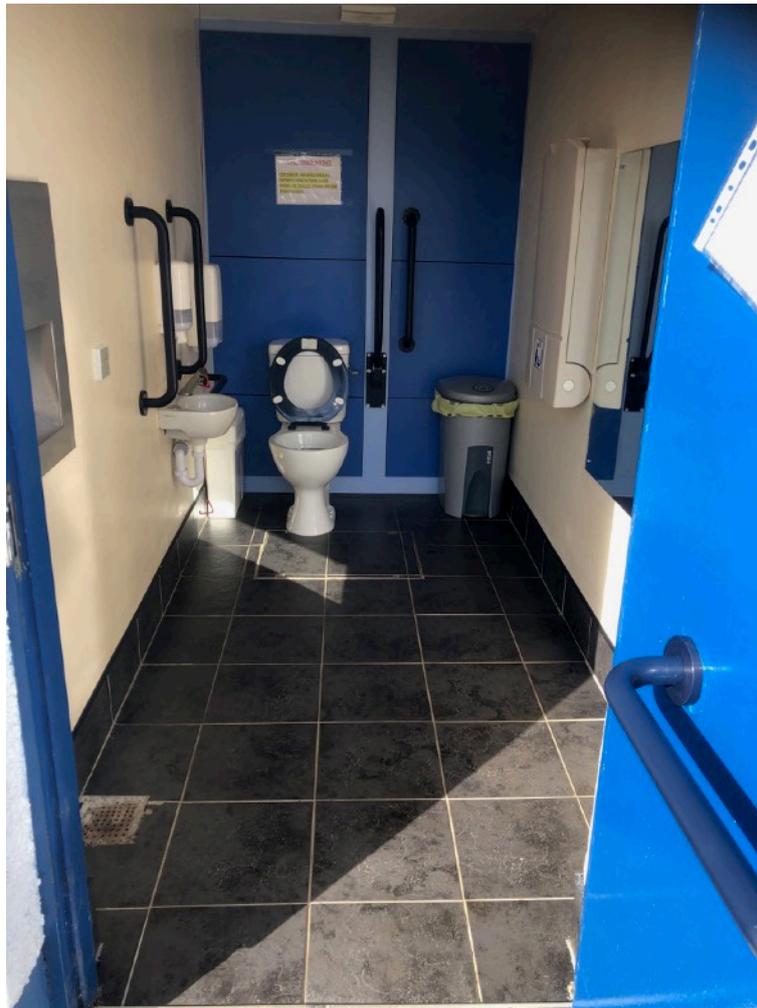
An accessible toilet has been provided to the rear of the ticket office, operated and maintained by Newry, Mourne and Down District Council. The design of the toilet is in line with good practice guidelines for a standard accessible toilet. The toilet can be accessed using a Radar key. The ticket office can provide a key if required.



(Picture 7 shows the steps at the front of the ticket office. The ramp is located to the side of the building.)



(Picture 8 shows the entrance to the ticket office with a semi-automated door.)



(Picture 9 shows the interior of the accessible toilet, located to the rear of the ticket office in Strangford. Signage on the door indicates the availability of a key from the ticket office)

Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis occurred shortly after the site visit and has impacted on all aspects of society in Northern Ireland. As with many other services the Strangford Lough Ferry service has been disrupted by the virus and measures introduced to combat it. This disruption has included restrictions in the frequency of the service and measures introduced to ensure social / physical distancing. It is likely that some restrictions will continue for the foreseeable future, even when the lockdown phase of response to COVID-19 is relaxed.

Findings and recommendations

The Strangford Lough Ferry service is an important service for the local community and visitors alike. It is important to Imtac that disabled people and older people can access the service on an equal basis to others. This aim has informed the Committee's approach to its findings and recommendations.

However it does recognise that there are limitations to physical changes that can be made to the current vessels in particular.

The Department is to be commended for the steps it has already taken to ensure there is good, detailed information available about the accessibility of the service (including details about limitations) as well as the standard of service that disabled people and others with reduced mobility can expect when using the service. By and large the experiences of members who took part in the site visits matched the pre-journey information provided on NI Direct. Particular credit must go to the proactive role played by the crew of the ferry in providing appropriate assistance when required.

The major issue identified by the site visit was the limitations to the access to the passenger lounge on the MV Strangford II. The very high step height at the entrance to the facilities means that even when using a ramp, access will be difficult or impossible for some disabled people, particularly people who use larger wheelchairs and power chairs. This results in some disabled people being unable to access the service on an equal basis to other members of the public.

As a matter of urgency the Department should explore solutions which reduce the gradients involved including the use of a longer ramp.

As an interim measure before a better solution is in place Imtac recommends that the Department updates information about the vessel to include information about the likely issues some disabled people may encounter with the ramp on the MV Strangford II.

In longer term the Department should consult with Imtac about any plans to change or refurbish existing vessels or when planning the procurement of new vessels to ensure all facilities are inclusive.

There were a number of other relatively minor issues picked up during the site visit.

The Committee recommends the Department to address the following:

- **Reviewing the provision of accessible parking at the quayside in Portaferry, to include expanding current provision of a single bay and ensuring accessible parking bays are designed to BS 8300 standards.**

- **Refreshing nosing markings on the steps outside the ticket office in Strangford.**
- **Ensuring all signage is visible and in good condition.**
- **Providing more prominent signage in priority space areas onboard vessels including a message that encourages passengers to move.**
- **Providing a better mix of seating onboard vessels including some perch style seating, some with armrests and an additional area for wheelchair users next to the windows.**

Although facilities are limited in both Portaferry and Strangford, the availability of an accessible ticket office and accessible toilet facilities in Strangford is welcome and should be promoted widely.

Imtac recommends that accessibility information about the service be updated to include information about the ticket office and toilet facilities in Strangford.

More broadly there are a number of wider interventions that Imtac believe would improve access to the ferry service in particular and more generally to both Strangford and Portaferry. These interventions include:

- Improved accessible pedestrian infrastructure in both locations including linkages to and from the ferry.
- Improved accessible on-street and off-street parking provision (both in terms of numbers and design) in both locations.
- Improved public transport infrastructure in both locations.
- Improved accessible public toilet provision in both locations including the provision of Changing Places facilities.

Finally, as society adapts to living with COVID-19 for the foreseeable future it is essential that changes to services to take account of social / physical distancing do not impact disproportionately on older people and disabled people.

Imtac recommends that all reasonable adjustments are made to reduce the impact of social / physical distancing measures on the accessibility of the ferry service. The Committee is happy to advise the Department on how this can be implemented.

Conclusion

Imtac would like to thank the officials from the Department and the crew of the Strangford Lough Ferry service for their help and assistance in arranging and facilitating the site visit. The Committee looks forward to working with the Department to make the current service more accessible and inclusive.