

# Council wants reassurance from internet provider after breakdown

■ Authority received notice of cable work at last minute

■ Connection eventually restored but a reduced capacity

BY KEEGAN MURRAY

The council will be seeking talks with its internet provider with a view to improving the resilience of backup communication links.

This comes after the local authority suffered communications problems owing to work being carried out on the Shefa-2 subsea cable connecting Faroese internet to mainland Scotland via Orkney and Shetland.

Meanwhile, the council's phone network is also to undergo changes designed to offset future disruption by relying on two separate connections in the hope this will leave around half of the council's phone network operational if one of the two connections fails.

Problems first arose for a number of residents and businesses on Thursday evening when cable ships working for a subsidiary of Faroese Telecom lifted a piece of the subsea cable connecting the North Atlantic island group to the UK.

For many there were little or no problems because a fully operational backup was in place. This backup comes from an effective loop of cables which connects the UK to the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Scandinavia via Orkney and Shetland. If a provider has purchased backup capacity their customers' connections can be redirected in the opposite direction to avoid any breaks

in the connection. If, however, the backup capacity is not in place then the connection will be impacted where there is a break, as was the case between Orkney and Shetland during the Shefa-2 cable works.

On Thursday the council discovered that their internet provider, Education Scotland, did not have this backup in place. The SIC's executive manager of ICT Susan Msalila this

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Susan Msalila

been slightly offset if the council had been notified of the scheduled works sooner. A memo had gone out from Faroese Telecom notifying providers of the work. But the message only arrived in the council's inbox on Thursday morning, hours before the work began.

Mrs Msalila said that the convoluted chain of communication which the message had to pass

which in turn purchases services from Capita (operator of SWAN - the Scottish Wide Area Network), which in turn purchases services from BT Openreach.

“There could have been a lack of understanding of the impact it would have [in Shetland] somewhere along that chain,” said Mrs Msalila.

Nevertheless, the council was quickly able to restore phone, email and internet functionality via a backup in the same fashion in which NHS Shetland ensured vital medical phone lines remained open. This involved redirecting traffic via the Farris cable link, which travels north through Iceland in a loop back to the UK, as opposed to south through Orkney.

Mrs Msalila stressed the problems would likely have only been marginally better if the message had been received sooner.

“We probably wouldn't have had downtime for phones. The internet and email wouldn't have stopped working”, she said.

“With more notice, we would have been a bit more prepared but actually we wouldn't have been enormously better off.”

Some services remained down and would have remained down regardless of notice. These were largely the ones which require secure links such as SIMS, the School Information Management

System. These remained down because by accessing the backup the council's IP address altered.

Mrs Msalila likened this to a change of home address. While your pizza delivery guy will simply take your word about a change of address your bank may request more evidence. This was, in effect the issue, with services requiring a secure connection.

Because the outage was expected to last a few days (though it eventually lasted until Tuesday, two days later than scheduled) the decision was taken to leave these down until work was completed and access to the regular Shefa-2 connection restored. It is these issues which the council hopes to explore with Education Scotland.

The SIC's chief executive Maggie Sandison was unavailable for interview this week, but in a statement she said: “The council will be discussing the lack of resilience, and impact on delivering services, with our internet provider and the Scottish government.”

Meanwhile, Mrs Msalila felt there would be lessons learned from the outage.

“It's been interesting in lots of ways. We have learned from it and we will be putting things in place in the future.”

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## Thomson has worries over connections

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“The Scottish government needs to hold the ring and to ensure that the significant amounts of taxpayers' money being invested in connectivity provides the best possible service, at least as good as that enjoyed in other parts of the country.”

Shetland Islands Council's transport committee chairman Ryan Thomson also said there were concerns about the air traffic control centre because of the connections to Shetland.

“There are concerns and there have been concerns [about connections] long before the internet outage that was over the weekend,” he said.

“We've had numerous internet outages before and I think the last one was in 2013/14 whereby the whole of Shetland was without internet access for a considerable amount of time, unless you were with BT or another that piggybacked on their service.”

Mr Thomson added: “It only takes the drudging of a cable or something to happen on-island for a network outage to happen. So the service we have up here is relatively fragile.”

Broadband had been around for 20 years, he said, however, Shetland was “always playing catch-up”.

“That's perhaps not something that is necessarily understood fully from a mainland operation and I use Hial in this instance,” he said, adding concerns about the viability of the project.

Hial would be holding a seminar with councillors in September, said Mr Thomson, who insisted he would be pushing to know what their plans were in terms of connections and a back-up.

Despite providing answers, Mr Thomson said Hial could not “legislate for the unknown”. Given Shetland's location Mr Thomson thought internet problems would continue.

“The reason for this network outage was for essential maintenance,” said Mr Thomson, adding there needed to be better communication from the internet companies.

“There are certainly more questions than answers at this stage,” added Mr Thomson about the traffic control plans.

“I'm sure whatever answers they give, you can't legislate for the unknown, and in a place like Shetland there are plenty of unknowns.”

This newspaper approached Hial to seek answers about how safe the system would be.

The organisation responded with an unattributed statement: “Highlands and Islands Airports will be introducing new methods of managing the airspace in and around the Highlands and Islands to help it meet regulatory requirements, address recruitment and retention issues, improve safety margins in busier skies, all against the backdrop of providing sustainable air traffic control.

“Fortunately the technology used does not rely upon one single form of communications, but rather a package of measures thus ensuring suitable back-up.”

Hial said Sumburgh is not solely reliant on online communication for its operations and also uses private wires and other methods including radar.

The operator said the Civil Aviation Authority would require more than one method of communication for the project and not be reliant on one technology.

The company did not go into details but said the package of measures would reflect such a requirement. It said each supplier had a different package and once the tender process was completed and a supplier confirmed it could provide more detail.

Mr Scott in response wanted Hial to be clear on its plans and felt it was irresponsible to proceed to tender without explaining how it was going to meet the CAA requirement.

However, Loganair has supported the plans. Managing director Jonathan Hinkles said: “The licensing of any airfield to accept scheduled flights covers a wide range of criteria including communications and back-up systems.

“We have every confidence that Hial as the airport operator and the CAA as the regulator will meet these criteria to continue to assure the safe operation of the airport.”

## Cable work disrupts hundreds of people

BY KEEGAN MURRAY

Hundreds of Shetland residents were left without internet or telephone services owing to work being carried out on a subsea cable.

Problems then persisted through the weekend for many residents and businesses as scheduled work on the Shefa-2 cable, which runs from Faroe to mainland Scotland via Orkney and Shetland, took place.

The work was expected to last for around 72 hours. By Monday, however, connectivity issues were still being reported and the subsea work had spilled over into a fourth day. Full service was only restored early Tuesday morning.

Fresh problems were also reported over the weekend with the coastguard losing connectivity at around 9.40am on Sunday (see separate story).

The first communications outage arose when cable ships, working for a subsidiary of Faroese Telecom called Shefa, lifted a piece of cable on Thursday 16th August to splice in a new section.

A number of organisations suffered communications problems owing to the resultant

capacity issues. NHS Shetland and Shetland Islands Council both experienced issues but on Friday morning the NHS sought to assure residents that emergency medical lines at Lerwick's Gilbert Bain Hospital and at health centres were operational.

NHS services were made a priority and communication was moved to a backup routed through Faroe, Iceland, Scandinavia, and back to Britain.

On Friday morning the council's website was down. Those attempting to call the authority were advised to keep trying if they did not get through immediately.

The council had, like NHS Shetland, moved to a backup. Despite this, some areas of their website and internal communications were not fully operational (see separate story).

The arts centre Mareel reported on Facebook on Thursday evening that it was unable to receive phone calls or emails and could not take card payments or print tickets. By Friday at noon the problems had mostly passed, Shetland Arts stated.

Because of the network failure Shetland Arts also reported being unable to receive

emails from external addresses. On Facebook on Tuesday the organisation said that they believed this had resulted in some job applications for three vacancies not being received.

“Could you please either contact us directly to check if your application has been received or resend your application to jobs@shetland-arts.org”, the post advised applicants.

On Monday Shetland Library tweeted that they were still experiencing “some problems”, with people having difficulty accessing their website or catalogue. Users looking to renew or request books were asked to phone the library instead of using their online services.

Organisations including the council and BT were referring to the scheduled maintenance as “emergency” works but according to Ian Brown of Shetland Broadband providers had been informed of the work.

In theory, he said, there should have been little problem as an operational backup, which provides connectivity north via Faroe and over a second subsea cable back to the UK, is available. But this system would only work where providers had bought capacity on the back-up route via Faroe.

Mr Brown said: “Their line [Faroese Telecom/Shefa], and I fully support them on this, is that there's a fully operational back-up available and it's up to individual providers to have this in place.

“Generally speaking, things shouldn't be as bad as they are.”

As of Friday morning, all but a “few hundred” BT customers had been reconnected and efforts were ongoing to reroute more traffic. By Monday BT said that there were still a few hundred customers experiencing problems, adding that Shefa's scheduled work had full overrun. Those customers finally had full connectivity restored on Tuesday morning.

A statement from the telecoms firm on Friday stated: “Shefa, part of Faroese Telecom, were carrying out emergency maintenance to their subsea cable which connects Shetland to the UK mainland. A small number of customers in Shetland may be experiencing problems connecting to broadband as a result.

“Shefa are working to restore the subsea link as soon as possible. We're sorry for any inconvenience.”

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## Coastguard was not affected, it is claimed

On Sunday the Shetland coastguard station lost internet connection following an outage in Lerwick.

The Shetland Times was made aware of the issue on Sunday and made enquiries locally. Our reporter was told the internet connection was lost between about 9.40am and 11.15am, with cover instead being picked up by coastguard staff in the south of England.

However, in a statement to this newspaper from Sophie

Turner, a press officer based at the coastguard headquarters in Southampton, on Tuesday, the organisation insisted that because the station was part of a national network the localised outage did not affect operations “in any way”.

The coastguard added there were two routine incidents coordinated from the Shetland station on Sunday. Neither were affected by the outage.

BT confirmed that between 9.40am and 10am a few hun-

dred broadband customers in Lerwick may have been unable to connect to the internet.

It is understood that the back-up for the internet connection was an undersea cable being worked on by Faroese Telecom which had caused earlier outages.

Meanwhile, customers at Tesco in Lerwick were unable to make contactless payments due to the internet outage on Sunday morning.

## Visitors aim to reassure EU citizens over Brexit



Mark Lazarowicz speaks during the Inverness event.

A group bringing together migrants' groups, voluntary organisations and lawyers wants to make sure EU citizens in Scotland know about their rights before and after Brexit.

After a series of successful events in Inverness, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Glasgow, the group will be coming to Lerwick next month.

During a two-hour session with EU citizens from Shetland, immigration lawyers will shed some light on Brexit, the current state of UK and EU negotiations and the “settled status” application process.

Presentations from specialist immigration solicitor David Brown of Drummond Miller LLP and advocate Mark Lazarowicz will be followed by a question-and-answer session. A member of the European Commission in Scotland will also take part in the meeting.

The event is organised by the “EU Citizens Rights” project, whose aim is to provide infor-

mation on Brexit for over 200,000 EU citizens living in Scotland, whose right to reside in the UK will change soon.

It has been brought together by Mr Lazarowicz, an advocate whose areas of work include EU law and citizenship issues and former MP for Edinburgh North and Leith.

Mr Lazarowicz said: “Even though the EU and the UK have reached a provisional agreement about the rights EU citizens will have in the UK about Brexit, there are still a lot of questions about how the arrangements will work in practice.

“And, of course, a lot of EU citizens (and also employers) have questions about what would happen if the UK leaves the EU with ‘no deal’.”

The Shetland information session will be held on 4th September between 6pm and 8pm at the UHI Shetland College campus at Gremista.

Those unable to attend in person are encouraged to participate in an e-session via a video-conferencing system.

The event is free but booking through the Eventbrite page is strongly encouraged: Brexit & EU citizens' rights – free event, Lerwick, Shetland.

The Citizens' Rights Project has already produced a factsheet detailing EU citizens' rights in the UK up to and after Brexit, which can be accessed online on Public Policy Events website via Facebook.

The leaflet is also available in Latvian, Polish, Romanian, and Spanish (and will also be available shortly in Lithuanian).

More information on the project and about the event may be found on social media: the Facebook page for the project EU Citizens Rights Project – Scotland and Twitter: Citizens Rights Project.