Written response to the recommendations from NorthLink Ferries

I refer to your letter of 13th September in which you ask for my organisation's view of the report "Removing Barriers and Creating Opportunities" and in particular how we intend to implement the report recommendations that are relevant to us.

NorthLink Ferries operates the lifeline ferry services to Orkney & Shetland. Our three passenger, car and freight ferries were specifically designed and built (in 2002) to make them more accessible and friendly towards those with disabilities. Matching facilities and functionality have been into the Terminals in each of the five ports we utilise.

We have sought input from and where possible acted upon the recommendations of relevant groups such as MACS and Disability Shetland. You may be interested to know that the latter group has recently conducted a survey of disabled travellers and I'm pleased to say that in all categories Northlink scored a very positive 4 or 5 out 5 in each category.

Amongst the facilities and services we offer are:

- Level access to vessels at all ports;
- Passenger Terminals with integral lifts;
- Vessel lift between car deck and two public decks;
- Each vessel has a number of cabins specially adapted for disabled passengers, including the provision of hoist facilities and beds for accompanying carers;
- Disabled friendly public spaces with multiple tables to accommodate those in wheelchairs, nearby disabled access toilets, etc;
- Procedure to position cars by the lift for those with mobility difficulties;
- Exemption for Assistance Dogs from general public space ban;
- Trip planning information on web-site including disabled access FAQs;
- Access to discounted fares;
- Staff training in disability awareness.

That said we are always willing to listen to suggestions of areas of services and facilities where we could improve.

As regards employment our staff are divided into sea staff and shore staff. Sea staff are primarily on-board as part of the vessel safety systems and as such staff are subject to a regulatory regime which unfortunately means that all seafarers are required to be able bodied.

In terms of shore staff Northlink operates an equal opportunities policy which ensures all candidates are treated equally for any vacancy regardless of disability or other potentially discriminatory factors.

If you would like additional information or have any questions then please do not hesitate to contact me.