

OpenVoiceNews U.K.

Transparent. Unbiased. Yours.

New £500m UK Tunnel Network to Boost Island Connectivity

July 17, 2025

— Categories: *Economics*



© Erik Christensen

Download IPFS

A bold £500 million plan to construct undersea tunnels in the Shetland Islands promises to transform connectivity and breathe new life into these remote Scottish communities. Drawing inspiration from the Faroe Islands, where a subsea tunnel network has already spurred population and economic growth, Shetland's ambitious project aims to replace ageing ferries with faster, more reliable transport links.

In the Faroe Islands, a self-governing archipelago under Danish sovereignty, the Eysturoyartunnil has proven the value of such infrastructure. Opened in 2020 after just four years of construction, this 6.9-mile tunnel network connects the capital, Torshavn, to the second-largest island, slashing travel times from over an hour to a mere 15 minutes. At its core lies the world's first underwater roundabout, submerged 72 metres below the sea. In a recent interview with the BBC, Faroe Islands Prime Minister Aksel Johannesen said, "Investment in infrastructure is a good investment," noting that the tunnels have bolstered both population and economic activity.

The Shetland Islands Council has taken note, recently approving a £500,000 study to explore the feasibility of a similar Fixed Link Model (FLM). According to *Ground Engineering*, the study will assess the commercial and financial viability of constructing tunnels between Shetland's islands, alongside outlining the next steps for the project.

Potential routes include connections from Yell to Unst (4.4km, up to 44m below sea level), Bressay to Lerwick (1.9km, up to 25m below sea level), Whalsay to mainland Shetland (5.5km, up to 80m below sea level), and Yell to mainland Shetland (6km, up to 40m below sea level). Whalsay to mainland Shetland (6.35km, up to 80m below sea level), and Yell to mainland Shetland (6km, up to 40m below sea level). A proposed link from Yell to Fetlar, however, has been deemed unviable due to its 4.5km length, significant depth of 65m, and the small population of just 61 on Fetlar, which would struggle to justify the high costs.

The Faroese model isn't without its price. Drivers pay a toll of 75 Danish kroner (£9) each way, or 175 kroner (£20) without a yearly subscription, with fees automatically charged via number plate recognition. These revenues are earmarked to fund further tunnel projects, a strategy Shetland may emulate to sustain its £500 million vision.

Shetland's current reliance on ferries, with an average fleet age of 31.5 years, has become increasingly unsustainable. Costs have soared over the past decade, and some routes struggle to meet demand for vehicle spaces, leaving islanders stranded or delayed. The proposed tunnels could eliminate these issues, offering a modern alternative that enhances accessibility and supports population growth.

While the initiative holds promise, it's not without challenges. The UK's Labour government, now overseeing national infrastructure priorities, has yet to commit funding, raising concerns among Shetland's leaders about delays and bureaucratic hurdles. Years of indecision have already frustrated progress, and local stakeholders are keen to avoid further

wasted time. If successful, however, this project could redefine life in the Shetlands, fostering economic vitality and ensuring these islands remain vibrant communities for generations to come.