



DRAMA FESTIVAL ... Pages 24 & 25

Heavy fine
Firm penalised after worker falls through roof
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Bressay's big day



Guizer Jarl Chris Sim raises his axe aloft during the Bressay Up-Helly-A' celebrations. Chris had waited a long time to lead the procession, and was delighted that the day had finally arrived. For full coverage turn to pages 20 and 21. Photo: Sophie Whitehead

New figures reveal sick days on ferries

EXCLUSIVE

By **KEVIN CRAIGENS**

Inter-island ferry staff took almost 3,000 sick days off in 2024 – up by around 1,100 (63 per cent) on the previous year.

Of that, a total of 759 – one in four – were attributed as “sick days due to mental health”, which is almost triple the 2023 level.

The figures were revealed in a Freedom of Information request from *The Shetland Times*.

They follow a series of well-documented disruptions to the beleaguered inter-island ferry service, with cancellations forced on the fleet on numerous occasions in recent months due to crew sickness.

One former staff member, who spoke anonymously to *The Shetland Times*, claimed over-stretched crews were being forced to work compulsory overtime, while trying to

fill “holes in the workforce”. They said it was “ridiculous” how ferry staff were being treated by management.

“They are so fatigued,” they said. This was down to a lack of staff, particularly at Master level, they claimed.

And “various tactics” have been used to “cajole staff to come in to work excessive amounts of overtime”.

While the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (Cosla) is arguing for a shorter working week – 35 hours – the former member of staff said some crew were being forced into taking on near-50 hour weeks.

“[Crew are] coming to me, deeply concerned because of the age bracket that they’re in, because of the fatigue level they’re already facing, but unable to say no to this because of peer pressure and because of the way it’s being put to them by management,” they told *The Shetland Times*.

“Management is actually going to individuals and saying, ‘Look, here’s a wonderful thing for you’, and signing members up. They’re not going through the union with this.”

The data obtained by this newspaper shows that a total of 1,882 sick days were taken by staff in 2019, of which 72 were attributed to mental health. The figures varied over the years, with 1,083 sick days in 2021, 1,812 in 2023, and then 2,956.5 in 2024 – a jump of 1,143 on the previous year.

Sick days due to mental health rose to 326 in 2020, dropped again to 230 in 2021, 252 in 2022, 271 in 2023 – before reaching 2024’s sharp rise of 180 per cent.

Management are also alleged to have approached union members without going through union leadership, “taking ballots” for major decisions.

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New energy park could be bigger than Sullom Voe

EXCLUSIVE

By **ANDREW HIRST**

A major new energy park – bigger than Sullom Voe Terminal – has been proposed for the North Mainland.

The 630-hectare Neshion Park would be built next to the

terminal, featuring 10 turbines, a battery energy storage system and an extensive habitat management area.

It is expected to cost £100m-£200m and could be operational as soon as 2030.

Shetland Aerogenerators, which is leading the project, with support from other local firms and individuals, said

community involvement was key – with a public engagement event planned for later this month.

Chief executive David Thomson said the aim was to create something “in Shetland, by Shetland, for Shetland”.

• *Read about the proposals in this month’s Energy Zone on pages six and seven.*

Lifesaving letters highlighted by Viking Genes volunteers

EXCLUSIVE

By **DANIEL SHAILER**

Dozens of volunteers have received a letter from Viking Genes alerting them

to dangerous variants in their DNA – helping some identify fatal diseases early enough to treat.

For fisherman John Arthur Poleson, it was a lifesaver. It also makes him one of the first cohorts in the country to receive personalised results from a research

project, according to an academic paper published in the *American Journal of Human Genetics* today.

For researchers, the results marks the culmination of 20 years’ work, and a major step towards “bespoke” genetic screening to help Shetlanders identify

diseases early. When Mr Poleson first went for a test a decade ago, the 62-year-old just wanted to know if he had Viking ancestry running through his veins.

Almost a decade after volunteering to give his blood, Mr Poleson learnt instead that he carries BRACA2 – a variant

unusually common in Whalsay which puts him at higher risk of contracting cancer.

Then more tests caught a potentially life-threatening tumour in his prostate.

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New Opportune makes her appearance at harbour

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Singer wears jeweller’s creation on television show.

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