

Fort William Strategic Transport Study Pre-Appraisal – the Case for Change: Executive Summary

Context

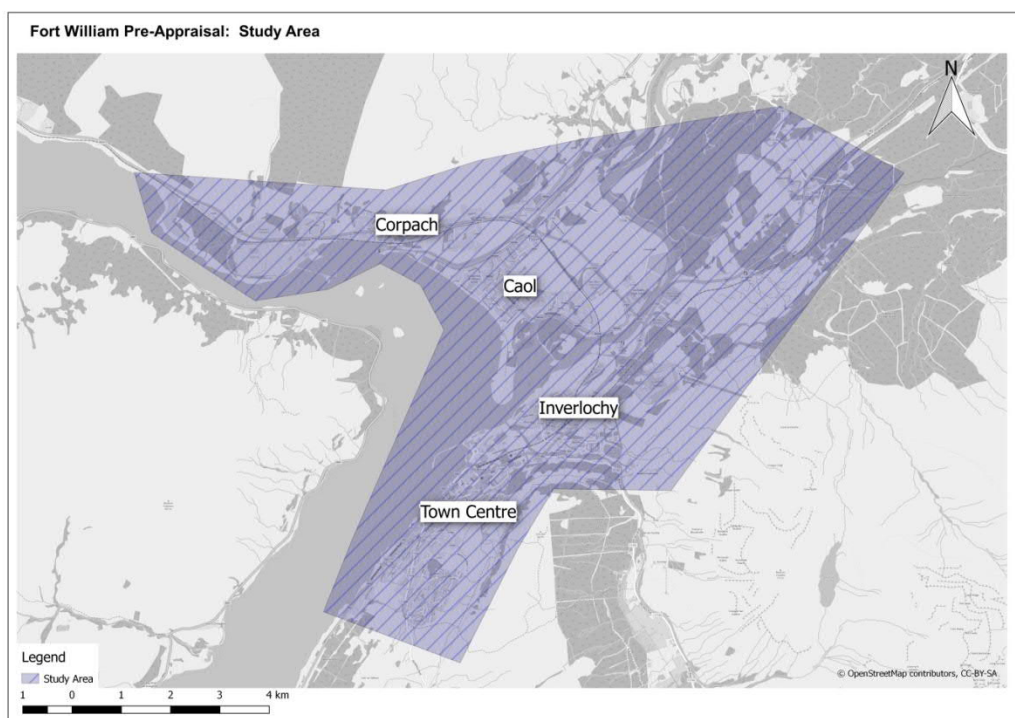
AECOM was commissioned in December 2017 to establish evidence of transport problems and to consider the appropriate approach to the future development of the transport network in Fort William through a Pre-Appraisal Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidance (STAG) study. The Fort William Strategic Transport Study (Pre-Appraisal) project steering group comprises the Highlands and Islands Regional Transport Partnership (HITRANS), The Highland Council (THC), Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) and Transport Scotland (TS).

The study is linked to the planned growth of Fort William, as per development allocations in the proposed West Highlands and Islands Local Development Plan, as well as the recent planning permissions for the major expansion at the Lochaber Smelter site in Fort William.

The overarching aim of the Pre-Appraisal stage of transport appraisal is to establish if there is an evidence-based case for change. Pre-Appraisal aims to:

- Establish evidence for problems and issues linked to transport in a specific area or corridor – key sources of evidence include data and engagement with stakeholders and the public.
- Identify opportunities and constraints that could exacerbate transport issues in the future and influence the development of solutions.
- Develop initial Transport Planning Objectives to clarify the aims of any interventions, and to guide the development of solutions.
- Develop a long list of possible options to tackle identified problems, and undertake an initial sifting exercise culminating in recommendations on a shorter list of options for progression towards Initial Appraisal.

The geographic scope of the Study Area is illustrated in the map shown below. Whilst named as the Fort William Strategic Transport Study, it should be noted the area comprises a number of linked settlements – Fort William, Caol, Corpach and Inverlochy.



Fort William

The total population of the Fort William area is around 10,300; this total includes the areas of Fort William, Caol, Inverlochy, Corpach and Banavie. Population for the Highland Council generally is forecast to increase in future years. The age structure of the population is comparable to the local authority and Scotland level, though it has a slightly higher percentage of 0-15 year olds.

Some 73% of people are economically active within the Study Area, which is 4% higher than the Scotland average. Wholesale and retail trade, and accommodation and food service activities employ a higher percentage of people in the Study Area compared to Highland and Scotland as a whole; accommodation and food service activities in particular accounts for almost double the proportion of people it employs in comparison to Scotland wide figures.

These figures underline Fort William's role in Scotland's visitor economy. The International Passenger Survey (IPS) suggests Fort William had 112,000 holiday-related visits in 2016, significantly more than comparable Aviemore – and visitor numbers have increased in Fort William in recent years. As well as major visitor attractions such as the Nevis Range and Glenfinnan, the area hosts major events, some linked to the area's brand as the Outdoor Capital of the UK. These include the annual UCI Mountain Bike Championships in early June which attracts 22,000 spectators and has brought over £37m to the Scottish economy since 2002.

Finally, manufacturing accounts for almost 10% of jobs in the Study Area, higher than the Highland and Scottish average. Agriculture, forestry and fishing accounts for 3%, less than the Highland average but higher than the national average for Scotland. This demonstrates that the Study Area has a relatively diverse economy, with local hauliers and businesses playing a role in producing and transporting goods across Scotland and further afield.

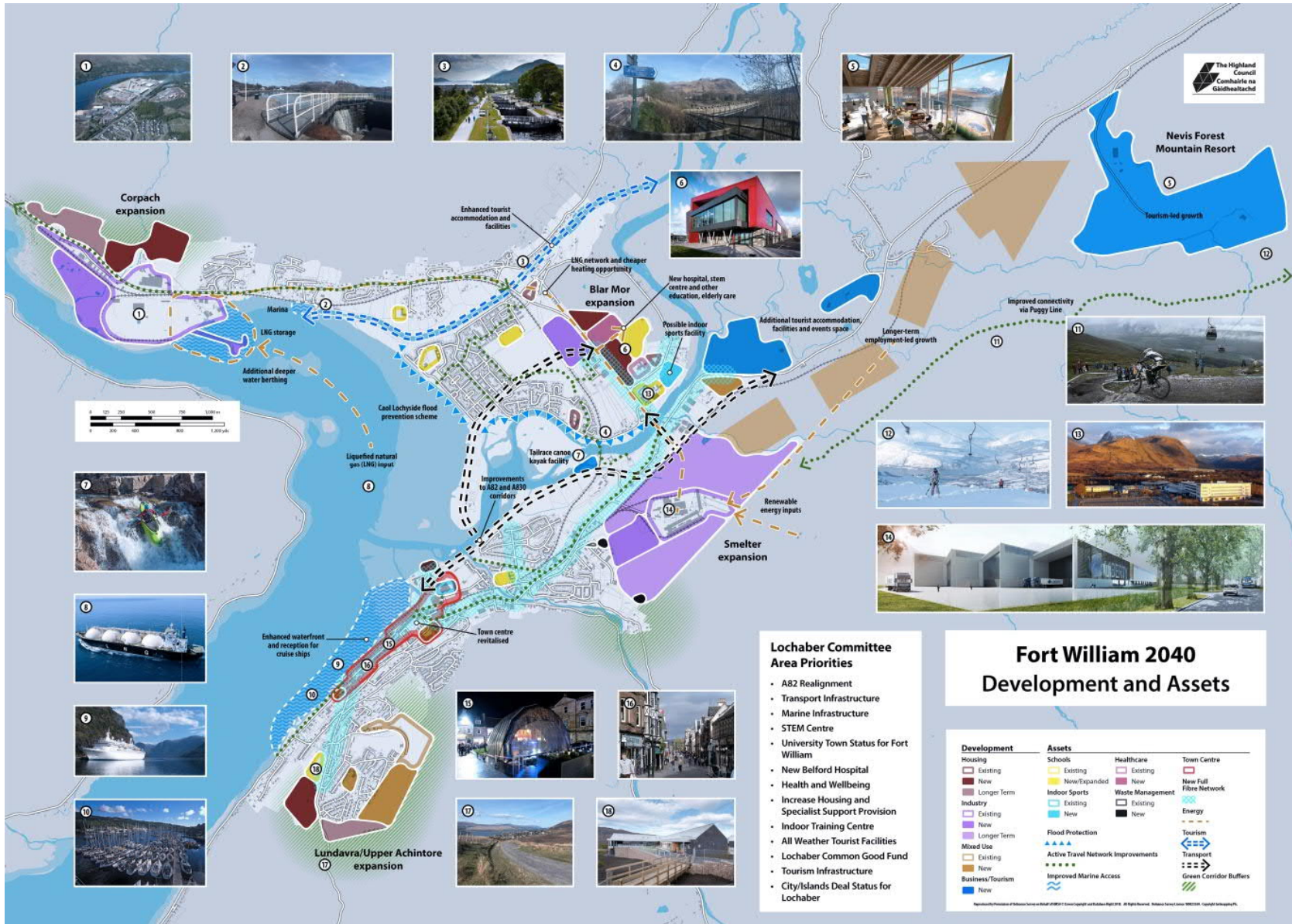
Future growth and change in Fort William

Liberty Lochaber Aluminium Ltd intend to develop an alloy wheel manufacturing facility on land adjacent to the existing Lochaber Aluminium Smelter, adjacent to North Road (A82) on the eastern side of Fort William. The site currently covers an area of 44 ha and is expected to generate approximately 400 new jobs. The existing access point at the new roundabout on the A82 serving the Retail Park will continue to serve the alloy wheel plant, with all staff entering and exiting from this location. However, there is also the intention to create additional access to the facility from Ben Nevis Drive through the Glen Nevis Business Park.

This development is expected to act as a catalyst for the development of a significant number of new homes, supporting businesses and other services throughout the study area.

In addition to Liberty, there are a number of potential developments arising from the Proposed West Highlands and Islands Local Development Plan for Fort William including allocations for over 800 housing units in the Study Area. Planned growth at Spean Bridge may also place more demand on Fort William as a regional service centre.

The following Highland Council figure demonstrates the potential growth and development of Fort William in the decades to come.



- Lochaber Committee Area Priorities**
- A82 Realignment
 - Transport Infrastructure
 - Marine Infrastructure
 - STEM Centre
 - University Town Status for Fort William
 - New Belford Hospital
 - Health and Wellbeing
 - Increase Housing and Specialist Support Provision
 - Indoor Training Centre
 - All Weather Tourist Facilities
 - Lochaber Common Good Fund
 - Tourism Infrastructure
 - City/Islands Deal Status for Lochaber

Fort William 2040 Development and Assets

| Development | Assets | Healthcare | Town Centre |
|------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Housing | Schools | Healthcare | Town Centre |
| Existing | Existing | Existing | New Full |
| New | New/Expanded | New | Fibre Network |
| Longer Term | Indoor Sports | Waste Management | Energy |
| Industry | Existing | Existing | Tourism |
| Existing | New | New | Transport |
| New | Flood Protection | Improved Marine Access | Green Corridor Buffers |
| Longer Term | Active Travel Network Improvements | | |
| Mixed Use | ***** | | |
| Existing | Improved Marine Access | | |
| New | | | |
| Business/Tourism | | | |
| New | | | |

What is the existing transport provision and what are the key issues?

As with many towns, Fort William has a multi-modal transport network.



A comprehensive engagement programme was carried out to inform this study. This comprised an online Placecheck tool, a focus group with residents, in-depth interviews with a large number of stakeholder organisations and community representatives, a public drop-in session in the town centre and a stakeholder workshop.

As a result of this engagement process, together with an analysis of data trends and previous research, a number of key transport problems have been identified for the Fort William area.

Journey time variability and seasonal congestion

Through engagement with stakeholders and the general public in this study, one of the most common themes that came up when asked about transport issues in Fort William was seasonal traffic congestion. Congestion is a difficult topic to define, as it can vary depending on what people are used to and individual perspectives. For this study therefore, journey time variability has mainly been focused on as an indicator. Notwithstanding that, people who live and work in Fort William frequently refer to the problem as “congestion”, and it should be recognised that this is how people perceive and articulate the problem.

Seasonal congestion has been recognised as an issue in Fort William for many years, with the existence of a local Fort William Congestion Group and development of a traffic model by Transport Scotland to test potential solutions. Some improvements have been made to the road network in recent years, most notably the replacement of the traffic signals at A82/Earl of Inverness (Inverloch Junction) junction with a mini-roundabout in 2016 to improve northbound journey times. At the time of writing, work is underway to improve the junction at the Glen Nevis bridge to improve traffic flow and relieve congestion at this point. This work suggests there is evidence that individual junctions and their configurations may be contributing to issues of congestion along the A82 within the Study Area. As incremental improvements are ongoing however, it is difficult to conclude if these will cumulatively improve travel time consistency within the Study Area until works are completed and monitoring has been carried out.

As set out in Section 3, data published in Transport Scotland’s Scottish Transport Statistics illustrates the higher relative seasonal increase in traffic volumes in the Study Area compared to the Highland region as a whole, and visitor data suggests that visitor numbers are increasing in the study area. A September Road Side Interview survey on the A82 south of Fort William in 2017 showed over 40% of vehicle drivers interviewed were on holiday. INRIX travel data and bespoke surveys carried out on the A82 in 2017 provided by Transport Scotland present the implications of these seasonally high traffic volumes in terms of travel times and travel time variability.

Analysis of this data verifies the local conceptions that southbound journeys are slower and more susceptible to higher degrees of variability compared to northbound journeys.

The study has identified the problems these traffic patterns and their impact on travel times present:

- Emergency Services in Fort William report issues of staff being unable to reach work due to traffic congestion, as well as delays to emergency vehicles accessing the road network at Belford junction which is in the heart of the A82 road network in Fort William. A teacher in a focus group as part of this research suggested congestion also impacted upon staff and students getting to school.
- Engagement for this study suggests people who live and work in the area are concerned the transport network cannot cope with the planned growth of the town with the Liberty Smelter proposals. The future anticipated population growth of surrounding settlements such as Spean Bridge would also further the importance of Fort William as a regional economic centre. Growth of both these outlying settlements and Fort William may potentially be constrained if travel times are highly variable and lengthy in nature, and diminishing attractiveness of the area as a place to live, work and invest in is a concern for some.
- There is a lack of diversionary routes within and through the study area, which means any delay on the A82 through Fort William can cause the road network to 'gridlock'. As several people have commented during engagement for this study, there is "one route in, and one route out" of Fort William.
- Bus operators have commented on the impact of congestion on their services, with additional vehicles having to be run during congested times to try to catch up with the timetable.
- Companies transporting goods in the area report that they sometimes choose to ground vehicles completely during road closures rather than attempt diversions, and some vehicles which should be able to make up to 6 loads a day are only making 4, leading to less efficient and more expensive operations.
- The Glen Nevis bridge/junction was reported by many as a source of congestion in the area, as well as the Inverlochry junction. Reports of southbound queuing on the A82 extending as far north as Torlundy were also noted during engagement. Traffic data for a Transport Scotland model suggest traffic flows are highest between the A82/A830 junction and Belford junction. As noted above, Transport Scotland has recently implemented an online improvement at the Glen Nevis junction to improve traffic flow at this point. INRIX data highlights high variability in travel times from the A82 to the A830/A82 junction in the north of town.
- During engagement in the study, people expressed concerns about growing traffic linked with new development such as the retail park and the move of some core services to Blar Mhor. Whilst it is not clear if these developments are leading to additional trips on the road network (as opposed to relocating existing trips), there is a fear that problems will worsen in these areas in years to come. It was also suggested at the focus group for this study that some residents choose not to come into Fort William for fear of congestion, which may have longer term impacts on the vitality of the town centre.

Road Network Resilience

The nature of the road network in the Study Area is such that it carries both local and strategic traffic as evidenced by results of RSIs discussed in Section 3. Additionally, as the A82 constitutes the sole north-south road link through Fort William, the network is highly sensitive to incidents resulting in road closures. The series of maps presented in Section 3 illustrate the official diversionary routes as supplied by the trunk road operating company Bear Scotland.

The length of diversion routes in the event of a road closure in the Study Area is considerable. During road closures, the journey time of A830 diversions would be at least 1hr and journey time of A82 diversions would be over 2½ hrs.

Data on road closures from BEAR Scotland Ltd seem to suggest road closures are infrequent and variable, with eight recorded in 2016 (mostly linked to Road Traffic Collisions), and three in 2017. The duration of road closures varies from 45minutes to one incident in 2018 where the A82 was closed for 14hours. Whilst infrequent, these closures cause significant disruption as reported through the engagement process.

Analysis of ATC data suggests traffic volumes do intensify during weekends, public holidays and potentially around events such as the Mountain Bike World Cup in early June. Anecdotally however, local people state that unexpected incidents are more likely to cause gridlock, and the lack of diversionary routes compounds the problem. From observed data and anecdotally, incidents can vary from road traffic collisions, issues with the canal swing bridge at Banavie and abnormal loads.

Poor bus accessibility and declining services

Public transport issues have been commonly cited during engagement for this study. The bus industry in the UK generally is facing a period of sustained passenger decline. Stagecoach has withdrawn from bus service provision in the area in 2018. The infrequent nature of the majority of bus services in the Study Area may limit the appeal of bus travel and may contribute to geographic exclusion/isolation, particularly for residents of the outlying settlements. Bus accessibility analysis, reported in Section 3, suggests Fort William has poorer bus accessibility than Oban, though is on a par with comparable areas elsewhere. Areas to the north-west of Fort William town centre, and the furthest south in the town, rank lowest on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation Geographic Access domain which measure access to vital services by public transport and private car. The study area has a higher proportion of households without access to a car than the Highland-wide average.

A local bus operator advocates for an improved bus station with better waiting facilities for passengers. The current bus station has real time information but buses share stances which may confuse some passengers. The waiting area offers limited protection from cold weather, though it is close to the rail station and taxi ranks which offers an opportunity for transport integration. The journey from the bus and rail station area to the town centre is not an inviting one, with the negotiation of a pedestrian underpass.

Low use of rail for local journeys and limited Central Belt connections

The timetabling of rail services in the Study Area is such that opportunities to travel by rail to work or study are limited. In respect of local commuter journeys, there is a single weekday service which calls at Corpach (07:13) and Banavie (07:17) en route to Fort William where it arrives at 07:25. In terms of services departing from Fort William, the only evening service which operates between Fort William and the same settlements departs at 16:19, calling at Banavie at 16:25 and Corpach at 16:30.

The limited number of Central Belt rail connections has been highlighted by a number of stakeholders and the public during this study, with a notable gap in the timetable from Fort William to Glasgow in the afternoon. The timetable also prohibits the use of rail for a full day trip (for leisure or business) in Fort William from the Central Belt, allowing only five hours in the town.

ScotRail data suggests rail demand on the West Highland Line continues to grow, though it is the most seasonal of all rail routes in Scotland, which suggests the business case for investment which would have all-year round costs (e.g. additional rail services) may be difficult to prove.

Constraints on active travel

There is a real desire by residents to walk and cycle more for everyday journeys. The alignment of the A82 causes severance of the Town Centre from the rail and bus stations and from the waterfront. This was frequently raised during the engagement process. Gaps or shortcomings in the cycle network were highlighted by local people, including a need for better links between Caol and Fort William town centre and the alignment of the National Cycle Network route 78.

Lack of awareness of existing active travel facilities was highlighted in respect of visitors and locals, in part due to a lack of signage. This lack of awareness, and gaps in onward connectivity i.e. with the Town Centre, may potentially make travelling by bicycle a less attractive option.

Summary: State of the Town – Transport problems

It is clear that congestion is a major concern for the people who live and work in Fort William. The contributory factors are less clear, though previous work by Transport Scotland suggests specific junctions are an important factor, whilst high seasonal volumes of traffic correlate with the largest degree of travel time variability. It is not clear if events themselves lead to travel time variability, and incidents, whilst having a major impact when they occur, do not happen frequently according to official data. The impacts of incidents however are compounded by the significant diversionary routes required in an area with limited or no diversionary routes within the Study Area.

Together with a range of wider contributory issues, such as an active travel and public transport network that is not supporting as many sustainable travel journeys as it potentially could, there is a case for intervention of varying types and magnitude to support Fort William's continued growth in the future.

Contributory Factors?

- Highly seasonal traffic flows and growing visitor numbers
- Extended peak tourist season
- Large-scale public events
- Physical constraints at river crossings
- Constrained junctions on A82 through Fort William
- Relatively low use of rail for travel to work
- Gaps in active travel network
- Bus accessibility a challenge from rural catchment

Legend

School Travel Mode

- Walk
- Cycle
- Scoot/Skate
- Park & Stride
- Driven
- Bus
- Taxi
- Other

Key Locations

- Belford Hospital
- Blar Mhor Ind. Est.
- Corpach Harbour
- Fire Station
- Police & Ambulance Station
- Retail Park
- Smelter
- Nevis Range

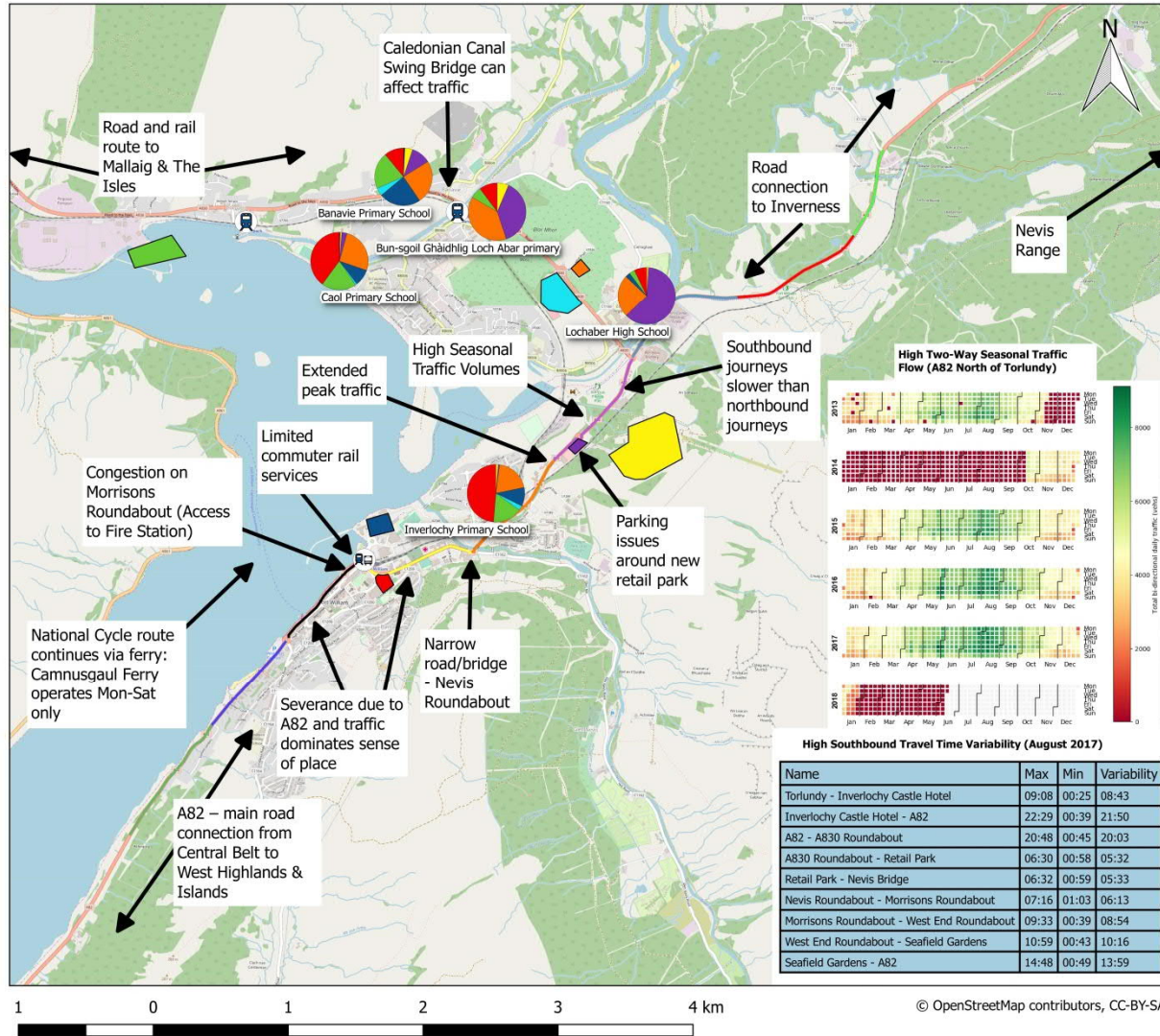
Route Sections

- A82 - A830 Roundabout
- A830 Roundabout - Retail Park
- Inverloch Castle Hotel - A82
- Morrisons Roundabout - West End Roundabout
- Nevis Roundabout - Morrisons Roundabout
- Retail Park - Nevis Bridge
- Seafield Gardens - A82
- Torlundy - Inverloch Castle Hotel
- West End Roundabout - Seafield Gardens

Public Transport Stations

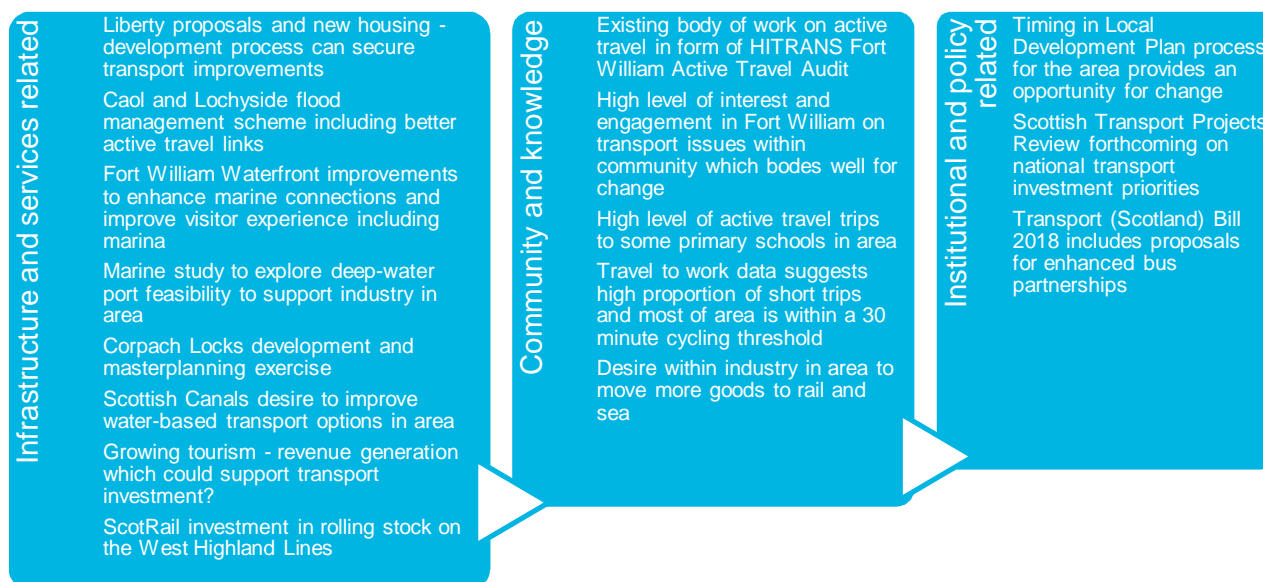
- Bus & Rail Station
- Railway Station

Fort William Pre-Appraisal: State of the Town



Opportunities to build on

Notwithstanding the perceived and observed problems with the transport network in Fort William, there are a number of opportunities that can be built upon to improve conditions. Some of these also include planned projects which may include scope for some improved transport provision.



Despite these opportunities, there is a concern by many who live and work in the town that major investment is needed to tackle persistent and growing issues of lengthening seasonal congestion, public transport service decline and gaps in the active travel network. There is also a desire to help grow the economy through improved rail and water-borne freight.

What should any investment seek to achieve?

Through a process of engagement with stakeholders, a set of transport planning objectives for transport investment have been developed. The transport appraisal process is evidence and objective led. This means that a clear direction and purpose is set by objectives, which in turn respond to evidence-based problems. These objectives state what needs to be achieved by any future interventions and investment, and guide the development, and ultimately the assessment of the relative performance of potential solutions.

Draft transport planning objectives for the study, which will be sense-checked through further stakeholder consultation in any next stage of the work, are shown below.

Objective

To create a transport network that alleviates the economic and social impacts of congestion, particularly journey time variability, for both local and strategic transport users and accommodates future growth in the Lochaber area:

This objective specifically addresses the problems of:

- The perceived and observed impacts of journey time variability in the Study Area.
- The concerns that congestion / journey time variability is preventing Emergency Services and bus services from operating properly, and affecting people getting to school and work.
- The concerns that journey time variability is leading to lost time for hauliers and deliveries.
- Concerns that visitors and local people may increasingly be deterred from the area by levels of congestion, and a desire to ensure the local economy continues to thrive in the future.

To ensure the transport network is resilient in the event of incidents and road closures:

This objective specifically addresses the problems of:

- The perception by stakeholders that incidents can cause journey time delay on the road network, and prevent vital social and emergency services from operating to the best of their ability.
- The limited nature of the road network in Fort William in terms of one primary road network running through the area with limited diversionary routes.

To deliver a health-promoting, sustainable and fair transport network that promotes equal access to opportunity:

This objective specifically addresses the problems of:

- Households without access to a car in Fort William and the need to ensure the growth of the town benefits everyone in an inclusive manner, even those without access to a car.
- The desire by many to be able to walk and cycle for more local journeys and Census evidence on the proportion of relatively short journeys for work and education.
- The severance caused by the A82 and A830 throughout the study area, and difficulties imposed by this road network on active travel connections.
- Local concerns over safe and appropriate active travel infrastructure.
- The need to improve the bus and local rail offer in Fort William to support modal shift to public transport.

To achieve smarter, more reliable and sustainable movement of goods to, from and through the area:

This objective specifically addresses the problems of:

- The desire by some industry sectors and employers to move freight away from road to offer greater resilience.
- The proportion of HGVs on the road network in the Study Area (though data is variable on this).
- Improved efficiency of road-based freight movements where road is the only option.

To achieve smarter management of travel demand to reduce seasonal impacts on the transport network:

This objective specifically addresses the problems of:

- Observed longer journey times during seasonal peaks (INRIX data) and resulting impacts on wider community as reported during engagement for this study.
- High proportion of vehicle travellers on A82 in vicinity of Fort William (as evidenced by RSI data) being visitors to the area, and a need to encourage more to travel by rail or bus (or even by water-borne means) to the area.

Options to tackle transport problems and deliver objectives

The transport appraisal process requires a long list of options to be developed at the pre-appraisal stage, in liaison with stakeholders, to identify all possible solutions to transport problems. In this study, this long list has been assessed in terms of their contribution to study objectives, which in turn reflect the transport problems that need to be addressed. A sifted and packaged list of options have been developed. These will be taken forward to the next stage of the transport appraisal process for further development and an 'Initial Appraisal' of their performance against STAG criteria of Environment, Safety, Integration, Economy, Accessibility and Social Inclusion, as well as deliverability. They are shown below.

Options for change

New road link between A82 and A830 to provide an additional and alternative route to the existing A82 through the Study Area. This could include a new link across to Caol, or a realignment of the existing A82.

A package of measures to improve and maximise the performance of the existing road network. Such an improvement has recently been completed at the Glen Nevis roundabout by Transport Scotland, following a recent upgrade to the Inverloch

Options for change

junction. Further improvements should be explored along the route.

Active travel infrastructure package, to fill gaps in the walking and cycling network to ensure a comprehensive and joined up network exists to support walking and cycling for everyday journeys.

Bus infrastructure improvement package which could include a new Park and Ride for Fort William, an improved bus station facility, and an integrated travel hub at Banavie.

Travel behaviour change package to support and encourage sustainable modes of travel for residents, employees and visitors. This could include a personalised travel planning project with a specific residential area, development of a bike share scheme, further expansion of car club facilities for employees and residents, integrated ticketing and exploration of a Mobility as a Service project to make it easier for people to purchase integrated travel options.

Travel information package to improve awareness of existing sustainable transport options and improve the efficiency of the network, through VMS signage on route delays and parking availability, and a new website/app to promote transport information to visitors and local people.

Rail service improvement package which looks at the frequency of rail services from local stations to support rail use for work and education, and the exploration of new rail halts to support the transport of people and goods by rail.

Bus service improvement package, to identify areas for bus priority to improve bus journey times and patronage, a review of bus services to suit local journeys, and a permanent shuttle bus service for visitors and multiple attractions.

Freight management package to explore and support local initiatives to develop freight transport by rail and water, and formalise lorry parking.

Marine and water package excluding freight to better use existing water-based resources like the Canal to support everyday journeys and improving the frequency of existing ferry connections to Corran and Camusnagaul.

Parking management to review the location of parking for types of visitor vehicles like campervans, better information provision on parking availability and a review of on-street parking to explore its role in congestion or excessive traffic movements.

Planning and development package to include a review of access arrangements and connectivity to and from emergency services to improve resilience during network incidents and congestion.

Next steps

This study constitutes the first part of a STAG-based approach. It has sought to establish the case for change in Fort William with regards to transport. The report is associated with The Highland Council's Proposed West Highlands and Islands Local Development Plan in terms of safeguarding transport infrastructure and related policies. The steering group for the study and associated governance structures will take a decision on whether to proceed to the next stage of STAG, known as Initial Appraisal. At this stage, further development of options is carried out, further option sifting if required and packaging, further consultation with stakeholders and further appraisal of the contribution of options to the final Transport Planning Objectives agreed with stakeholders. These options will then be subject to quantitative assessment in the Detailed Appraisal stage, particularly to gauge the impact and value of potentially alternative options designed to address the key problems highlighted in this study – chief amongst these being congestion and lack of network resilience in the area.

