HITRANS Regional Transport Strategy

Regional Transport Strategy for submission to Ministers

On behalf of the **Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership**

HITRANS
THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS TRANSPORT PARTNERSHIP

Project Ref: 330610615 | Date: January 2024

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Document Control Sheet

Project Name: HITRANS Regional Transport Strategy

Project Ref: 330610615

Report Title: Regional Transport Strategy for submission to Ministers

Date: 17th January 2024

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For and on behalf of Stantec UK Limited				

Revision	Date	Description	Prepared	Reviewed	Approved
v.2.0	26/03/24	Draft for consultation following HITRANS comments	Stephen Canning	Scott Leitham	Stephen Canning
vFINAL	18/04/24	Minor amendments to draft for consultation	Scott Leitham	Stephen Canning	Stephen Canning
Draft for Ministers	17/09/24	Draft RTS post-consultation to be issued to Ministers	Scott Leitham	Stephen Canning	Stephen Canning

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The Highlands and Islands Regional Transport Strategy 2008-2022 (RTS) was approved by Scottish Minsters in 2008. It was informed and influenced by widespread public and stakeholder consultation. The RTS, projects and themes from the associated Delivery Plan, set out the key policies and proposals required to deliver our vision for transport in the region. Much of the core policy framework and strategic direction of the RTS and its vision and objectives remain valid today with a focus on a prosperous economy and on inclusive, connected and healthy communities. However, there have been several changes to the policy, economic, societal and environmental contexts within which our Partnership now operates, and these are reflected in our updated RTS.

The Scottish Government published its updated the National Transport Strategy in 2020. This sets out four key priorities to support it vision: reducing inequalities; taking climate action; helping deliver inclusive economic growth; and improving our health and wellbeing. At its heart is the *Sustainable Investment Hierarchy* which is now being used to inform future investment decisions and ensure transport options that focus on reducing inequalities and the need to travel unsustainably are prioritised. It also highlights a need to focus on maintaining and safely operating existing assets, taking due consideration of the need to adapt to the impacts of climate change.

It is in this context that HITRANS and other Regional Transport Partnerships have been updating their Regional Transport Strategies. Our RTS seeks to ensure that these national outcomes are supported whilst also reflecting the local opportunities and challenges within the HITRANS region. Our overarching Vision underpinning the Strategy is that that **our transport networks and services will act to realise the economic potential of our region through reducing the actual and perceived impacts of distance, poor resilience and low population density. By doing this, they will facilitate economically and socially valuable activities for all, provide equality of opportunity, enable people to live active and healthy lives and allow our region to contribute fully to the national net zero emissions target.**

In developing the Strategy and through an initial public consultation last year on the ‘Case for Change’ report, we initially agreed a series of objectives against which our transport problems and options for addressing them were assessed. The final Strategy on which we undertook statutory consultation considered the options identified in the Preliminary Options Appraisal under **11 Strategy Themes, with each theme containing a set of individual policies.**

Feedback received through the consultation was supportive of the approach we have adopted and the policies outlined in the draft version of the Strategy. The Regional Transport Strategy Consultation Note enables all those who responded to the consultation to see how their input has fed into the development of the final document that was submitted to Scottish Ministers for approval.

RTS Introduction

The original Regional Transport Strategy (RTS) was published in 2008. We refreshed the Strategy in 2018 but following the publication of a new National Transport Strategy in 2020, our Members considered it appropriate that we undertake a full update of our own Strategy to ensure it reflected the current policy landscape and wider regional priorities.

The development of the RTS has followed a staged process and we have already completed the '*Case for Change'* following a public consultation on a draft that sought initial views on our proposed Vision and Strategy Objectives. Subsequently, we undertook a *Preliminary Options Appraisal* report that appraised a long-list of options that had been identified to address the transport problems in our region. Each stage has also been informed by a multi-stage Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA) and Island Communities Impact Assessment (ICIA).

The RTS has placed shortlisted options into 11 themes with each containing a set of policies to address the transport challenges and problems in the Highlands and Islands. The final Strategy will provide the strategic framework for the development of transport in our region for the next 20 years. It is necessarily a comprehensive document requiring relevance to both immediate issues but also those medium to longer term challenges that will take many years to address.

Following the review of the public consultation, HITRANS is now seeking Ministerial approval of the finalised Regional Transport Strategy. We will then publish our first Delivery Plan that will set out our priorities for implementing the Strategy. The Delivery Plan will be updated regularly, providing an opportunity to reset or realign priorities to the changing political, social, environmental and economic landscape.

Our work to date and early engagement with key stakeholders has highlighted a number of priority areas that the Regional Transport Strategy seeks to address.

Firstly, the challenge of ensuring the reliability and resilience of our existing transport networks and services let alone an improvement is increasingly evident. Severe weather events have closed or disrupted our transport services with closures impacting the strategic network not just at known areas of weakness such as the Rest and Thankful on the A83 but at multiple locations throughout the region and with an increasing frequency. Our RTS highlights the need for all levels of government to work collaboratively and innovatively to better address and mitigate these challenges.

Similarly, we have seen increasing pressures on our lifeline ferry networks. The introduction of Road Equivalent Tariff has seen significant success in growing demand for travel on the Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Services (CHFS) network. However, that this success was not reinforced with the timeous replacement of new vessels to replace life expired tonnage or to increase frequency and has left a perception that this increased demand for travel on the network is a bad thing. The impact of the eagerly anticipated six new major vessels into the CHFS fleet will help address many of the recent significant resilience challenges that have so heavily impacted the lives of islanders across the HITRANS region.

However, there are many wider challenges impacting ferry services beyond the need for new tonnage on the CHFS network. HITRANS has recently produced a report on the severe capital and revenue pressures faced by those local authorities - Argyll and Bute, Highland, Orkney and Shetland – that operate ferry services. HITRANS has also recently responded to the consultation on the CHFS3 contract, highlighting a number of strategic changes which we and our local partners feel are required to ensure that the future investment and operation of services delivers for the communities it serves. The opportunity to fundamentally change how we provide and operate services to our islands (and remote peninsular communities) must be grasped.

The RTS reiterates our support for the early delivery of several committed transport improvements in our region. These include the dualling of the A9 and A96. We have recently written to the Cabinet Secretary highlighting our Board's support for the early prioritisation of the Inverness to Auldearn section and bypasses of Elgin and Keith that will provide an opportunity to transform the centres of these two towns and that of Nairn with the removal of the congestion and heavy goods traffic that they currently have to accommodate. Investment in these key arteries and other sections of the strategic network that are still not constructed to a suitable standard for the function they perform is essential for addressing issues relating to road safety, driver frustration, journey reliability and perceptions of remoteness, and in doing so, will help realise the economic potential of the Highlands and Islands. The A82 and A83 perform similar functions for the West Highland and islands economies, transporting the goods and visitors to this region but also providing the connectivity necessary for our residents and businesses to thrive. We would like to see the designed scheme for Tarbet to Inverarnan progressed and a solution found for the negative economic and environmental impacts that heavy strategic traffic are having on both Fort William and Oban. Recent work has highlighted the value of the goods transported on our regional strategic network to the Scottish and UK economies. We would like to see an expansion of support for projects that enable the transfer of freight movements from road to rail and sea such as those funded through the Timber Transport fund and Tesco in Inverness, but in many areas the road network remains the only viable means of transporting heavy goods.

In addition to these traditionally successful exports, the Highlands and Islands is well placed to benefit from a number of recent economic developments. The huge potential to be realised from ScotWind Leasing – the process of making seabed available for commercial-scale offshore wind projects – is only starting to be realised but has the potential to benefit businesses and communities in the region for decades to come as well as providing a major boost to national clean energy production. With strategic oversight and collaboration there is an opportunity to harness this and other renewable energy in the region to provide a 'Just Transition to Net Zero' that will enable all aspects of the region's economy to benefit from decarbonising.

In 2023, it was announced that Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport was successful in being awarded Green Freeport status by the Scottish and UK Governments. The primary objective of the public and private partnership is to maximise the local benefits from a pipeline of renewable energy projects which will create business opportunities and employment, attract inward investment, research and development, and position the Highlands at the heart of the country's commitment to becoming a net-zero economy.

When operational, it is estimated that the Green Freeport will attract 10,000 jobs and £3billion of investment. HITRANS has already been engaging with the Freeport and other key stakeholders to understand the transport improvements required to support what will be a step-change in economic investment within the area and enable the wider Highland economy to benefit.

There is now a recognition across public and private stakeholders that transport networks and services need to urgently decarbonise and HITRANS has been at the forefront of projects to realise the regions renewable energy surplus. HITRANS is now the lead partner of the Sustainable Aviation Test Environment (SATE) project. SATE, which is based at Kirkwall Airport, is the UK's first low carbon test location at an operational airport.

The project and its partners show emerging technologies along with real-world potential scenarios that seek to highlight the environmental, social and economic contribution sustainable aviation can make. Similarly, through the FASTER ERDF project we have worked with partner Local Authorities to roll out EV charging Infrastructure in the West Highlands and islands. We will continue to work with public and private partners to develop electric, hydrogen and other innovative alternative fuelled options that can decarbonise all modes of transport in our region.

Our consultation and engagement to date has highlighted the increasing challenge our residents face in accessing healthcare within our region. On a number of transport services including some air links, passengers accessing healthcare can make up the majority of passengers. The centralisation of healthcare provision into a number of specialised facilities has resulted in increased journeys and the cost of accessing healthcare for both patients and their families. HITRANS will seek to work with the NHS, local authorities and transport providers to improve the options available to patients and reduce the need to travel wherever possible.

While the expansive geography and low population density of our region can involve travelling longer distances to access employment and key services, the vast majority of trips are, even in most rural areas, within walking or cycling distance. Indeed, the HITRANS region has the highest cycle to work rates of any region and individual settlements such as Elgin and Inverness the highest levels for any large town or city in Scotland respectively. We welcome the Scottish Government's recent move to provide more direct funding for active travel infrastructure to our local authority partners and the funding of Regional Transport Partnerships to encourage people to travel sustainably through the utilisation of behaviour change funding. We are currently developing an ambitious programme of interventions for 2024/25 that will see the roll out of cycle parking to key trip generators across the region and the expansion of the HI-Bike e-bike hire scheme within Inverness and Fort William and into Elgin.

We have highlighted the increasing challenge to the resilience of our rail network from climate change but there are also significant opportunities for rail to tackle many of the underlying transport challenges in our area. Transport Scotland's Route Map to reducing car kilometres by 20% by 2030 has highlighted that a small number of longer journeys account for a disproportionate percentage of total car kilometres. Enhanced, reliable and affordable rail services and reduced journey times on key inter-urban routes offer an opportunity to encourage significant modal shift on journeys both within our area but also improved connectivity to the major urban centres in Scotland and the rest of the UK. For this to be realised we need to see continued investment in expanding the electrification of the network into our area. HITRANS was a key stakeholder in the new Inverness Airport Station and will continue to make the case for investment in the redevelopment of Inverness Station which is a Strategic Transport Projects Review 2 priority.

Improving the integration of transport services is another consistent theme which initial public consultation has highlighted. Integration covers a myriad of different issues but at its heart is the need for the public to have both confidence to undertake public transport journeys with multiple legs with the security that they will reach their destination on time and, when there is disruption, information on alternative arrangements is available. Improving transport Integration is also about addressing the ease and cost of purchasing multi-modal journeys. With the support of the Scottish Governments MaaS Investment Fund, HITRANS has developed the award-winning Go-Hi app which allows users to find, book and pay for all of their travel in and around the Highlands and Islands of Scotland in one place. We have also developed and made available the Demand Responsive app Moove Flexi, which allows passengers to book journeys on flexible services and track their progress in real-time. This has seen passenger numbers grow on each service where it has been deployed including in Moray, where under the successful m.connect brand it offers the first council wide demand responsive transport service. We have also provided and operate over 150 real-time information displays at key interchanges and bus stops and produce static at-stop information for over 2,000 stops across the region. We are keen to expand the provision of these services in partnership with local authorities and operators.

The most effective way to improve integration is often by increasing the frequency of services which reduces the waiting time and pressure on connecting services. HITRANS, recently published a paper on Rural Bus Service Support and Funding (March 2021) that identifies some of the challenges which have led to a sharp decline in local bus services across Scotland for the last 15 years or so. Frequency of bus use is, as expected, higher in urban areas where more bus services operate. Much of rural Scotland continues to rely on supported local bus services, and communities are dealing with the reduction and demise of many routes in their areas. The national funding schemes for local bus services in Scotland all

favour urban areas and areas operating with commercial services. HITRANS will continue to articulate the need for dedicated national funding streams for rural transport.

Tourism and visitors to our region have been and remain a linchpin of the local economy in the majority of the HITRANS area. However, its recent growth and the changing way in which people visit has placed severe pressure on local communities and the natural environment in a number of areas. The RTS seeks to promote policies which enable us to provide infrastructure and public transport services that both reduces the impact of visitors but also provides improved connectivity for local residents.

This introduction covers just a small selection of some of the fundamental transport challenges in the Highlands and Islands which we are looking to address with local, regional and national partners in the years ahead.

Executive Summary

Overview

This Regional Transport Strategy (RTS) has been prepared by the Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership (HITRANS), the statutory Regional Transport Partnership for much of the Highlands and Islands covering the entire council areas of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Moray Council, Orkney Islands Council, The Highland Council and Argyll and Bute Council (Helensburgh and Loch Lomond excepted, which are covered by Strathclyde Partnership for Transport, SPT). A map of our region is provided below:

Figure ES1: Our RTP area

As an RTP, our core function under the Transport (Scotland) Act 2005 is to produce an RTS for our region. The RTS sets out the transport needs of our region, identifies the practical means of addressing these needs and sets out how transport will be provided, developed,

maintained, improved and operated. This Strategy has been prepared to fulfil this requirement and replaces our previous RTS which was published in 2008.

Our new RTS sets the strategic framework for the development of transport in our region over the next 20 years. Its aim is to deliver a transport system that contributes to the priorities of the National Transport Strategy 2 (NTS2) through reducing inequalities, taking climate action, delivering inclusive economic growth and improving health and wellbeing.

How have we approached the preparation of our new RTS?

Our new RTS has been prepared in accordance with the Transport Scotland RTS development guidance (2006), the revised (2022) Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidance (STAG) and all relevant legislative and policy requirements. The RTS itself marks the final step in a three-stage process which involved the delivery of a:

- **'Case for Change Report'**, published in early 2023, which detailed the transport problems that need to be considered in the RTS and the RTS Strategy Objectives which will underpin it
- **Preliminary Options Appraisal Report**, produced in summer 2023, which generated, developed, packaged and appraised options which could address the identified transport problems

The outputs from the 'Case for Change' and Preliminary Options Appraisal have been directly incorporated into this RTS, as shown in the figure below:

RTS development process and timeline

The preparation of our new RTS has also been informed by a multi-stage **Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA) and Island Communities Impact Assessment (ICIA)**. These standalone and independent processes set out how relevant environment, equalities and islands considerations were considered within the RTS development process. SEA, EqIA and ICIA assessments of the RTS accompany this document. A Health Impact Assessment (HIA) and workshop was also undertaken during the statutory public consultation period with the outputs reflected in the RTS where appropriate.

Our RTS Vision and Strategy Objectives

Vision

Our RTS Vision is an expression of the type of region that we want the HITRANS region to be and how transport can contribute to achieving that for everyone. It has been developed to reflect national policy and legislation, most notably the commitment to net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2045, but at the same time reflects the very distinctive character of our region. The Vision provides an overarching context within which our RTS Strategy Objectives can sit and provides a long-term focus for HITRANS and our constituent members.

Our transport networks and services will act to realise the economic potential of our region through reducing the actual and perceived impacts of distance, poor resilience and low population density. By doing this, they will facilitate economically and socially valuable activities for all, provide equality of opportunity, enable people to live active and healthy lives and allow our region to contribute fully to the national net zero emissions target.

RTS Strategy Objectives

The RTS Strategy Objectives: (i) provide the bridge between the transport problems in our region and the outcomes that we are seeking through our RTS; and (ii) express how our RTS Vision will be realised. In order to ensure that the process of setting RTS Strategy Objectives was both systematic and rigorous, a seven-step bottom-up approach was adopted.

The RTS Strategy Objectives define the outcomes that we are trying to achieve through the RTS. Emerging from 'Step 6' of the above referenced process, they are an aggregation of individual Transport Planning Objectives (TPOs) set in relation to each specific transport problem identified in the Transport Problems Framework. The Strategy Objectives are therefore:

Strategy Objective 1: To make a just transition to a post-carbon and more environmentally sustainable transport network.

Why? – Scotland has a target to achieve net zero carbon emissions of all greenhouse gases by 2045 and transport is a key sector in terms of such emissions, accounting for 20% of territorial emissions (CO_2e) across the region[1]. The transport networks and services in our region must adapt to fulfil this target in a fair and equitable way whilst also being developed in as environmentally sustainable a way as possible. The process must also recognise the needs of all groups through a 'Just Transition'.

Strategy Objective 2: To transform and provide safe and accessible connections between and within our city, towns and villages, to enable walking, wheeling and cycling for all.

Why? – to allow everyone to walk, wheel and cycle more, leading to more local living patterns, greater inclusion, affordable transport, healthier lifestyles, and reduced car use – the latter leading to reduced emissions / noise etc and improved road safety.

Strategy Objective 3: To widen access to public and shared transport and improve connectivity within and from / to the region.

Why? – to give people in the HITRANS region new travel choices, allowing them to: (i) use accessible and affordable public or shared transport options to make journeys they previously could not make; or (ii) to use public or shared transport instead of the car - this leading to lower levels of car use and reduced emissions / noise etc., as well as improved road safety. This objective is also important in encouraging inclusive economic growth by widening labour markets and providing improved accessibility to employment opportunities by public transport.

Strategy Objective 4: To improve the quality and integration of public and shared transport within and from / to the region.

Why? – to make public and shared transport in the HITRANS region more attractive and competitive with car-based travel and to ensure the accessibility needs of all groups are accommodated. This will improve the travel experience for existing public transport users and

[1] Derived from https://www.data.gov.uk/dataset/723c243d-2f1a-4d27-8b61-cdb93e5b10ff/uk-greenhouse-gas-emissions-local-authority-and-regional

encourage people to use public or shared transport instead of the car, leading to lower levels of car use and reduced emissions / noise etc, improved road safety and will support the social benefits associated with shared transport.

Strategy Objective 5: To ensure reliable, resilient, affordable and sustainable connectivity for all from / to our island, peninsular and remote communities.

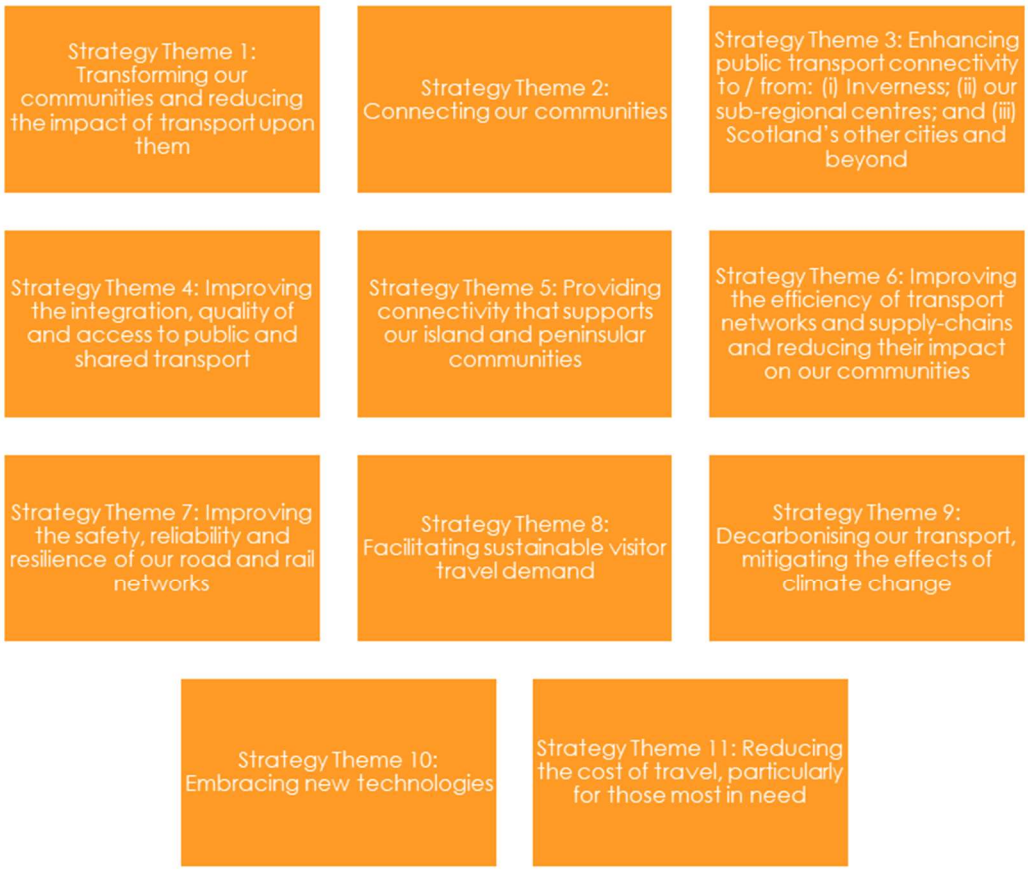
Why? – some of our island and peninsular communities have suffered from pronounced connectivity difficulties in recent years. This has had wide-ranging impacts on these communities and this objective recognises the need to tackle this issue, in tandem with Strategy Objective 4. Delivering this objective will provide the foundation for the long-term sustainability and success of these vulnerable communities, including through helping meet the needs of people with protected characteristics and by tackling socio-economic disadvantage.

Strategy Objective 6: To improve the efficiency, safety and resilience of our transport networks for people and freight and adapt to the impacts of climate change.

Why? – our transport systems must be safe and able to adapt to changing demands (e.g., tourism patterns, trade etc) and be resilient in the face of climate change. This objective is important in allowing the society and economy of our region to prosper and to reduce inequalities of outcome associated with socio-economic disadvantage.

RTS Themes and Policies

Following the completion of the Preliminary Options Appraisal, the shortlisted options were aggregated into **11 Strategy Themes**. The RTS Themes have been used to shape the content of the RTS, with each theme containing a set of individual policies therein.



The Strategy Themes are summarised below, together with the inherent policies.

Strategy Theme 1: Transforming our communities and reducing the impact of transport upon them	
Improving the public realm and mobility within settlements by reducing the dominance of the private car and maximising opportunities for walking, wheeling and cycling	
Policy ST1a	The RTS supports the principle of **reallocating road space**, including parking, from general traffic. This should support placemaking to shape improved walking, wheeling and cycling opportunities in our communities as a means to promote safe active travel and encourage use of active travel modes. Reallocation of road space should avoid any negative impacts on bus services.
Policy ST1b	Where traffic in settlements is reduced by investment in road infrastructure, **road space reallocation** should be undertaken as an integral component of that investment.
Policy ST1c	The RTS supports the principle of **traffic calming and speed limit reductions** and enforcement where this is the wish of our communities, including on the Trunk Road network.
Policy ST1d	The RTS supports measures to **reduce road-based severance** in our communities.
Policy ST1e	The RTS recognises the challenges presented by the impacts of increasing **abnormal load movements** across the region. It calls for a coordinated approach to be taken to ensure that appropriate planning and mitigation is put in place as part of the planning process for new developments that will generate such movements.
Policy ST1f	Parking management is the responsibility of partner local authorities. The RTS supports **the development of a consistent approach (in 'like-for-like' locations) of parking management across our region**, including payment mechanisms, parking information and enforcement.
Policy ST1g	The RTS supports the principle of improving the management and enforcement of **traffic and parking around schools**, including *School Streets* (a road outside a school with temporary restriction on motorised traffic at school drop-off and pick-up times).
Policy ST1h	The RTS supports the prioritisation of **new development** in locations that are in proximity to key services and already well-served by active travel and public transport.
Policy ST1i	The RTS supports the **local delivery of public services**, including health and education, and other day-to-day retail and personal services (e.g., banking) which minimise the need to travel.
Policy ST1j	The RTS supports the integration of active travel, public transport and shared mobility into the **planning of all new developments**. Proposers of new developments should be required to outline how they will deliver connections into the local active travel and public transport networks.
Policy ST1k	The RTS supports the concept of '**infrastructure first**' in relation to developments across our region.
Policy ST1l	The RTS recognises the centrality of **environmental considerations**, particularly biodiversity enhancements and nature networks, within the planning and decision-making process.

Strategy Theme 2: Connecting our communities	
Facilitating walking, wheeling and cycling within settlements and improving active travel connections between them.	
Policy ST2a	The RTS supports transformational investment in the improvement of our existing **active travel networks** to make these accessible to all.
Policy ST2b	The RTS supports the reinstatement and expansion of a network of **strategic and local traffic free / quiet walking, wheeling and cycling routes** to connect communities across and beyond our region.

Strategy Theme 2: Connecting our communities	
Policy ST2c:	The RTS supports the expansion of the **National Cycle Network** to all parts of the region.
Policy ST2d	Our active travel infrastructure should be designed to a high standard in accordance with the most up-to-date **best practice and regionally appropriate design standards** (as this evolves) to meet the needs of all users.
Policy ST2e	The RTS supports the **integration of active travel and public transport connections** within our communities.
Policy ST2f	The RTS promotes the adoption of measures outlined in the ***Sustainable Travel to Stations Strategy*** with respect to access to railway stations.
Policy ST2g	The RTS seeks the implementation of initiatives which widen **access to bicycles and e-bicycles**, including e.g., promoting ownership, expansion of bicycle share and hire and provision of new 'first mile, last mile' cycling opportunities.
Policy ST2h	The RTS supports the upgrade and new provision of **bicycle parking and facilities** at all public buildings, transport interchanges and key on-street locations within the region as well as the provision of bicycle storage for residents.
Policy ST2i	Our **active travel network** should be developed, presented and promoted in a more coherent, recognisable and integrated way for regular, occasional and new users of the network, including visitors.

Strategy Theme 3: Enhancing public transport connectivity to / from: (i) Inverness; (ii) our sub-regional centres; and (iii) Scotland's other cities and beyond	
Distance, topography, geography and low population density currently limit public transport connectivity within much of the region. This Strategy Theme is focused on improving public transport connectivity for journeys within, to and from the region through expanding the transport network, providing additional connections and making journeys quicker.	
Policy ST3a	The RTS supports measures to reduce **social exclusion** for those without access to a car. It supports the principle of the entitlement to minimum levels of connectivity reflecting settlement types and geographies.
Policy ST3b	The RTS recognises that the **decline in bus passenger numbers in the region needs to be reversed** and supports measures to extend service coverage, improve frequencies, lengthen the operating day and make the network more integrated.
Policy ST3c:	The RTS supports measures to **reduce bus journey times** both between and within settlements in the region, including through the provision of bus priority measures.
Policy ST3d	The RTS supports innovative **alternatives to fixed route bus services** where these can be affordably provided.
Policy ST3e	The RTS recognises the role which **community transport and Demand Responsive Transport** (DRT) plays in our most rural communities and supports its expansion and integration with timetabled services.
Policy ST3f	The RTS supports measures to widen the **awareness and use of community transport, DRT and Enhanced Demand Responsive Transport (EDRT)** amongst all members of society.
Policy ST3g	The RTS recognises the **role of taxis** as a key element of transport provision in the region where community transport, DRT and EDRT services are not provided.
Policy ST3h	The RTS recognises that **rail journey times** to, from and within the region are typically longer than elsewhere in Scotland, and therefore supports measures to reduce these journey times.
Policy ST3i	The RTS supports the commitment to **electrify the Highland Main Line** and **Aberdeen to Inverness Line** as an opportunity to reduce rail journey times and improve reliability as part of the overall decarbonisation of the network.
Policy ST3j	The RTS recognises that very low rail service frequency often makes rail uncompetitive with the car and therefore supports measures which would facilitate **increased rail**

Strategy Theme 3: Enhancing public transport connectivity to / from: (i) Inverness; (ii) our sub-regional centres; and (iii) Scotland's other cities and beyond	
	service frequency, particularly between Inverness and Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow.
Policy ST3k	The RTS promotes and supports the development of **additional local rail services** focused on our regional centres.
Policy ST3l	The RTS supports **infrastructure measures** which would enable increased service frequency, such as the electrification of the Highland Main Line and Aberdeen to Inverness, and improvements to the signalling system.
Policy ST3m	The RTS supports the planning and delivery of **new railway stations**, including innovative solutions proportionate to the location, subject to the development of an appropriate business case.

Strategy Theme 4: Improving the integration, quality of and access to public and shared transport	
Addressing the barriers to travel by public transport, including interchange within and between modes, physical barriers for those less able and poor-quality facilities and travel information	
Policy ST4a	The RTS supports measures that will improve **integration within and between modes of transport** at key locations and transport interchanges in order to provide new travel options and alternatives to the private car, recognising the constraints within which this is possible (e.g., delivering school bus services).
Policy ST4b	The RTS supports **integrated ticketing measures** to simplify travel and improve the passenger experience.
Policy ST4c:	The RTS supports the adoption of contract conditions for tendered and supported services that **encourage operators to work in partnership** to improve integration, timetable planning and coordination.
Policy ST4d	The RTS supports the provision and enhancement of **mobility hubs** across the region, in line with a hierarchy reflecting local requirements.
Policy ST4e	The RTS supports measures which will enable people to **leave their bicycles in a secure environment** at a bus stop / station, railway station, ferry terminal or airfield.
Policy ST4f	The RTS supports, where practical, the provision of increased **bicycle capacity on public transport** services within the region.
Policy ST4g	The RTS supports the simplification of the process of **taking a bicycle** both to and onto a bus or train.
Policy ST4h	The RTS supports more widespread journeys which **combine bicycle and public transport**.
Policy ST4i	The RTS supports the provision of consistent standards of **facilities at bus stations and bus stops** reflecting location and usage.
Policy ST4j	Our bus network should be **safe, secure and fully accessible** to all.
Policy ST4k	Our bus network should provide a high-quality and consistent **onboard experience**.
Policy ST4l	Travel on buses to, from and within the region should, where possible, **enable meaningful working time**.
Policy ST4m	The RTS supports the provision of **more consistent standards** of facilities at railway stations, reflecting station usage.
Policy ST4n	Our railway network should be **safe, secure and fully accessible** to all.
Policy ST4o	The RTS supports the continuation and expansion of the ***Scotland's Railway*** **Adoption Programme** and other measures to enhance the station environment.
Policy ST4p	Our ferry network should be **safe, secure and fully and easily accessible** to all. This includes both shore-to-vessel access and movement around the vessel itself.

Strategy Theme 4: Improving the integration, quality of and access to public and shared transport	
Policy ST4q	In partnership with key public stakeholders and operators we will continue to explore solutions which improve the accessibility of inter-Island air services in Argyll and Bute, Orkney and the Western Isles. We will also keep abreast of developments in technology and **new aircraft types**. More widely, the RTS supports improved accessibility for all to commercially operated aircraft.
Policy ST4r	The RTS supports sufficient provision and better enforcement of **Blue Badge parking** across the region.
Policy ST4s	The RTS recognises the important role of **taxis** as part of the overall transport mix in the region. It supports partnership working with licencing authorities and taxi providers to raise standards of provision where required and to facilitate the expansion of the network.
Policy ST4t	The RTS supports the provision of **taxi services** which are fully accessible in terms of booking and vehicle access.
Policy ST4u	A key component of making travel accessible to all, the RTS supports measures to **remove barriers to travel**, including increased staff training, passenger chaperones and the provision of physical and online travel information in accessible formats.
Policy ST4v	The RTS supports the maintenance and expansion of at-stop / at-station multi-modal **real-time information**.
Policy ST4w	The RTS promotes the **simplification and consolidation of travel planning** and in-journey information to make travel easier for less frequent users.
Policy ST4x	The RTS supports the further development of the **GO-HI travel app**.
Policy ST4y	The RTS supports the provision of up-to-date **physical travel information** at bus stops, and the removal of out-of-date information.
Policy ST4z	The RTS calls for improved **cross-provider digital connectivity** across the region to facilitate access to travel information for all (including in-car information), enable meaningful working time when travelling by public transport and to help reduce the need to travel where possible.

Strategy Theme 5: Providing connectivity that supports our island and peninsular communities	
Improving the connectivity and reducing the peripherality of island and peninsular communities through improved ferry and air services, and potentially fixed links	
Policy ST5a	The RTS supports the provision of longer **daily time on-mainland and on-island** where this is required for the long-term sustainability of a community.
Policy ST5b	The RTS supports the provision of services which minimise the requirement for one or more **overnight stays**.
Policy ST5c:	Where practicable, the RTS supports the operation of **additional sailings** on the supported ferry networks within the region.
Policy ST5d	The RTS supports year-round **seven-day connections** for island and peninsular communities where this is required for the long-term sustainability of a community and enjoys public support.
Policy ST5e	The **booking and ticketing** arrangements for ferry services in the region should support the convenience and efficiency of travel for all.
Policy ST5f	The RTS calls for the earlier opening of **ferry booking systems** and increased transparency around the release and management of vehicle deck space.
Policy ST5g	The RTS supports the principle of **Road Equivalent Tariff** (RET). However, where service frequency permits, controlled use of peak times / surge pricing could be used to help manage demand, recognising that this would need to be at no net detriment to the connectivity of island and peninsular communities.

Strategy Theme 5: Providing connectivity that supports our island and peninsular communities	
Policy ST5h	The RTS supports operational measures which maximise the efficient management of **vehicle deck space** on sailings.
Policy ST5i	The RTS supports measures to improve **door-to-door journeys** through enhancing active travel, public transport and shared mobility connections to and from ferry terminals, combined with other measures to reduce the need to take a car onboard.
Policy ST5j	The RTS recognises the long-term underfunding of vessels and infrastructure in the region and strongly calls for fleet and **infrastructure modernisation** to address issues of reliability and resilience.
Policy ST5k	The RTS calls for the development of a regularly maintained ***Vessels and Infrastructure Planning Pipeline*** across all publicly supported ferry networks in Scotland.
Policy ST5l	The RTS supports an increase in the overall **fleet size** and the **inter-operability** of that fleet and supporting infrastructure to strengthen resilience.
Policy ST5m	The RTS supports the principle of **increasing capacity** through frequency rather than larger vessels.
Policy ST5n	The RTS calls for an objective consideration of the **design characteristics of future vessels** for all routes, including hull form and the provision of crew accommodation.
Policy ST5o	The RTS supports the introduction of new **low or zero emissions vessels** to replace life-expired tonnage. This should be done in line with the NTS2 *Sustainable Investment Hierarchy*.
Policy ST5p	With the vessel and infrastructure replacement cycle, the RTS supports measures to **reduce journey times** for our island communities. This includes providing direct sailings rather than via another island (where this is the preference of the local community) and consideration of new ferry terminal locations that reduce crossing distances.
Policy ST5q	The RTS supports **harbour infrastructure** improvements ahead of life expiry where this could contribute to a material improvement in reliability.
Policy ST5r	The RTS supports the **conversion of the remaining Lo-Lo routes** in the region to Ro-Ro where there is community support.
Policy ST5s	The RTS supports the further development of the Highlands and Islands' **air network** in terms of both services and supporting infrastructure.
Policy ST5t	The RTS supports the further development of **commercial external routes**, particularly to London Heathrow and other international hub airports, that support the economic competitiveness of the region.
Policy ST5u	The RTS supports the retention of the **PSO air network** within the region and, where alternative travel choices are inadequate, its further expansion. 'Adequate' in this context refers to the ability to achieve an affordable daily return to / from a national centre.
Policy ST5v	The RTS supports the operation of **additional connections and flights** on the PSO air networks within the region, whether delivered by existing, additional or new low emission aircraft.
Policy ST5w	The RTS supports more **direct flights** rather than via another island.
Policy ST5x	The RTS supports the adoption of **technological and infrastructure solutions** which would improve the reliability and frequency of inter-island air services.
Policy ST5y	The RTS supports the principle of **fixed links** where they represent value for money and are supported by the island or peninsular community. Any fixed link should be implemented in conjunction with improved public transport connectivity and incorporate provision for active travel.
Policy ST5z	The RTS supports the consideration of **tolling** where this would assist in making the case for a **fixed link**. The use of vehicle number plate recognition technology could allow local residents to travel for free.

Strategy Theme 6: Improving the efficiency of transport networks and supply-chains and reducing their impact on our communities	
Many supply-chains in the region are marginal and face challenges not found elsewhere in Scotland, working around ferry connections for example. This Strategy Theme is focused on enhancing the efficiency of supply-chains and identifying means for improving their environmental sustainability.	
Policy ST6a	The RTS supports the principle of new dedicated or high-capacity **freight vessels** on freight intensive routes.
Policy ST6b	The RTS supports the formalisation and extension of the carriage of **unaccompanied trailers** to a wider range of routes.
Policy ST6c:	The RTS supports the operation of dedicated **freight sailings**, either by contracted or commercial operators where there is demand and it is operationally deliverable.
Policy ST6d	The RTS supports moves towards greater simplification and consistency in the setting of **ferry freight fares** across the region, recognising that this would be achieved over the medium-term.
Policy ST6e	The RTS supports **infrastructure measures** which will enable the growth of rail freight to and from the region.
Policy ST6f	The RTS supports infrastructure investment and funding initiatives which will enable the growth of **waterborne and air** freight to, from and within the region.

Strategy Theme 7: Improving the safety, reliability and resilience of our road and rail networks	
Weather, geological instability and very limited diversion opportunities make resilience a key issue in the region, whilst safety is a primary concern on many of the main road routes. This Strategy Theme is therefore focused on improving the safety, reliability and resilience of transport networks within the region.	
Policy ST7a	The RTS restates our support for the full **dualling of the A9 and A96**, with early prioritisation of the Elgin and Keith bypasses to dual carriageway standards, following the already committed Inverness to Wester Hardmuir scheme.
Policy ST7b	The RTS calls for incremental improvements to our **road network** where there are safety, efficiency and environmental benefits, including in relation to single track roads.
Policy ST7c:	The RTS supports the expansion of **50mph HGV speed limits** across the Trunk Road network in the region where it is safe to do so.
Policy ST7d	The RTS supports the provision of improved **overtaking opportunities** on our roads, especially where there are known problems with vehicle platooning which can cause driver frustration.
Policy ST7e	The RTS calls for investment in our regional road network where there are regular and sustained **periods of disruption** due to weather and / or geological instability.
Policy ST7f	The RTS recognises the increasing vulnerability of our region's **road network** to severe weather events linked to **climate change** and supports capital and revenue measures to mitigate this.
Policy ST7g	The RTS recognises the increasing vulnerability of the **railway network** to severe weather events linked to **climate change** and supports capital and revenue measures to mitigate this.
Policy ST7h	The RTS supports the continued provision and expansion of **real-time travel information** for motorists and public transport users through existing and emerging platforms.
Policy ST7i	The RTS recognises that many parts of our region's road network are in poor condition. It calls for **enhanced preventative and remedial road maintenance** to ensure the safe, reliable and efficient movement of people and goods and the delivery of services across our region.

Strategy Theme 7: Improving the safety, reliability and resilience of our road and rail networks	
Policy ST7j	Investment in our road network should continue to have an overarching focus on **safety** with a view to reducing road traffic casualties in accordance with *Scotland's Road Safety Framework to 2030.*
Policy ST7k	To address **risks which are particular to roads in our region**, the RTS supports: enhanced advisory signage; ongoing public information campaigns around the use of single-track roads; provision of additional safe motorist services and HGV rest areas; and information campaigns for visitors driving left-hand drive vehicles.
Policy ST7l	The RTS specifically supports the improvement or removal of **priority junctions on higher speed trunk roads**, especially for right-turning traffic.
Policy ST7m	The RTS calls for increased provision of **level boarding at stations** across the region, which will reduce station dwell times.
Policy ST7n	The RTS supports the provision of additional **sections of double track** (or static or dynamic passing loops where double track does not represent value for money) to improve punctuality.
Policy ST7o	The RTS supports infrastructure and timetable improvements external to the region which will improve the **reliability of services** to / from Inverness, Fort William, Oban and Mallaig.

Strategy Theme 8: Facilitating sustainable visitor travel demand	
Responding to the challenges arising from the significant seasonal influx of tourists to the region, often in the areas least well-placed to accommodate it	
Policy ST8a	The RTS supports the further development of **long-distance walking, wheeling and cycling** routes (including the National Cycle Network), recognising the visitor, economic and local benefits offered.
Policy ST8b	The RTS supports the development of **active travel connections** to our ports, airports and regionally important railway stations.
Policy ST8c:	The RTS supports the development of **active travel connections** to our key tourism destinations where this would be a realistic option for some visitors.
Policy ST8d	Where there are concentrations of international tourists, including cruise passengers, the RTS supports the provision of enhanced local travel information and coordination to **improve visitor experience** and reduce impacts on local networks.
Policy ST8e	The RTS supports the operation and promotion of **additional local rail services** to key tourism destinations.
Policy ST8f	The RTS supports the provision of **additional rail carriages** on existing services in peak season, where feasible.
Policy ST8g	The RTS supports the principle of **flexible timetabling** where this can co-exist with regular services for local residents.
Policy ST8h	The RTS supports the principle of expanded **open access rail services** where these can be accommodated at no disadvantage to scheduled services.
Policy ST8i	The RTS supports the principle of **sustainably accommodating visitor demand** whilst maintaining or increasing visitor numbers.
Policy ST8j	The RTS supports the introduction of increased **parking management measures** at tourist honeypots as a tool to encourage improved access to these locations by public transport or active modes and to address indiscriminate and dangerous parking.
Policy ST8k	Where new or increased **parking charges** are introduced, the RTS encourages that this should be done in combination with improved facilities for those accessing via sustainable modes.

Strategy Theme 8: Facilitating sustainable visitor travel demand	
Policy ST8l	The RTS supports measures to ensure that **motorhome and campervan-based tourism demand** is sustainably accommodated so that any negative impacts on communities are mitigated.
Policy ST8m	Whilst recognising the benefits of **cruise tourism** in our region, the RTS recognises that catering for this demand can negatively impact on our communities. The RTS therefore supports measures to ensure that this demand is more sustainably accommodated.
Policy ST8n	The RTS supports measures which would allow the benefits of **cruise tourism** to be more evenly distributed around the region.
Policy ST8o	The RTS supports the principle of **bespoke bus services** aimed at tourists to address excessive car-based demand at honeypot locations.
Policy ST8p	The RTS recognises that high volumes of tourist traffic are impacting the **condition of some roads** in our region and that increased central government funding is required that reflects this increased pressure on local transport infrastructure, to support an enhanced repair and maintenance programme.
Policy ST8q	The RTS recognises that **high volumes of tourist traffic** can lead to slow and inefficient journeys and therefore supports measures to address this.

Strategy Theme 9: Decarbonising our transport, mitigating the effects of climate change	
Supporting the decarbonisation of transport through the adoption of zero emission vehicles, vessels, and aircraft	
Policy ST9a	The RTS supports the implementation of measures which facilitate the **decarbonisation of the public transport vehicle fleet** within the region, including commercial vehicles, buses and community transport, rail rolling stock, aircraft and ferries.
Policy ST9b	The RTS recognises the opportunities brought about by the **availability of renewable energy** in our region, including locally produced green hydrogen. The transport fleet mix and associated infrastructure should reflect this.
Policy ST9c:	The RTS supports the development of **vehicle pooling and vehicle sharing services** across the region to reduce the need for personal car ownership.
Policy ST9d	The RTS calls for the **expansion, standardisation and maintenance of EV charging infrastructure** to support the decarbonisation of all vehicle based travel in our region.
Policy ST9e	The RTS recognises the challenges of distance, topography, climate and short winter daylight hours to the rollout of battery electric powered commercial vehicles and seeks **low or zero emission solutions appropriate to our region**, and which capitalise on the surplus energy production within our region.
Policy ST9f	The RTS supports the roll-out of other **alternative fuels** to promote the decarbonisation of our transport networks, ports, ferry terminals, airports and airfields.

Strategy Theme 10: Embracing new technologies	
Capitalising on innovations in new technology	
Policy ST10a	The RTS embraces the opportunities provided by **new technologies** to improve the provision of transport infrastructure and services across the region.
Policy ST10b	The RTS supports consideration of the provision of future **innovative personal transport** within the design of our active travel network and mobility hubs.
Policy ST10c:	The RTS supports the principle and further development of **Mobility-as-a-Service** as the technology evolves, particularly through our Go-HI app.
Policy ST10d	The RTS supports opportunities for the more widespread adoption of **Connected and Autonomous Vehicles** and autonomous buses, whilst recognising the challenges posed in our region.

Strategy Theme 11: Reducing the cost of travel, particularly for those most in need	
Improving the connectivity and reducing the peripherality of island and peninsular communities through improved ferry and air services, and potentially fixed links	
Policy ST11a	**Transport poverty** is a complex, dispersed and often hidden problem in our region. The RTS commits to define and evidence this problem and identify appropriate actions to be delivered by HITRANS and our partners.
Policy ST11b	Recognising that, for many in our region (and especially those living in our island communities), transport costs account for a high proportion of household income, the RTS supports a **reduction in public transport fares** and the introduction of payment plans for multi-journey tickets.
Policy ST11c:	The comparative costs of public transport mean that residents and visitors to the region often **choose to travel by car**. The RTS therefore supports a reduction in the cost differential between travelling by public transport and car.
Policy ST11d	The RTS supports in principle the roll-out of **Road Equivalent Tariff** to any ferry routes on which it does not currently apply, including local authority services.
Policy ST11e	The RTS calls for greater cross-industry partnership working and regulatory reform to reduce the **cost penalty for interchange** within or between modes of transport.
Policy ST11f	The RTS calls for the extension of the **National Concessionary Travel Scheme** and Under-22s Concessionary Travel Scheme to rail, ferry and air services where these are the main or only mode of public transport in an area.
Policy ST11g	The RTS calls for the retention and expansion of the **Air Discount Scheme**, including to businesses in the region.
Policy ST11h	**National road pricing proposals** may emerge in response to the reduction in fuel duty and Value Added Tax as a result of the mass adoption of electric vehicles. If this eventuality materialises, the RTS calls for a road pricing system that recognises the unique characteristics of our region.

Draft RTS Consultation

The Draft RTS was consulted on for an eight-week period from 19th April 2024. This involved an online public consultation and questionnaire and writing to statutory stakeholders to obtain their views. A total of **37** responses were received, of which **25** were from members of the public and **12** from organisations.

The consultation responses expressed strong support for the RTS Vision, Strategy Objectives, Strategy Themes and Policies overall. Minor amendments to the Draft RTS were made to reflect specific comments, whilst comments from statutory stakeholders were incorporated and responded to in the Strategic Environmental Assessment Report.

RTS Action Plan

Subsequent to the adoption of the RTS, an accompanying **Action Plan** will therefore be developed. This will state the actions that we will take to progress the RTS and the timeframes within which each action will be progressed. The Action Plan will contain a combination of proposed appraisals / business cases, research studies, projects and programmes. It will focus on **actions that are regionally significant in nature** - i.e., those which are large scale or cross-boundary, either between authorities within our region or between our region and other RTP areas. Local issues will be a matter for the Local Transport Strategies of our constituent members.

Unlike the RTS itself, which provides a circa 20-year strategic framework, the **Action Plan will be regularly reviewed and updated** to reflect the changing status of projects, their differing stages in the project lifecycle and the need for new or amended actions to support a policy (e.g., in response to the emergence or development of new technology).

Governance

In developing an intermediate refresh of our RTS in 2018, HITRANS undertook a regional governance review, in partnership with our constituent local authorities. This considered both how we deliver the RTS, opportunities for both greater collaboration and how services and projects could be delivered differently. Transport Scotland has also begun to review its earlier work on transport governance as part of the commitments set out in the Fair Fares Review. On adoption of our RTS, we will work with both Transport Scotland and partner local authorities to identify improved transport governance opportunities and then seek to implement any recommendations over the first RTS Delivery Plan period.

1 Introduction

1.1 Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership

1.1.1 The Transport (Scotland) Act 2005 created the framework for Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs), recognising the need for cross-boundary transport strategy, planning and delivery. This was intended to address the long-running issue whereby, following the abolition of the regional tier of government, there was a gap between national and local transport planning, leading to inconsistencies and inefficiencies at the regional level.

1.1.2 We, the Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership (HITRANS), are the statutory RTP for much of the Highlands and Islands covering the council areas of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Moray Council, Orkney Islands Council, The Highland Council and much of Argyll and Bute Council (Helensburgh and Loch Lomond excepted, which are covered by Strathclyde Partnership for Transport, SPT). A map of our region is shown below in which it is divided into **18 '**travel-to-work areas' (TTWAs) defined by the Office of National Statistics, together with the main localities in the region in gradations from **500 persons** upwards:

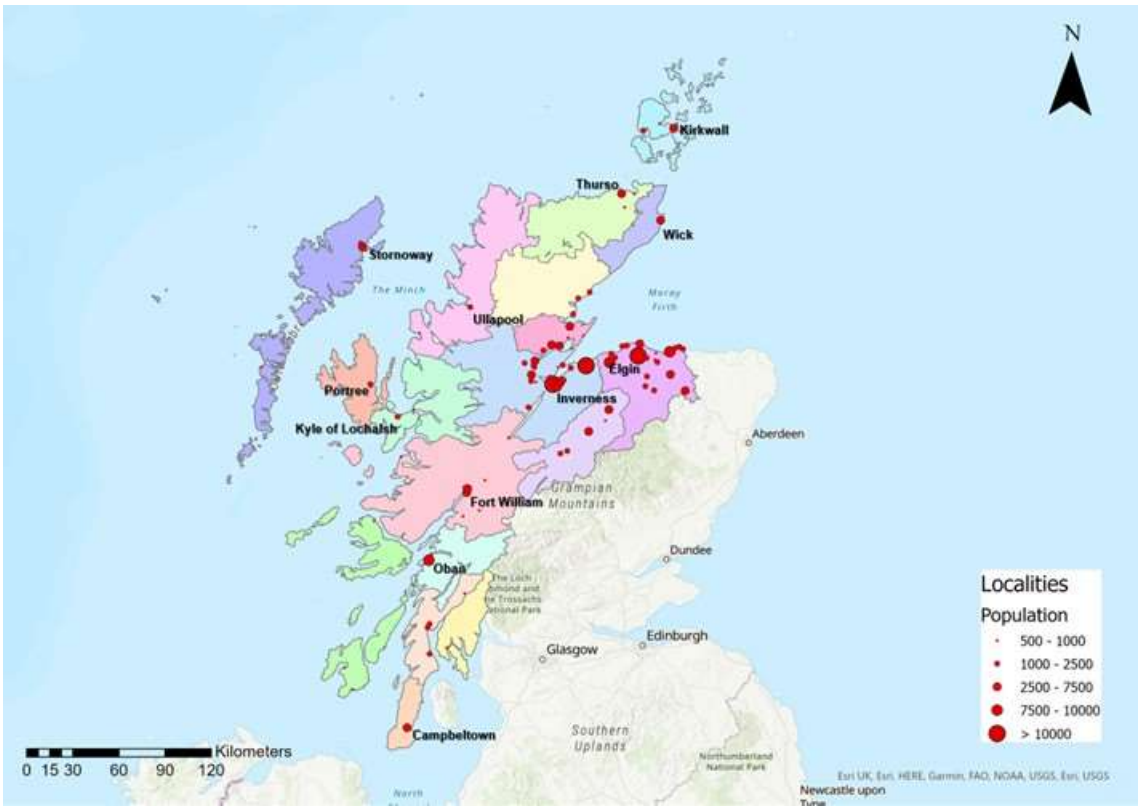


Figure 1.1: Our geographic coverage – TTWAs and localities populations (Source: Office for National Statistics)

1.1.3 The concentration of the largest settlements around the Inner Moray Firth and the Cromarty Firth is very clear from this graphic. However, even with this higher overall concentration, the only localities with a (2020) population of greater than 10,000 are Inverness including Culloden (63,730), Elgin (25,040) Fort William (10,260) and Nairn (10,190). Indeed, the **distances from major population centres of much of our region is one of its defining features**. Our region is also highly diverse, containing a mixture of islands, remote mainland, rural and urban areas. It includes the fast-growing city of Inverness and other major administrative centres such as Elgin and Oban, island 'capitals' such as Kirkwall and Stornoway, larger islands with their own service centre (e.g., Mull) and remote islands with populations of fewer than 100 people.

1.1.4 Our **region is large**, accounting for around half of Scotland's land mass. It includes long indented coastlines as well as mountainous areas. It also has over 50 permanently inhabited islands. These physical features act as barriers to the movement of people and goods. Routes can be slow and / or circuitous, increasing the time and cost of travel.

1.1.5 Delivering a safe, efficient and reliable transport network requires partnership working and a recognition of the unique challenges posed by geography, topography, weather and low population density. Our role is to foster such partnership working, drawing together our constituent members and other partners to develop, maintain and deliver a coherent transport strategy for our region.

1.2 Our Regional Transport Strategy

1.2.1 The core function of Scotland's seven RTPs is to produce a Regional Transport Strategy (RTS). The guidance for the development of an RTS states, in summary, that the RTP must *seek to identify the present and future transport needs of the region, practical means of addressing these needs, and set out how transport in the region will be provided, developed, improved and operated so as to: promote safety; enhance social and economic well-being; promote sustainability; conserve and enhance the environment; promote social inclusion and equal opportunities; improve access to healthcare; and foster integration between modes and with cross-boundary routes*.

1.2.2 Our **current RTS was first published in 2008 and was refreshed in 2018**, although the refresh was never formally adopted due to changes in the wider policy environment. The Transport (Scotland) Act 2005 states that RTPs should keep their RTS under review and modify or create a new one as necessary. In our view, several factors have combined to make it the right time to produce a new RTS – these include:

- The publication of the new **National Transport Strategy 2** (see Chapter 2) in 2020 has refocused transport policy at the Scotland-level, and our RTS must align with this
- Alongside this, the **Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Act 2019** has committed to the delivery of net zero emissions by 2045. In particular, the Climate Change Plan Update published in December 2020 outlined that, by 2030: (i) *our roads will contain no new petrol or diesel cars or vans*; and (ii) *car kilometres will have reduced by 20%* (relative to 2019 base). In a region such as ours, where travel distances are often long and public transport connectivity limited, it is necessary for our RTS to set out how we can respond to these ambitious targets
- Whilst our region is particularly vulnerable to climate change, **climate mitigation measures also present an important economic opportunity**. Our region is rich in both established and emerging renewable energy, including offshore and onshore wind, pumped storage hydro and green hydrogen amongst others. It is essential that our transport networks support the construction of renewable energy infrastructure in a manner that does not negatively impact our communities, whilst also connecting labour to the employment generated in both its construction and operation. A key opportunity in this respect is the **Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport**, which aims to create over 10,000 local jobs and generate over £3 billion in investment in the region[2]
- The **emergence of new technology** is changing the way that we live and work. This will have consequential impacts on travel both in terms of the **journeys that we make** (e.g., increased remote working and a reduction in business travel) and **how these journeys are made**
- Our **region has also changed significantly since the publication of the previous RTS**. Technological improvements, a major increase in remote working (particularly post-

[2] https://greenfreeport.scot/green-freeport-forecasts-more-than-10000-new-jobs-and-3billion-investment-for-the-highlands/

COVID-19) and the evolution of policy have created new business opportunities and promoted in-migration in some locations, whilst domestic and international tourism has grown hugely over this period. This has delivered increased economic benefits overall, but these trends have created new problems such as, for example, a shortage of labour in certain areas and seasonal pressures for those communities most popular with visitors

- Whilst much has changed, **we also continue to wrestle with many of the long-term challenges which our region faces**, including population decline in many parts of the region, an ageing population and the difficulties and costs associated with delivering services (particularly health, social care and education) to such a geographically dispersed population

1.2.3 Recognising both the new and long-term transport challenges in our region, **our new RTS sets the strategic framework for the development of transport in our region over the next 20 years**, with the aim of delivering a transport system that reduces inequalities, takes climate action, helps deliver inclusive economic growth, and improves health and wellbeing.

How have we approached the preparation of our new RTS?

1.2.4 Our new RTS has been prepared in accordance with the Transport Scotland RTS development guidance (2006), the revised (2022) Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidance (STAG) and all relevant legislative and policy requirements. The RTS itself marks the final step in a three-stage process which involved the delivery of a:

- **'Case for Change Report'**, published in early 2023, which detailed the transport problems that need to be considered in the RTS and which the RTS Strategy Objectives which will underpin it
- **Preliminary Options Appraisal Report**, produced in summer 2023, which generated, developed, packaged and appraised options which could address the identified transport problems

1.2.5 The outputs from the 'Case for Change' and Preliminary Options Appraisal have been directly incorporated into this RTS, as shown in the figure below:

Figure 1.2: RTS development process and timeline

1.2.6 The preparation of our new RTS has also been informed by a multi-stage **Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA) and Island Communities Impact Assessment (ICIA)**. These standalone and independent processes set out how relevant environment, equalities and islands considerations were considered within the RTS development process. SEA, EqIA and ICIA assessments of the RTS accompany this document.

Draft RTS Consultation

1.2.7 The Draft RTS was consulted on for an eight-week period from 19th April 2024. This involved an online public consultation and questionnaire and writing to statutory stakeholders to obtain their views. A total of **37** responses were received, of which **25** were from members of the public and **12** from organisations.

1.2.8 The consultation responses expressed strong support for the RTS Vision, Strategy Objectives, Strategy Themes and Policies overall. Minor amendments to the Draft RTS were made to reflect specific comments, whilst comments from statutory stakeholders were incorporated and responded to in the Strategic Environmental Assessment Report.

Structure of RTS

1.2.9 The remainder of our RTS is structured as follows:

- **Chapter 2** establishes the policy and planning context within which our RTS has been developed
- **Chapter 3** summarises the main transport problems in our region, drawing on the RTS 'Case for Change' Report
- **Chapter 4** sets out our RTS Vision, Strategy Objectives and Themes
- **Chapters 5-15** describe each of the eleven RTS Themes in detail, setting out the policies which we will be pursue over the lifetime of the RTS
- **Chapter 16** outlines how we will deliver our RTS
- **Chapter 17** outlines how we will monitor the performance of our RTS and evaluate its success over its lifetime

2 Policy and Planning Context

2.1 Overview

2.1.1 As a bridge between national and local transport policy, our RTS should align with the policy priorities of national government but ensure that these are tailored to our regional and local circumstances. Indeed, as alluded to in Chapter 1, the recent evolution of the policy context has been a principal driver of our decision to develop a new RTS (see **Section 2.2)**.

2.1.2 Allied to the evolving policy environment is the need to ensure that our new RTS reflects the **unique demographic, spatial and socio-economic characteristics** of our region (i.e., the planning context) (see **Sections 2.3 and 2.4 and 'Case for Change' for detail)**.

2.2 Policy context

National policy context

2.2.1 Our new RTS must therefore reflect the prevailing national policy context, most notably **National Transport Strategy 2 (NTS2)**. The NTS2 was published in February 2020 and set the following 'Vision' for Scotland's transport system over the 20-year period to 2040:

"We will have a sustainable, inclusive, safe and accessible transport system, helping deliver a healthier, fairer and more prosperous Scotland for communities, businesses and visitors."

2.2.2 The NTS2 Vision is underpinned by **four** 'priorities', which are shown in the figure below:

Figure 2.1: NTS2 priorities

2.2.3 The NTS2 also established two hierarchies which define how transport investment decision making and services should be planned. These are the ***Sustainable Travel Hierarchy*** and ***Sustainable Investment Hierarchy*** and are summarised in the figure below:

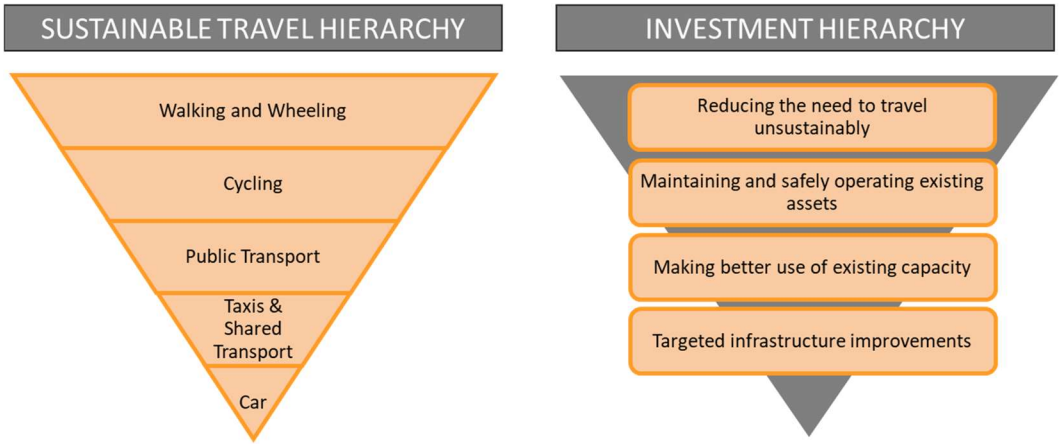


Figure 2.2: NTS2 *Sustainable Travel Hierarchy* and *Sustainable Investment Hierarchy*

2.2.4 Two key points emerge in relation to our RTS:

- In accordance with the **NTS2 *Sustainable Travel Hierarchy***, the RTS themes and their inherent policies should prioritise **active travel and accessible public transport connections** whilst at the same time **discouraging short, single car occupant journeys**
- The **NTS2 *Sustainable Investment Hierarchy*** dictates that investment in new infrastructure should only be considered once a wider package of options to reduce the need to travel, reduce the need to travel unsustainably, optimise use of existing infrastructure and influence travel behaviour or manage demand have been explored

2.2.5 The approach adopted in the NTS2 is focused on delivering Scotland's **legal commitment to deliver net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2045**, but in a manner that reduces inequalities, improves public health and supports a strong and resilient economy. The commitment to net zero allied with NTS2 has in turn generated a number of policies and associated strategies which our RTS must take cognisance of, including:

- The recommendations of the **Strategic Transport Projects Review 2 (STPR2)**, which is the 'delivery plan' for NTS2 with respect to nationally funded strategic infrastructure. Of relevance to our region is the desire to increase active travel provision, reduce the movement of freight on roads and redesign travel to some island communities
- The policy to **reduce car kilometres by 20% by 2030.** Regional targets have not yet been set but there is an acknowledgement that urban and rural targets and approaches may vary
- The adopted National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) sets out plans to increase connectivity through the development of new **20-minute neighbourhoods and improvement of strategic connections between all modes of transport**, adhering to the **'Place Principle'**[3] as far as possible
- Our region covers most of Scotland's islands and our RTS will therefore reflect and, where appropriate, challenge the **National Islands Plan** and provide inputs to future iterations of this Plan

2.2.6 Our RTS will act as a bridge between national and local transport and land-use planning policy. Of particular importance in this respect will be ensuring that the RTS provides a

[3] The 'Place Principle' requires that all those responsible for providing services and looking after assets in a place need to work and plan together, and with local communities, to improve the lives of people, support inclusive and sustainable economic growth and create more successful places. *National Planning Framework 4* (Scottish Government, 2022), p. 154.

framework for and contributes positively to the **Local Transport Strategies** and **Local Development Plans** produced by our constituent members.

2.3 The demographic and spatial characteristics of our region

2.3.1 As outlined in the introductory chapter, our region is **unique within the UK**, with long distances from major population centres being one of its defining features for many. However, it is also diverse, containing a mixture of island, remote mainland, rural and urban areas.

2.3.2 For context, the figure below shows the distribution of population across our constituent local authorities in 2021.[4]

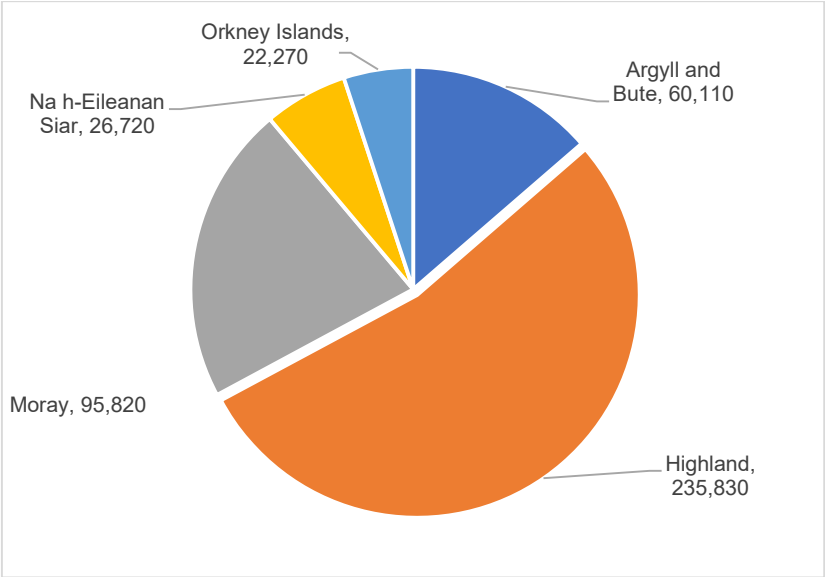


Figure 2.3: HITRANS local authorities' populations (Source: NRS mid-year population estimates)

2.3.3 The estimated total population of the region in 2021 was **440,750** (8% of the Scottish total - living in approaching half of the Scottish landmass), **54%** of whom lived in The Highland Council area. Some **11%** of our residents live in the island groups of the Outer Hebrides (Na H-Eileanan) and Orkney. **Population is heavily concentrated in the Inverness and Elgin TTWAs** (introduced in Figure 1.1), which account for **over 50%** of the total population of the region. All other TTWAs have populations of around 20,000 or less.

2.3.4 Chapter 2 of the 'Case for Change' Report provides an extensive commentary on the demographic and spatial characteristics of our region - key demographic and spatial considerations can be summarised as follows:

- Our region has a higher proportion of **older age groups** and a **lower proportion of working age adults** compared to Scotland as a whole. This is though typical of rural Scotland and implies a greater demand for access to health and care services in particular. There are areas within the region where this is particularly pronounced, such as the 'Dunoon and Rothesay' and 'Golspie and Brora' TTWAs
- Highland, Moray and mainland Orkney saw significant **in-migration** in the decade prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a trend which accelerated with changing working patterns post-pandemic (although the permanence of this effect remains to be established). Transport connections are likely to be a factor in determining the **future pattern of in-migration** and will be important in retaining those moving into our region in the longer-term

[4] Estimate of HITRANS part of Argyll and Bute (70%)

- The **population of our region is projected to decline in the medium-term**, with fewer young and working-age people, and more people of pensionable age. This will increase the need to **access health and social care services** and also generate **labour market issues**, potentially with insufficient workers to fill posts in certain areas. The **geography of our region largely precludes 'in commuting'** to fill these posts in some areas. The provision of improved connectivity within and to / from our region will be important in retaining young people and attracting in-migrants
- **Over half of our region's population is classed by Scottish Government as 'remote' or 'very remote'** whilst around a quarter live in larger settlements (10,000+). Our region is therefore very diverse and our RTS needs to address the needs of some of Scotland's most geographically remote communities through to those living in the city of Inverness
- Inverness is the **primary employment, retail and service centre for much of our region**, albeit there are several regionally important service centres such as Lochgilphead, Kirkwall, Elgin and Stornoway

2.4 The socio-economic characteristics of our region

2.4.1 Geography is again a defining factor in shaping the economy of our region – key socio-economic characteristics can be summarised as follows (and are detailed at length in the 'Case for Change' Report):

- Reflecting the rural nature of much of our region, **car ownership rates are higher than the Scotland average**. This implies a high degree of **car dependence** for many and the requirement to own and run a car **('forced' car ownership)** will undoubtedly have a significant negative impact on some households' finances. Moreover, some households will require a second car if the primary car is away from the property for most or all of some days, given the absence of alternatives in many places
- Despite its size, our **region is home to less than 10% of Scotland's population**. Many businesses therefore have **a strong outward focus**, selling goods and services externally, ranging from whisky to textiles. Moreover, our region is rich in **natural resources** such as timber and has a significant primary sector, particularly agriculture, forestry and fishing. This means that **transport links with other parts of Scotland and beyond are as important as those within the region itself**. Moreover, our region experiences **high volumes of inbound domestic and international seasonal tourism travel**, particularly post-COVID-19
- Our region sees **less in the way of extremes of wealth and deprivation than other parts of Scotland**. Nevertheless, there are areas with **pockets of multiple deprivation** in Dunoon, Rothesay, Alness, Balintore, Inverness, Oban and Wick. Deprivation in rural areas is also more dispersed compared to urban areas and frequently 'hidden', in that standard indices often do not fully capture the impact of the higher cost of living and geographic isolation on these communities
- Large parts of rural HITRANS have some of the highest rates of **second home ownership** in the country. As well as sometimes being an issue for local communities, these houses are likely to generate many mostly car-based trips to and from the area either through the owners' use or as holiday lets. **Car-based tourism is a major contributor to traffic in our region**
- Even prior to the pandemic, working from home was more common in our region compared to the rest of the country. The **travel-to-work areas generally show high degrees of self-containment**. Inverness is the focus of in-commuting, with nearly 12,000 living outside the area and travelling to work there
- Providing **access to healthcare** is already a key issue in our region and will become increasingly important as the population profile is projected to age and there is a trend towards service centralisation. This is an issue across many communities in the region

(even in large settlements such as Wick) but those in some island and very remote mainland locations face particular difficulties

3 Transport problems in our region

3.1 Overview

3.1.1 This chapter briefly profiles the transport network in our region and key recent trends. It thereafter summarises the **transport problems** experienced in our region, which are the building blocks of our new RTS. The transport network and services are profiled in Chapter 4 of the 'Case for Change' Report, where additional detail can be found.

3.2 Transport networks in our region

3.2.1 Our region is unique in the UK in terms of its mix and extent of transport services, ranging from small community operated passenger only ferries and single pilot aircraft through to inter-city rail connections and trunk roads. The two maps which follow show the primary road and rail networks, in both cases also showing ferry connections and airports / airfields[5].

[5] Note that there is some overlap on the Orkney inter-island air service airfields due to the scale of the map. In summary, there are six island airfields – Eday, North Ronaldsay, Papa Westray, Sanday, Stronsay and Westray.

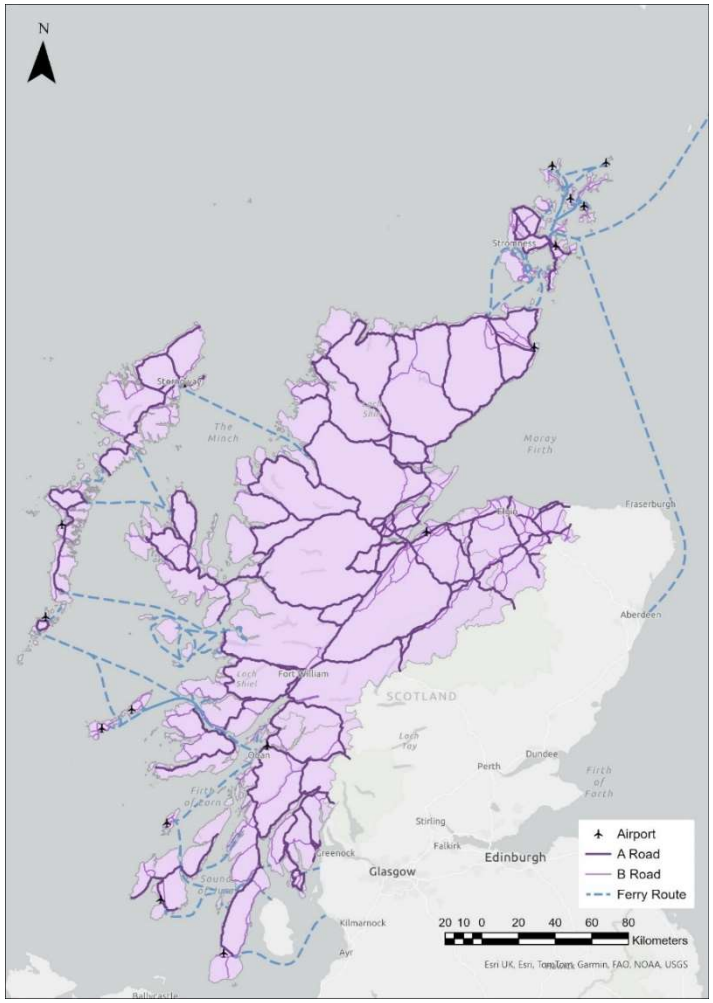


Figure 3.1: HITRANS region road network, ferry connections and airports / airfields

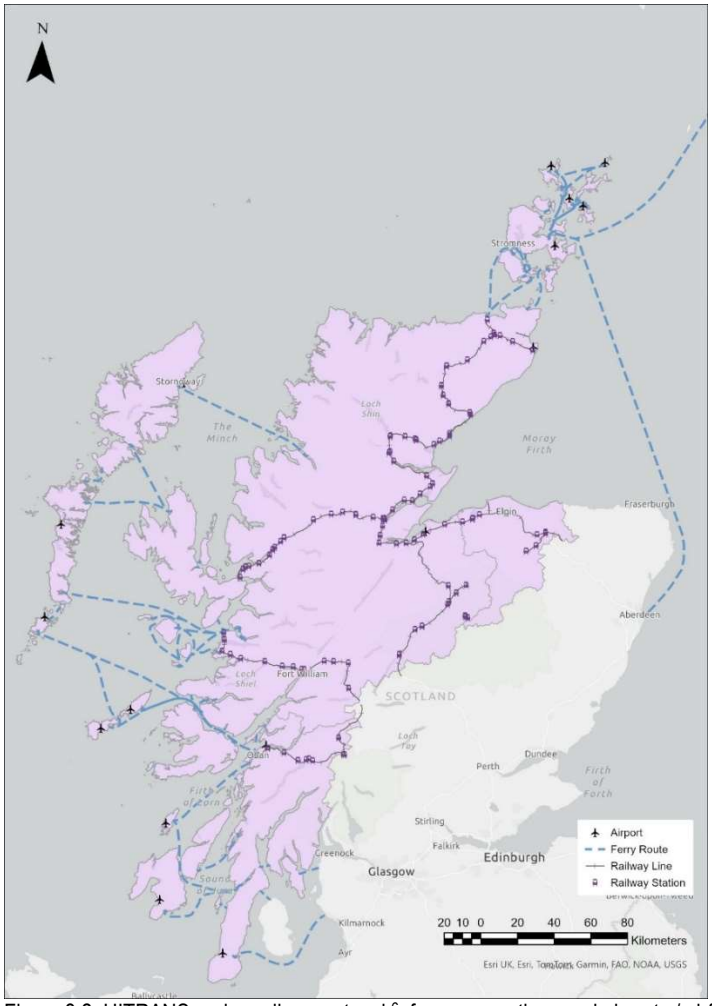


Figure 3.2: HITRANS region railway network[6], ferry connections and airports / airfields

[6] Includes heritage lines

3.3 Recent trends

3.3.1 The chart below provides an overview of travel volumes by mode in the decade prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the years since, all indexed to 2019 for comparative purposes.[7]

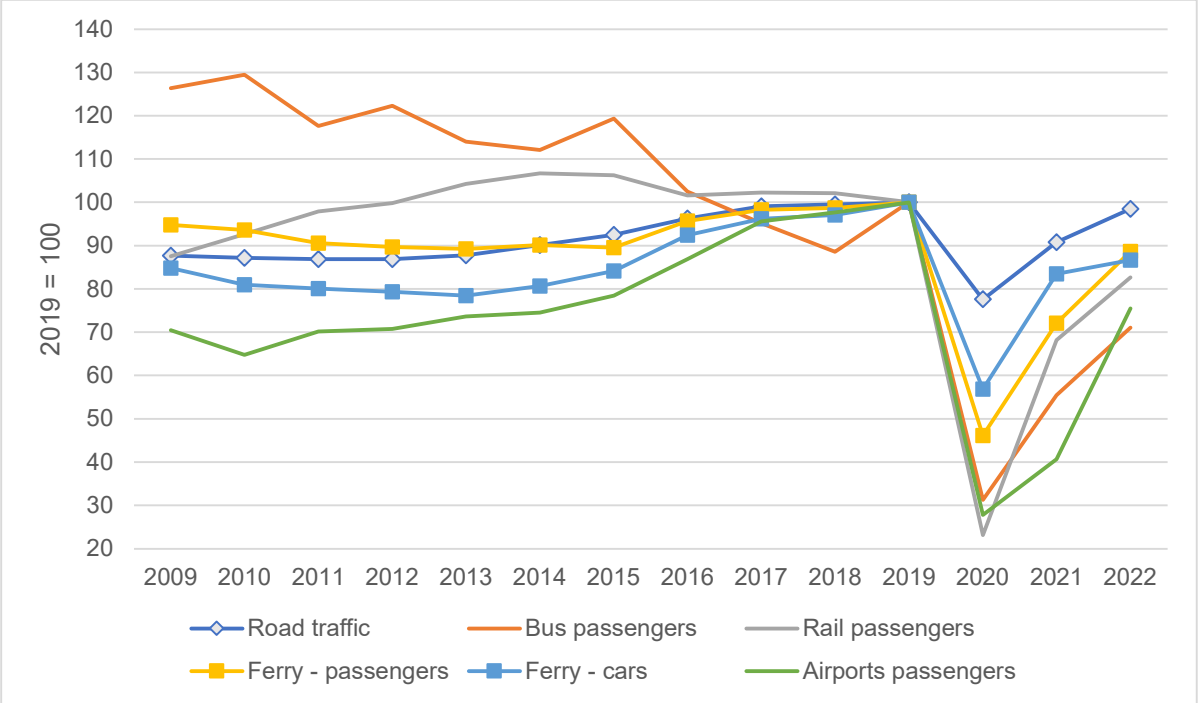


Figure 3.3: Trend in travel by mode in the HITRANS region (2019=100)

3.3.2 The first few years after 2009 saw the aftermath of the financial crash and associated UK recession which explains the dip in most travel. From 2013, road traffic grew steadily until 2019, the last full year prior to the pandemic. Bus travel fell throughout this period though and was **20%** below its 2009 level in 2019. As is common for most trend-based analysis in our region, there is significant variation between and within local authorities. For example, bus patronage in the Orkney Islands has increased slightly over the same period despite the overall decline across our region.

3.3.3 After air travel, car-based ferry travel grew the most over this period at **18%**. It is notable that the growth in car carryings significantly outpaced the growth in passenger carryings at **6%**. Much of this is down to the introduction of Road Equivalent Tariff (RET) across the Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Services (CHFS) network. In air travel, passenger numbers at Inverness Airport grew rapidly by **61%** between 2009 and 2019.

3.3.4 The pandemic of course had a major impact on travel and this is easily seen in the graph. In 2020, road traffic reduced by **22%,** public transport (affected by both lockdowns and social distancing policies / concerns over infection) saw bus travel reducing by **66%** and train by **93%**. Ferry travel was less affected than bus and rail reflecting the 'lifeline'[8] nature of much of

[7] Road traffic – Vehicle kms in HITRANS local authorities, including all of Argyll and Bute (Scottish Transport Statistics, STS); Bus passengers – Eilean Siar, Highland, Moray, Orkney Islands, Shetland Islands, Argyll & Bute (STS); Rail passengers – ORR Station data (all stations in HITRANS area); Ferry – Argyll and Bute services, CalMac, Highland Council services, Orkney Ferries, NorthLink (excluding Shetland), Western Ferries (STS); Air – terminal passengers at Barra, Benbecula, Campbeltown, Inverness, Islay, Kirkwall, Stornoway, Sumburgh, Tiree, Wick John O'Groats (STS)

[8] 'Lifeline' transport infrastructure is often a single route that connects a community with key destinations. These are ones that need to be accessed for health, employment, education, shopping and leisure; plus services

this travel, with much of the reduction being attributable to reduced visitor / tourist travel, particularly at Easter and at least the early part of the summer holidays.

3.3.5 By 2022, when all COVID-19 restrictions were being lifted in the early part of the year, rail passenger numbers were **83%** of pre-pandemic levels, bus passenger numbers **71%** and road traffic had fully recovered (although car traffic is down somewhat with commercial vehicle traffic now above pre-pandemic levels). Ferry tarvel was around **90%** of 2019 levels with air travel at **75%**. The long-term impact of the pandemic on travel is therefore still being keenly felt and post-pandemic reductions in public transport services have the potential to particularly impact on groups with protected characteristics.[9]

3.3.6 The Scottish Household Survey (SHS) publishes a range of statistics about travel in Scotland, some of which are disaggregated by RTP area. Analysis of recent trends (between 2012/13 to 2019 (pre-pandemic)) for our region shows:

- **Commuting to work:** an increase in car use and active travel, and a reduction in public transport usage
- **Place of work:** an increase in working from home
- **Travel to school:** a reduction in walking and bus use and an increase in car-based travel
- **Main mode of travel:** an increase in car use and a reduction across all other modes
- **Car availability:** an increase in the proportion of households with two or more cars and a reduction in zero-car households
- **Car use:** an increase in car use and driving licence holding
- **Bicycles:** a small increase in rates of bicycle ownership
- **Walking:** a reduction in walking as a means of transport but an increase in walking for leisure
- **Use of buses and trains:** a reduction in bus and train use
- **Satisfaction with public transport:** a reduction in levels of satisfaction with public transport
- **Concessionary fares:** an increase in the proportion of people with a National Entitlement Card but some reduction in usage amongst holders
- **Distance travelled:** an increase in the distance travelled per person

3.3.7 It is therefore clear that **the majority of these indicators in our region are going in the 'wrong' direction from a policy (and equalities) perspective**, albeit there will again be variation across the region. This clearly presents a range of challenges which the RTS will seek to address.

3.4 Summary of transport problems in our region

3.4.1 The 'Case for Change' sets out at some length the transport problems in our region – these can be summarised as follows:

- **Journey times** for trips between settlements within our region and to / from our region to elsewhere in Scotland are **long** and characterised in places by **low average speeds**. This is true of road, rail and bus and impacts on the productivity and economic competitiveness of our region

provided by those based elsewhere and the movement of freight. If a lifeline route is unavailable, that community will often be cut off, or in some cases face a long diversionary route.

[9] As defined by the Equality Act 2010

- **Journey time reliability by road** is also relatively poor, affected by vehicle platooning, inclement weather, poor network resilience when incidents occur and limited daylight hours in winter. This is a particular issue for **road freight**, which is sometimes moving high-value and time sensitive products to end customers or forwarding depots, which makes journey time reliability essential
- **Reliability** more generally is becoming a major issue on almost all **ferry networks** in our region, with **ageing vessels and port infrastructure** breaking down more frequently. These issues compound the **underlying reliability challenges** caused by inclement weather
- **Public transport frequency** is also generally **very low** outwith the larger settlements and, in most cases, operates over a **shorter day** than would be found elsewhere in Scotland. This acts to **limit access to opportunities** and can lead to the need for expensive **overnight stays**, particularly for those travelling from and to our island communities. Even in Inverness, the first **direct trains** of the day from the Central Belt do not arrive until late morning / early afternoon (10:28 from Glasgow Queen Street and 12:01 from Edinburgh Waverley)
- The **long travel distances**, and in some cases the need to **combine an overland trip with a ferry or air service**, makes travel in our region **more expensive** than elsewhere in Scotland. For **ferry travel**, this is compounded by **differential tariff structures** (passenger, car and freight) between networks and even on some islands within the same network
- Some roads within our region also suffer from a **poor road safety** record and in particular a high proportion of fatal personal injury collisions. Even on trunk and major A-roads, the network is almost exclusively **single carriageway or single track,** often over difficult terrain with few overtaking opportunities and limited lighting. Several **major roads** such as the trunk A96 Inverness – Aberdeen and A82 Inverness – Glasgow via Fort William also **run through numerous settlements** along their route, making walking, wheeling and cycling in these settlements less safe and attractive
- **Transport resilience** is also a major issue in our region, more so than anywhere else in the UK. The **road and railway networks** are subject to **extremes of weather** (e.g., snow, flooding etc) and **geological instability** in some locations. In the event of road closures, with few alternative routes, this can lead to **very long diversions** and can have **major negative impacts on the emergency services** (e.g., if an ambulance or fire appliance is located on the 'wrong side' of an accident) and in terms of **service delivery**, such as social care, district nursing etc. The **ferry networks** around our region are also generally operated on fine margins, with **few spare vessels** to cover for increasingly frequent breakdowns, particularly during refit / drydock periods, which themselves are becoming longer
- With **Inverness acting as our major regional centre** to a widely dispersed hinterland, this generates significant vehicle kilometres and a demand for parking in the city. Moreover, for those travelling from the remotest settlements, public transport journey times are long and services can be infrequent and expensive, particularly given fuel price differentials in more remote areas. Allied to this, many people have to travel increasing distances to access key services as a result of the **centralisation of provision** of facilities, branches e.g., banking, post offices but most evidently healthcare
- Many of the settlements in our region are **rural**, and our region includes some of Scotland's **most remote communities**. The impact of this is fourfold: (i) **labour markets** are limited in size and in most cases largely self-contained within discrete travel-to-work areas – this can lead to **labour shortages and challenges in matching skills to jobs**; (ii) there is a reliance on the transport network to **connect people to services** (e.g., retail) and vice versa (e.g., social care), but the limitations of the network make such journeys long and expensive; (iii) very low travel volumes make the **delivery of transport services expensive** and, with respect to bus services, **subject to short notice**

reduction and withdrawal; and (iv) the scope for **active travel journeys** between settlements is limited

- Connected to the above point is the issue of **transport poverty**, where low service frequency and / or short operating days can act to **limit the ability to access essential services**. Indeed, in some parts of our region, there are no scheduled public transport services at all, leading to **'forced car ownership'**. This can be a '**push' factor in out-migration** in communities which are already fragile
- The above challenges are compounded by the **extreme winter-summer differentials in travel in Argyll and the Highlands and Islands**. In the summer months, the network has to accommodate day-trippers, staying visitors, motorhomes and cruise passengers, whilst traffic has to be managed at 'honeypot' locations such as Skara Brae in Orkney. A particular feature of tourism in our region is that much of it is drawn towards where the transport infrastructure is least well-placed to support it, e.g., the North Coast 500; the islands, where visitors can consume a significant amount of ferry vehicle capacity; and 'honeypot' locations such as Glenfinnan and the Fairy Pools on Skye. This can lead to **deteriorating road conditions** and the need for increased maintenance
- A consequence of low population density and public transport frequency is that our region derives a proportionally lower benefit from **national policies and funding streams**, e.g., the National Concessionary Travel Scheme – this is a clear inequality. Moreover, there are **inequalities between areas** within our region associated with anomalies in historic funding and delivery arrangements, the existence of which have little evidential basis. For example, all ferry services in the CHFS network are entirely funded by the Scottish Government, whereas the additional cost of local authority funded ferry services over and above the Grant Aided Expenditure (GAE) settlement from the Scottish Government must be met by local authorities from their own resources (although there are examples of additional government 'top-up' funding being provided)
- The very different nature of the supply of and demand for transport in our region also raises a **question as to how national government policy aspirations should be delivered**. For example, for many essential journeys, there is no realistic alternative but to use the private car, which presents a challenge in terms of delivering the 2045 net zero commitment and the proposed 20% reduction in vehicle kilometres by 2030

3.4.2 Despite these transport challenges, our region is in many respects thriving like never before. Headline long-term population decline has been checked although this is still an issue in many communities and forecast population loss and ageing remains an issue. There are significant concentrations in growth industries from traditional staples such as, food and drink and tourism to renewables and spaceports. Improved connectivity is providing the opportunity for more people to reduce travel by working from home and enable creative industries to locate within the region; and our region is also at the forefront of piloting renewable fuels, the use of hydrogen fuel cells on the Orkney Ferries' vessel MV *Shapinsay* for example. Continued development and growth are however dependent on the **provision of fast, reliable, safe and resilient transport connections between communities in our region and between our region and elsewhere in Scotland**. Supporting the delivery of these connections is the focus of our RTS.

4 Our Vision and RTS Strategy Objectives

4.1 Our RTS Vision

4.1.1 Our RTS Vision is an expression of the type of region that we want the Highlands and Islands and Argyll to be and how transport can contribute to achieving that for everyone. It has been developed to reflect national policy and legislation, most notably the commitment to net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2045, but at the same time reflects the very distinctive character of our region. The Vision provides an overarching context within which our RTS Strategy Objectives can sit and provides a long-term focus for HITRANS and our constituent members.

Our transport networks and services will act to realise the economic potential of our region through reducing the actual and perceived impacts of distance, poor resilience and low population density. By doing this, they will facilitate economically and socially valuable activities for all, provide equality of opportunity, enable people to live active and healthy lives and allow our region to contribute fully to the national net zero emissions target.

4.2 Our RTS Strategy Objectives

4.2.1 The RTS Strategy Objectives: (i) provide the bridge between the transport problems in our region and the outcomes that we are seeking through our RTS; and (ii) express how our RTS Vision will be realised. To ensure that the process of setting RTS Strategy Objectives was both systematic and rigorous, a seven-step bottom-up approach was adopted, as summarised in the figure below:

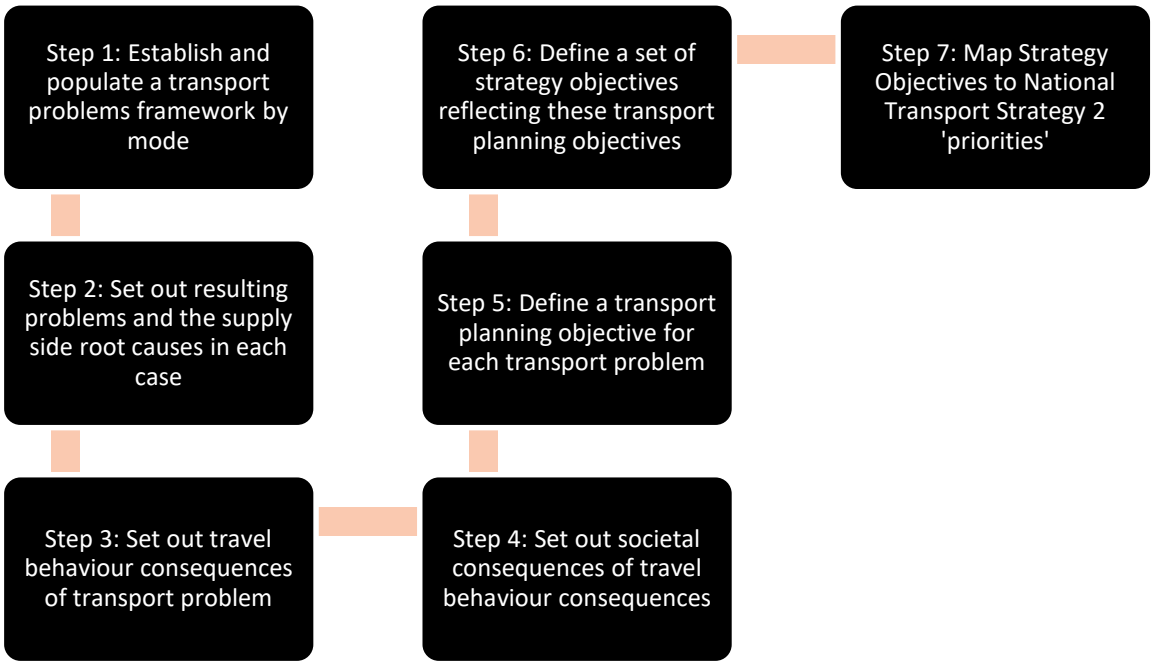


Figure 4.1: RTS Strategic Objectives development process

4.2.2 A description of each individual step in this process is provided in the 'Case for Change' Report. However, we briefly reflect on the 'Transport Problems Framework' (Step 1), as this is the foundation on which our RTS was built.

Transport Problems Framework

4.2.3 Given the geographic, socio-economic, demographic and modal diversity of our region, it was essential that the approach to setting the RTS Strategy Objectives was rigorous and systematic. To this end, we developed and populated a **'Transport Problems Framework'** at the 'Case for Change' stage. This defined a transport problem as being **a problem experienced by a user, or potential user of the transport network** in our region. These transport problems can be thought of as one or more of:

- Something that **negatively affects a journey which is still made** (people and freight) by that mode of travel – in the main this makes a trip less efficient, more expensive, less comfortable or more stressful in terms of safety and / or wellbeing
- Something that **stops people or goods travelling by (generally) more sustainable and policy friendly modes** – this primarily leads to more car use and associated negative impacts across a range of policy areas including environment, climate change and safety
- Something that **stops people making the trips they would like to make, or goods being moved** – impacting on peoples' life chances, wellbeing, and business opportunities

4.2.4 Transport problems, when defined in this way, are typically associated with a relatively narrow range of parameters which define any trip or travel, and these are set out in the table below.

Table 4.1: Transport problem 'themes'

All Modes of Travel	Public transport specific
Concern over environmental impact of travel	Booking and journey planning (e.g., making connections between services)
Cost of travel and affordability	Capacity – seating / ferry car deck and sleeping accommodation
Fuel / power issues	Comfort, safety and security
Integration of travel between modes	Connectivity and network coverage (availability of services)
Journey information, including for protected groups who may find accessing information particularly difficult	Ease of use / convenience
Journey quality	Integration between services (within mode, e.g., bus-to-bus and between modes, e.g., ferry-to-train, active travel to bus etc), including for people with disabilities or other protected characteristics which affect accessibility
Journey times	Service reliability (cancellations and punctuality)
Journey time reliability (including public transport service punctuality)	Timetables (first and last / frequency / days of the week etc.) and their accessibility for all groups
Lack of awareness of travel options	
Personal accessibility – being able to access transport networks and public transport services specifically including people with disabilities or other protected characteristics which affect accessibility	
Personal security (fear of crime)	
Travel safety (collisions, personal injury)	

4.2.5 The above list was used as a 'checklist' to develop a set of transport problems for each mode of transport in the context our region, drawing in the evidence developed for and presented in the 'Case for Change'.

RTS Strategy Objectives

4.2.6 The RTS Strategy Objectives define the outcomes that we are trying to achieve through the RTS. Emerging from 'Step 6' of the above referenced process, they are an aggregation of individual Transport Planning Objectives set in relation to each transport problem identified in the Transport Problems Framework. The Strategy Objectives are therefore:

Strategy Objective 1: To make a just transition to a post-carbon and more environmentally sustainable transport network.

4.2.7 *Why?* – Scotland has a target to achieve net zero carbon emissions of all greenhouse gases by 2045 and transport is a key sector in terms of such emissions. Our transport networks and services must adapt to fulfil this target in a fair and equitable way whilst also being developed in as environmentally sustainable a way as possible. The process must also recognise the needs of all groups through a 'Just Transition'.

Strategy Objective 2: To transform and provide safe and accessible connections between and within our city, towns and villages, to enable walking, wheeling and cycling for all.

4.2.8 *Why?* – to allow everyone to walk, wheel and cycle more, leading to more local living patterns, greater inclusion, affordable transport, healthier lifestyles, and reduced car use – the latter leading to reduced emissions / noise etc and improved road safety.

Strategy Objective 3: To widen access to public and shared transport and improve connectivity within and from / to the region.

4.2.9 *Why?* – to give people new travel choices, allowing them to: (i) use accessible and affordable public or shared transport options to make journeys they previously could not make; or (ii) to use public or shared transport instead of the car - this leading to lower levels of car use and reduced emissions / noise etc., as well as improved road safety. This objective is also important in encouraging inclusive economic growth by widening labour markets and providing improved accessibility to employment opportunities by public transport.

Strategy Objective 4: To improve the quality and integration of public and shared transport within and from / to the region.

4.2.10 *Why?* – to make public and shared transport more attractive and competitive with car-based travel and to ensure the accessibility needs of all groups are accommodated. This will improve the travel experience for existing public transport users and encourage people to use public or shared transport instead of the car, leading to lower levels of car use and reduced emissions / noise etc, improved road safety and will support the social benefits associated with shared transport.

Strategy Objective 5: To ensure reliable, resilient, affordable and sustainable connectivity for all from / to our island, peninsular and remote communities.

4.2.11 *Why?* – some of our island and peninsular communities have suffered from pronounced connectivity difficulties in recent years. This has had wide-ranging impacts on these communities and this objective recognises the need to tackle this issue, in tandem with Strategy Objective 4. Delivering this objective will provide the foundation for the long-term sustainability and success of these vulnerable communities, including through helping meet

the needs of people with protected characteristics and by tackling socio-economic disadvantage.

Strategy Objective 6: To improve the efficiency, safety and resilience of our transport networks for people and freight and adapt to the impacts of climate change.

4.2.12 *Why?* – our transport systems must be safe and able to adapt to changing demands (e.g., tourism patterns, trade etc) and be resilient in the face of climate change. This objective is important in allowing the society and economy of our region to prosper and to reduce inequalities of outcome associated with socio-economic disadvantage.

Alignment of our Strategy Objectives with NTS2

4.2.13 As our new RTS reflects national transport policy, it is important to ensure alignment between our RTS Strategy Objectives and the NTS2. The table below therefore maps the RTS Strategy Objectives to the four NTS2 Priorities:

Table 4.2: Map of Strategy Objectives to NTS2 priorities

	NTS2 Priorities			
Strategy Objective	**Reduces inequalities**	**Takes climate action**	**Helps deliver inclusive economic growth**	**Improves our health and wellbeing**
1: To make a just transition to a post-carbon and more environmentally sustainable transport network.	✓	✓		✓
2. To transform and provide safe and accessible connections between and within our city, towns and villages to enable walking, wheeling and cycling for all	✓	✓	✓	✓
3. To widen access to public and shared transport and improve connectivity within and from / to the region	✓	✓	✓	
4. To improve the quality and integration of public and shared transport within and from / to the region	✓	✓	✓	
5. To ensure reliable, resilient, affordable and sustainable connectivity for all from / to our island, peninsular and remote communities	✓		✓	✓
6. To improve the efficiency, safety and resilience of our transport networks for people and freight, and adapt to the impacts of climate change		✓	✓	✓

4.2.14 As can be seen from the above table, there is clear alignment between our RTS Strategy Objectives and national transport policy, as expressed in the NTS2.

4.3 RTS Themes

4.3.1 Following the completion of the Preliminary Options Appraisal, the shortlisted options were aggregated into **11 Strategy Themes**, which are summarised in the table below:

Table 4.3: RTS Strategy Themes

Theme		Description
1	Transforming our communities and reducing the impact of transport upon them	Improving the public realm and mobility within settlements by reducing the dominance of the private car and maximising opportunities for walking, wheeling and cycling.
2	Connecting our communities	Facilitating walking, wheeling and cycling within settlements and improving active travel connections between them.
3	Enhancing public transport connectivity to / from: (i) Inverness; (ii) our sub-regional centres; and (iii) Scotland's other cities and beyond	Distance, topography, geography and low population density currently limit public transport connectivity within much of the region. This Strategy Theme is focused on improving public transport connectivity for journeys within, to and from the region. Widening the network, providing more connections, making journeys quicker
4	Improving the integration, quality of and access to public and shared transport	Addressing the barriers to travel by public transport, including interchange within and between modes, physical barriers for those less able and poor-quality facilities and travel information.
5	Providing connectivity that supports our island and peninsular communities	Improving the connectivity and reducing the peripherality of island and peninsular communities through improved ferry and air services, and potentially fixed links.
6	Improving the efficiency of transport networks and supply-chains and reducing their impact on our communities	Many supply-chains in the region are marginal and face challenges not found elsewhere in Scotland, working around ferry connections for example. This Strategy Theme is focused on enhancing the efficiency of supply-chains and identifying means for improving their environmental sustainability.
7	Improving the safety, reliability and resilience of our road and rail networks	Weather, geological instability and very limited diversion opportunities make resilience a key issue in the region, whilst safety is a primary concern on many of the main road routes. This Strategy Theme is therefore focused on improving the safety, reliability and resilience of transport networks within the region.
8	Facilitating sustainable visitor travel demand	Responding to the challenges arising from the significant seasonal influx of tourists to the region, often in the areas least well-placed to accommodate it.
9	Decarbonising our transport, mitigating the effects of climate change	Supporting the decarbonisation of transport through the adoption of zero emission vehicles, vessels, and aircraft.
10	Embracing new technologies	Capitalising on innovations in new technology.
11	Reducing the cost of travel, particularly for those most in need	Reducing the cost of travel for residents of the region, which is a primary contributor to 'transport poverty'

4.3.2 The RTS Themes have been used to shape the content of the RTS, with each subsequent chapter of this document focusing on a separate theme and relevant **policies** therein. The table below maps the RTS Themes to the Strategy Objectives. As is evident from the table, the RTS Strategy Themes are well-aligned to our RTS Strategy Objectives and thus form a robust basis for our RTS.

Table 4.4: Mapping of RTS Themes to Strategy Objectives

Strategy Theme	**SO1:** To make a just transition to a post-carbon and more environmentally sustainable transport network	**SO2:** To transform and provide safe and accessible connections between and within our city, towns and villages, to enable walking, wheeling and cycling for all	**SO3:** To widen access to public and shared transport and improve connectivity within and to / from the region	**SO4:** To improve the quality and integration of public and shared transport within and from / to the region	**SO5:** To ensure reliable, resilient, affordable and sustainable connectivity for all from / to our island, peninsular and remote communities	**SO6:** To improve the efficiency, safety and resilience of our transport networks for people and freight and adapt to the impacts of climate change.
1. Transforming our communities and reducing the impact of transport upon them	✓	✓				
2. Connecting our communities	✓	✓		✓		
3. Enhancing public transport connectivity to / from: (i) Inverness; (ii) our sub-regional centres; and (iii) Scotland's other cities and beyond	✓		✓	✓	✓	
4. Improving the integration, quality of and access to public and shared transport	✓		✓	✓	✓	
5. Providing connectivity that supports our island and peninsular communities	✓		✓	✓	✓	
6. Improving the efficiency of transport networks and supply-chains and reducing their impact on our communities	✓				✓	✓
7. Improving the safety, reliability and resilience of our road and rail networks					✓	✓
8. Facilitating sustainable visitor travel demand	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9. Decarbonising our transport, mitigating the effects of climate change	✓		✓		✓	✓
10. Embracing new technologies	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11. Reducing the cost of travel, particularly for those most in need	✓		✓	✓	✓	

5 Strategy Theme 1: Transforming our communities and reducing the impact of transport upon them

5.1 Overview

5.1.1 The transport networks in our region play an essential role in facilitating the movement of residents, freight and visitors in our region. It is also integral to the delivery of essential services such as health and social care, more so than elsewhere in Scotland. However, transport can also imposes significant 'costs' on our communities, including road traffic collisions, noise, vibration, poorer air quality, greenhouse gas emissions, limitations of being able to walk, wheel and cycle, poor quality public realm and community severance.

5.1.2 The first theme of our RTS is therefore focused on transforming our communities and reducing any negative impacts of transport upon them. We will do this through improving the public realm and mobility within our settlements, reducing the dominance of the private car in particular, and maximising opportunities for walking, wheeling and cycling.

5.1.3 The figure below sets out the policy areas (i.e., the headings under which the respective policies are grouped) covered under this theme:

Figure 5.1: Strategy Theme 1 – policy areas

5.2 Reallocating road space to active travel

5.2.1 The dominance of vehicular traffic in our settlements means that walking, wheeling and cycling is often unattractive, with opportunities to travel in this way interrupted by busy road crossings and the absence of footways (or very narrow footways), whilst there is also a general lack of dedicated, segregated cycle infrastructure, including both on-road and segregated provision. This issue also diminishes the liveability of our communities.

5.2.2 Increasing rates of walking, wheeling and cycling in our communities will contribute to reducing emissions, supporting healthier lifestyles, reducing inequalities and supporting sustainable economic growth. To help overcome safety concerns, minimise traffic intimidation and improve placemaking, **road space should be reallocated** away from general traffic to walking, wheeling and cycling. This can be done through:

- The **widening of walking and wheeling routes** and the **provision of additional footways** through the reallocation of existing road space from general traffic and parking
- **Reducing road widths at junctions** in settlements, tightening turning radii and slowing down traffic
- The provision of **new dedicated on-road cycle lanes**, ranging from unprotected cycle lanes through to fully segregated cycleways reflecting *Cycling by Design*
- The **designation of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods**, where motor vehicle traffic in residential streets is greatly reduced

5.2.3 As well as our commitment to this principle, we consider it essential that, where traffic in settlements is reduced by investment in road infrastructure (for example the proposed settlement bypasses as part of the A96 dualling), road space reallocation should be undertaken as an integral component of that investment.

5.2.4 We do however recognise the importance of ensuring that **road space reallocation does not have a negative impact on bus services**, given our aspiration to increase public transport mode share for journeys beyond settlements.

Policy ST1a: The RTS supports the principle of reallocating road space, including parking, from general traffic. This should support placemaking to shape improved walking, wheeling and cycling opportunities in our communities as a means to promote safe active travel and encourage use of active travel modes. Reallocation of road space should avoid any negative impacts on bus services.

Policy ST1b: Where traffic in settlements is reduced by investment in road infrastructure, road space reallocation should be undertaken as an integral component of that investment.

5.3 Reducing the impact of traffic on our communities

5.3.1 Trunk and major A-roads often **run through the heart of our communities**, for example the A9 through Golspie and Brora, the A82 through Inverness, Fort Wiliam and Fort Augustus and the A96 through Nairn, Elgin and Keith. Our settlements therefore accommodate a higher proportion of through / strategic traffic, including commercial vehicles and abnormal loads, than is the case in some other parts of Scotland where the strategic network usually bypasses settlements. Moreover, visitors to our region are often attracted to communities that are least well-placed to accommodate them, Glenfinnan and the Quiraing on Skye for example, impacting on local communities.

5.3.2 Vehicular traffic therefore has a pervasive effect on some of our communities, imposing negative impacts such **as accidents, noise, vibration, intimidation and community severance**. Major settlements such as Elgin, Oban and Fort William experience significant challenges in this respect, but it is common across the region. Outwith these larger settlements, traffic speeds through towns and villages can be an issue, particularly on strategic routes and also on routes to ports, where drivers can be 'racing' to catch a ferry.

5.3.3 We recognise the importance of mitigating and reducing the impact of this traffic on our communities. There are different ways in which this objective can be achieved, including traffic speed enforcement and traffic calming measures such as speed cushions, road humps, road

narrowing, pedestrianisation, speed limit reductions and the establishment of 20mph zones in settlements. The most appropriate actions will vary by settlement – e.g., what works for Campbeltown may not work for Benbecula – but we recognise overall the imperative of reducing any negative impacts of traffic on our communities.

Policy ST1c: The RTS supports the principle of traffic calming and speed limit reductions and enforcement where this is the wish of our communities, including on the Trunk Road network.

Policy ST1d: The RTS supports measures to reduce road-based severance in our communities.

Policy ST1e: The RTS recognises the challenges presented by the impacts of increasing abnormal load movements across the region. It calls for a coordinated approach to be taken to ensure that appropriate planning and mitigation is put in place as part of the planning process for new developments that will generate such movements.

5.4 Managing the impact of parking

5.4.1 Parking provision and enforcement varies across our region and between authorities with a range of policies in place to manage local demand. In many smaller settlements, much of the provision is on-street or indeed informal. The ready availability of free or low-cost parking can encourage car use for some shorter journeys which could potentially be undertaken by active modes, with resultant negative impacts such as traffic intimidation, emissions and noise.

5.4.2 However, as with most other elements of the transport system in our region, there exists the dual challenge of managing day-to-day parking requirements and **peak season visitor parking, particularly at 'honeypot' sites** such as Skara Brae and the Fairy Pools. Traffic management around ferry terminals can also be an issue (e.g., at Port Ellen and Oban), particularly in peak season.

5.4.3 A mixed approach to both provision and enforcement can lead to inappropriate parking. Consequences of this include degradation of the public realm, lost trade for local businesses and footpaths being blocked, a particular issue for certain protected groups such as those in wheelchairs or pushing a pram. There are also particular risks associated with indiscriminate, illegal and dangerous parking around our schools.

5.4.4 We acknowledge the delicate balance between parking provision and enforcement and how this varies across our region. However, we also recognise that illegal and indiscriminate parking **negatively impacts on our communities and the experience of visitors to our region**, and therefore support improved management of parking. We again recognise that the most appropriate actions will vary by settlement and moreover that parking policy is a matter for our constituent members. However, through the RTS, we see an opportunity to work with our partner local authorities to develop more consistent approaches to some common challenges, such as the provision of parking and facilities for motorhomes, solutions for reducing private vehicle at 'honeypot' tourist attractions and payment mechanisms.

Case Study: School Streets – Seafield and New Elgin Primary Schools, Moray

'School Streets' are roads outside of a school with a temporary restriction on motorised traffic at school drop-off and pick-up times. The restriction is applied to school traffic and through traffic and is a proactive solution to tackling local air pollution, poor health and road safety risks.

Seafield and New Elgin Primary Schools took part in a pilot programme that closed streets in the immediate vicinity to traffic for half an hour at school drop-off and pick-up times. Access

was maintained for residents, emergency services and utility companies. Police Scotland supported the initiative and carried out regular patrols of the area.

The initiative has been highly successful:

- *The number of pupils and parents walking, cycling and scooting to school increased in both pilot locations, with a 50% increase in pedestrians accessing the schools.*
- *The speed of traffic around New Elgin Primary School reduced by 12%, although the speed of traffic near Seafield Primary School increased by 2%.*

***Following the success of the pilots, the 'School Streets' initiative at these two schools was made permanent in February 2022.*[10]**

Policy ST1f: Parking management is the responsibility of partner local authorities. The RTS supports the development of a consistent approach (in 'like-for-like' locations) of parking management across our region, including payment mechanisms, parking information and enforcement.

Policy ST1g: The RTS supports the principle of improving the management and enforcement of traffic and parking around schools, including *School Streets* (a road outside a school with temporary restriction on motorised traffic at school drop-off and pick-up times).

5.5 Facilitating sustainable land-use development

5.5.1 At the heart of our RTS is our commitment to reduce transport-related greenhouse gas emissions in our region, supporting the national 2045 net zero target. However, this should be achieved in a manner which reflects the characteristics of our region, including its geography and the spatial distribution of its population. In general, we **support the concept of 'Triple Access Planning' (TAP)** where the transport system (physical mobility), the land-use system (spatial proximity) and the telecommunication system (digital connectivity) are delivered in an integrated manner known as a Triple Access System (TAS).[11]

5.5.2 For many years, transport and land-use planning in our region has been largely predicated on the ability to access employment, services and leisure opportunities by car, particularly in Inverness but also in other major settlements such as Elgin, Fort William, Oban, Campbeltown, Kirkwall and Stornoway. This has been compounded by a model of public service delivery increasingly built on centralisation, particularly in health and education. We therefore start from a position where a **high proportion of journeys undertaken by car** in our region are essential rather than discretionary. Over the lifetime of the RTS and indeed beyond, it is our aspiration that this need to travel is reduced through a growth in localism, where employment, service and leisure opportunities can be accessed locally or, where a journey is required, by active travel or public transport.

5.5.3 Planning for transport as part of new developments is essential if we are to ensure that an **'infrastructure first'** approach (i.e., identifying and addressing the infrastructure capacity and requirements arising from a development) is adopted and that such developments are created in a manner that embeds **sustainable transport provision** from the outset and prevents car dependency from becoming entrenched. The concept of **Transit Orientated Development (TOD)** should be used where practicable to provide sufficient population density to make high quality and regular public transport services viable. This requires the concentration of major trip generating developments around public transport corridors (e.g., the A96), stops and stations to be effective.

[10] https://newsroom.moray.gov.uk/news/morays-school-streets-to-be-made-permanent

[11] Triple Access Planning for Uncertain Futures (tapforuncertainty.eu)

5.5.4 Placemaking and the development of a high-quality public realm are also essential to creating spaces that people want to spend time in and feel safe walking, cycling and wheeling to get around. This is integral to the concept of 'Living Well Locally' which aim to create attractive, safe and walkable environments which connect people to the facilities and services for their everyday needs via short walking, wheeling or cycling journeys. By designing around this concept, planning focuses on walking, cycling and wheeling rather than car travel, helping to align spatial planning and transport planning at a local scale. It can also enhance the inclusivity of areas through improving connectivity to services which may not previously have been readily accessible to some people who do not own or have access to a car. Once again, we recognise that the concept of Living Well Locally will be more suited to more concentrated settlements than outlying rural areas and thus there should be flexibility in the application of the concept across our region, with active travel links from outlying areas into local hubs.

5.5.5 In some instances, the application of TOD and Living Well Locally principles may make it possible to explore the implementation of **zero car developments**, particularly in the Inner Moray Firth area. These can be supported by **shared mobility** solutions which depart from traditional car ownership models and allow people to access transport, including cars, on an on-demand basis. This has the potential to reduce or remove the need for vehicle ownership and provides people with a wider range of sustainable transport options than they would have had under a traditional ownership-based approach.

5.5.6 Shared mobility should be an integral part of all significant new developments. It will provide scope to reduce parking provision and create an opportunity to increase density and / or create additional green or blue space within new developments. Electric vehicle (EV) charging provision will also be a fundamental requirement in all new developments.

5.5.7 The integration of active travel within new developments and improvements to existing active travel routes would also provide opportunities for enhancing biodiversity.

Case Study: Tornagrain

Tornagrain is a new town being developed between Inverness and Nairn, just to the west of Inverness Airport. It is an exemplar of a sustainably planned new settlement which will be realised over the long-term. The planning permission, granted in 2012, allows for 5,000 new homes, three primary schools, a secondary school, shops, employment space, parks and other services. Tornagrain will have a town centre focussed on a High Street, with squares at either end, together with surrounding neighbourhoods. Each neighbourhood will have a centre, including a primary school, within five-minutes walk of the residents of that area. All of the town's residents will be within 10-minutes walk of the town centre.

Whilst a long-term project (50-years), it is founded on sustainable development with local employment, amenities and services. Within the town, the emphasis will be on walking and cycling to local services and shops. For journeys beyond the town, there are bus services to Inverness and Nairn, whilst rail services are available from the recently opened (2nd February 2023) Inverness Airport railway station.

Policy ST1h: The RTS supports the prioritisation of new development in locations that are in proximity to key services and already well-served by active travel and public transport.

Policy ST1i: The RTS supports the local delivery of public services, including health and education, and other day-to-day retail and personal services (e.g., banking) which minimise the need to travel.

Policy ST1j: The RTS supports the integration of active travel, public transport and shared mobility into the planning of all new developments. Proposers of new developments should be required to outline how they will deliver connections into the local active travel and public transport networks.

Policy ST1k: The RTS supports the concept of 'infrastructure first' in relation to developments across our region.

Policy ST1l: The RTS recognises the centrality of environmental considerations, particularly biodiversity enhancements and nature networks, within the planning and decision-making process.

5.6 How does this Strategy Theme contribute to our RTS Objectives?

5.6.1 The table below summarises how this Strategy Theme contributes to our RTS Objectives:

Table 5.1: Contribution of Strategy Theme 1 to our RTS Objectives

RTS Strategy Objectives	
SO1: To make a just transition to a post-carbon and more environmentally sustainable transport network	✓✓
SO2: To transform and provide safe and accessible connections between and within our city, towns and villages, to enable walking, wheeling and cycling for all	✓✓✓
SO3: To widen access to public and shared transport and improve connectivity within and to / from the region	o
SO4: To improve the quality and integration of public and shared transport within and from / to the region	o
SO5: To ensure reliable, resilient, affordable and sustainable connectivity for all from / to our island, peninsular and remote communities	o
SO6: To improve the efficiency, safety and resilience of our transport networks for people and freight and adapt to the impacts of climate change.	o

5.6.2 This Strategy Theme makes a highly positive contribution to our RTS Strategy Objectives in two ways:

- At the settlement level, it prioritises active travel and reduces the impact of vehicular traffic on communities, thus contributing to **SO1**. As well as supporting a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, it offers several wider environmental benefits including improved local air quality, reduced noise, reduced severance and an improved public realm
- By supporting road space reallocation, improved parking management, traffic impact reduction measures and positive land-use changes, this Strategy Theme will provide safe and accessible connections within our settlements, contributing to **SO2**

6 Strategy Theme 2: Connecting our communities

6.1 Overview

6.1.1 This Strategy Theme is focused on improving and **expanding opportunities for walking, wheeling and cycling within and between our communities**. Enabling more safe active travel in our region requires the provision of integrated and high-quality routes for active travel combined with measures to widen bicycle availability and promote walking, wheeling and cycling as a means of travel. This is essential in enabling our residents to make healthy journey choices and in creating places that are more accessible, inclusive and prosperous.

6.1.2 We recognise that in parts of the region, factors like the geography, topography, climate and low population density can make it both challenging and expensive to deliver active travel infrastructure and promote journeys made by active modes. Transformational investment in active travel infrastructure in our region will therefore be required if significant modal shift is to be achieved, and **any funding settlement must specifically recognise the challenges posed by distance and our spatially dispersed population**.

6.1.3 The figure below sets out the policy areas covered under this theme:

Figure 6.1: Strategy Theme 2 – policy areas

6.2 Improving and expanding walking, wheeling and cycling routes

6.2.1 There is significant variation in the provision, scale and quality of walking, wheeling and cycling infrastructure across our region. Where provision is poor or non-existent, it can directly reduce access for certain groups, including disabled people, the elderly, young people and women.

6.2.2 Regular **walking and wheeling** trips will by and large be local in nature, and thus our focus will therefore be on improving the walkability (and 'wheelability') within or between proximate settlements. Enhancements could include but are not limited to: improved crossing facilities; improvements to existing routes to make them more direct, coherent, comfortable and

attractive; new or enhanced signage, lighting, surfacing etc; rationalisation of street furniture and other obstructions; and the implementation of physical accessibility improvements on existing routes (including the enforcement of pavement parking).

6.2.3 Many **cycling** routes in our region (at least where these are formalised) are on or alongside major roads, including high-speed Trunk Roads and A-roads, or, at the other end of the scale, narrow single-track roads, many of which have poor sightlines and still carry significant volumes of traffic including commercial vehicles. Design standards implied by Cycling by Design[12] are not widely met – this is reflected in the sparse nature of the National Cycle Network in our region. This gives rise to a range of issues such as safety risks, traffic intimidation, noise etc., creating an unattractive environment for cycling journeys, particularly for occasional or infrequent cyclists. These issues are significantly amplified during the winter months with reduced daylight and more inclement weather. Upgrades to and the formalisation of existing cycle routes, in addition to new routes are therefore necessary to expand the number of journeys made by bicycle. Central to this is the need for regionally and locally appropriate design standards that reflect both forecast usage of active travel infrastructure and the rural environment in which much of it would be situated.

6.2.4 Many **walking and wheeling, and some cycling trips will be to access public transport**, be that the local bus service, railway station, ferry terminal or, in some island communities, airfields. Promoting high quality 'first mile / last mile' walking, wheeling and cycling routes to transport interchanges is a clear and obvious means through which our RTS can contribute to reducing vehicle kilometres and transport-related emissions. It is important that such routes are safe and secure, direct and regularly treated during the winter months. In island and rural communities, a locally appropriate solution would be to provide safe walking routes to bus stops within townships. For many households in rural locations where there is no footpath and the road adjacent to the house is unsafe for walking, wheeling or cycling due to traffic volumes and speed, then residents effectively have no option to travel sustainably from their own home.

6.2.5 In addition to improving existing walking, wheeling and cycling infrastructure, there would be benefit in investing in **new 'greenfield' active travel routes.** We will also look to expand the number of **'quiet roads'**[13] on minor rural roads following pilots at Glencoe and on Skye. It is essential that such routes are designed to the current standards and apply the principles of inclusive design, whilst minimising or eliminating conflicts with vehicular traffic. The development of new routes of this nature would be particularly beneficial for journeys between settlements, creating a regional network that facilitates longer-distance active travel journeys.

6.2.6 We also recognise that many active travel journeys in our region are made for leisure purposes. This includes journeys on designated routes such as the Great Glen Way and Hebridean Way but also circular walking, wheeling and cycling journeys in and around our settlements. We recognise the importance of these routes to the visitor economy, but also as dual use facilities which provide

[12] https://www.transport.gov.scot/media/50323/cycling-by-design-update-2019-final-document-15-september-2021-1.pdf

[13] Quiet roads are designated rural roads where traffic volumes and vehicle speeds are already low, and are aimed at encouraging people to travel by foot, by bike and on horseback.

residents of our region with the opportunity to make functional active travel trips between settlements.

Policy ST2a: The RTS supports transformational investment in the improvement of our existing active travel networks to make these accessible to all.

Policy ST2b: The RTS supports the reinstatement and expansion of a network of strategic and local traffic free / quiet walking, wheeling and cycling routes to connect communities across and beyond our region.

Policy ST2c: The RTS supports the expansion of the National Cycle Network to all parts of the region.

Policy ST2d: Our active travel infrastructure should be designed to a high standard in accordance with the most up-to-date best practice and regionally appropriate design standards (as this evolves) to meet the needs of all users.

Policy ST2e: The RTS supports the integration of active travel and public transport connections within our communities.

Policy ST2f: The RTS promotes the adoption of measures outlined in the *Sustainable Travel to Stations Strategy* with respect to access to railway stations.

6.3 Widening the availability of cycling

6.3.1 Our region has **one of the highest household bicycle availability rates in Scotland**, with **46%** of households having access to at least one bicycle. And while cycling levels vary across the Highlands and Islands, the HITRANS region as a whole has a higher share of people cycling to work than any other region in Scotland. However, there is a significant body of literature which highlights differential access to cycling amongst those with protected characteristics. Whilst in some cases this is due to limited cycling infrastructure (i.e., it is a function of supply), for others, and particularly those on low incomes, the main issue is the cost of owning and maintaining a bicycle. his is particularly the case for electric bicycles (e-bikes) which cost significantly more to purchase and also cost money to charge.

6.3.2 Encouraging the uptake of cycling will therefore depend on increasing access to bicycles, and 'normalising' cycling across the region. This can be done both through supporting the cost of purchasing a bicycle or by expanding the coverage of our existing Hi-Bike electric bike share schemes (and other schemes of this nature). We consider it essential that cycling opportunities are accessible to all and, to this end, adaptive bicycles should be available as

part of any bike hire or share schemes. Through the evolving picture with respect to funding and delivery we will also work with employers and developers within our region to encourage and support them to provide secure bicycle parking and suitable changing facilities at their premises.

Case Study: Hi-Bike

Promoted and supported by HITRANS, the HI-Bike system launched in Inverness in October 2021 and has expanded within the city and was also introduced to Fort William in 2022. The introduction of Hi-Bike was funded with support from Transport Scotland's Regional Active Travel Grant, e-Bike Grant Fund and two EU programmes (North Sea Region Stronger Combined Project for Inverness and Low Carbon Transport and Travel ERDF Funding for Fort William). The implementation was led by HITRANS and Lochaber Environment Group, with HITRANS now responsible for the continued operation of the scheme.

Since the scheme was launched in late 2021 there has been steady growth in regular users. As of January 2024, there were nearly 1,000 regular users who have purchased 2,700 memberships. Additionally, there has been 12,000 single use users purchasing either a 3-hr pass which is common for tourists and visitors, or a pay-per-ride pass. This equates to a total of almost 13,000 users of the Hi-BIKE scheme since it launched. Furthermore, there have been almost 48,000 individual unlocks and 220,000 km travelled which can be calculated as 30,448 kilograms of CO_2 saved by traveling by Hi-BIKE. Evidence of existing users also demonstrates that it is already supporting members to both obtain and maintain employment opportunities.

Additional bikes and docks are to be introduced in Inverness in 2024 and further expansion is planned to other parts of the Highlands and Islands including Elgin.

Policy ST2g: The RTS seeks the implementation of initiatives which widen access to bicycles and e-bicycles, including e.g., promoting ownership, expansion of bicycle share and hire and provision of new 'first mile, last mile' cycling opportunities.

Policy ST2h: The RTS supports the upgrade and new provision of bicycle parking and facilities at all public buildings, transport interchanges and key on-street locations within the region as well as the provision of bicycle storage for residents.

6.4 Promoting walking, wheeling and cycling

6.4.1 There is a significant body of evidence highlighting the health and wellbeing benefits of active travel, which are supplementary to the environmental benefits offered. However, **a prominent barrier to encouraging walking, wheeling and cycling is perception and a lack of information**. Moreover, many visitors to our region are interested in outdoor pursuits and thus ensuring that they have the information on available walking, wheeling and cycling possibilities provides an opportunity for modal shift amongst visitors.

6.4.2 Promoting the benefits of active travel and highlighting options for engaging in walking, wheeling and cycling journeys is important to increasing uptake. Our GO-HI app provides a platform through which mapping and other information can be provided. However, encouraging increased walking, wheeling and cycling requires the input of a much wider range of partners including our constituent local authority members and public transport operators in the region. Each of these organisations have their own plans and targets of increasing active travel uptake, making coordinated, consistent and coherent messaging and information essential. The evolving funding and delivery picture will enable us to develop coordinated proposals with our partner councils for encouraging behaviour change with consistent messaging and a series of initiatives promoting walking and cycling that focuses of daily trips to work and school, 'walking buses'[14] for example.

Policy ST2i: Our active travel network should be developed, presented and promoted in a more coherent, recognisable and integrated way for regular, occasional and new users of the network, including visitors.

6.5 How does this Strategy Theme contribute to our RTS Objectives?

6.5.1 The table below summarises how this Strategy Theme contributes to our RTS Objectives:

Table 6.1: Contribution of Strategy Theme 2 to our RTS Objectives

RTS Strategy Objectives	
SO1: To make a just transition to a post-carbon and more environmentally sustainable transport network	✓✓✓
SO2: To transform and provide safe and accessible connections between and within our city, towns and villages, to enable walking, wheeling and cycling for all	✓✓✓
SO3: To widen access to public and shared transport and improve connectivity within and to / from the region	o
SO4: To improve the quality and integration of public and shared transport within and from / to the region	✓
SO5: To ensure reliable, resilient, affordable and sustainable connectivity for all from / to our island, peninsular and remote communities	o

[14] A 'walking bus' is a form of pupil transport for young schoolchildren who are chaperoned typically by two adults, a 'driver' who leads and a 'conductor' who follows. Children may walk to school along a set route, with designated 'stops' and 'pick-up' and 'drop-off' times.

RTS Strategy Objectives	
SO6: To improve the efficiency, safety and resilience of our transport networks for people and freight and adapt to the impacts of climate change.	O

6.5.2 This Strategy Theme makes a highly positive contribution to our RTS Strategy Objectives, as follows:

- By focusing specifically on policies which will grow both the absolute number of active travel journeys and its percentage mode share, our RTS will support a just transition to a post-carbon and more environmentally sustainable transport network for all **(SO1)**
- It will also make a highly positive contribution to **SO2**, through providing safe and accessible walking, wheeling and cycling connections within and between our settlements
- When integrated as part of wider mobility planning, the policies set out in this theme will also contribute to **SO4**

7 Strategy Theme 3: Enhancing public transport connectivity

7.1 Overview

7.1.1 Public transport connectivity is fundamental to the functioning of our region and its interactions with other regions of Scotland and beyond – it plays several key roles including:

- Connecting **residents to employment**, particularly in Inverness, our larger settlements such as Elgin, Fort William, Oban and Thurso and our main island settlements such as Kirkwall, Stornoway and Tobermory
- Connecting **our businesses to labour and to other businesses** in the region, elsewhere in Scotland and beyond
- Facilitating **access to public and personal services such as health, education, retail and banking**. Access to **healthcare facilities** within and beyond our region is particularly important in this respect given the pressure on, and challenges in, the delivery of patient transport
- Providing connectivity for those **without access to a car** and / or who would **prefer not to drive**
- Underpinning the **social fabric of communities**, where the above factors combine to support **community viability** in the first instance, and thereafter in providing a **balanced population and economy** and transport options that are **environmentally sustainable and equitable**

7.1.2 There are three components of public transport connectivity in this context:

- **Network geographical coverage:** The bus, community and demand responsive transport, rail, ferry and air services that collectively form a network of connections for our communities
- **Timetables / connections:** The number of days on which a service operates, the frequency at which it operates and the time of the first and last service
- **Journey times and journey time reliability:** How long the journey takes, including the time on-vehicle and 'door-to-door' journey time, and the extent to which the service operates (i.e., is not cancelled) and arrives on time

7.1.3 **Public transport connectivity is one of the fundamental transport challenges facing our region**. Distance, topography, geography and low population density have combined with increasing costs and diminishing budgets to threaten the sustainability of many routes, ranging from local bus services to commercially operated air services.

7.1.4 The figure below sets out the policy areas covered under this theme:

Figure 7.1: Strategy Theme 3 – policy areas

7.2 Reducing social exclusion

7.2.1 **Inequality is a consequence of our limited public transport network**, both in terms of geographic coverage and service provision. For many households in our region, they have little option but to accept the cost of owning and running a car or a second car (i.e., 'forced' car ownership) if they are to make essential journeys. In some households, those who cannot drive or do not have access to a car face social exclusion. This Strategy Theme is therefore focused on improving land-based public transport connectivity for journeys within, to and from our region by expanding the network, providing more connections and making journeys quicker and more reliable. Air and ferry services are considered separately in Strategy Theme 5, and the cost of travel is covered in Strategy Theme 11.

Policy ST3a: The RTS supports measures to reduce social exclusion for those without access to a car. It supports the principle of the entitlement to minimum levels of connectivity reflecting settlement types and geographies.

7.3 Bus and coach services

7.3.1 Buses are the backbone of the public transport network in our region – services vary from commercial long-distance coach services to conventional urban and suburban services in areas such as the Inner Moray Firth and Lochaber to small minibus operations that serve the most geographically remote parts of our region, sometimes with only one bus per day in each direction.

7.3.2 There has been a **long-term decline in bus passenger numbers in our region, despite the operation of a broadly stable number of bus kilometres**, as is shown in the figure below.

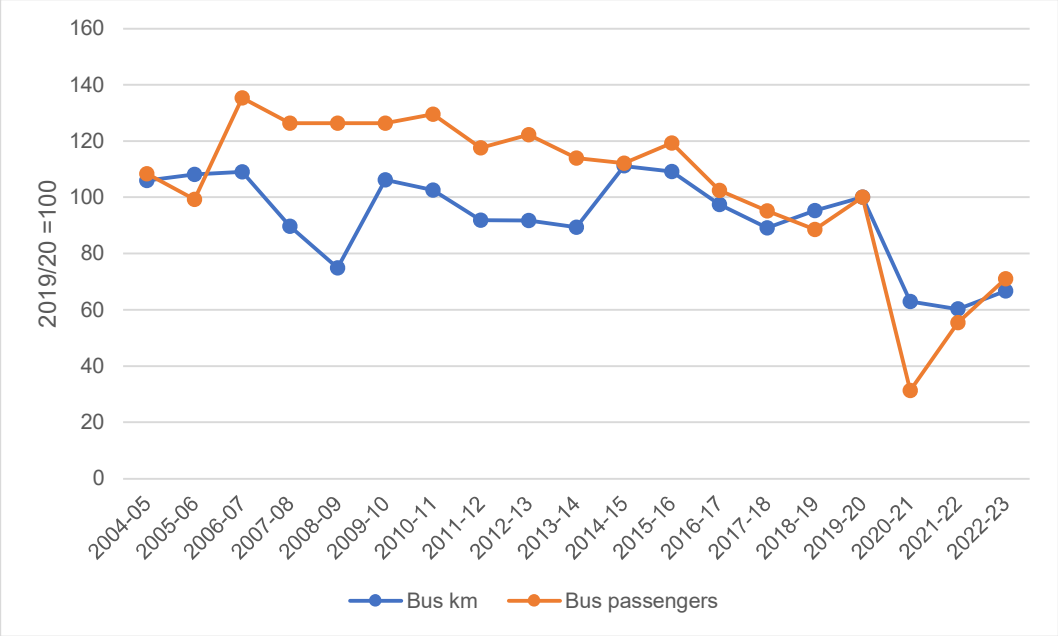


Figure 7.2: Bus kilometres and passenger numbers in the HITRANS region (2019-20 = 100) (Source: Scottish Transport Statistics 2022)[15]

7.3.3 In 2018-19, bus passengers caried in the region were around **80%** of their 2004-05 level and reduced to circa **30%** of that level during the COVID-19 pandemic.[16] Whilst bus networks across Scotland are facing an uncertain future, this is particularly true in rural areas. An increase in bus travel by those under 22 has not offset a decline in bus use by those 60+ since the pandemic. By 2022-23, passenger numbers were still 29% down on pre-pandemic levels and the withdrawal of COVID-19 support grants has made some routes unviable. Moreover, the bus industry generally is facing a shortage of drivers, whilst the existing labour force is ageing. This is further compounded by current (2023) high fuel prices and general inflation, where costs are increasing at a time when the revenue base is diminishing.

7.3.4 A key factor which disincentivises the use of the bus is that **journey times are often long** - whilst this is obviously to some degree reflective of the distances involved, commercial realities mean that buses often need to make diversions off main routes to make multiple stops, slowing down journeys even further. In larger settlements such as Inverness, Elgin and Fort William, bus services are also affected by more conventional congestion associated with peak commuting periods and seasonal tourist traffic.

7.3.5 In our **urban areas**, where congestion affects bus journey time reliability, there is a requirement for further bus priority measures (including on Trunk and major A-roads) such as bus lanes, bus gates and bus pre-signals where appropriate, and initiatives which reduce bus stop dwell times such as smart ticketing. In our **rural areas and island communities**, a more holistic approach is required which considers the structure of the network, integration with other modes such as rail and the potential for Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) to supplant conventional bus services (as explained in Section 7.3).

7.3.6 Bus service frequency across some parts of our region is low. In our most remote communities:

[15] Scottish Transport Statistics, data for Eilean Siar, Highland, Moray, Orkney Islands, Shetland Islands, Argyll & Bute

[16] Source: Scottish Transport Statistics 2022.

- There is sometimes **only one bus service per day**, with the return journey slotted in between school transport requirements thus limiting meaningful time at destination
- There are instances where the **public bus route is part of the school bus network** and thus only operated on school days, e.g., Glendale and Milovaig in Skye[17]
- There are further instances where a community has **no scheduled bus service at all**, e.g., Port Appin and the Waternish Peninsula in Skye

7.3.7 The figures below show the **frequency** and the times of the **first** and **last buses** from each designated stop in our region, which provides an indication of the time allowed to users of these stops to undertake activities across the day.

[17] https://tiscon-maps-stagecoachbus.s3.amazonaws.com/Timetables/North%20Scotland/Highlands/Skye%20Revised%202022.pdf

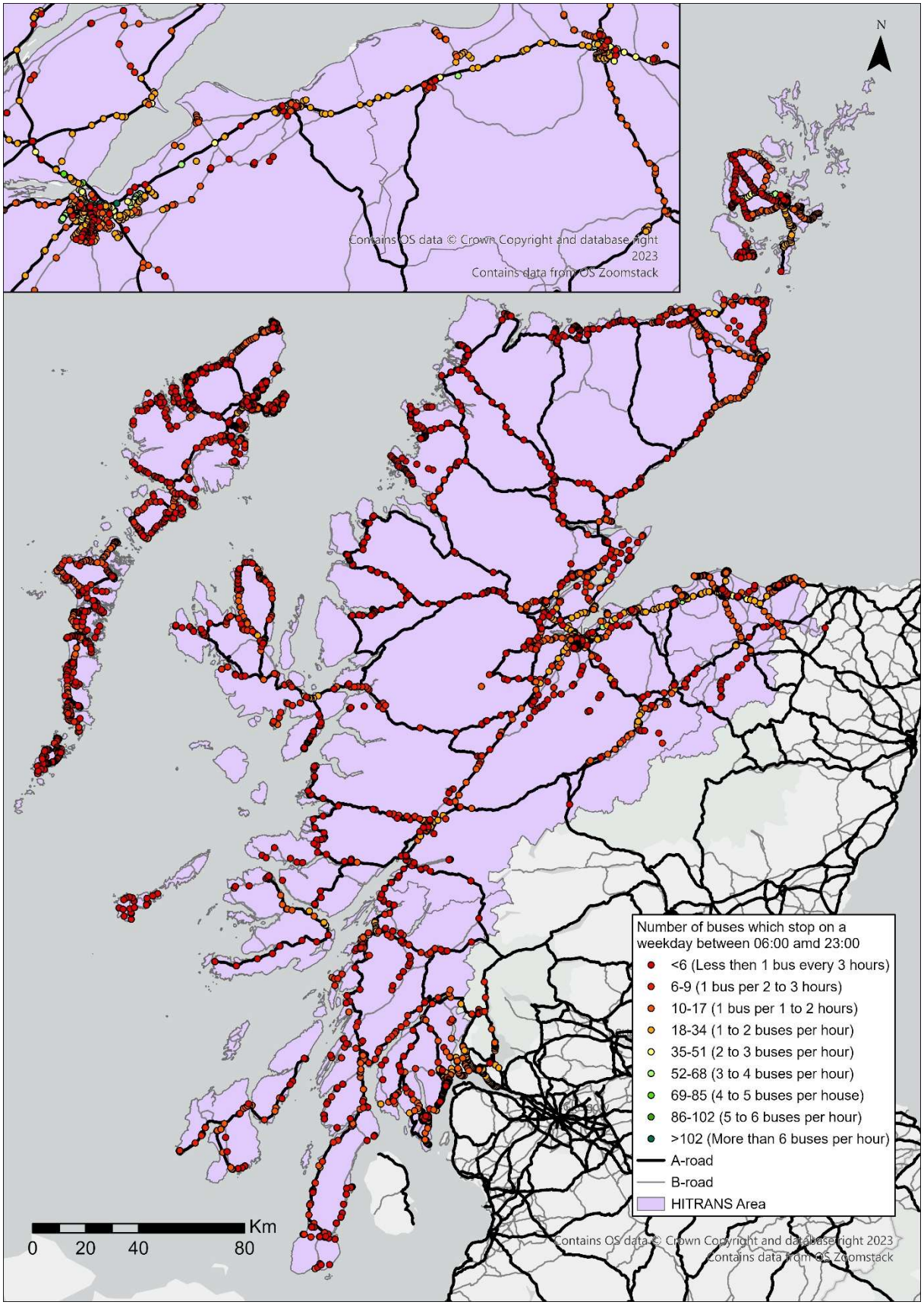


Figure 7.3: Bus service frequencies across the HITRANS region (Source NaPTAN, Q2 2022)

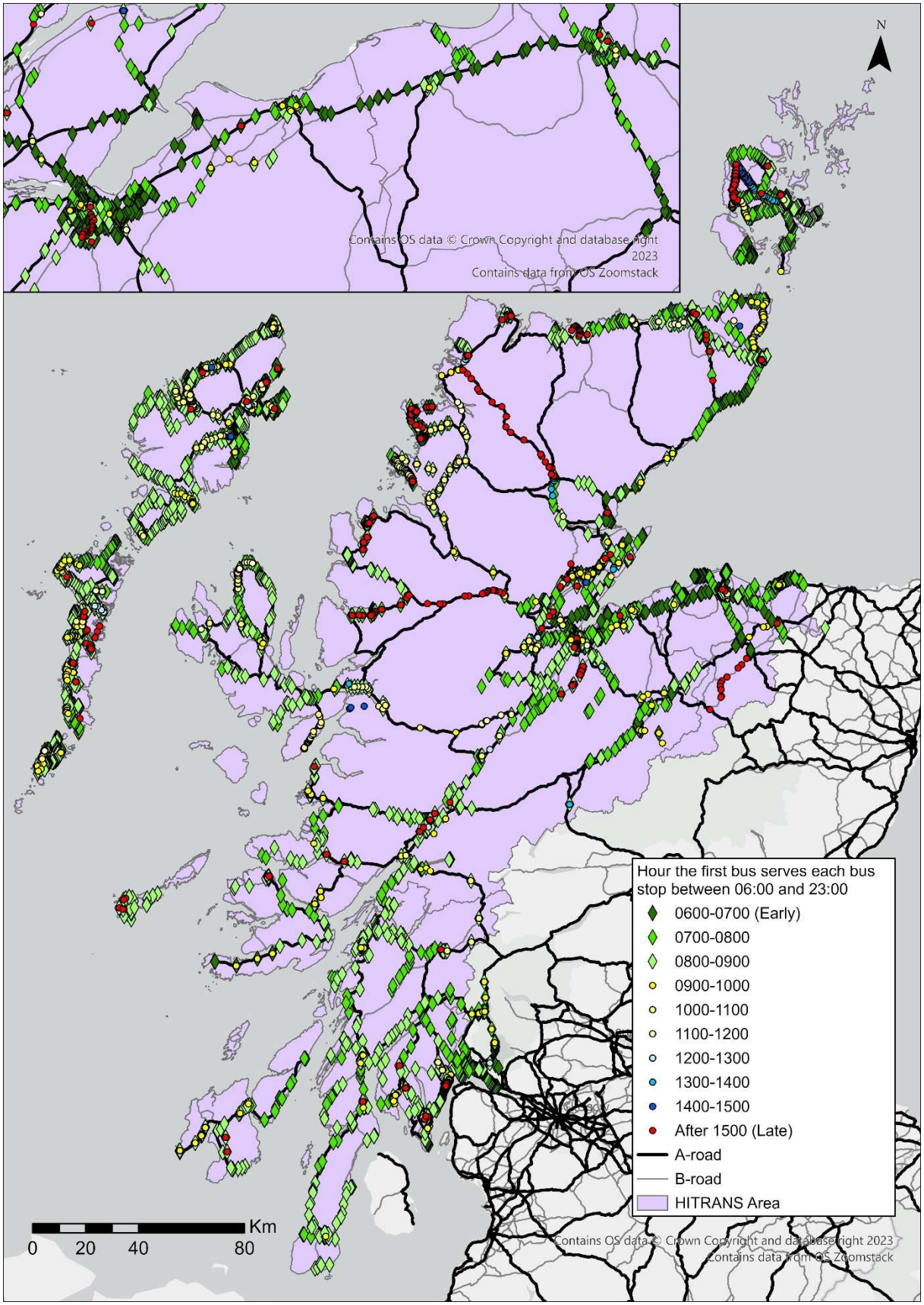


Figure 7.4: First bus from each stop in the HITRANS region (Source: NaPTAN, Q2 2022)

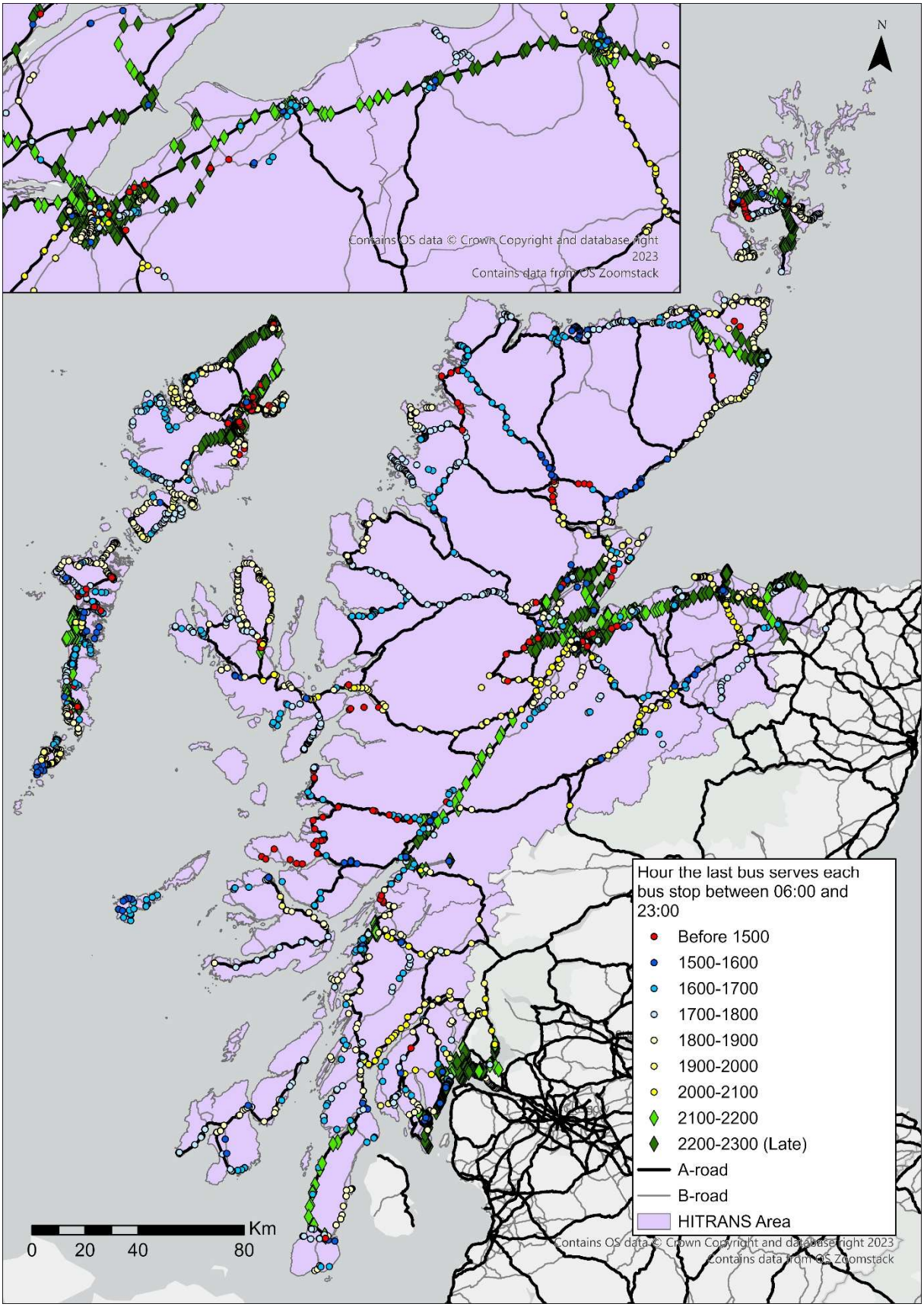


Figure 7.5: Last bus from each stop in the HITRANS region (Source: NaPTAN, Q2 2022)

7.3.8 The above figures highlight that, outwith the Inner Moray Forth and a handful of other locations such as Stromness, Stornoway and Kirkwall, bus frequency in our region is very low and the last bus is often relatively early. This means that those travelling to an urban centre such as Inverness can either have too little time to carry out their activities in a single day or alternatively could have a long wait between services. In addition, there are many settlements and transport interchanges in our region from which bus connections are indirect. This all adds to both the time and cost of travel, which is disproportionately greater than for equivalent journeys in central Scotland.

7.3.9 This analysis highlights locations across our region where bus services need to be enhanced to improve non-car based access to employment and essential services and to reduce the likelihood of people suffering from transport-induced deprivation. In many of these locations, a combination of **new bus services**, **increased frequencies on existing bus services, earlier first departures and later last arrivals** would improve connectivity and reduce the scope for transport-related social exclusion.

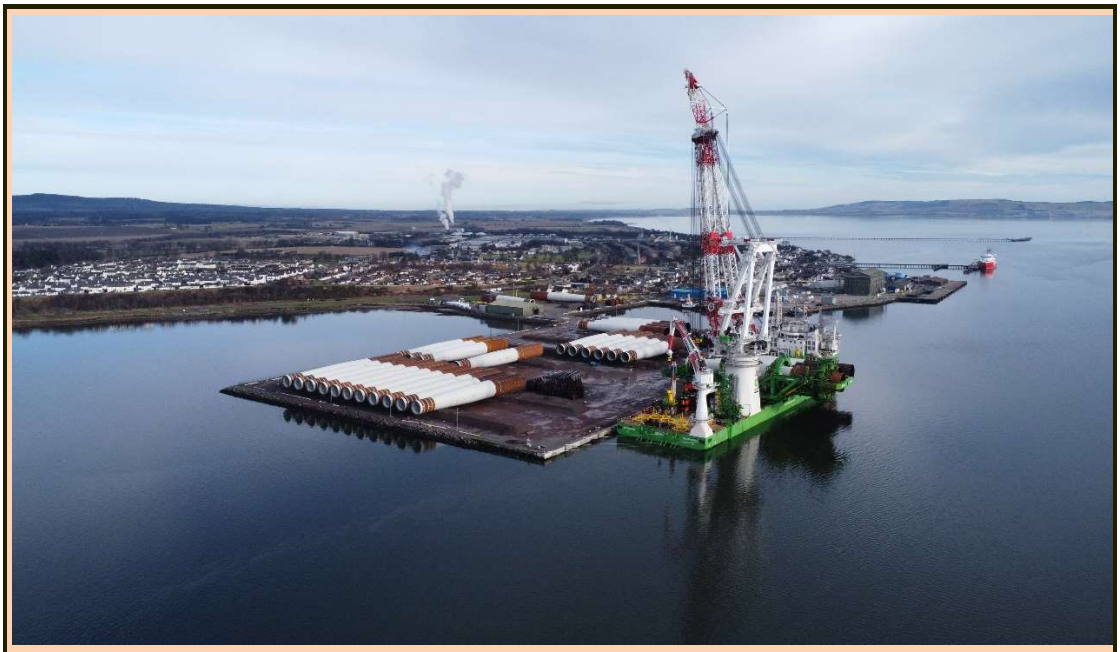
7.3.10 We recognise the challenges of bus service viability in the many rural parts of our region, where an ever-increasing level of subsidy is required to maintain a basic service that caters for fewer and fewer passengers. The provision of a core rural bus network is essential if we are to reduce social exclusion but it is also important to recognise that there are other ways of delivering this connectivity, including through providing feeder services to railway stations and DRT (as previously mentioned).

7.3.11 The Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 provided **new powers** in relation to buses, including the ability to introduce Bus Service Improvement Plans and local franchising. The application of these powers may in some cases be an appropriate means of delivering improvements to the bus network in our region and we will explore this as part of our first RTS Action Plan. Indeed, The Highland Council has now set up an in-house bus company in the light of the increasing costs associated with tendered services from local operators.[18]

Case Study: Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport

On 13th January 2023 it was announced that Inverness and Cromarty Firth was successful in being awarded Green Freeport status by Scottish and UK Governments. The primary objective is to maximise the local benefits from a pipeline of renewable energy projects which will create business opportunities and employment, attract inward investment, research and development, and position the Highlands at the heart of the country's commitment to becoming a net-zero economy.

[18] https://www.busandcoachbuyer.com/highland-council-launching-in-house-bus-company/



When operational, the Green Freeport will offer a package of tax and customs incentives to attract inward investment and stimulate innovation and growth. 10,000 jobs and £3bn of investment is forecast. The proximity of the area's deep water port facilities and available development land to the leased floating offshore wind sites in the North Sea will drive demand for transport and infrastructure investment. HITRANS has already been engaging with the Freeport and other key stakeholders to understand the range of transport improvements required to support what will be a step change in economic investment within the area and enable the wider Highland economy to benefit.

An early win was the Sumitomo announcement in February 2024 for a £350m high voltage cable factory at Nigg, which will supply offshore wind developments, creating 330 jobs over 10 years including 156 manufacturing jobs at the plant.

The Cromarty Firth element of the Green Freeport highlights however the weakness of our public transport services in the area. The limited bus (and train) services that operate from the Invergordon and Nigg areas are orientated around a working day in Inverness, and thus do not facilitate travel to this part of the Green Freeport site. ***Without intervention to improve public transport services, employee and business travel to and from Invergordon and Nigg will be by car, generating additional vehicle kilometres and emissions.***

Policy ST3b: The RTS recognises that the decline in bus passenger numbers in the region needs to be reversed and supports measures to extend service coverage, improve frequencies, lengthen the operating day and make the network more integrated.

Policy ST3c: The RTS supports measures to reduce bus journey times between and within settlements in the region, including through the provision of bus priority measures.

7.4 Community and Demand Responsive Transport

7.4.1 Whilst we strongly support the retention and development of a core rural bus network, we also recognise that there are instances where our spatially dispersed population cannot be affordably, practically or efficiently served by scheduled bus services. Indeed, community transport (CT) and Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) has been a long-term feature of the transport network in our region, connecting local residents to employment and services. For

example, the award winning 'm.connect' DRT service, operated by our partners at Moray Council, has over many years provided accessible door-to-door bus services for those who do not have a regular scheduled bus service and since May 2023 has provided the first such DRT service to operate across the entire local authority area. It provides appropriate public transport links across the area, incorporating innovative approaches to service delivery.

7.4.2 There are various CT and DRT models in operation, with some operating a semi-fixed route and fixed timetable and others zonally based with no fixed start or end point. Taxis are also an important part of this solution in some areas. Providers include the public sector and charities. More recently, 'Enhanced' DRT (EDRT) services have emerged, which are technology-led DRT solutions using an app-based booking system, direct messaging, dynamic vehicle scheduling and GPS vehicle tracking. These may appeal to a new demographic who would otherwise not use DRT.

7.4.3 DRT and Enhanced DRT could be used to enhance or replace fixed route bus services across our region where there is insufficient demand or funding to justify a traditional timetabled bus service or a timetabled bus service at a meaningful level of frequency. This could include providing / supporting CT, DRT and EDRT services to:

- Supplement or replace timetabled bus services on routes where the frequency is low, including providing early morning, late evening or weekend services
- Reduce the need for passenger / patient transport to hospitals
- Provide connections to long-distance coach services
- Provide connections to railway stations

Case Study – Moove Flexi & m.connect Demand Responsive Transport Services

Moove Flexi is a demand responsive transport system aimed at improving the booking, operation and marketing of existing on-demand public transport services in the region. The project secured funding from Transport Scotland's MIF Round 2, The Scottish Government Islands team, Smarter Choices Smarter Places and two of HITRANS's European projects; G-PaTRA and MOVE. In December 2021, HITRANS awarded an initial 3-year contract to Liftango to deploy the system, which consists of a booking app, an operations portal and a driver's tablet. HITRANS has since worked with the company to develop branding, a website and onboard services to trial the system.

Moove Flexi has been successfully deployed in the Ferintosh Community Council (Black Isle) and has had a significant impact on service usage, contributing to yearly passenger totals increasing by over 100% from 2022 to 2023.

The system has also been introduced across Moray as part of the Council's rebranded m.connect service, formally known as Dial M for Moray. Since launching in May 2023, m.connect has also seen an increase in total passengers and a positive response to the new booking app with one passenger stating "I have found m.connect to be a game changer for me…the app gives me instant access to booking the journeys I need".

Other operators currently involved in the project include the Far North Bus who operate in Durness, Wheels in Nairnshire and Glenfarg Community Transport.

Moove Flexi provides operators the opportunity to boost the use and efficiency of their demand responsive services and give their users an alternative, more flexible booking option and receive status updates in real-time.

Policy ST3d: The RTS supports innovative alternatives to fixed route bus services where these can be affordably provided.

Policy ST3e: The RTS recognises the role which community transport and Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) plays in our most rural communities and supports its expansion and integration with timetabled services.

Policy ST3f: The RTS supports measures to widen the awareness and use of community transport, DRT and Enhanced Demand Responsive Transport (EDRT) amongst all members of society.

Policy ST3g: The RTS recognises the role of taxis as a key element of transport provision in the region where community transport, DRT and EDRT services are not provided.

7.5 Railway services

7.5.1 The railway network in our region caters for a combination of long-distance travel to Aberdeen, the Central Belt and England and local journeys, predominantly in the Inner Moray Firth area (at least in terms of passenger numbers). A unique feature of this network is that its lengthy route sections (e.g., Perth – Inverness, Inverness – Wick / Thurso etc) are almost entirely single track. Indeed, **Inverness is the only rail-connected city in Britain[19] that is not served by a continuous double track railway in any direction**.

7.5.2 **Rail journey times across our region are therefore long**, with average speeds much slower than in the Central Belt and indeed much of the UK generally. This is largely a product of the very limited physical infrastructure and, in some cases such as the Far North Line, indirect routeing caused by the terrain e.g., major river firths.

7.5.3 The consequence of these long journey times is that the train is generally not competitive with the car for many journeys, for example Glasgow Queen Street – Fort William and Inverness – Wick / Thurso. Rail in the UK commonly enjoys significant journey time advantages for long-distance inter-urban connections (e.g., Edinburgh – London, Manchester - Cardiff etc.) but road-based journey times from Inverness to Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Perth are all competitive with rail. Long journey times are compounded by low frequency, often making the train unattractive for time critical journeys.

[19] Only the very small and historic cities of Ripon (population 16,700), St Asaph (3,300), St Davids (1,900) and Wells (12,000) are not rail connected at all.

7.5.4 We recognise that, in most cases, significant journey time improvements can only be delivered through investment in e.g., improved signalling, line speed improvements, track (re)doubling to reduce the need to build in time for trains crossing in loops etc. The first STPR published in 2008 proposed a sub two-hour, hourly Aberdeen to Inverness journey time, while the Highland Main Line anticipated hourly services with a fastest journey time of 2:45, average times of 3:00. Neither of these proposed improvements have been delivered.

7.5.5 Whilst it is recognised that developing a business case for transformative investment in the Far North, Kyle and West Highland Lines will always be challenging, incremental measures can be pursued to support reduced journey times, including line speed improvements, level crossing enhancements or closures, timetable planning measures and conversion of some scheduled low demand stations to request only, (although this would only make a marginal difference). In the medium to long-term, new rolling stock with faster acceleration and deceleration profiles may also assist in reducing journey times.

7.5.6 A further consequence of the highly constrained railway infrastructure is that **rail service frequency across our region is extremely low**. For example, excluding the Caledonian Sleeper:

- Fort William has the lowest service frequency of any town of its size in the entirety of the UK, with only **three** trains per day in each direction to / from Glasgow Queen Street
- Inverness only has **13** services per day to and from the Central Belt (seven for Glasgow, five for Edinburgh and one travelling on to London Kings Cross)
- Similarly, Inverness only has **11** services per day to and from Aberdeen, although a further **six** services operate to Elgin

7.5.7 **Frequency to / from Inverness is significantly lower** than other UK cities of a similar population such as Stirling, Dunfermline, Lancaster and Winchester. Rail **service frequency *within* our region is also very low**, with only four departures per day from Inverness to Kyle of Lochalsh and Wick / Thurso.

7.5.8 We strongly support increased rail service frequency to Aberdeen and the Central Belt but recognise that any transformational change will require the delivery of the committed improvements to the Highland Main Line and Aberdeen – Inverness Line. We would also support the operation of a Saturday evening Caledonian Sleeper service from Fort William and Inverness, at least in the summer months, where it could support the weekend short stay market in our vibrant visitor economy, and the inclusion of Oban as a sleeper destination.

7.5.9 In the shorter-term, there are opportunities to deliver more locally focused service improvements largely using existing infrastructure. These include, for example, operating additional local services in the Fort William area in the gaps between currently timetabled services and bringing weekend provision to a level equivalent to a standard weekday, recognising the national post-COVID-19 growth in leisure travel by rail. Our initiative of establishing the 'Invernet' services (the Inverness commuter market) has demonstrated how a good local rail product can grow passenger demand. This will be important if we are to provide a clear alternative to the car and ensure that our region makes its fair contribution to national vehicle kilometre and carbon reduction targets.

Case Study: Additional Dalmally – Oban service

In 2013, we worked with ScotRail to introduce an additional return service between Dalmally and Oban to facilitate travel to and from Oban High School. The morning service starts from Glasgow Queen Street at 05:20, providing an additional long-distance connection in both directions as this unit works back to the Central Belt in the evening, departing Oban at 18:11. This service replaced long-distance and expensive school bus connections from settlements east of Oban as far as Dalmally. The timetable was built around this but offered a wider range of benefits, including:

- *Additional opportunities for residents to make local commuting, personal business, retail and leisure trips*
- *Improved connections for long-distance travellers from other parts of the country, especially tourists*
- *Enhanced irregular commuting possibilities into Glasgow due to the wider spread of departures at both ends of the school day*
- *Improved integration with the wide range of ferry services which operate from Oban*

The new service led to a consistent and significant increase in use of the stations along this stretch of line. Use of Oban station grew by nearly 50% from 2013 to 2014 and demand remained consistent over the five years prior to the pandemic.

There were a wide range of benefits for from a school transport perspective, including the reallocation of buses to strengthen other services, reduced late arrival at school due to traffic congestion, reduced journey times for pupils and fewer issues with pupil behaviour. Pupils were also able to engage in after school activities and return home on later trains. The same applied to those who were able to secure after school jobs.

Policy ST3h: The RTS recognises that rail journey times to, from and within the region are typically longer than elsewhere in Scotland, and therefore supports measures to reduce these journey times.

Policy ST3i: The RTS supports the commitment to electrify the Highland Main Line and Aberdeen to Inverness line as an opportunity to reduce rail journey times and improve reliability as part of the overall decarbonisation of the network.

Policy ST3j: The RTS recognises that very low rail service frequency often makes rail uncompetitive with the car and therefore supports measures which would facilitate increased rail service frequency, particularly between Inverness and Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow.

Policy ST3k: The RTS promotes and supports the development of additional local rail services focused on our regional centres.

Policy ST3l: The RTS supports infrastructure measures which would enable increased service frequency, such as the electrification of the Highland Main Line and Aberdeen to Inverness, and improvements to the signalling system.

7.6 Railway stations

7.6.1 As in other rural areas of the UK such as Gwynedd, the Conwy Valley and Norfolk, the railway network plays an important role in supplementing local bus services, or indeed acting as the ‘local bus service’. On lines of this nature, often basic stations are provided short distances apart, providing connectivity for small towns and villages to larger centres of population. This is a model which has worked well in our region, and we have a strong track record of supporting the delivery of new proportionate low-cost railway stations which support the local

travel needs of communities, good examples of this being the single short platform stations at Beauly and Conon Bridge.

7.6.2 We have ambitions to open new stations in our region, with current proposals including Inverness East, Evanton, Faslane (for H.M. Naval Base Clyde), Torlundy (for the settlement and Nevis Range) and Carrs Corner (for Lochaber High School and Fort William).

7.6.3 Given the generally low travel volumes, it is important that **any future station in our region is delivered in a proportionate manner that minimises costs**. For example, Beauly and Conon Bridge were both delivered with short platforms at which only one set of carriage doors can open. This was however entirely appropriate for the level of demand ensured that a viable outcome could be realised.

7.6.4 Where new stations are delivered, our objective would be to ensure that this is not to the detriment of end-to-end journey times or frequency.

Policy ST3m: The RTS supports the planning and delivery of new railway stations, including innovative solutions proportionate to the location, subject to the development of an appropriate business case.

7.7 How does this Strategy Theme contribute to our RTS Objectives?

7.7.1 The table below summarises how this Strategy Theme contributes to our RTS Objectives:

Table 7.1: Contribution of Strategy Theme 3 to our RTS Objectives

RTS Strategy Objectives	
SO1: To make a just transition to a post-carbon and more environmentally sustainable transport network	✓✓✓
SO2: To transform and provide safe and accessible connections between and within our city, towns and villages, to enable walking, wheeling and cycling for all	o
SO3: To widen access to public and shared transport and improve connectivity within and to / from the region	✓✓✓
SO4: To improve the quality and integration of public and shared transport within and from / to the region	✓
SO5: To ensure reliable, resilient, affordable and sustainable connectivity for all from / to our island, peninsular and remote communities	✓
SO6: To improve the efficiency, safety and resilience of our transport networks for people and freight and adapt to the impacts of climate change.	o

7.7.2 This Strategy Theme will make a highly positive contribution to facilitating our region's transition to a post-carbon and more environmentally sustainable transport network **(SO1)**. As has been detailed, the frequency and journey times offered on our bus and rail services are unattractive when compared to the car, and it is essential that this differential is reduced if our region is to fully contribute to national vehicle kilometre and carbon reduction targets.

7.7.3 Current levels of public transport connectivity are a significant barrier to regional economic growth and a contributory factor to transport poverty, inequality and social exclusion. Improvements to public transport connectivity to, from and within our region will widen access to public transport **(SO3)** and support a range positive economic and societal impacts.

7.7.4 By improving the coverage and frequency of public transport services and reducing journey times, this Strategy Theme will:

- Improve the quality and integration of public and shared transport to, from and within our region **(SO4)**
- Support our island communities through providing viable onward transport connections from ferry terminals and airports **(SO5)**

8 Strategy Theme 4: Improving the integration, quality of and access to public and shared transport

8.1 Overview

8.1.1 Whilst improving public transport connectivity is essential, the full benefits of this will not be realised if the services provided are poorly integrated, of low quality and not fully accessible. This Strategy Theme is therefore focused on addressing the impediments to travel by public transport, including interchange within and between modes, physical and other barriers for those less able and poor-quality facilities and travel information.

8.1.2 The figure below sets out the policy areas covered under this theme:

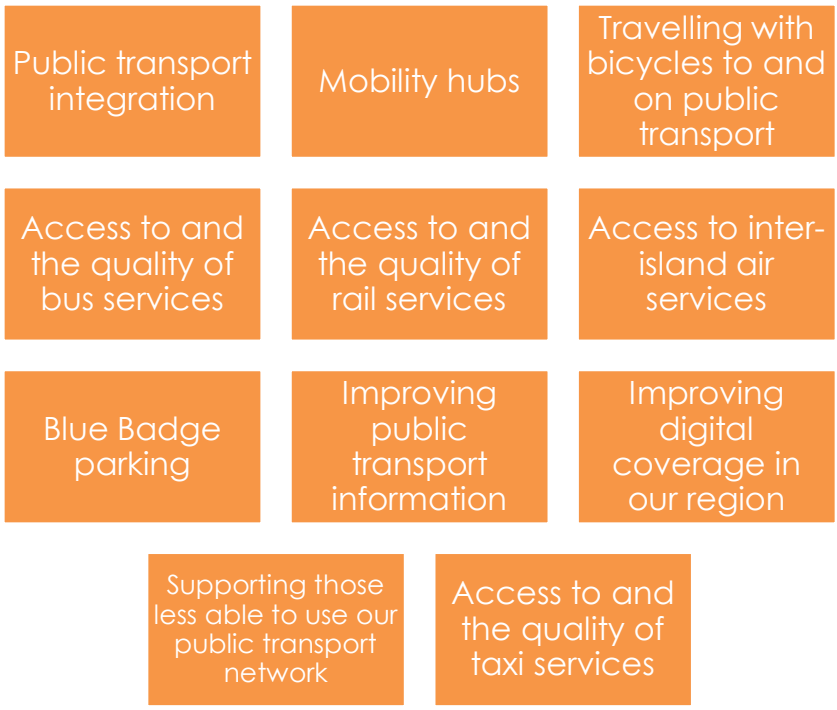


Figure 8.1: Strategy Theme 4 – policy areas

8.2 Public transport integration

8.2.1 The ability to easily and conveniently (or seamlessly) switch from one bus to another or from a bus to a train is a factor which influences the attractiveness of public transport in any setting. However, it assumes a particular importance in our region for **two** reasons:

- Very **low public transport service frequency** across many parts of our region means that a missed connection can lead to a long wait for the next service or, in some instances, will require a costly overnight stay
- For those living in our **island communities**, almost all journeys to the mainland will require at least one interchange, often more

8.2.2 So, **what is meant by 'seamless integration'** – there are **three** components to this:

- The ability to reliably interchange between public transport services on **the same day and with minimum wait time**
- Transport interchange facilities that make it attractive and **physically easy to switch between services**, particularly for those with a mobility or sensory impairment or who are travelling with young children, luggage etc
- Ideally, the ability to make a **door-to-door journey with a single ticket**

8.2.3 Enhancing integration within and between modes of transport reduces the actual and perceived barriers to multi-leg journeys, which in turn helps to ensure that public transport is seen as a viable alternative to the car.

8.2.4 A particular challenge faced in achieving seamless **bus-to-bus** and **bus-to-train** integration between services is competition between commercial operators. For example, Scottish Citylink competes with ScotRail on several long-distance routes, e.g., Oban to Glasgow. Whilst there are examples of integrated ticketing, for example the availability of PlusBus[20] tickets in Elgin, Fort William and Inverness, these are few and far between and are not widely used or promoted.

8.2.5 Timetable coordination is also difficult given often long route distances, particularly as some bus services need to be planned to accommodate school transport. Similarly, ScotRail timetables are heavily influenced by constraints imposed by the very limited infrastructure in our region and the availability of paths in the Central Belt for longer-distance services.

8.2.6 Improving integration will in many cases depend on being able to increase bus service frequency (increasing train service frequency is more difficult, although not impossible, as the Dalmally – Oban case study in the previous chapter highlights). However, there is potentially a case for a more radical review of the role of the supported bus network in terms of how it could be reorganised to more efficiently connect with coach and rail services, particularly given the opportunities presented by the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019. and alternative models of provision such as Community or Demand Responsive Transport solutions.

8.2.7 Connecting services are of critical importance to our **island communities** as **ferry** and **flight** passengers will only have a certain amount of time at their destination before their return trip. Long waits or missed connections significantly reduce meaningful time at destination and can on some occasions lead to a requirement for one or more costly overnight stays. This is **societally as well as financially important** – for example, for children who board at mainland (or island mainland) schools Sunday or Monday to Friday (e.g., Kirkwall Grammar, Mallaig High, Oban High etc), there is a desire to maximise time at home at the weekend, which assists with population retention.

8.2.8 One of the challenges with **bus-ferry integration** is that, if the ferry arrives late, the connecting bus will often depart before ferry passengers have disembarked. This is because the bus needs to maintain its other timetabled calls on the route (this is also an issue with **bus-air integration** but is less prominent as the bus routes are generally much shorter and, in some cases, will be dedicated services). One option would be to provide dedicated 'ferry buses' which operate direct from the ferry terminal to a destination such as Inverness, Thurso or Portree. These 'ferry buses' could either travel on the ferry on short crossings or meet the ferry on longer crossings and could be provided by CT, DRT or EDRT services as well as scheduled bus services. Good examples of this are local bus services in Orkney which are timed to connect with inter-island ferry services for Rousay, Egilsay and Wyre and Hoy and Flotta (albeit these are not specifically dedicated 'ferry buses').

8.2.9 There is also an issue around the certainty of getting a seat on the bus – some of the larger ferries operating in our region can on occasion carry up to 1,000 passengers, and thus there is

[20] PlusBus is an add-on that can be bought in tandem with a train ticket to provide unlimited bus travel around the whole urban area of the rail-served town or city.

a risk that demand can overwhelm the capacity of a single bus or coach. In partnership with Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, we have previously underwritten the cost of an additional coach from Ullapool (which meets the ferry from Stornoway) over the summer to cater for whenever bookings for the service exceed the bus capacity more than 48 hours in advance. Innovative approaches such as this highlight how additional demand can be flexibly accommodated and high-quality integration delivered.

8.2.10 Integration of **rail and ferry** timetables is more challenging, as timetable planning for both modes (particularly rail) is constrained by infrastructure and operational parameters. However, opportunities to retime ferry services to better connect with trains should be considered where practicable. Similarly, the process of changing from ferry to rail and vice versa should be made as simple as possible, particularly where a connecting journey is required such as between Thurso and Scrabster (this is an example of a particularly poor interchange at present).

8.2.11 For our **island communities in Orkney**, it is important that inter-island air and ferry services are well integrated with Loganair, NorthLink and Pentland Ferries connections to the Scottish mainland. A particular consideration is the ability to make 'same day' connections to / from the Scottish mainland (e.g., from Westray to Inverness), including early morning and late evening arrivals and departures to / from the Scottish mainland, where practicable.

8.2.12 An important principle with respect to integration across all modes is **integrated ticketing**. At its most basic, this entails cross-operator ticket acceptance or 'combi' tickets such as PlusBus and 'Rail and Sail'. However, creating a seamless transport network will ultimately require fare capping or other such measures to reduce the cost of two or more fare trips, an issue addressed in Strategy Theme 11.

Policy ST4a: The RTS supports measures that will improve integration within and between modes of transport at key locations and transport interchanges in order to provide new travel options and alternatives to the private car, recognising the constraints within which this is possible (e.g., delivering school bus services).

Policy ST4b: The RTS supports integrated ticketing measures to simplify travel and improve the passenger experience.

Policy ST4c: The RTS supports the adoption of contract conditions for tendered and supported services that encourage operators to work in partnership to improve integration, timetable planning and coordination.

8.3 Mobility hubs

8.3.1 The potential creation of a network of **mobility hubs** across our region provides an important opportunity to improve, formalise and promote integration. Mobility hubs bring together shared transport with public transport and active travel in spaces designed to improve the public realm for all, supplemented by facilities such as EV charging points, bicycle parking and repairs etc. and high-quality travel information. Other community services such as Wi-Fi, parcel lockers and other urban realm improvements can also be provided. They offer a range of benefits for the customer (including visibility, convenience, safety and accessibility), transport providers and policy makers. There are already a number of mobility hubs in our region, including at the University of the Highlands and Islands' Inverness Campus.

8.3.2 Mobility hubs should be co-located with major transport interchanges such as Inverness Station and key junctions on the main road network and inter-urban bus-routes, supplementing the role of high-frequency public transport within and to / from our settlements. They can be developed in a range of settings, from city centres to rural areas and at differing scales to suit local needs, which is particularly important in our region. Indeed, they provide a potential opportunity to 'rural proof' the 20-minute neighbourhood concept. It is important that

local access to mobility hubs is facilitated by high quality active travel routes that enable safe walking, wheeling and cycling.

Case Study: Angus Rural Mobility Hub

Whilst there are many examples of mobility hubs across Europe, many of these are in urban areas, either cities or large towns. Whilst such solutions offer great promise for settlements such as Inverness, Elgin, Fort William etc, there is a wider question as to how this concept can be applied to our rural areas.

The emerging Angus Council Rural Mobility Hub, which is being delivered as part of the Tay Cities Deal provides an interesting example in this respect. The Rural Mobility Hub (RMH) will be co-located with a new clean growth energy park in Brechin, just off the A90 which, taken together, will integrate zero carbon energy systems with mobility services, enabling a 'smart mobility infrastructure'.

Transport opportunities that will be explored as part of the RMH include EV charging infrastructure; smart logistics solutions; EV car and fleet sharing; development of a digital platform to enable rural active travel and automation capabilities; bus interchange; trialling of on-demand public transport; micromobility connections (e-bikes and cargo bikes); changing washing and locker facilities; and connectivity to public amenities through safe and sheltered pedestrian and cycle routes. This is a good example of how a mobility hub of some considerable scale can be developed in a predominantly rural area.

https://investinangus.com/tay-cities-deal/the-angus-fund/low-carbon/angus-rural-mobility-hub/

Policy ST4d: The RTS supports the provision and enhancement of mobility hubs across the region, in line with a hierarchy reflecting local requirements.

8.4 Travelling with bicycles to and on public transport

8.4.1 Whilst cycling, alongside walking and wheeling, is at the top of the *Sustainable Transport Hierarchy*, provision for cyclists at public transport interchanges is patchy outwith the main settlements, whilst the public transport fleet used in our region is not always conducive to carrying a bicycle (although foldable bicycles can be more readily accommodated). Moreover, information on cycle parking, booking etc is often non-existent or out-of-date. **Making it easier to access public transport by bicycle** is therefore important to improving the overall quality of transport provision in our region.

8.4.2 The recent introduction of 'active travel carriages' to some West Highland Line services to create the ScotRail *Highland Explorer* product are a good example of what can be achieved in this area. These modified Class 153 units have 24 seats (20 seats around tables and four airline style seat), with the rest of the vehicle given over to the carriage of 20 bicycles, sporting equipment and large items of luggage. This is however a relatively short-term solution given the age of these units. The real opportunity presents itself in the requirement for **new rolling stock** over the next two decades, driven both by the requirement for decarbonisation and the age of the current fleet. We will work with partners, including *Scotland's Railway*, to influence future rolling stock specification, and will make the case for a specific **'rural' unit specification** suited to our region. Carriage of bicycles will be central to the case that we make.

8.4.3 We also recognise that, in many cases, cyclists prefer to leave their bicycle at the station. The provision of secure **bicycle parking** is therefore important, particularly at the main commuter

stations such as Dingwall and Nairn. Given the cost of bicycles, and particularly e-bicycles, this should ideally be secure parking of the type shown in the image inset.

8.4.4 There is a wide range of bus vehicles in our region, from small minibuses through to large coaches, and the ability to carry bicycles varies, although is generally very limited. We support the provision of **facilities for bicycles on buses** and indeed our **'Bikes on Buses'**[21] scheme is a practical initiative to support integrated active travel and public transport journeys. However, we also recognise that there are several practical challenges to this including space and safety. To this end, we also call for the provision of **new, extended or upgraded secure bicycle parking** at high volume bus stations / stops and in other key locations such as town centres, major employment sites and transport interchanges, potentially as part of a wider mobility hub arrangement (see **Policy ST4d**).

8.4.5 Provision of facilities is of course only half of the solution. The process of taking a bicycle on a train or bus or parking it at a station or stop can be problematic. For many journeys, it is not possible to book carriage space or a secure bicycle parking space and thus uncertainty is introduced into the journey. The **provision of clear, correct and regularly updated information** is therefore essential, with new technology providing an opportunity to improve the **efficiency of booking** and the provision to book your bike via the Scotrail app is a welcome improvement.

Policy ST4e: The RTS supports measures which will enable people to leave their bicycles in a secure environment at a bus stop / station, railway station, ferry terminal or airfield.

Policy ST4f: The RTS supports, where practical, the provision of increased bicycle capacity on public transport services within the region.

Policy ST4g: The RTS supports the simplification of the process of taking a bicycle both to and onto a bus or train.

ST4h: The RTS supports more widespread journeys which combine bicycle and public transport.

8.5 Access to and the quality of bus services

8.5.1 The sheer breadth of the bus network across our region means that there are also significant differences in the quality of vehicles, bus stops, bus stations and the overall customer experience. Raising the quality of bus services and making them fully accessible to all is therefore an important component of an overall package of measures to facilitate and encourage both more journeys by bus and mode switch to the bus.

8.5.2 At **bus stops**, improvements could include the provision of dropped kerbs; new sections of footway to improve access; improved bus shelters, including provision of seating and up-to-date travel information; and measures to improve security of passengers such as lighting[22] and CCTV, particularly where anti-social behaviour is known to be a problem. As well as these improvements, regional **bus stations** should incorporate appropriate high quality waiting facilities such as real time information, a covered and seated waiting area and accessible toilet facilities. In designing and delivering new bus station and bus stop infrastructure, it is important that the most **up-to-date equalities design guidance** is followed. This may include *Inclusive Mobility*, the Department for Transport's best practice design guidance on access to

[21] The 'Bikes on Buses' scheme was introduced in 2021 and allows commuters and visitors to the region to take their bikes on popular Highland bus routes. A booking service is operated to guarantee a seat to accompany free carriage of the bike - https://hitrans.org.uk/News/Story/1284

[22] Consideration would need to be given to what is appropriate, particularly in rural locations where excessive lighting has potential to cause environmental and amenity disturbance.

pedestrian and transport infrastructure, and Scottish guidance within which inclusive design principles are incorporated.

8.5.3 Improvements to the **bus vehicle fleet** will also be important, including the provision of a fully accessible and comfortable fleet, well-trained drivers and mechanically sound vehicles. We specifically recognise that many bus journeys to, from and within our region are of a long duration, meaning that passengers experience significant dead time when travelling. It is our aspiration that bus travel should enable meaningful working time through the provision of high-quality seating, tables, Wi-Fi etc.

Case Study: TrawsCymru

TrawsCymru is a medium-to-long distance strategic bus network, connecting major towns in Wales. The network consists of a mix of longer distance and shorter distance routes and is funded by Welsh Government, managed by Transport for Wales (TfW), and delivered through seven bus operators contracted by local authorities.

The TrawsCymru network fills an essential role in the overall public transport network in Wales. The geography and spatial distribution of the population means that, throughout much of the country, the scope for the operation of commercial bus services is limited. TrawsCymru therefore responds to the public transport connectivity challenges faced outwith the metropolitan areas of Wales. In some respects, it acts like a long-distance coach service connecting, for example, Newtown with Cardiff and Carmarthen with Aberystwyth. However, there is a recognition that the TrawsCymru service may be the only bus service available to certain communities and thus, unlike most express coach services, its stopping pattern will connect local settlements along the route. Moreover, TrawsCymru generally complements the railway network, either through:

- *Providing a public transport connection where there is no direct railway line, Barmouth to Wrexham for example*
- *Providing bus-rail interchange opportunities, for example connecting the university town of Lampeter to Aberystwyth and Carmarthen*
- *Supplementing low frequency rail services, for example along the Conwy Valley between Llandudno and Blaenau Ffestiniog*

This multi-faceted role as long-distance coach operator and 'local' bus service is essential in providing public transport connectivity which would otherwise not exist, therefore reducing car dependency and inequalities associated with 'forced' car ownership. Moreover, TrawsCymru provides a consistent product for customers in terms of branding, vehicles, accessibility, fares, certainty of supply etc, providing increased customer confidence and also making it easier to use and more marketable to visitors. It also provides very high-quality vehicles which are attractive to passengers making medium to long-distance trips – amenities include tables, reliable wi-fi, the ability to carry luggage and foldable bikes and the provision of comfortable seats. Importantly, integrated and discounted ticketing is offered with selected TfW operated rail services, thus reducing cost significantly.

Policy ST4i: The RTS supports the provision of consistent standards of facilities at bus stations and bus stops reflecting location and usage.

Policy ST4j: Our bus network should be safe secure and fully accessible to all.

Policy ST4k: Our bus network should provide a high-quality and consistent onboard experience.

Policy ST4l: Travel on buses to, from and within the region should, where possible, enable meaningful working time.

8.6 Access to and the quality of rail services

8.6.1 Relative to bus services, the passenger experience for rail passengers is typically much more consistent and generally of a higher quality, although there remains scope to raise standards.

8.6.2 Whilst our region offers some of the most scenic rail journeys in the world (which are popular with visitors as an attraction in their own right), the **quality of the on-train experience** is variable. Services on the Highland Main Line and Aberdeen – Inverness Line are often operated by Class 170 or 158 Diesel Multiple Unit stock more suited to urban routes or shorter distance regional routes or 1970s-built (although significantly refurbished) High Speed Train (HST) stock. On the West Highland Line and Far North Line, services are operated by 1980s built Class 156 or 158 stock cascaded from the Central Belt. These units, particularly Class 156 trains, are not ideal for the length of the journey and offer limited space for bicycles, luggage etc. (although the addition of modified Class 153s for cycle carriage has addressed this issue on selected services to some degree).

8.6.3 On train-provision in terms of e.g., catering, toilets, wi-fi etc is often less than would perhaps be expected given journey lengths and well below the standard found on ‘signature’ routes abroad. On certain units, the seats are not well-aligned with the windows, which means that passengers cannot always fully appreciate the views, which for some is why they are making the journey in the first place.

8.6.4 Providing a higher quality on-train experience for the passenger is an important element of growing the customer base and encouraging mode shift to rail. Central to this will be the rolling stock replacement over the next 10 years, and we have already stated our desire for a rural unit specification suited to operating in our region. However, shorter-term improvements such as improved on-train catering could also make a meaningful improvement to the passenger experience.

8.6.5 Our region also incorporates a diverse set of **railway stations**, ranging from city and town centre stations such as Inverness and Elgin to small unmanned rural halts such as Beasdale and Scotscalder. By dint of this, facilities and manning levels also vary significantly. In most cases, the level of facilities provided is proportionate to patronage. Nonetheless, facilities at several stations are sub-optimal, particularly in terms of level access to both the platform and

the trains. In addition, rural stations can also feel isolated and passengers can on occasion have long waits with very limited facilities. Request to Stop machines at rural locations can provide security through the provision of real time running information, in addition to the performance and environmental benefits, and we would support further roll-out on Kyle and West Highland routes.

8.6.6 The key action required in relation to station improvements is to **improve access for all**, particularly where there is no step free access to the station. The accessibility of all railway stations is assigned to one of three categories, as follows:

- **Category A:** The station has step-free access to and between all platforms, at all times trains are running, via level access, lifts or ramps
- **Category B:** The station does not meet Category A standards but has step-free access to either all platforms or one platform
- **Category C:** The station has no step free access to any platform[23]

8.6.7 Of the stations in our region:

- **28% (21 stations)** are **Category A**, although Nairn does not fall under this category and is a particularly obvious outlier
- **59% (44 stations)** are **Category B**, although the access to many of these stations is over rough and uneven ground unsuited to e.g., wheelchairs, mobility aids, prams etc
- **12% (9 stations)** are **Category C**, including Bridge of Orchy, Crianlarich and Nairn[24]

8.6.8 In the immediate term, provision of information on where access to a station is not step free, and advice on alternative arrangements continues to be essential. More generally, stations would benefit from upgrades (e.g., waiting areas, customer toilets etc); continued high quality station appearance, potentially through the *Scotland's Railway* Station Adoption programme; and a wider roll-out of the automated request stop kiosks which have recently been introduced on the Far North Line.

Policy ST4m: The RTS supports the provision of more consistent standards of facilities at railway stations, reflecting station usage.

Policy ST4n: Our railway network should be safe, secure and fully accessible to all.

Policy ST4o: The RTS supports the continuation and expansion of the *Scotland's Railway* Adoption Programme and other measures to enhance the station environment.

8.7 Access to and the quality of ferry services

8.7.1 Some of the ferries around our region and the ports which accommodate them are old and fall well below modern accessibility standards, their continued operation protected by 'grandfather rights'. This issue is perhaps most extreme on lift-on, lift-off routes in Orkney (Graemsay, North Ronaldsay and Papa Westray) but can be found across the network. Passengers regularly experience having to board ferries over steep gangways and linkspans and face other obstacles onboard the vessels including steep stairs and door sills.

[23] *Accessible Travel Policy – Guidance for Train and Station Operators* (ORR, 2019), p. 46.

[24] https://www.scotrail.co.uk/media/3504/download?inline

8.7.2 Passenger comfort on some routes (e.g., the CalMac Ferries Ltd Gourock – Dunoon route) can be an issue for some, but it is generally a much less prevalent problem than physical access.

8.7.3 These problems will be progressively resolved through the introduction of new tonnage and port infrastructure which meets Equality Act 2010 requirements. However, options to improve existing vessels through the introduction of lifts, ramps etc should also be explored.

Policy ST4p: Our ferry network should be safe, secure and fully and easily accessible to all. This includes both shore-to-vessel access and movement around the vessel itself.

8.8 Access to inter-island air services

8.8.1 Inter-island air services in the Orkney Islands and Argyll and Bute are exclusively operated by 8-9 seat single pilot Britten-Norman *Islander* aircraft. These aircraft are ideally suited to the operating environment in the Inner Hebrides and Orkney but are challenging to access for Persons of Reduced Mobility – indeed, any passengers carried must be able to self-evacuate the aircraft. This issue will however only be addressed through the long-term replacement of the *Islander* aircraft, but there is not as yet an obvious candidate aircraft and thus this may be a challenging point to resolve in the medium-term.

Policy ST4q: In partnership with key public stakeholders and operators we will continue to explore solutions which improve the accessibility of inter-Island air services in Argyll and Bute, Orkney and the Western Isles. We will also keep abreast of developments in technology and new aircraft types. More widely, the RTS supports improved accessibility for all to commercially operated aircraft.

8.9 Blue Badge parking

8.9.1 Whilst the RTS generally has a presumption against new parking provision, it is important that an appropriate number of disabled parking bays are provided, particularly as our region's population is forecast to age. Disabled parking availability is of particular importance at 'honeypot' tourist locations if equitable access is to be enjoyed.

Policy ST4r: The RTS supports sufficient provision and better enforcement of Blue Badge parking across the region.

8.10 Access to and the quality of taxi services

8.10.1 The taxi industry across our constituent authorities is commercial in nature, with Councils fulfilling a licencing role. It is however an essential industry, providing connections to transport interchange points such as railway stations, ferry terminals and airports / airfields, whilst also providing essential connectivity where public transport is limited or non-existent.

8.10.2 Recognising the importance of taxis in our region in facilitating essential journeys and filling connectivity gaps, we support the continual development of the industry as a vital component of the transport network. Of particular importance is increasing the number of fully accessible taxis and ensuring a consistent taxi licencing and enforcement programme. However, improvements in relation to customer experience and security would also be beneficial – these could include, for example, the option of a text booking service for those with a hearing impairment, training in customer care for drivers and increased in-vehicle CCTV coverage.

Policy ST4s: The RTS recognises the important role of taxis as part of the overall transport mix in the region. It supports partnership working with licencing authorities and taxi providers to raise standards of provision where required and to facilitate the expansion of the network.

Policy ST4t: The RTS supports the provision of taxi services which are fully accessible in terms of booking and vehicle access.

8.11 Supporting those less able to use our public transport network

8.11.1 Accessing public transport services can be difficult or impossible for some users because of physical barriers. In addition, the tasks and experiences inherent in undertaking independent public transport travel can also pose challenges for some, such as those with autism and cognitive impairments, dementia for example. Such issues can be particularly significant for island residents for whom the use of multiple modes of transport operating on irregular timetables may be required. This results in people either choosing to travel by car or not travelling at all which in turn can limit access to employment, education, and social opportunities as well as key services.

8.11.2 To ensure that all residents of our region can participate fully in society, we advocate measures to support those less able to use our public transport network. These include, but are not limited to: provision of accessibility / disability awareness training (including dementia training) for drivers and other support staff, e.g., those working at railway stations, travel centres etc; chaperoning services for vulnerable users; the provision of all online content in accessible formats and ensuring that it is up-to-date; and the provision of all published material in multiple formats (e.g., Braille, large print, different languages etc).

Policy ST4u: A key component of making travel accessible to all, the RTS supports measures to remove barriers to travel, including increased staff training, passenger chaperones and the provision of physical and online travel information in accessible formats.

8.12 Improving public transport information

8.12.1 The range of modes (walking, wheeling, cycling, bus, rail, ferry and air), diversity of the geography and the number of public transport operators across our region can make public transport journeys difficult to understand and plan, particularly for visitors, who will be less familiar with the area.

8.12.2 It is essential that everyone has access to the information that they need to be able to plan and make journeys, and enable them to make the right choice for them when faced with a range of what can be confusing travel options. To be accessible to all, public transport information should be available in a wide range of formats including online sources, dedicated apps, hard copy, large print, braille and audio.

8.12.3 It is particularly important that reliable and up-to-date information is provided at bus stops, railway stations and transport interchanges. Where there has been investment in ‘screen’ based information, these facilities need to be maintained and populated with meaningful information. At higher volume

locations, this could include real-time information. However, as a minimum, physical timetable information should be provided at bus stops, travel centres and community facilities (for those without access to the internet). We will continue to work with partner councils and local bus operators to improve the quality and consistency of information provision at transport nodes across the region.

8.12.4 Apps have also become a prominent feature of journey planning and making – in many respects, they have transformed journeys by instantly providing real-time information within and across modes. However, there are plethora of such apps and some are more useful than others, and this can be bewildering for occasional users and visitors. It is important therefore that there is a consistency of information between apps and that customers know where to look for information, particularly visitors to our region. Our GO-HI has an important role to play in this respect.

Case Study: GO-HI App

Go-HI is a groundbreaking Mobility-as-a-Service (MaaS) platform, which we launched in June 2021. Its aim is to improve accessibility to integrated transport services for residents, tourists and business travellers in our region and beyond.

The free-to-use app integrates multiple transport and travel options into one platform, providing more reliable journey planning capabilities, easier access to travel information, in-app ticketing and a hassle-free payment system. GO-HI has integrated API data feeds to enable passengers to plan book and pay for travel by air, bus, coach, car club, ferry, folding bike, e-Bike and train.

GO-HI has been developed with support from Transport Scotland's MaaS (Mobility-as-a-Service) Investment Fund. The Fund's aim is to test, in a practical application, the viability of MaaS in Scotland.

The success of the app was recognised in 2023 with awards for innovation at the Transport Times Scottish Transport Awards, SCDI Business Awards and CiTTi Magazine awards.

Policy ST4v: The RTS supports the maintenance and expansion of at-stop / at-station multi-modal real-time information.

Policy ST4w: The RTS promotes the simplification and consolidation of travel planning and in-journey information to make travel easier for less frequent users.

Policy ST4x: The RTS supports the further development of the GO-HI travel app.

Policy ST4y: The RTS supports the provision of up-to-date physical travel information at bus stops, and the removal of out-of-date information.

8.13 Improving digital coverage in our region

8.13.1 Over the last decade, digital connectivity has assumed an increasingly prominent role in transport and travel. From a customer perspective, this has taken the form of web and app-based travel information, electronic ticketing (e.g., smartcards, mobile tickets, car parking etc) and technologies such as Apple Car Play. For transport providers, the provision of travel information and ticket retailing has significantly shifted towards digital media, whilst wireless technology has become operationally essential, e.g., bus ticket machines.

8.13.2 In order to take advantage of the opportunities offered, high-quality digital connectivity is essential, including 4G / 5G coverage, adequate broadband speeds and DAB radio signal. By dint of its rural nature and sparse population, digital coverage across our region varies enormously. Whilst not directly a transport issue, patchy digital connectivity will limit the benefits of modern technology in the region including the delivery of e.g., online health

appointments, and will cause inequalities and social exclusion where connectivity is at its poorest.

Case Study: Scottish 4G Infill Programme

The Scottish 4G Infill (S4GI) programme is a joint Scottish Government and European Regional Development Fund investment to expand 4G coverage in 55 mobile 'notspots' (many of which are in our region) through the erection of phone masts. The project was completed by the end of 2023, with mobile network operator EE providing 4G services across all bar one of the new sites, although all sites are capable of supporting multiple operators in the future.

The S4GI programme has provided members of the 55 affected communities with a transformational improvement in their digital connectivity. From a transport perspective, residents of these communities can now access websites and apps that they could not previously, facilitating e.g., ticket booking, journey planning, live journey update information etc. Digital connectivity is also vital for the operation and maintenance of EV charging points.

Policy ST4z: The RTS Calls for improved cross-provider digital connectivity across the region to facilitate access to travel information for all (including in-car information), enable meaningful working time when travelling by public transport and to help reduce the need to travel where possible.

8.14 How does this Strategy Theme contribute to our RTS Objectives?

8.14.1 The table below summarises how this Strategy Theme contributes to our RTS Objectives:

Table 8.1: Contribution of Strategy Theme 4 to our RTS Objectives

RTS Strategy Objectives	
SO1: To make a just transition to a post-carbon and more environmentally sustainable transport network	✓✓✓
SO2: To transform and provide safe and accessible connections between and within our city, towns and villages, to enable walking, wheeling and cycling for all	o
SO3: To widen access to public and shared transport and improve connectivity within and to / from the region	✓✓
SO4: To improve the quality and integration of public and shared transport within and from / to the region	✓✓✓
SO5: To ensure reliable, resilient, affordable and sustainable connectivity for all from / to our island, peninsular and remote communities	✓✓
SO6: To improve the efficiency, safety and resilience of our transport networks for people and freight and adapt to the impacts of climate change.	o

8.14.2 High quality and well-integrated public and shared transport is at the heart of our approach to achieving a just transition to a post-carbon and more environmentally sustainable transport network **(SO1)**. Enhancing connectivity is good and well, but many journeys in our region require interchange within and between modes and are also very long. Seamless integration and a high-quality waiting and on-vehicle experience, including the ability to undertake meaningful work, is therefore integral to encouraging journeys by public transport. This Strategy Theme therefore strongly supports **SO3** and **SO4**.

8.14.3 For those living in our island communities, all journeys consist of at least three legs – i.e., travel to the ferry terminal / airport; the journey on the ferry or aircraft; and an onward journey to a final destination. Moreover, these journeys are often time constrained, with a requirement to make a return connection to the island, either on the same day or a different day. For those travelling without a car, seamless and reliable integration between modes is essential in

maximising meaningful time at the ultimate destination. This Strategy Theme therefore supports **SO5**.

9 Strategy Theme 5: Providing connectivity that supports our island and peninsular communities

9.1 Overview

9.1.1 A unique feature of our region that sets it apart from almost all others in the United Kingdom is the number of island and peninsular communities contained within it, over 50 in total. Indeed, two of our constituent members – Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and Orkney Islands Council – are wholly island authorities, whilst the Moray Council area is the only part of our region with no island or peninsular communities.

9.1.2 The number of island and peninsular communities in our region is however just a small part of the story. This grouping of communities is often thought of, referred to and planned for as a single homogenous entity, with islands treated in the generality. These communities are however extremely diverse in terms of population size, economic structure, culture and history. For example, Islay's prominence in the Scotch whisky industry means that it has an industrial and export-focused economy whereas, at the other end of the scale, communities such as North Uist and Graemsay are predominantly focused on crofting. Our RTS specifically recognises for this point – whilst it defines overarching policies for island and peninsular communities, it explicitly recognises that the actions required to deliver these policies may vary by community.

9.1.3 Common across all these communities is the key role of ferry services, and in some cases air services, in facilitating travel for business, health, education, tourism and the functioning of supply-chains. However, with regards to **ferry services**, the absence of new ferries in recent years means that severe reliability, capacity and resilience issues have emerged, and these are having detrimental impacts on some of our communities. In addition, a shortage of ferries and funding pressures mean that the level of connectivity offered is often not meeting the needs of our communities. These problems are set against the wider backdrop of the requirement to decarbonise the ferry fleets in our region.

9.1.4 The geography and topography of our region means that **aviation** has a key role to play in reducing peripherality, both in terms of strengthening existing routes and considering how the network could be expanded to connect other communities.

9.1.5 One way in which the connectivity of island and peninsular communities has historically been improved in our region is through **fixed links**, significantly reducing journey times between communities. This has included fixed links across major river firths (e.g., Moray, Cromarty and Dornoch), between island communities and the Scottish mainland (e.g., Skye) and between islands (e.g., Scalpay to Harris). Fixed links have the potential to transform the economic and social structure of communities, offering many benefits, although also increasing the risk of loss of local identity and the centralisation of services. Given the recent ferry-related resilience and cost challenges, the potential of fixed links as means of transforming connectivity in our region must be considered.

9.1.6 This Strategy Theme is therefore focused on improving the connectivity and reducing the peripherality of island and peninsular communities through improved ferry and air services, and potentially fixed links.

9.1.7 The figure below sets out the policy areas covered under this theme:

Figure 9.1: Strategy Theme 5 – policy areas

9.2 Connectivity of island and peninsular communities

9.2.1 The concept of **'connectivity'** in relation to public transport was introduced under Strategy Theme 3. To recap, there are three components to this:

- **Network geographical coverage:** The bus, community and demand responsive transport, rail, ferry and air services that collectively form a network of connections for our communities
- **Timetables / connections:** The number of days on which a service operates, the frequency at which it operates and the time of the first and last service
- **Journey times and journey time reliability:** How long the journey takes, including the time on-vehicle and 'door-to-door' journey time, and the extent to which the service turns-up and arrives on time

9.2.2 In the context of ferry services, there is an additional dimension to this, namely their role in meeting the service delivery, visitor and inbound and outbound **supply-chain** and **service delivery** needs of communities. These needs often necessitate a different set of service requirements. For most resident travel, the desire is for an early service off-island and late evening return, maximising the time on mainland. Conversely, supply-chains are often (although not always) orientated around early morning arrivals into an island and a late evening or even overnight sailing off-island to tie into logistics hubs in Inverness and the Central Belt. The delivery of services, such as visiting health professionals, itinerant teacher cover, utilities providers etc, generally requires a timetable that facilitates a half-day or working-day on island.

9.2.3 A feature of many ferry services is their use by visitors – many routes experience a significant summer / winter variation in demand. For example, in calendar year 2022, CalMac carrying statistics show that **76%** of all passengers who travelled on the Oban – Craignure route did so in five months between April and September (with **30%** in July and August alone). Much of this visitor demand is also clustered around certain days (e.g., Saturday) and sailings. This

seasonality is a common feature on many island archipelagos across Europe such as in Norway, Denmark and Greece.

9.2.4 Meeting the sometimes competing connectivity needs of residents, visitors, service providers and the supply-chain is challenging. Whilst most islands have a daily connection to and from the Scottish or 'island' mainland (e.g., Orkney Mainland), it is in many cases not a 'meaningful' connection in terms of allowing the desired activities to be undertaken in a day. The term 'meaningful' varies by island type – for example, for islands close to the mainland, this may be a service which facilitates commuting to employment or education whilst, for more distant islands, this may be the ability to travel for a medical appointment, a tradesperson visit or to undertake a shopping trip and return on the same day.

9.2.5 The absence of 'meaningful' time on-mainland and / or on-island can constrain an island economy and society or increase the cost of doing business or providing services there. For example, it is not possible for a fuel supplier to make a meaningful day return trip to some islands in the winter months as the last ferry departure leaves 30-45 minutes after the first arrival. This leads to significant standing time for the vehicle and potentially the driver, and cost to the business / customer. Similarly, residents of Colonsay cannot make a day-return trip to Oban on all days, meaning an overnight stay is required when such trips are made.

9.2.6 Our aspiration over this RTS period is therefore to **work towards a 'meaningful' day on-mainland and on-island** for island communities across our region (this is less of an issue for peninsular communities). There are some short-term measures which could assist this including:

- Operating **additional services with existing vessels**. This would though require an increase in crew complement, which presents its own challenges in terms of recruitment and, for vessel-based crew, accommodating them. The impact of additional sailings on reliability and resilience would also have to be considered
- Deployment of **additional charter vessels to supplement the existing fleet** – there is precedent for this with the summer deployment of MV *Alfred* on the Arran run and the repeated deployment of MV *Arrow* on the Stornoway – Ullapool and Aberdeen – Kirkwall / Lerwick routes. The scarcity of suitable vessels, especially for short-term charter, and the cost of such charters mean that this can only ever be a stop-gap option
- **Timetable amendments**, particularly where it would allow a vessel to be based on-island (or at either side of a crossing when there are two vessels, e.g., Bute)
- **Working with commercial airlines to provide the necessary connectivity**, albeit it is of a different nature to that offered by ferry services

9.2.7 Whilst the above options could assist in progressing towards a meaningful day on-mainland and on-island, the scope for any major expansion of services is limited significantly by the number of available vessels and crew, as well as the cost of operating such services. The ultimate realisation of this aspiration will require both infrastructure investment, and additional revenue funding / human resource.

9.2.8 An issue facing a number of communities is the absence of **seven-day connectivity** (primarily in the winter months) or a reduction in Sunday connectivity to the extent that it does not allow meaningful return journeys to be made. There is also **no winter service** on some routes (e.g., Nigg – Cromarty) or a **much-diminished winter service** (e.g., Mallaig – Armadale and Mallaig – Small Isles). A further variation of this is the **refit ferry timetable for the Orkney Outer North Isles**, which leads to a significant diminution in connectivity. The absence of a connection on one or more days a week can be highly detrimental to an island community, requiring overnight stays when a return journey cannot be completed in a day or the service is disrupted. For some islands, this is difficult to resolve within the current resources. However, for other islands, the reduction in connectivity is due to low demand and the high-cost of operating the service. Whilst we acknowledge that additional services would

operate at a deficit, delivering seven-day connectivity by ferry (and air where appropriate) would be beneficial to communities.

Policy ST5a: The RTS supports the provision of longer daily time on-mainland and on-island where this is required for the long-term sustainability of a community.

Policy ST5b: The RTS supports the provision of services which minimise the requirement for one or more overnight stays.

Policy ST5c: Where practicable, the RTS supports the operation of additional sailings on the supported ferry networks within the region.

Policy ST5d: The RTS supports year-round seven-day connections for island and peninsular communities where this is required for the long-term sustainability of a community and enjoys public support.

9.3 Booking and ticketing arrangements

9.3.1 The growing pressure on ferry vehicle deck capacity in the summer months, particularly on parts of the CHFS network and in Orkney, means that the efficiency of the **ferry booking process and ticketing arrangements** is becoming increasingly important. Whilst booking and ticketing arrangements vary across Scotland, there is a general desire to see booking systems opened earlier and for island residents to have access to more convenient ticketing options, such as longer duration multi-journey books, increased use of mobile and electronic ticketing and integrated ferry and rail / bus tickets.

9.3.2 All ferry tickets are available on a **first come, first served basis** at present. A key issue raised by island communities is that visitors typically plan much further ahead and therefore often book the vehicle deck capacity on the most popular sailings early, leaving little or no space for residents who may be travelling at shorter notice (albeit essential resident travel for e.g., a funeral is almost always accommodated). There has been a longstanding debate as to whether residents should be afforded a degree of priority and, at the time of writing, a trial is underway in Mull, Coll and Tiree whereby a certain proportion of vehicle deck space is held back in the booking system for local residents until 72 hours before departure. Other groups such as freight customers also make the case for guaranteed space, and on some routes, this is offered through block booking systems.

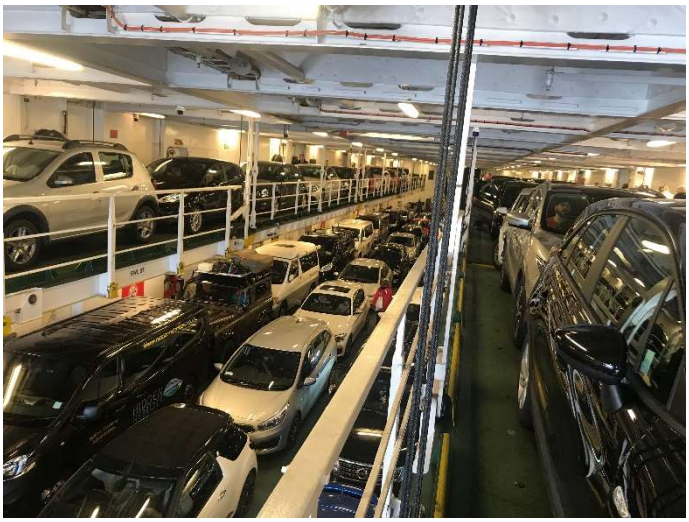
9.3.3 The question of prioritisation and indeed general transparency and consistency around the release and management of vehicle deck space on ferry services is one which needs to be considered and resolved over the RTS period.

Policy ST5e: The booking and ticketing arrangements for ferry services in the region should support the convenience and efficiency of travel for all.

Policy ST5f: The RTS calls for the earlier opening of ferry booking systems and increased transparency around the release and management of vehicle deck space.

9.4 Managing capacity on ferry services

9.4.1 A major pressure on ferry services across our region is capacity. On most routes, this relates to the carriage of vehicles, whilst cabin capacity can also be an issue on the NorthLink Aberdeen – Kirkwall – Lerwick route. With some limited exceptions (e.g., certain sailings on the Oban – Craignure route), passenger capacity is almost always sufficient. A particular challenge for most ferry operators in Scotland is adjusting supply to reflect demand – winter carryings are typically low and summer carryings high, with some routes such as Uig – Tarbert / Lochmaddy, Oban – Craignure and Houton – Lyness / Flotta experiencing pronounced summer peaks.



9.4.2 However, despite public perceptions, capacity utilisation data highlights that, on most routes, it is particular sailings or sailing days that are problematic, rather than capacity across the piece, although this may not be the case during periods of service disruption, which have become far more frequent in recent years. Addressing these issues through adding capacity is difficult in the short-term - the fleet and crew that ferry operators in our region work with is largely fixed, outwith some minor increments in crew to expand services and the occasional use of charter vessels.

9.4.3 There are however opportunities to better manage the capacity on our ferry services, through a combination of **fares-based measures** and the **more efficient use of existing vessels**.

9.4.4 At present, ferry fares on most routes are the same across the year and, with limited exceptions such as the NorthLink seasonal fares. There is no use of pricing to manage demand, as happens in parts of the railway and airline industries. There are very good reasons for this, including the terms of operator contracts; the desire to maintain a simple fares system; and to avoid generating inequalities for those who have little flexibility in their choice of sailing. However, capacity constraints impose costs on our island communities, and we support a position where **price incentives are introduced to encourage off-peak travel**. This support is predicated on **two conditions**:

- **No fares are increased** for any community
- Any measures would need to be introduced manner that led to **'no net detriment' for the operator**, therefore implying additional subsidy

9.4.5 There are many different options for introducing price incentives to encourage off-peak travel and these could vary by route, route group or network. Potential options include:

- Fares differentials to **incentivise the use of quieter sailings** by time of day or week

- Fares differentials to **incentivise foot-passenger travel rather than taking a car onboard** (although it should be noted that current ticketing systems do not differentiate between foot passengers and passengers in a car, so this issue would have to be resolved)
- Provision or extension of price incentives to move **commercial traffic and potentially unaccompanied cars on freight sailings** (currently Aberdeen – Kirkwall / Lerwick or Stornoway – Ullapool only)
- Provision of **incentives to use an alternative route**, e.g., Lochaline – Fishnish rather than Oban – Craignure when travelling from Mull
- Specifically on the NIFS services, further **promotion of the 'land bridge' offer on the Stromness – Scrabster route** to release space on Kirkwall – Aberdeen sailings

9.4.6 Price is course only one of the mechanisms that can be used to manage demand and capacity – two other complimentary strategies can be pursued:

- Implementing measures to **make more efficient use of existing capacity** such as, for example: improved management of block bookings; improved management of commercial vehicles and motorhomes where they prevent the deployment of mezzanine decks; advertised freight only sailings; and coordination of different traffic types to minimise conflicts between users
- Providing better **options for travelling without a car**, including enhanced active travel, public transport and shared mobility options for travelling to and from ferry terminals, potentially allied with increased parking capacity at ferry terminals. This measure could be reinforced through offering reduced or free passenger fares

Policy ST5g: The RTS supports the principle of Road Equivalent Tariff (RET). However, where service frequency permits, controlled use of peak times / surge pricing could be used to help manage demand, recognising that this would need to be at no net detriment to the connectivity of island and peninsular communities.

Policy ST5h: The RTS supports operational measures which maximise the efficient management of vehicle deck space on sailings.

Policy ST5i: The RTS supports measures to improve door-to-door journeys through enhancing active travel, public transport and shared mobility connections to and from ferry terminals, combined with other measures to reduce the need to take a car onboard.

9.5 Modernising ferry fleets and infrastructure

9.5.1 The recent and well-publicised reliability problems on several Scottish ferry routes highlight the need for new vessels. The 'rule of thumb' in relation to vessels operating in Scottish waters is that they should be replaced when they are circa 30-years old. However, there are now a considerable number of vessels which are older than this, with many others between 20 and 30 years old. Some networks, such as those operated by Orkney Islands Council[25] and Argyll & Bute Council have not seen a newbuild vessel introduced to their fleet this century, and this is clearly not a sustainable position.

9.5.2 Throughout 2023, the risks associated with depending on ageing vessels materialised. Cancellations and vessel redeployments due to vessel breakdowns on the CHFS network have been extensive, with communities suffering from the impacts of this – e.g., the service to

[25] It should though be noted that Orkney Ferries purchased the 2012-built passenger ferry MV *Nordic Sea* in April 2020 to operate the Pierowall to Papa Westray route, although there have been issues getting this vessel into service.

South Uist was withdrawn for an extended period; the busy Islay route was reduced to a single vessel; and Colonsay could only be offered a very limited winter timetable. However, nowhere have the impacts been felt more keenly than on the west side of the Corran Narrows. The Corran Ferry is the busiest single vessel crossing in Europe but a technical fault with the main vessel MV *Corran* and repeated breakdowns of the relief vessel MV *Maid of Glencoul* meant that the vehicle carrying service was more or less suspended for a whole year.

9.5.3 Whilst there are several new vessels on order for CHFS network, on delivery of these the average age of the fleet will remain relatively high. On local authority networks, there is no new tonnage on order outwith a committed three-year pilot operation of two small passenger only vessels in Orkney from 2024. **Investment in new vessels over the RTS period is therefore essential**.

9.5.4 In our view, any vessel replacement programme must:

- Be informed by an overarching **'Vessels and Infrastructure Planning Pipeline'** which provides a robust and transparent evidence base to inform investment decisions and priorities
- Be supported by a **robust and objective business case informed by significant community inputs**, which clearly sets out how a preferred option has been arrived at. Within this, there is a requirement to ensure that an **objective approach to vessel design characteristics** is adopted
- **Address the recent resilience issues** which have so badly affected our island and peninsular communities. Options to strengthen resilience include greater standardisation of vessels and infrastructure to facilitate **inter-changeability** and **building more rather than larger vessels** (i.e., providing capacity and resilience through increased frequency rather than larger vessels)

9.5.5 The future vessels strategy should look to provide increased capacity (e.g., vehicle deck, sleeping accommodation etc) where required; improved passenger comfort, including access for all; and reduced journey times where practicable (particularly in Orkney, where the deployment of additional tonnage could support the splitting of indirect routes).

9.5.6 As vessels nominally have a service life of 30-years in Scottish water (and in reality much longer), it is essential that investment in new tonnage has a strong focus on **decarbonisation**, as even a new vessel introduced in 2024 would be in service long after the national 2045 net zero target.

9.5.7 Investment in new vessels also provides an opportunity to adopt a more holistic approach to asset planning. **Investment in harbours** (e.g., piers, linkspans, marshalling areas, terminal buildings etc) will almost always be required to accommodate a new vessel. Many of the ports around our region suffer from constraints associated with their spatial layout (and the availability of space generally), draught, tidal conditions, bespoke infrastructure for a specific vessel etc. This in turn causes **reliability and resilience issues** associated with e.g., the inability to access ports in certain weather / wind conditions, delays to turnaround times, limited diversion ports / ports of refuge.

9.5.8 Whilst enhanced preventative maintenance at harbours is always beneficial, it is in planning for new vessels that major changes can be made, for example the forthcoming relocation of Lochboisdale ferry terminal to the adjacent island of Gasaigh. It is essential that **vessel and harbour solutions are jointly progressed to deliver the optimum combination**. This should be informed by a robust and objective business case, which demonstrates how the preferred option has been arrived at and how any particular port / route fits within the wider network. Any business case should as a minimum consider opportunities for the **establishment of shorter crossings**, where this is a practical proposition.

9.5.9 Ferry terminals are generally 60-year assets and there is again a requirement to ensure that environmental considerations are at the forefront of investment planning. An issue of particular importance here is ensuring that **landside civil engineering works associated with new vessels are minimised**, so as to reduce embodied carbon and other environmental impacts. This approach goes hand-in-hand with focusing on a larger fleet of smaller interchangeable vessels.

Policy ST5j: The RTS recognises the long-term underfunding of vessels and infrastructure in the region and strongly calls for fleet and infrastructure modernisation to address issues of reliability and resilience.

Policy ST5k: The RTS calls for the development of a regularly maintained *Vessels and Infrastructure Planning Pipeline* across all publicly supported ferry networks in Scotland.

Policy ST5l: The RTS supports an increase in the overall fleet size and the inter-operability of that fleet and supporting infrastructure to strengthen resilience.

Policy ST5m: The RTS supports the principle of increasing capacity through frequency rather than larger vessels.

Policy ST5n: The RTS calls for an objective consideration of the design characteristics of future vessels for all routes, including hull form and the provision of crew accommodation.

Policy ST5o: The RTS supports the introduction of new low or zero emissions vessels to replace life-expired tonnage. This should be done in line with the NTS2 *Sustainable Investment Hierarchy*.

Policy ST5p: With the vessel and infrastructure replacement cycle, the RTS supports measures to reduce journey times for our island communities. This includes providing direct sailings rather than via another island (where this is the preference of the local community) and consideration of new ferry terminal locations that reduce crossing distances.

Policy ST5q: The RTS supports harbour infrastructure improvements ahead of life expiry where this could contribute to a material improvement in reliability.

9.6 Converting Lo-Lo routes to Ro-Ro

9.6.1 A small number of ferry routes in our region continue to operate on a lift-on, lift-off (Lo-Lo) basis, where cargo and vehicles are craned or physically handled from the vessel onto the quayside (and vice versa). This imposes limitations on the types of goods that can be moved and also increases the costs of doing so by adopting what is now an outdated and inefficient practice.

9.6.2 The main islands which fall into this category are Graemsay, North Ronaldsay and Papa Westray in the Orkney internal network. The latter two islands are also part of the Outer North Isles mini-network of services and their Lo-Lo operations impose constraints on the other four islands in that network (Eday, Sanday, Stronsay and Westray). Through their 'Inter-Island Transport Study' business case work, Orkney Islands Council has confirmed the replacement of Lo-Lo with Ro-Ro (roll on, roll off) on these islands as priority, subject to this being acceptable to the communities. There are a small number of other island and peninsular communities outwith the publicly supported network, such as Knoydart and Ulva, which are also served in this way.

9.6.3 An important consideration in any Lo-Lo to Ro-Ro conversion is ensuring that the change in freight handling method does not lead to a significant increase in fares or the cost of moving goods more generally.

Case Study: Converting the Small Isles from Lo-Lo to Ro-Ro

For generations, Scotland's island communities were served by passenger ferries and packet steamers, typically calling at multiple islands on a round-trip basis, conveyed people and all goods to and from an island, operating on a Lo-Lo basis. On what is now the CHFS network, Ro-Ro began to be introduced in the 1970s. By the 1990s, almost all CHFS routes were operated by either slipway or linkspan Ro-Ro vessels. One of the few exceptions was the group of four islands to the west of Mallaig – Canna, Eigg, Muck and Rum, the Small Isles.

The Small Isles were served by a traditional mail steamer, which was replaced in 1979 by a Lo-Lo vessel specifically designed to meet the requirements of the route. Only Canna had its own pier, so passengers and cargo were transferred onto small flit boats at each of the other three islands. A round trip from Mallaig took 10 hours, in part due to time consuming Lo-Lo operations and flit boat transfers at three of the four ports.

Recognising the need to modernise the route, the Small Isles were converted to Ro-Ro in 2003. A new purpose-built vessel, the stern-loading MV Lochnevis, was procured at a cost of £5.5m and entered service in 2000, reducing the round-trip journey time from 10-hours to 7-hours. New slipways were built at Eigg, Muck and Rum. A new non-tidally constrained pier was built at Canna and opened in 2006. MV Lochnevis was also built to accommodate 14-cars, but this was predominantly for her use as the winter vessel on the Mallaig – Armadale route. An image of the vessel departing Mallaig is shown below:

The impacts and benefits of the converting the Small Isles to Ro-Ro included:

Despite the limitations of serving four islands with a single vessel, by 2014, passenger carryings were 59% higher than in 2003, increasing from circa 19,000 to 30,000 per annum. Following a dip in 2015, the introduction of RET fares system took carryings back to around

the 30,000 mark, where they remained until the pandemic. Car carryings also increased significantly, from 334 cars in 2004 to 1,800 in 2019. The introduction of Ro-Ro effectively facilitated meaningful car traffic for the first time. Ro-Ro significantly improved freight handling on the route, with almost all freight moved on wheeled vehicles. Goods now often arrive in much better condition and livestock can be moved on dedicated floats, improving animal welfare. Project delivery on-island, such as the building and refurbishment of properties has also become easier and cheaper. The delivery of services to the Small Isles, including social care, has also become easier as it is possible to make a day return trip to each island on certain days of the week.

Policy ST5r: The RTS supports the conversion of the remaining Lo-Lo routes in the region to Ro-Ro where there is community support.

9.7 Air network coverage

9.7.1 Aviation is of critical importance to the cohesion of our region and its connectivity with the Central Belt, London and further afield. It fulfils both an economic role (e.g., business travel) and social role (e.g., connecting island residents to hospitals), mitigating the impact of distance and reducing the geographic peripherality of many of our communities, and in particular our island communities.

9.7.2 With exception of the PSO services supported by Argyll & Bute Council and Orkney Islands Council and a handful of longer distance PSO routes, most of the aviation network is operated commercially. Whilst we, nor the public sector at large, cannot directly influence how these routes are operated, we have always worked closely with airlines, particularly Loganair as the most significant in the region in terms of network coverage. This is something which we will continue to do over our RTS period, **making the case for the operation of additional flights and new / larger aircraft** where appropriate.

We will also continue to **work closely with partner organisations that support regional PSO routes** - namely Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Stornoway – Benbecula), Transport Scotland (Barra, Tiree and Campbeltown) and The Highland Council (Wick John O'Groats – Aberdeen) – to make the case for **additional flights and capacity** where required.

9.7.3 We will continue to explore the case for the **reinstatement or development of new routes** across the region, such as between Skye and Glasgow. In the majority of cases, these would be PSO routes given that they have not been progressed commercially to date. Just as importantly, we commit to working with partners to **protect existing routes** which may be under threat or where the level of service may be diminished to the extent that it adds little value.

Policy ST5s: The RTS supports the further development of the Highlands and Islands' air network in terms of both services and supporting infrastructure.

Policy ST5t: The RTS supports the further development of commercial external routes, particularly to London Heathrow and other international hub airports, that support the economic competitiveness of the region.

Policy ST5u: The RTS supports the retention of the PSO air network within the region and, where alternative travel choices are inadequate, its further expansion. 'Adequate' in this context refers to the ability to achieve an affordable daily return to / from a national centre.

9.8 Inter-island air services

9.8.1 Our inter-island air services in Argyll & Bute and Orkney provide essential connections for 10 islands, several of which are the amongst the most fragile and least populated in our region. These services allow island residents to access employment, education and undertake business trips. However, they are also integral to service delivery in the islands, including but not limited to health provision, itinerant teacher cover, banking and veterinary care.

9.8.2 The major challenge associated with these services is **seat capacity**, with the Britten-Norman *Islander* aircraft only capable of carrying eight passengers, or occasionally nine if one passenger sits next to the pilot. Many flights also serve more than one island in a single 'rotation' and capacity is therefore often a major constraining factor where there may be double demand. The scope for introducing larger aircraft in the short-term or expanding the number of flights operated by the current aircraft is very limited. However, *Islander* aircraft are in plentiful supply and are relatively low cost to lease and operate – the deployment of additional aircraft would increase capacity through expanding frequency and reduce the number of indirect flights and the capacity issues associated with them.

9.8.3 The inter-island air services are also operated by a single pilot under Visual Flight Rules (VFR), which effectively entails flying by line of sight. This impacts on service **reliability** as low cloud cover, fog or darkness can lead to flights being cancelled, delayed or brought forward. On some islands, this issue is exacerbated by their only being a single runway, increasing the crosswind cancellation risk.

9.8.4 There are a range of potential options for expanding the flying envelope including operating under Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) or adopting satellite navigation aids. However, IFR flying and the use of navigational aids would increase the cockpit workload and could necessitate a second pilot, significantly increasing costs. Ground-based measures such as additional cross runways and runway lighting are also options, although the experience of runway lighting in North Ronaldsay to date has been far from positive. Whilst changing operational practices is not without its challenges, it is important that opportunities to improve reliability and expand the flying day for the benefit of our communities are continually explored.

Policy ST5v: The RTS supports the operation of additional connections and flights on the PSO air networks within the region, whether delivered by existing, additional or new low emission aircraft.

Policy ST5w: The RTS supports more direct flights rather than via another island.

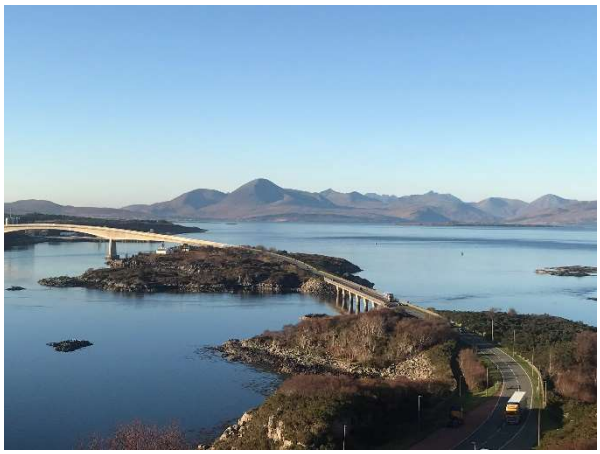
Policy ST5x: The RTS supports the adoption of technological and infrastructure solutions which would improve the reliability and frequency of inter-island air services.

9.9 Fixed links

9.9.1 One means of improving the connectivity of island and peninsular communities in the region is through fixed link (bridges, causeways and tunnels). Over the last 50-years, the construction of bridges and causeways (although not yet tunnels) has been instrumental in improving connectivity in our region – these include the Kessock, Dornoch, Cromarty, Skye, Scalpay and Kylesku bridges and the chain of causeways in the Outer Hebrides. There are three potential opportunities in relation fixed links:

- **Island-to-mainland:** there are several proposals of this nature, with a fixed link between Mull and the mainland being included as recommendation in STPR2
- **Island-to-island:** Whilst there are fewer proposals in this category, those such as that to connect Rousay with Egilsay in Orkney would offer efficiencies in the operation of ferry services. Proposals for fixed links across the Sound of Harris and Sound of Barra were also included as an recommendations in STPR2
- **Intra-mainland:** These are fixed links which would cross major sea lochs or river firths – there are several longstanding aspirations in this respect including at Corran and Stromeferry, where there are existing proposals

9.9.2 It is essential that communities are engaged in making the case for any fixed link, with a view to ensuring that they are fully informed of the benefits and potential implications of providing such a connection. This would include a discussion around any implications for future service delivery in an island or peninsular community.



9.9.3 Given the high up-front costs of fixed links and the challenges in developing a value for money conventional business case (even when considered in its broadest sense), the case for **tolling** any prospective fixed link should be considered. Within any such tolling regime, it is our expectation that residents of the **island or peninsular community would travel at a discount or for free with no delay to their journey**, this being enabled by the application of modern vehicle recognition technology.

9.9.4 We recognise that the replacement of a ferry by a fixed link could actually **reduce** connectivity for those without access to a car. Indeed, it is possible that walking, wheeling and cycling journeys could be prevented entirely in a situation where a tunnel is progressed. It is therefore essential that any fixed link progressed is done so in conjunction with a high-quality public transport offer which incorporates provision for cyclists.

Case Study: Fixed Links in the Faroe Islands

The Faroe Islands are a self-governing and autonomous nation within the Kingdom of Denmark. The archipelago consists of 18 islands, 17 of which are inhabited. Its has a population of 55,000, about 40% of which lives in the capital Tórshavn. As with many island communities in our region, connectivity to the main settlement of Tórshavn on the island of Streymoy and the airport on the island Vágar is essential.

The Faroese have addressed the island connectivity challenge through a major programme of fixed link building (predominantly tunnels), including four subsea tunnels, the most recent of which – the Sandoy Tunnel, which connects Streymoy and Sandoy – opened in December 2023.

Tolls are charged on all subsea tunnels in the Faroe Islands and are used to pay for the operation of the tunnels and repayment of the loans used to finance their construction. Island residents benefit from discounted tolls based on subscriptions.

The tunnel network built in the Faroe Islands is considered to have been a major success and is a great source of national pride. The subsea tunnels reduced journeys which previously took a full day to just a few hours and thus more closely integrated the different island communities which comprise the archipelago.

The fixed link network built in the Faroe Islands has supported population retention and growth and has increased economic agglomeration between island communities. Research

undertaken by Hokwerda (2017) also found that the subsea tunnels accelerated the process of centralisation and urbanisation (which has its benefits and disbenefits); increased mobility; dissolved spatial boundaries; and increased mutual dependency between villages and the capital Tórshavn.

https://www.faroeislands.fo/the-big-picture/

Policy ST5y: The RTS supports the principle of fixed links where they represent value for money and are supported by the island or peninsular community. Any fixed link should be implemented in conjunction with improved public transport connectivity and incorporate provision for active travel.

Policy ST5z: The RTS supports the consideration of tolling where this would assist in making the case for a fixed link. The use of vehicle number plate recognition technology could allow local residents to travel for free.

9.10 How does this Strategy Theme contribute to our RTS Objectives?

9.10.1 The table below summarises how this Strategy Theme contributes to our RTS Objectives:

Table 9.1: Contribution of Strategy Theme 5 to our RTS Objectives

RTS Strategy Objectives	
SO1: To make a just transition to a post-carbon and more environmentally sustainable transport network	✓✓
SO2: To transform and provide safe and accessible connections between and within our city, towns and villages, to enable walking, wheeling and cycling for all	o
SO3: To widen access to public and shared transport and improve connectivity within and to / from the region	✓✓
SO4: To improve the quality and integration of public and shared transport within and from / to the region	✓
SO5: To ensure reliable, resilient, affordable and sustainable connectivity for all from / to our island, peninsular and remote communities	✓✓✓
SO6: To improve the efficiency, safety and resilience of our transport networks for people and freight and adapt to the impacts of climate change.	o

9.10.2 The central focus of this Strategy Theme is providing reliable, resilient and sustainable connectivity for all from and to our island and peninsular communities. All of the policies listed make a highly positive contribution to **SO5**. In addition, there is a strong focus on improving air and ferry connectivity, both on existing and potential new routes, thus supporting **SO3**.

9.10.3 Given their long asset life, it is important that all new vessels are low or zero emission, and our RTS includes a specific policy related to this (aviation decarbonisation is covered in **Strategy Theme 9**). This Strategy Theme also identifies as a priority the need to ensure proportionate harbour works to accommodate new tonnage, and in particular advocates a fleet of smaller standardised vessels which will minimise landside infrastructure requirements. It therefore supports **SO1**.

9.10.4 This Strategy Theme also advocates addressing the barriers to travel faced by Persons of Reduced Mobility, particularly in terms of making vessels and harbour infrastructure fully accessible, thus supporting **SO3**.

10 Strategy Theme 6: Improving the efficiency of transport networks and supply-chains and reducing their impact on our communities

10.1 Overview

10.1.1 Our region is a major exporter, but many of our supply-chains are marginal (i.e., they only just cover their costs) and face challenges not encountered elsewhere in Scotland, working around ferry connections for example. This means that the efficiency and environmental sustainability of transport links with other parts of Scotland and beyond are as important as those within the region itself.

10.1.2 This Strategy Theme is therefore concentrated on enhancing the efficiency of supply-chains and identifying means for reducing the impact which they have on our communities. It focuses specifically on **ferry, other waterborne transport** and **rail-based** supply-chains. Issues related to road freight are addressed in **Strategy Theme 7**.

10.1.3 The figure below sets out the policy areas covered under this theme:

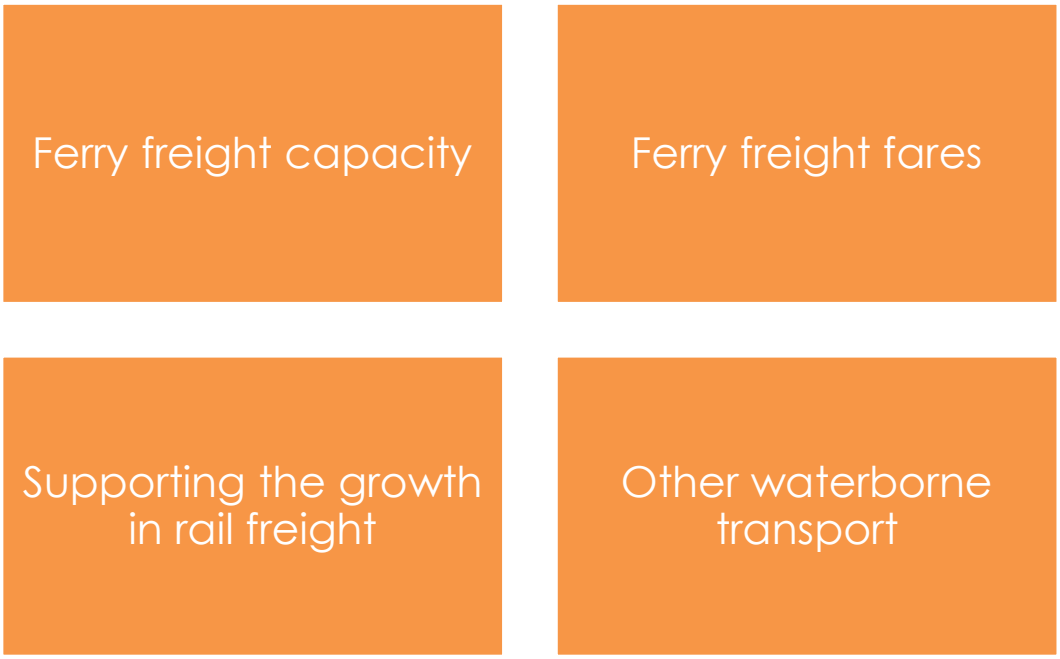


Figure 10.1: Strategy Theme 6 – policy areas

10.2 Ferry freight capacity

10.2.1 Ferry freight is of critical importance to the functioning of our island communities. It is a multi-faceted industry with different islands having different needs. In some communities such as Gigha and Lismore, the need is predominantly related to the inbound supply-chain, whilst in others such as Islay and Orkney Mainland, the freight industry must also meet high export demand, in some cases clustered around specific peaks, such as livestock season in Orkney. There are also several vessels on freight intensive routes which are restricted in terms of weight, height, use of mezzanine decks and carriage of dangerous goods. This can be to the disadvantage of both freight customers and car passengers.

10.2.2 With vehicle deck capacity pressures on many routes, particularly in the summer months, there is a frequent tension between deck space for personal vehicles and freight. We recognise the importance of ferry freight in our region and support the case for additional capacity for the carriage of freight.

10.2.3 In the medium-term, the demand for freight capacity can best be met through the introduction of **new vessels**, as outlined in **Strategy Theme 5**. As part of the overall planning for and prioritising of new tonnage, it is important that the requirements of the freight industry in each island are fully understood and that a forward look is taken on any major projects (e.g., new hospital buildings, windfarms etc) or emerging / evolving industries (e.g., the expansion of the green hydrogen industry in Shapinsay and Eday) that could impact demand for the movement of commercial vehicles. Vessel design requirements should reflect this, and it may be that there is a case for dedicated freight vessels, as operate on the Aberdeen – Kirkwall / Lerwick route or 'freight plus'[26] vessels.

10.2.4 In the immediate term, there is a case for considering how **existing capacity can be more efficiently managed** to provide additional capacity for freight. Options in this respect are largely captured by **RTS policies 5g and 5i**, which consider how pricing flexibility and operational changes can support improved demand management overall. However, one freight specific measure which could be progressed is the **formalisation and extension of the carriage of unaccompanied trailers** to a wider range of routes, which would reduce the lane meterage consumed by commercial vehicles. At present, unaccompanied trailers are formally carried (i.e., operator managed) on the Stornoway – Ullapool overnight freight service and NorthLink services, whilst more informal arrangements (i.e., haulier managed) are in place on the Port Ellen – Kennacraig route. Expansion of this practice provides an opportunity to reduce capacity pressures on busy routes, but any potential impact on turnaround times would need to be considered on a route-by-route basis.

10.2.5 Where ferry freight capacity is particularly pressured, there is a case for considering the operation of **dedicated freight sailings year-round or for short periods** (e.g., to accommodate livestock season in Orkney). This could be done using existing vessels (as per the practice with MV *Loch Seaforth* on Stornoway – Ullapool), charter vessels (e.g., as per the frequent charter of MV *Arrow*) or commercially where such a market exists.

Policy ST6a: The RTS supports the principle of new dedicated or high-capacity freight vessels on freight intensive routes.

Policy ST6b: The RTS supports the formalisation and extension of the carriage of unaccompanied trailers to a wider range of routes.

Policy ST6c: The RTS supports the operation of dedicated freight sailings, either by contracted or commercial operators where there is demand and it is operationally deliverable.

10.3 Ferry freight fares

10.3.1 The approach to the setting of ferry freight fares on most publicly supported networks in Scotland is inconsistent, archaic and, in many cases, simply born of history. There are significant inconsistencies even within networks in terms of the basis of the charge and the absolute tariff level, whilst there are a multitude of discounts and surcharges that apply to individual routes or small bundles of routes. This creates inefficiencies in the movement of freight, the commercial viability of some of which is already marginal, and inequalities between islands.

[26] These are predominantly freight vessels but with some passenger and car carrying capacity.

10.3.2 Transport Scotland recognised this issue and undertook a *Ferry Freight Fares Review* (FFFR) in 2014-15 for the Clyde and Hebrides and Northern Isles networks. However, the major challenge emerging from this review was that, to provide consistency across the network, either: (i) significant additional subsidy would be required to reduce all fares to the lowest common denominator; or (ii) to achieve revenue neutrality, some fares would need to go up to compensate for others going down. Hauliers evidently consider absolute costs in relation each route that they serve (i.e., comparative fares between routes are less important), so the risk of increasing fares for some islands is that some commodities may no longer be shipped, or indeed the haulier could stop serving the island altogether. However, the subsidy impact of reducing fares to the lowest common denominator is also significant. The FFFR has not progressed further although a commitment to it has been confirmed in Transport Scotland's Fair Fares Review[27]. Constituent local authorities within our region have also undertaken wider ferry fares reviews but have not progressed these beyond concept stage.

10.3.3 Whilst this is an undeniably complex issue, it is important that it is resolved, either through progressing with a new fares system(s) or accepting the inbuilt inequalities and inconsistencies within the current framework.

Policy ST6d: The RTS supports moves towards greater simplification and consistency in the setting of ferry freight fares across the region, recognising that this would be achieved over the medium-term.

10.4 Supporting the growth in rail freight

10.4.1 Growth in rail freight offers significant opportunities for our region, either delivered commercially or in support or major new developments such as the Cromarty Firth Green Freeport. A key societal benefit offered by rail freight is reducing the number of HGV journeys – this would be a particular benefit in our region where HGVs extend journey times and increase driver frustration on our predominantly single carriageway roads. They also emit significant carbon dioxide and have a disproportionately negative effect on the condition of our road network. Moreover, rail freight is well-suited to handling bulk and homogenous products such as timber, bulk liquids and waste, which are features of our region's supply-chain.

10.4.2 Supporting the growth in rail freight will require enabling investment in services and facilities, including improved route availability; improved gauge clearance; new rail freight terminals; improvements to the efficiency of existing rail freight terminals; longer passing loops for larger freight trains; procurement of adapted wagons to run on our region's network; and new connections to emerging industrial sites.

Policy ST6e: The RTS supports infrastructure measures which will enable the growth of rail freight to and from the region.

10.5 Other freight transport

10.5.1 Our region features a long coastline, dozens of ports and harbours, deep sea lochs and inland waterways, all of which offer opportunities for waterborne freight transport. Indeed, the super quarry at Glensanda on the western shore of Loch Linnhe has been in operation for almost 40-years, moves all quarried rock by sea, and is an example of the scope for waterborne freight movements in our region.

10.5.2 Waterborne transport provides an important opportunity to remove commercial vehicle kilometres from our region's roads (and in, some cases, ferries) in two ways:

[27] https://www.transport.gov.scot/our-approach/strategy/fair-fares-review/#:~:text=The%20Fair%20Fares%20Review%20aims,across%20government%2C%20business%20and%20society.

- Taking materials to site and removing waste associated with **major new construction projects located adjacent to waterways**, for example the proposed Coire Glas pumped hydro storage scheme (which is adjacent to Loch Lochy and the Caledonian Canal)
- Handling the **routine movement of bulk commodities**, for example the import of grain for the Diageo maltings at Port Ellen by the bulk coaster MV *Victress*

10.5.3 Our region's coast and waterways are therefore under-used assets and we support both the expansion of waterborne transport on a commercial basis and via government-based incentives such as the Freight Facilities Grant.

10.5.4 Key technical developments are also taking place to accelerate the use and efficiency of amphibious aircrafts, including zero-emission power technologies for use in salt-water environments. here are several emerging aviation technologies that will improve efficiency and environmental sustainability, as well as support connectivity across the HITRANS region. Advancements in heavy-lift autonomous drones, airships and seaplanes provide an opportunity to improve freight and logistics services whilst reducing the carbon impact of operations. The Sustainable Aviation Test Environment (SATE), established through Innovate UK's Future Flight Challenge, could offer a long-term test environment to facilitate trials with a range of these technologies to encourage future adoption.

Case Study - Scottish Timber Transport Scheme

In recent years the Scottish Timber Transport Scheme (STTS) managed by Scottish Forestry (SF) has provided significant funding for projects in the Highlands and Islands. The STTS funding supported with additional funds from both the private sector and the Highland Council have help move timber along fragile road networks and through sensitive communities.

Since 2021, 15 projects totalling £6.9m have been funded in Highland, including £915,000 on the A897 Helmsdale-Melvich, £1.05m on bridge replacement and other improvements at Tomatin, the £150k construction of a pier to move land locked timber to market at Gorteon, and bridge and other works at Loch Arkaig valued at £485k.

STTS also funds TimberLINK which ships up to 100,000 tonnes of timber a year from Argyll to mills in Ayrshire, avoiding around 8,000 lorry journeys on the A83. Since 2000, the TimberLINK service has shipped 2m tonnes of timber, saving 42k tonnes of CO_2 emissions.

STTS shows the way forward for partnership working, enabling timber resource to be harvested while improving fragile infrastructure for all users.

Policy ST6f: The RTS supports infrastructure investment and funding initiatives which will enable the growth of waterborne and air freight to, from and within the region.

10.6 How does this Strategy Theme contribute to our RTS Objectives?

10.6.1 The table below summarises how this Strategy Theme contributes to our RTS Objectives:

Table 10.1: Contribution of Strategy Theme 6 to our RTS Objectives

RTS Strategy Objectives	
SO1: To make a just transition to a post-carbon and more environmentally sustainable transport network	✓
SO2: To transform and provide safe and accessible connections between and within our city, towns and villages, to enable walking, wheeling and cycling for all	o
SO3: To widen access to public and shared transport and improve connectivity within and to / from the region	o

RTS Strategy Objectives	
SO4: To improve the quality and integration of public and shared transport within and from / to the region	o
SO5: To ensure reliable, resilient, affordable and sustainable connectivity for all from / to our island, peninsular and remote communities	✓
SO6: To improve the efficiency, safety and resilience of our transport networks for people and freight and adapt to the impacts of climate change.	✓✓✓

10.6.2 This Strategy Theme is predominantly focused on **SO6** and will contribute strongly to improving the efficiency of our ferry, rail and waterborne transport networks. By extension, ferry-based measures will support our island and peninsular communities **(SO5)**.

10.6.3 Shifting road-based freight to rail and water will also facilitate our aspiration to make a just transition to a post-carbon and more environmentally sustainable transport network **(SO1)**.

11 Strategy Theme 7: Improving the safety, reliability and resilience of our road and rail networks

11.1 Overview

11.1.1 The extremes of geography, topography and weather together with limited road and rail diversion routes mean that our region is singularly lacking in network resilience. Closures of routes such as the A83 Rest and Be Thankful and A890 at Stromeferry can leave communities with long diversion routes and with a sense of isolation.

11.1.2 However, even at a day-to-day level, short-term road and rail closures can lead to lengthy delays and diversions, whilst there is a significant backlog in road maintenance. (in March 2022, The Highland Council had a road maintenance backlog of £194m, whilst Argyll & Bute had a backlog of £112m[28]). Similarly, the accident rate and severity of accidents on several roads in the region is well in excess of the national average, a risk heightened by the large summer visitor influx, many of whom will be driving our roads for the first time.

11.1.3 This Strategy Theme is therefore focused on improving the safety, reliability and resilience of transport networks within the region. It should be noted that the focus is on **road and rail**, as active travel is covered in **Strategy Themes 1 and 2** and ferries and aviation in **Strategy Themes 5 and 6**.

11.1.4 The figure below sets out the policy areas covered under this theme:

Figure 11.1: Strategy Theme 7 – policy areas

[28] https://www.highwaysmagazine.co.uk/Scottish-local-road-backlog-close-to-1.7bn/9579

11.2 Road-based journey times

11.2.1 The 'Case for Change' clearly demonstrated that **road-based journey times within and to / from our region are in most cases slow and unreliable**. As well car journeys, this impacts negatively on bus / coach journey time reliability and also the haulage industry, with its strict regulations around driver hours.

11.2.2 Whilst policy has largely moved away from major road-building schemes, it is important to recognise that there **will be occasions where new / upgraded roads are required** on the basis of safety (particularly the **A82 from Tarbet to Inverarnan**), congestion reduction in settlements and improved journey time reliability, particularly for strategic freight movements. On our Trunk and major A-roads, investment could include full or partial dualling; climbing lanes, overtaking opportunities and sections of '2+1' in areas with poor accident records, low average speeds and poor journey time reliability; junction improvements, Route Actions Plans to address known issues of e.g., geometry, gradient, width, improved forward visibility from vegetation clearance etc; and the increase of HGV speed limits to 50mph as per the A9.

11.2.3 We actively support the **full dualling of the A96** and advocate that the proposed **bypasses of Elgin and Keith should be delivered immediately and should be dual rather than single carriageway**, and on the alignment presented in the A96 Dualling Hardmuir to Fochabers Scheme preferred option exhibition in December 2018. For context, an image of the proposed Elgin bypass on the preferred north route alignment, a key early priority for HITRANS, is shown in the figure below:

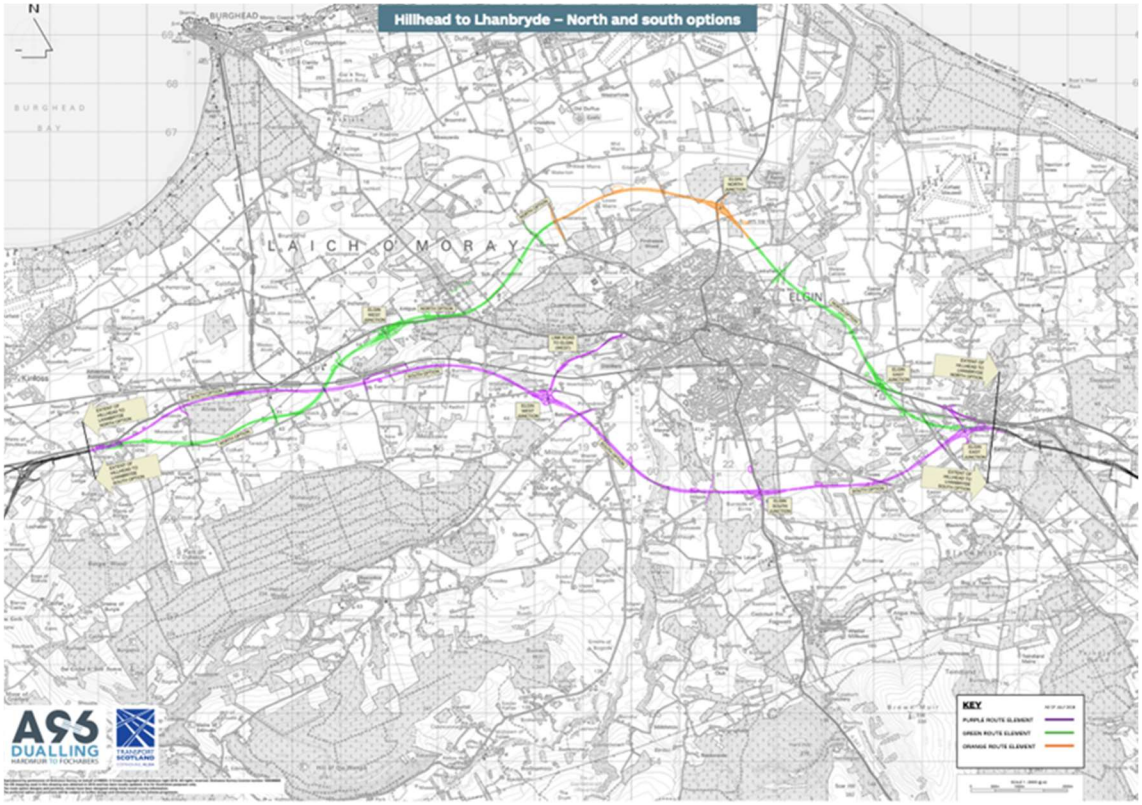


Figure 11.2: A96 Hardmuir to Hillhead with Elgin bypass – north option preferred (Source: Transport Scotland)

11.2.4 We are also seeking the urgent and accelerated construction of the **A96 Hillhead to Lhanbryde section** on the preferred alignment as an early action.

11.2.5 **Single track roads** account for a significant proportion of road kilometres in our region.

Indeed, several of the regionally significant roads connecting settlements such as the Outer Hebrides Spinal Route through much of Harris, Uist and Barra and sections of the A848 between Salen and Craignure are of this form. Journey times on single track roads are slow and variable, whilst the frequent stopping and starting consumes much more fuel, thus making journeys more expensive and environmentally damaging, as well as being more demanding on car maintenance. Adding and lengthening passing places and converting the busiest single-track roads to single carriageway would therefore be positive in terms of safety, connectivity, resilience and the environment.

Policy ST7a: The RTS restates our support for the full dualling of the A9 and A96, with early prioritisation of the Elgin and Keith bypasses to dual carriageway standards, following the already committed Inverness to Wester Hardmuir scheme.

Policy ST7b: The RTS calls for incremental improvements to our road network where there are safety, efficiency and environmental benefits, including in relation to single track roads.

Policy ST7c: The RTS supports the expansion of 50mph HGV speed limits across the Trunk Road network in the region where it is safe to do so.

Policy ST7d: The RTS supports the provision of improved overtaking opportunities on our roads, especially where there are known problems with vehicle platooning which can cause driver frustration.

11.3 Network resilience

11.3.1 The DfT describes transport system resilience as:

- *"The ability of the transport network to withstand the impacts of extreme weather, to operate in the face of such weather and to recover promptly from its effects"*[29]

11.3.2 The resilience of the transport network in our region is a major issue, one that is not experienced to the same degree anywhere else in the United Kingdom.

11.3.3 Our **road network is particularly vulnerable to disruption** due to a combination of severe weather (e.g., snow), geological instability (e.g., A83 Rest and Be Thankful, A890 Stromeferry etc) and flooding / sea level rises. This vulnerability to disruption is compounded by the length and standard of diversions in the event of disruption. For many settlements in our region, the terrain means that there is a dependence on only one road for travel e.g., north or south, even for regional centres such as Fort William. This has led to these sections of the network being defined as 'lifeline' in function, since their loss has such a significant impact on the impacted communities that are cut off from the day-to-day amenities on which any community depends. Diversions can take several hours and sometimes require a ferry crossing, such as when the A83 Rest and Be Thankful or A830 west of Lochailort are closed. A good recent (2023) example of this was the closure of the A816 in Argyll due to a landslide – a consequence of this was that children in the village of Ardfern were unable to take the bus to Lochgilphead High School and required a private boat transfer to Crinan to pick-up a school bus from there.

11.3.4 We recognise that the scale of this problem means that options to improve resilience are often limited, for example on the A82 between Ballachulish and Fort William. However, we support the exploration of options for emergency diversions equivalent to e.g., the Old Military Road at the A83 Rest and Be Thankful and the use of Kyle Line for vehicles at Stromeferry. In addition, we call for permanent solutions where there is frequent and repeated disruption

[29] Transport Resilience Review – A review of the resilience of the transport network to extreme weather events (DfT, 2014), p. 8.

leading to communities being cut-off for extended periods, most notably at the A83 Rest and Be Thankful and the A890 at Stromeferry.

11.3.5 Like the road network, the **railway network in our region is highly susceptible to disruption** due to weather and geological instability. Indeed, three sections of the West Highland Line were damaged in June 2023 during heavy rain, with one of the sections having to be rebuilt after 400 tonnes of material was swept away. Similarly, the Far North Line had to be closed between Brora and Helmsdale in November 2023 when Storm Babet damaged the sea wall.

11.3.6 It is important that the safety and integrity of the railway network in our region continues to be carefully monitored and that improvements are made to improve resilience, including regular vegetation clearance.

11.3.7 More generally, it is essential that **new transport infrastructure in our region is designed to mitigate the impacts of climate change** such as increased severe weather events and flooding.

Case Study: A83, Rest and Be Thankful

The A83 is one of Scotland's longest trunk roads, departing the A82 at Tarbet on the western shore of Loch Lomond and running all of the way to Campbeltown in the Mull of Kintyre. One of the most notorious stretches of this road is that between Ardgartan, located just south-west of Arrochar, through Glen Croe to the Rest and Be Thankful, a viewpoint at the head of then glen.

This section of road has been affected by a series of major landslips in recent years, requiring the use of the Old Military Road (OMR) (with associated delays) or creating an additional 25-mile detour via Tyndrum (Tarbet to Inverary via Crianlarich and Dalmally). More frequent severe weather events associated with climate change are exacerbating these concerns. The resilience of the RaBT is a key issue for Argyll, and the Scottish Government published the following data in response to an FoI request.

The level of disruption and uncertainty clearly affects communities and businesses which rely on the RaBT. Transport Scotland is currently progressing plans to construct a permanent solution to the issue.

A83 Rest and Be Thankful disruption (Source: FoI Request)

Year	Days with temporary lights in operation	No of Days A83 RaBT closed	No of days OMR in operation	No of nights OMR in operation	No. of days both A83 RaBT & OMR closed with diversion route in operation
2010/11	0	0	0	0	0
2011/12	0	5	0	0	5
2012/13	0	4.5	0	0	4.5
2013/14	0	6	5	5	1
2014/15	0	5	5	7	0
2015/16	0	5	3.5	0	1.5
2016/17	0	0	0	0	0
2017/18	155	0	0	0	0
2018/19	365	9	3.5	2	5.5
2019/20	309	2.5	2	2	0.5

Policy ST7e: The RTS calls for investment in our regional road network where there are

regular and sustained periods of disruption due to weather and / or geological instability.

Policy ST7f: The RTS recognises the increasing vulnerability of our region's road network to severe weather events linked to climate change and supports capital and revenue measures to mitigate this.

Policy ST7g: The RTS recognises the increasing vulnerability of the railway network to severe weather events linked to climate change and supports capital and revenue measures to mitigate this.

11.4 Travel disruption information

11.4.1 Weather, geological instability, roadworks and accidents all having the potential to lead to delays and diversions. Limited fuelling and EV charging infrastructure is also an issue for those less familiar with the region or parts of it. In most cases, there is no diversion route available, or the diversion is extremely lengthy, often on less suitable roads. These issues are compounded by delays and cancellations to ferry services, which are effectively part of the road network – a good example of this being the extended disruption to the Corran Ferry service in 2022-23.

11.4.2 A feature of this lack of diversion routes is the requirement to provide reliable and up-to-date travel information as quickly as possible and at strategic points on the road network. Intelligent Transport Systems (ITS) and information on websites such as Traffic Scotland and the CalMac App is essential, as is up-to-date social media information.

11.4.3 Given limited digital connectivity in much of our region, traditional methods of imparting information such as Variable Messaging Signs (VMS) and traffic cameras continue to be necessary and important. This is particularly the case at strategic points on the network, e.g., at Tyndrum where the A82 and A85 diverge.

11.4.4 Where disruption is anticipated due to e.g., planned roadworks, rail replacement services or forecast bad weather, it is important that this is publicised to our communities in advance. Expected disruption should be publicised through a variety of media, including: formal sources where relevant (e.g., The Scottish Road Works Register); public transport operator websites; the local press; and social media, including apps such as GO-HI.

Policy ST7h: The RTS supports the continued provision and expansion of real-time travel information for motorists and public transport users through existing and emerging platforms.

11.5 Road maintenance

11.5.1 A combination of the size of our region together with the very low traffic flows on many roads make prioritising and funding road maintenance difficult. This issue is heightened by the high cost and logistical challenges of undertaking even routine maintenance in some islands and our more remote communities. A consequence of this is that a significant length of the road network is in a poor state of repair with potholes, degraded carriageways and damaged verges to name but a handful of the problems.

11.5.2 Improving the condition of our road network is an important element of our overall objective to improve road safety in our region. Well maintained roads are also integral to the efficient movement of people and goods around our region and influence the perception of it amongst those visiting. Remedial work is therefore required to address known maintenance backlogs, whilst the overall maintenance programme needs to be strengthened, something which we recognise will require an increase in funding for both Transport Scotland (as the Trunk Roads authority) and our local authority partners.

Policy ST7i: The RTS recognises that many parts of our region's road network are in poor condition. It calls for enhanced preventative and remedial road maintenance to ensure the safe, reliable and efficient movement of people and goods and the delivery of services across our region.

11.6 Road safety

11.6.1 **Road safety** in our region is a **long-term issue of public concern** and regularly features prominently in both the local and national press. Rural routes, which are prevalent in our region, typically tend to have higher rates of fatal and serious accidents than urban roads and motorways. This trend is however amplified in our region by the long duration of many journeys undertaken, a significant length of single-track roads and the seasonal influx of visitors, a subset of whom do not speak English as a first language and will be driving left-hand drive vehicles.

11.6.2 The long-term trend at the regional level has been positive, with the total number of accidents reducing by around half since 2000. **Nevertheless, in 2019, there were 39 fatalities and 264 serious injuries on our region's roads**.[30] In absolute terms, the route sections with the greatest number of accidents are the A9 Perth – Inverness; the A83 Tarbet – Campbeltown; and the A96 Inverness – Keith. We share and support the Scottish Government's ambitious vision for Scotland to have the best road safety performance in the world by 2030 and the long-term goal where no one is seriously injured or killed on our roads by 2050.[31] We still have some way to go to meet these targets in our region and thus our RTS calls for measures to improve regional road safety.

11.6.3 There are a range of measures which could be implemented to support this, including:

- **Road improvements** such as addressing sections of poorly aligned carriageway, converting single track roads to single carriageway where appropriate etc, particularly where there are known safety problems

[30] Scottish Transport Statistics, includes figures for whole of Argyll and Bute

[31] https://www.transport.gov.scot/news/scotland-s-road-safety-framework-to-2030/

- Increased **HGV-specific and general motorist rest areas / services**, particularly on strategic long-distance routes such as the A9, A96 and A82 etc
- **Improvement or removal of priority junctions** on higher speed roads, particularly for right turning traffic
- The wider roll-out of **average speed cameras**
- Ongoing **public information campaigns around the use of single track roads**, promoted in partnership with local authorities, ferry operators, airlines, HIAL and car hire companies
- **Increased advisory signage** (including multi-lingual signage) to highlight specific dangers, such as where there is a high risk of animals on the road or where a road is not suitable for certain vehicle types
- **Information campaigns for those visiting our region**, particularly where they are driving left-hand drive vehicles
- An **improved winter roads treatment programme**, in particular ensuring that journeys in the early morning and late evening are as safe as possible
- **Level crossing closures / improved management of level crossings** (which would have the ancillary benefit of potentially being able to increase line speeds on the railway)

11.6.4 These physical improvement measures should be combined with ongoing initiatives to improve driver education and enforce penalties for unsafe driving behaviour.

Policy 7j: Investment in our road network should continue to have an overarching focus on safety with a view to reducing road traffic casualties in accordance with *Scotland's Road Safety Framework to 2030.*

Policy 7k: To address risks which are particular to roads in our region, the RTS supports: enhanced advisory signage; ongoing public information campaigns around the use of single-track roads; provision of additional safe motorist services and HGV rest areas; and information campaigns for visitors driving left-hand drive vehicles.

Policy 7l: The RTS specifically supports the improvement or removal of priority junctions on higher speed trunk roads, especially for right-turning traffic.

11.7 Rail service reliability

11.7.1 Whilst rail service reliability in our region overall was not identified as a major issue in the 'Case for Change', limited infrastructure, aging rolling stock and imported delay from elsewhere in the country do cause some challenges in this respect. Our RTS therefore supports measures that improve service reliability within and external to the region and reduce station dwell times.

Policy ST7m: The RTS calls for increased provision of level boarding at stations across the region, which will reduce station dwell times.

Policy ST7n: The RTS supports the provision of additional sections of double track (or static or dynamic passing loops where double track does not represent value for money) to improve punctuality.

Policy ST7o: The RTS supports infrastructure and timetable improvements external to the region which will improve the reliability of services to / from Inverness, Fort William, Oban and Mallaig.

11.8 How does this Strategy Theme contribute to our RTS Objectives?

11.8.1 The table below summarises how this Strategy Theme contributes to our RTS Objectives:

Table 11.1: Contribution of Strategy Theme 7 to our RTS Objectives

RTS Strategy Objectives	
SO1: To make a just transition to a post-carbon and more environmentally sustainable transport network	o
SO2: To transform and provide safe and accessible connections between and within our city, towns and villages, to enable walking, wheeling and cycling for all	o
SO3: To widen access to public and shared transport and improve connectivity within and to / from the region	o
SO4: To improve the quality and integration of public and shared transport within and from / to the region	o
SO5: To ensure reliable, resilient, affordable and sustainable connectivity for all from / to our island, peninsular and remote communities	✓
SO6: To improve the efficiency, safety and resilience of our transport networks for people and freight and adapt to the impacts of climate change.	✓✓✓

11.8.2 This Strategy Theme is predominantly focused on **SO6** in terms of improving the safety, reliability and resilience of our road and rail networks. It therefore contributes highly positively to this RTS Strategy Objective. There would also be a minor positive impact for our island communities **(SO5)**, particularly for time sensitive freight.

12 Strategy Theme 8: Facilitating sustainable visitor travel demand

12.1 Overview

12.1.1 Our region is characterised by extreme winter-summer differentials in travel associated with a significant influx of domestic and international visitors. Retail and tourism are the second and third biggest sectors by employment in our region, and the biggest employers outwith the public sector. Indeed, compared to the rest of Scotland, the economy of our region has a **significantly higher proportion of jobs in tourism** (**10%** versus **6.8%** for the rest of the country). The most recent (pre-COVID-19) data from VisitScotland suggests:

- **Argyll and the Isles**[32] (2017-19 average): a total of **6.5m visits**, with **4.0m nights stayed**, with associated spending of **£443m**. Top attractions included Argyll Forest Park, Inverary Castle and Staffa National Nature Reserve
- **Highlands**[33] (2019): a total of **12.5m visits**, with **11.5m nights stayed** and associated spending of **£1,533m**. Top attractions included Urquhart Castle, Glenfinnan Viaduct, Glencoe visitor centre and Glenmore Forest Park
- **Orkney**[34] (2019): a total of **192k visits**, with associated spending of **£67m**
- **Outer Hebrides**[35] (2017): a total of **218k** visits, with associated spending of **£65m**. Top attractions included Callanish Stones, Butt of Lewis and Harris Distillery

12.1.2 Taken together, these figures amounted to around **£2bn** of tourism spend annually in the region pre-pandemic.

12.1.3 Despite the clear benefits of tourism to our region, the volume, diversity and type of tourism in our region has a significant impact on the transport network, some associated with 'over-tourism'. Some of the main impacts include:

- **Higher traffic volumes** and **slower journeys** during peak tourism season – this affects both trunk and local roads. It also impacts on a range of different users, but particularly on those for whom **journey time reliability** is essential, e.g., freight, residents travelling for appointments etc. High volumes can also contribute to carriageway degradation leading to frequent vehicle damage and punctures such as that seen in parts of Skye
- **Safety and driver frustration risks**. This includes but is not limited to: the risks of driving on the wrong side of the road; misunderstanding the frequent switches between dual and single carriageway on the A9; safety and etiquette when driving on single track roads; and the high risk of animals on the road
- **Indiscriminate, illegal, damaging and dangerous parking** at 'honeypots' (e.g., the Fairy Pools on Skye, Glenfinnan etc) and in passing places to take photographs or admire views, of Luskentyre / Seilebost for example
- **Vehicle capacity constraints on many ferry routes** (and passenger capacity constraints on a handful of routes) – as visitors typically book further in advance, they will

[32] https://www.visitscotland.org/binaries/content/assets/dot-org/pdf/research-papers-2/regional-factsheets/argyll-and-the-isles-factsheet-2019.pdf

[33] https://www.visitscotland.org/binaries/content/assets/dot-org/pdf/research-papers-2/regional-factsheets/highland-factsheet-2019.pdf

[34] https://www.visitscotland.org/binaries/content/assets/dot-org/pdf/research-papers/orkney-visitor-survey-2019---exec-summary.pdf

[35] https://www.visitscotland.org/binaries/content/assets/dot-org/pdf/research-papers/outer-hebrides-report---may-18.pdf

often book a car deck space early, which can be to the disadvantage of residents who tend to book at shorter notice (although urgent travel is almost always accommodated). This can also impact on freight, although block booking of slots does provide a degree of protection against this

- There has also been a strong growth in **'travel' based tourism**. The highest profile example is the North Coast 500's (NC500 initiative) success in attracting many more visitors to the areas covered by the route. This actively encourages road-based travel (car, motorbike, motorhome (where there has been rapid growth in rental provision)) in some of the most remote areas of our region and indeed on some of the most unsuitable roads. Whilst the NC500 was reported to have generated £22.9m in GVA for businesses along the route in 2018[36], the increase in visitor numbers and the anti-social behaviour exhibited by some visitors is not universally welcomed. Other examples include 'trails' such as the Malt Whisky Trail in Speyside and the Highland Tourist Route
- **Cruise tourism** has also been a significant growth industry in the region, particularly in Orkney (which is the UK's most popular cruise ship destination, with over 170 calls per annum) and Invergordon, but also in a selection of other ports such as Stornoway and Portree. Cruise tourism can bring significant economic benefits and can also provide the volumes required to maintain e.g., a large and modern bus fleet, but the sheer volume of passengers can overwhelm the limited infrastructure and services and small communities

12.1.4 Overall, tourism is essential to our region, but sustainably managing its impact on the transport network, local communities and the environment is a key consideration for our RTS.

12.1.5 The figure below sets out the policy areas covered under this theme:

Figure 12.1: Strategy Theme 8 – policy areas

[36] https://www.scottishfield.co.uk/travel/scotland-travel/north-coast-500-boosts-economy-by-22million/

12.2 Improving active travel for those visiting our region

12.2.1 Whilst investing in and promoting active travel is a central theme of our RTS overall, it is important to differentiate between leisure and 'travel for a purpose' journeys, such as travel-to-work or education. Active travel planning and funding is conventionally targeted at the latter. However, leisure-based active travel to and from tourist destinations as well as cycling and walking holidays more generally is very prominent in our region. An important feature of many of these trips is that they are linear (e.g., cycling the Hebridean Way) or concentrate high volumes of cars at a specific nodal point (e.g., Glenfinnan) or mountain, forest, loch or river access roadsides or car parks.

12.2.2 We recognise the importance of active holidays to our region and therefore support:

- The **expansion of leisure-based walking, wheeling and cycling networks**, building on major success stories such as the Great Glen Way, Hebridean Way and West Highland Way
- Improved **active travel connections to and from major tourist attractions**, both in terms of infrastructure and visitor services such as bike buses
- Improved **active travel connections to and from ports, airports and regionally important railway stations** to their surrounding hinterland

Policy ST8a: The RTS supports the further development of long-distance walking, wheeling and cycling routes (including the National Cycle Network), recognising the visitor, economic and local benefits offered.

Policy ST8b: The RTS supports the development of active travel connections to our ports, airports and regionally important railway stations.

Policy ST8c: The RTS supports the development of active travel connections to our key tourism destinations where this would be a realistic option for some visitors.

12.3 Improving public transport interchange for those visiting our region

12.3.1 A priority for visitors to our region is maximising their 'holiday' / leisure time, thus reducing transport-related 'dead time'. For public transport to be a viable and attractive option for visitors, the **public transport interchange experience must be of a high quality** through a combination of increased seasonal staffing, the provision of high-quality information and a positive 'welcome ashore' experience for cruise passengers (an area in which Orkney has a particularly strong reputation).

12.3.2 Partnership working is required to deliver a high-quality experience of this nature and thus it is not an issue for the RTS alone. Multi-agency delivery from local authorities, port authorities, Visit Scotland, HIE and other partners will be essential.

Policy ST8d: Where there are concentrations of international tourists, including cruise passengers, the RTS supports the provision of enhanced local travel information and coordination to improve visitor experience and reduce impacts on local networks.

12.4 Enhanced rail services in peak season

12.4.1 The railway network in our region, and in particular the scenic West Highland, Kyle and Far North lines, experience a major uplift in passenger numbers in the summer. For many passengers, the attraction is the journey itself, whilst for others the train is a means of reaching their destination, either on a day-trip or where there is one or more overnight stays

involved. This puts pressure on seat capacity, but also increases demand for the carriage of bicycles, luggage, equipment etc on what are essentially urban diesel multiple units.

Whilst the infrastructure constraints on the region's railway network limit the scope for a major ramp-up in services, there are opportunities to operate some additional local services, such as in the Fort William area. Similarly, there are options to strengthen peak services with additional carriages (such as the Class 153 bicycle carriages introduced by ScotRail).

Policy ST8e: The RTS supports the operation and promotion of additional local rail services to key tourism destinations.

Policy ST8f: The RTS supports the provision of additional rail carriages on existing services in peak season, where feasible.

Policy ST8g: The RTS supports the principle of flexible timetabling where this can co-exist with regular services for local residents.

Policy ST8h: The RTS supports the principle of expanded open access rail services where these can be accommodated at no disadvantage to scheduled services.

12.5 Parking provision, management and enforcement at tourist destinations

12.5.1 The **demand for parking and illegal / damaging / indiscriminate parking** is one of the more visible impacts of the seasonal influx of visitors to our region. Throughout Scotland, parking management and enforcement resources tend to be focused on urban centres and settlements and is concentrated on managing compliance and increasing turnover. It can be difficult to flex this model to incorporate both specific tourist attractions (e.g., Luskentyre) and large areas of high seasonal demand (e.g., the Cairngorms National Park). Added to conventional parking problems is campervan and motorhome parking, coach parking at tourist sites and other problematic practices such as parking in passing places.

12.5.2 It is essential that the **RTS adopts an even-handed approach to this problem** – excess demand and inappropriate parking behaviour imposes real costs on some of our communities but, at the same time, these visitors are crucial to our local and regional economy. We recognise that new / strengthened parking restrictions and enforcement are required in several locations to manage demand and turnover and reduce inappropriate parking which restricts access, jeopardises safety and impacts negatively on our communities. However, **the parking problem in many cases reflects a lack of parking supply or meaningful alternatives to use of the car**. We therefore support:

- **Increased visitor parking provision** where improved management and enforcement would not make a material difference
- Specific **parking for camper vans and motorhomes**, including more European-style '**aires',** and signed and dedicated spaces in town car parks such as those in Dornoch
- **Management of overnight parking in laybys**, including formalisation and clarification for potential users around what is permitted or otherwise

Case Study: Pen-y-Pass car park, Eryri National Park

In Eryri National Park (Snowdonia), the National Park Authority has introduced a requirement to pre-book a parking space at Pen-y-Pass car park between April and October, a popular access point to Yr Wyddfa (Mount Snowdon). The charge for booking a parking space is not insignificant but has been used to subsidise the Sherpa'r Wyddfa bus service, which provides high-quality public transport access to the mountain and around the National Park. This has been supported by an app-based booking system that provides real-time parking availability updates.

Policy ST8i: The RTS supports the principle of sustainably accommodating visitor demand whilst maintaining or increasing visitor numbers.

Policy ST8j: The RTS supports the introduction of increased parking management measures at tourist honeypots as a tool to encourage improved access to these locations by public transport or active modes and to address indiscriminate and dangerous parking.

Policy ST8k: Where new or increased parking charges are introduced, the RTS encourages that this should be done in combination with improved facilities for those accessing via sustainable modes.

Policy ST8l: Whilst recognising the benefits of motorhome and campervan-based tourism in our region, the RTS acknowledges that it can impact negatively on our communities at certain times of the year. The RTS therefore supports measures to ensure that this demand is sustainably accommodated.

Policy ST8m: The RTS supports measures to ensure that this **motorhome and campervan-based tourism** demand is sustainably accommodated so that any negative impacts on communities are mitigated.

Policy ST8n: The RTS supports measures which would allow the benefits of cruise tourism to be more evenly distributed around the region.

Policy ST8o: The RTS supports the principle of bespoke bus services aimed at tourists to address excessive car-based demand at honeypot locations.

12.6 Targeted road improvements where there is high seasonal demand

12.6.1 A growing challenge posed by tourism is the pressure that it puts on roads which are not designed to accommodate it. The most obvious example of this is of course the North Coast 500, but other obvious examples include the Outer Hebrides Spinal Route in Uist, the roads between Craignure and Tobermory / Fionnphort and the Bealach na Bà (Applecross, part of the NC500) road.

12.6.2 There are incremental improvements which could be made to these roads to improve their standard and suitability including: improved maintenance where road conditions and verges are severely damaged by high tourism volumes; improved and / or increased provision of

passing places in areas of high demand; formalisation of informal passing places in areas of high demand; and improved signing and lining.

12.6.3 Whilst the presumption of our RTS is against new road building, there will be occasions where the case for more significant investments such as the long-proposed conversion of the Salen to Tobermory route to single carriageway should not be ruled out, particularly when considered from a safety, driver frustration and emissions perspective.

Policy ST8p: The RTS recognises that high volumes of tourist traffic are impacting the condition of some roads in our region and that increased central government funding is required that reflects this increased pressure on local transport infrastructure, to support an enhanced repair and maintenance programme.

Policy ST8q: The RTS recognises that high volumes of tourist traffic can lead to slow and inefficient journeys and therefore supports measures to address this.

12.7 How does this Strategy Theme contribute to our RTS Objectives?

12.7.1 The table below summarises how this Strategy Theme contributes to our RTS Objectives:

Table 12.1: Contribution of Strategy Theme 8 to our RTS Objectives

RTS Strategy Objectives	
SO1: To make a just transition to a post-carbon and more environmentally sustainable transport network	✓
SO2: To transform and provide safe and accessible connections between and within our city, towns and villages, to enable walking, wheeling and cycling for all	✓✓
SO3: To widen access to public and shared transport and improve connectivity within and to / from the region	✓✓
SO4: To improve the quality and integration of public and shared transport within and from / to the region	✓✓
SO5: To ensure reliable, resilient, affordable and sustainable connectivity for all from / to our island, peninsular and remote communities	✓
SO6: To improve the efficiency, safety and resilience of our transport networks for people and freight and adapt to the impacts of climate change.	✓

12.7.2 We recognise the economic and societal importance of tourism to our region, but we also understand the significant transport impacts that this demand can have on our communities. Our RTS supports the continued development of tourism in our region but calls for both capital investment and additional revenue funding to ensure that the demand generated by the sector can be sustainably accommodated.

12.7.3 The policies promoted through this Strategy Theme will make a positive contribution to all six of our RTS Strategy Objectives, complimenting resident-focused policies in other Strategy Themes. Of particular focus is improving the provision, quality and integration of active travel and public transport, thereby making notably positive contributions to **SO2**, **SO3** and **SO4**.

13 Strategy Theme 9: Decarbonising our transport, mitigating the effects of climate change

13.1 Overview

13.1.1 Decarbonisation and mitigating the effects of climate change is embedded through our RTS through behavioural change and supply side changes. The small population of our region means that it generates comparatively few emissions in absolute terms and is, at the same time, one of the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Increased severe weather events will affect the reliability of our ferry and land-based transport networks and increase the risks of geological instability, whilst rising sea levels pose a risk to our coastal roads and railway lines.

13.1.2 Whilst decarbonisation is a key objective at all levels of government in Scotland, there are features of our region which make decarbonisation challenging, including the geography, range of modes of transport and commercial provision of some transport services. Policies and associated actions for achieving net zero in our region must reflect our local context and circumstances and will in reality require an expansion of both capital and revenue funding.

13.1.3 The figure below sets out the policy areas covered under this theme:

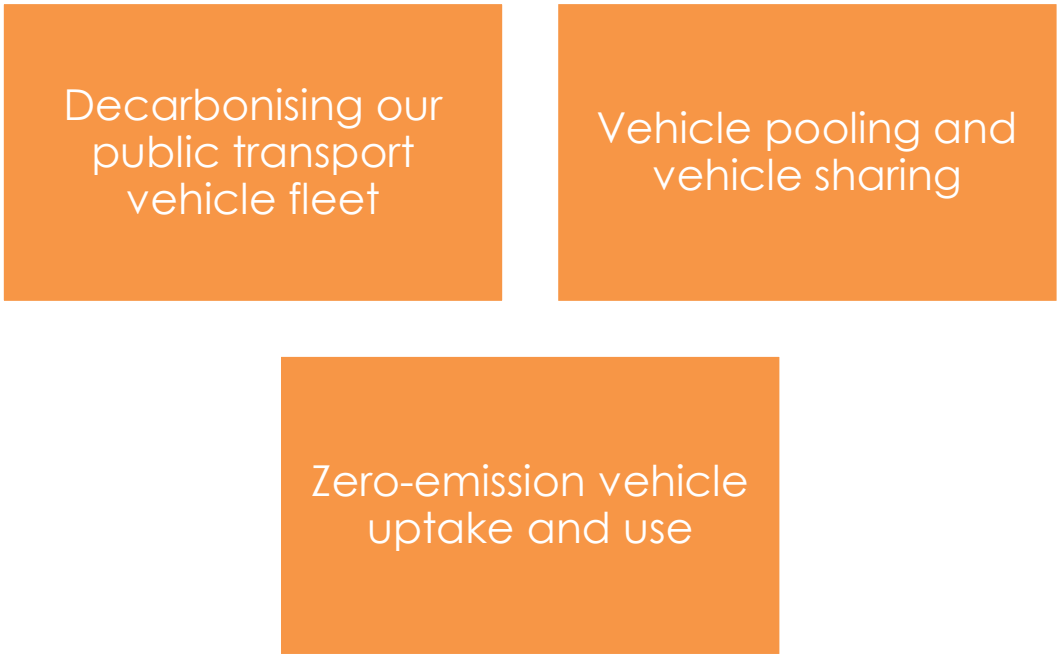


Figure 13.1: Strategy Theme 9 – policy areas

13.2 Decarbonising our public transport vehicle fleet

13.2.1 Outwith a few electric buses and hybrid-electric ferries, the public transport vehicle fleet in our region is almost entirely hydrocarbon based. There are several reasons for this:

- The **long-distance of many bus and coach routes** means that they can be towards the outer end of the range for electric buses. In addition, one end of almost every route is likely to be relatively rural in nature and thus opportunities for recharging are limited

- The **same is also true of the railway network**. At present, the strategy for rail decarbonisation in Scotland, as defined in the *Rail Services Decarbonisation Action Plan*[37], is predominantly built around a **rolling programme of electrification**, but this will be **expensive to deliver in our region and will also assume a lower priority** relative to busier urban and suburban routes. To this end, **alternative traction solutions** are proposed on the Aberdeen – Inverness, West Highlands, Far North and Kyle Lines – however, the preferred option(s) have not yet been confirmed
- For commercial bus, coach, ferry and aviation companies, **hydrocarbon-based fuels are generally cheaper than sustainable alternatives**. Additionally for ferries, grid capacity in island and rural communities may be short of what would be required to routinely charge large seagoing vessels such as those in CFL's 'Major Vessel' fleet

13.2.2 However, **our region is at the forefront of renewable energy production in the UK**, and it is important that our transport infrastructure capitalises on and reflects this.

Buses and coaches

13.2.3 Buses and coaches potentially present the **quickest win in terms of decarbonising our public transport vehicle fleet**. Battery performance and range is rapidly improving and it is likely that as older buses are phased out, they will gradually be replaced by electric buses. This will likely be an organic process, starting in the Inner Moray Firth and larger settlements such as Fort William and then gradually expanding over time.

13.2.4 There is however a case for continued public sector support in incentivising the uptake of more fuel efficient / alternative fuel vehicles and associated support services. This may require the provision of financial or other incentives to commercial operators to modernise their fleet, particularly for the very small operators found all across our region, but particularly in the most rural areas. The Scottish Zero Emission Bus Challenge Fund is a good example of such a scheme, where funding has been provided to upgrade refuelling infrastructure and convert existing diesel buses to a zero-emission drive train or to fund new zero emissions buses.

Rail rolling stock

13.2.5 The rolling stock used in our region operates exclusively on diesel (although the LNER *Azuma* units are bi-mode and are operated as electric services from Edinburgh Haymarket South Junction). Moreover, the majority of the units used were built between the 1970s and 1990s, with only the Class 170 stock built this century, and even that is now circa 20-years old. This presents a challenge in terms of the scale of replacement required, but also an **opportunity to deliver a transformational change** akin to that realised when the 'Sprinter' fleet was introduced in the 1980s.

13.2.6 We recognise that the approach to traction decarbonisation will largely be driven from the top down given that the units will operate to and within the Central Belt either routinely or occasionally. It will however be important to communicate the specific needs and aspirations of our region into the national process, particularly with regards to the prioritisation of electrification schemes.

Aircraft

13.2.7 The market for aircraft is global and thus delivering a fully decarbonised fleet in our region will to a large degree be driven by the economics of the industry. That said, there are exciting developments in this field, and our region is in the vanguard of low carbon aviation in the form

[37] rail-services-decarbonisation-action-plan.pdf (transport.gov.scot)

of the **Kirkwall-based Sustainable Aviation Test Environment**, the UK's first low carbon test location at an operational airport (see case study below).

13.2.8 Moreover, in most other transport sectors, change tends to happen at scale and trickle down – for example, major rail investment tends to be concentrated on the busiest lines and electric buses have been developed at scale in cities. In the aviation sector however, the early decarbonisation opportunities relate to smaller aircraft – for example, Britten-Norman is planning to introduce its first zero emission *Islander* aircraft in 2026. This presents an important opportunity for our region where small aircraft such as the *Islander*, *Twin Otter* and ATRs form the spine of our network.

13.2.9 Whilst we recognise that much of the aviation network in our region is commercial, there is a clear opportunity for HITRANS and our constituent local authority members to facilitate delivery of fleet decarbonisation through our PSO contracts.

13.2.10 PSOs are a unique opportunity to promote and incentivise early adoption of low or net-zero emission technologies in aviation. Deployment of low emission aircrafts could start from 2026/27, and local authorities could be early adopters and help to establish the necessary infrastructure for their operation, bridging the risk gap for operators.

13.2.11 PSOs could be designed to promote innovation. For example, airlines can struggle to justify investment in new aircrafts for fear of not being competitive at the next tender round if a competitor offers an older, compliant aircraft. A new aircraft cannot be fully depreciated in the c.4-year PSO cycle, therefore if the specification better promoted innovation and sustainable technologies this could favour operators who prioritise low and zero-emission aircrafts in the future.

Ferries

13.2.12 It should be noted that decarbonisation of the ferry fleets within our region is largely captured in **Strategy Theme 5** in relation to new vessels. Whilst it is possible to decarbonise existing vessels (e.g., the proposed conversion of MV *Shapinsay* to hydrogen), the age of most vessels in the Scottish networks means that this will be uneconomical relative to procuring new tonnage.

Case Study: Sustainable Aviation Test Environment, Kirkwall

As referenced above, the Kirkwall-based Sustainable Aviation Test Environment (SATE) is the UK's first low carbon test location at an operational airport. HITRANS and our constituent member, Orkney Islands Council, are amongst several local partners involved in the SATE consortium. Indeed, Kirkwall Airport has a dedicated hangar to house any aircraft during any trial or demonstration flights.

Led by HITRANS, SATE is at the forefront in progressing UK and Scottish Government's aviation aspirations, bringing together a consortium of 14 partners covering industry, public sector, and academia. Partners work with a range of regional businesses and stakeholders to showcase emerging technologies alongside real-world potential scenarios, highlighting the environmental, social, and economic contribution sustainable aviation can make.

The project is part-funded by the UKRI Future Flight Challenge – a £300 million programme, co-funded by government and industry, that is supporting the creation of the aviation ecosystem needed to accelerate the introduction of advanced air mobility (AAM), drones, and zero-emission sub-regional aircraft in the UK.

While the SATE facilities are based at Kirkwall Airport, the project is evolving to focus on the Highlands & Islands as a whole, matching new technologies with practical use cases to benefit communities.

The work for SATE covers: the development of new sustainable ecosystems; aircraft development and demonstration; airspace change proposals; airport operations; ground infrastructure; skills development; and energy and fuels.

SATE provides a blueprint for net zero regional aviation and has already delivered some early successes, including trialling the first hybrid electric flights in Scotland and collaborating with Windracers and Royal Mail on autonomous drone flights.

Policy ST9a: The RTS supports the implementation of measures which facilitate the decarbonisation of the public transport vehicle fleet within the region, including commercial vehicles, buses and community transport, rail rolling stock, aircraft and ferries.

Policy ST9b: The RTS recognises the opportunities brought about by the availability of renewable energy in our region, including locally produced green hydrogen. The transport fleet mix and associated infrastructure should reflect this.

13.3 Vehicle pooling and vehicle sharing

13.3.1 Our RTS seeks to provide **alternatives which make car ownership less necessary, reducing the need to multi-car households in particular**. The provision of vehicle pooling and vehicle sharing opportunities are two means by which the ned to own a car, or an additional car, can be reduced.

13.3.2 **Vehicle-pooling** is ride sharing where people with similar travel requirements share one vehicle rather than making separate trips. Vehicle-pooling can be undertaken informally between friends / colleagues (as is highly common in islands), coordinated by an employer, or formally through an online platform or app that matches people who have no other connection other than similar travel requirements.

13.3.3 **Vehicle sharing** can remove the need for vehicle ownership. Instead, users access shared vehicles through a vehicle sharing organisation that provides a fleet of vehicles in their local area. Vehicles can then be booked online or via a smartphone app. The operator provides

fuel, parking and maintenance with users paying a fee each time they use the vehicle. We already support the concept of lift sharing through our www.hitravel.liftshare.com website, which would provide a basis for further expansion.

Policy ST9c: The RTS supports the development of vehicle pooling and vehicle sharing services across the region to reduce the need for personal car ownership.

13.4 Zero-emission vehicle uptake and use

13.4.1 The Scottish Government is aiming to phase out the need for new petrol and diesel cars by 2030, although the UK ban on the sale of such cars has been pushed back to 2035, in line with the EU. It is therefore essential that, over the RTS lifespan, alternative fuels and environmentally friendly technologies are critically assessed for both cars and good vehicles (buses having been considered above).

13.4.2 Battery Electric vehicles (BEVs) are seen as the long-term future of road transport (with Plug-in Hybrid Vehicles (PHEV) and Hybrid Electric Vehicles (HEV) playing a role in the medium term) – **BEV registrations in the UK in 2022 were 40% higher than in 2021** and, with **267,203** new BEVs sold, accounted for **16.6% of all new car sales in that year**.[38]

13.4.3 BEVs offer zero tailpipe carbon emissions albeit they still have whole life carbon impacts, from electricity generation, manufacturing to disposal. Whilst not a panacea for the issue of car-based emissions, BEVs will deliver a major reduction in whole life carbon emissions.

13.4.4 However, there are a number of factors hindering uptake:

- Despite lower running costs, **BEVs remain significantly more expensive to purchase than internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicles**. This restricts market uptake and introduces an inequality whereby those on lower incomes are either excluded from the market or are disproportionally affected due to a higher proportion of their income being spent on BEV acquisition. That said, improvements in battery technology and more widespread adoption means that unit costs are declining, and it is anticipated that the cost of an EV will come into line with an ICE vehicle in the years ahead
- The **running cost advantage of EVs was reduced** by major increases in energy costs over the period 2021-23 and the reduction in the number of free-to-use chargers. The recent volatility of energy prices may act as a short-term barrier to BEV uptake, at least until energy markets settle for a sustained period
- There are also **relatively few BEV chargers in the region (626 in total as at 1st October 2023[39])**, although provision varies by authority, with Orkney for example having the highest number of chargers per capita in Scotland (231 chargers per 100,000 population[40]). This is a major challenge given the **geographic expanse of our region** where journeys are often long. Moreover, **steep and frequent gradients, shorter winter days and inclement weather all give rise to range anxiety**. This would be a particular **challenge for fully laden commercial vehicles** travelling to and from e.g., geographically remote Scotch whisky distilleries
- The **electrical grid** in the region, and in particular in the most remote areas may not have sufficient capacity to support the wholesale and uniform transition of the transport network to EVs at present. A range of other low and zero emission fuels are also emerging

[38] https://heycar.com/uk/blog/electric-cars-statistics-and-projections

[39] https://maps.dft.gov.uk/ev-charging-map/index.html

[40] https://maps.dft.gov.uk/ev-charging-map/index.html

13.4.5 Nonetheless, positive progress is being made in our region. For example, the 'Pathfinder Project', a joint procurement exercise between Highland, Aberdeenshire, Aberdeen City and, latterly, Moray Councils has expanded the public EV charger network in our region.[41]

Case Study: FASTER

The FASTER Project is a joint initiative by partners in Scotland, Ireland and Northern Ireland to support the overarching ambition to transition to low carbon transport systems. The project partnership has completed the physical roll out and installation of 75 rapid (50KW capacity) electric vehicle charging stations in the programme area.

Within Scotland, 23 chargers have been installed at 12 sites across the Western Isles, Argyll & Bute and the Highland regions. Three priorities were identified:

- *To increase coverage across network gaps, aiding a just transition in more rural and remote areas*
- *To improve accessibility for both small commercial vehicles and those with mobility issues through the design*
- *To improve reliability through a more enforceable maintenance contract and co-locating chargers on the Western Isles, so that there is a back-up if one is waiting to be fixed*

The multi-unit delivery programme afforded many learning opportunities, the most pertinent being the complexity of scheduling four different suppliers for a five-stage installation process at each site, after obtaining the necessary legal agreements and consents. Some organisations built in significant timeframes for flexibility and were not accountable to HITRANS or the project timeframes (e.g., 3rd party legal, wayleaves, EDF metering). This resulted in some delays to the programme, causing frustration for members of the public.

The project offered the opportunity to share challenges and learning with other members of the partnership at a local, regional and national level and positive engagement with local communities and private landowners helped achieve and overcome the necessary legal issues.

HITRANS and partners hope to take forward the lessons learnt into future EV infrastructure work including the EV Infrastructure Funding (EVIF) programme.

13.4.6 Whilst electric power is emerging as the dominant vehicle fuel technology, it will not necessarily be appropriate in for all modes of transport, commercial vehicles for example. **Alternative fuels** such as green hydrogen may therefore have a role of play in our region's future vehicle mix.

[41] https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/1210/environment/943/electric_vehicle_infrastructure/3

Policy ST9d: The RTS calls for the expansion, standardisation and maintenance of EV charging infrastructure to support the decarbonisation of all vehicle based travel in our region.

Policy ST9e: The RTS recognises the challenges of distance, topography, climate and short winter daylight hours to the rollout of battery electric powered commercial vehicles and seeks low or zero emission solutions appropriate to our region that capitalises on the surplus energy production within our region.

Policy ST9f: The RTS supports the roll-out of other alternative fuels to promote the decarbonisation of our transport networks, ports, ferry terminals, airports and airfields.

13.5 How does this Strategy Theme contribute to our RTS Objectives?

13.5.1 The table below summarises how this Strategy Theme contributes to our RTS Objectives:

Table 13.1: Contribution of Strategy Theme 9 to our RTS Objectives

RTS Strategy Objectives	
SO1: To make a just transition to a post-carbon and more environmentally sustainable transport network	✓✓✓
SO2: To transform and provide safe and accessible connections between and within our city, towns and villages, to enable walking, wheeling and cycling for all	o
SO3: To widen access to public and shared transport and improve connectivity within and to / from the region	✓
SO4: To improve the quality and integration of public and shared transport within and from / to the region	o
SO5: To ensure reliable, resilient, affordable and sustainable connectivity for all from / to our island, peninsular and remote communities	✓
SO6: To improve the efficiency, safety and resilience of our transport networks for people and freight and adapt to the impacts of climate change.	✓✓

13.5.2 The over-riding emphasis of this Strategy Theme is on transitioning to a post carbon and more environmentally sustainable transport network, and it therefore makes a particularly strong contribution to **SO1**. Mitigating the effects of climate change would have positive impacts for our island communities **(SO5)** and in terms of the efficiency, safety and resilience of our transport networks for people and freight **(SO6)**.

13.5.3 Vehicle pooling and vehicle sharing schemes would expand shared transport provision within our region and would thus support **SO3**.

14 Strategy Theme 10: Embracing new technologies

14.1 Overview

14.1.1 Travel in our region changed significantly in the 1960s and 1970s. The upgrading of major roads such as the A9, the construction of river and estuarial crossings, the conversion of many ferry routes to Ro-Ro and the growth in regional aviation provided new opportunities for travel and improved journey quality. Since that period, the pace of change has been much slower, with travel by 2010 not dissimilar to the end of the 1970s in terms of journey times, routes, means of travel etc. However, over the last 10 years or so, the rapid growth in technology combined with wider societal change (accelerated by COVID-19) has changed travel behaviour across our region and beyond.

14.1.2 Many of these emerging technologies, and their associated impacts on society, are at an early stage of development and manifestation but offer new ways of providing and accessing transport services. This Strategy Theme is therefore focused on options for embracing new technologies over the lifespan of the next RTS.

Policy ST10a: The RTS embraces the opportunities provided by new technologies to improve the provision of transport infrastructure and services across the region.

14.1.3 The figure below sets out the policy areas covered under this theme:

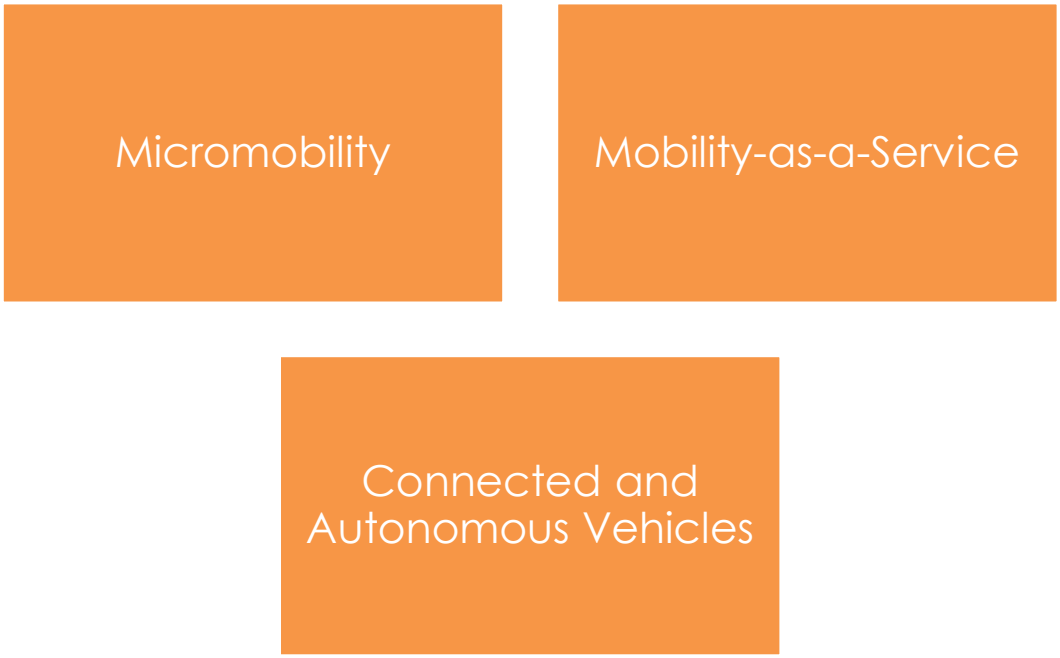


Figure 14.1: Strategy Theme 10 – policy areas

14.2 Micromobility

14.2.1 Micromobility refers to the use of a range of small, lightweight vehicles, including bikes, e-bikes, electric scooters etc. Micromobility devices can be human-powered or electric and can be privately-owned or available through a shared fleet.

14.2.2 Although not legal on the roads in the UK as of 2024, two wheeled electric scooters are growing in popularity with sharing schemes available in several European cities and pilot schemes running in the UK. These are usually dockless and typically, users can track, reserve, and unlock scooters via their smartphone with payment on an annual, monthly, daily or per-trip basis. The availability of shared schemes also removes the purchase cost for users which can be a significant deterrent to use.

14.2.3 Micromobility solutions can be delivered independently or as part of the overall concept of mobility hubs, as introduced in relation **Policy ST4d**.

Policy ST10b: The RTS supports consideration of the provision of future innovative personal transport within the design of our active travel network and mobility hubs.

14.3 Mobility-as-a-Service

14.3.1 **Mobility as a Service (MaaS)** allows users to plan, book and pay for multiple transport services (including public transport, car clubs, access to active travel, taxi, demand responsive transport, etc.) as packages based on their needs instead of buying these in a series of individual purchases. The concept moves away from relying on personally owned models of transport towards being able to access various modes of transport through a single platform. The implementation of a MaaS system or systems within all of parts of our region would create opportunities to develop a seamless, integrated and sustainable transport system that effectively and efficiently meets the needs of residents and visitors.

14.3.2 The fundamental components of MaaS are:

- **Multi-modal:** integration between multiple modes of transport including public transport, active travel, and shared mobility solutions
- **Payment solutions:** users are able to pay for their travel across a range of modes directly through the MaaS platform with integrated multi-modal ticketing solutions in-built
- **One platform:** for everything including travel information, booking, ticketing and payments
- **Integration:** bringing together customers, transport providers, public sector, payment processors, telecommunication companies and the platform owners
- **Digital:** an online platform supported by telecommunications technology
- **User-focused:** centred around demand from customers and personalised to their needs

14.3.3 MaaS is still an emerging concept and is yet to be widely implemented, although Apps which are built on the principles of MaaS are beginning to emerge. For example, our Go-HI app allows residents and visitors to plan, book and pay for end-to-end multi-modal journeys in a single transaction using their smartphone or desktop devices. The platform offers instant access to book buses, trains, taxis, demand responsive transport, car clubs, air travel and car hire, with bicycle hire and ferries being added to the app as the project expands. The app therefore provides a basis for the further development of this option into a fully functional MaaS system.

Policy ST10c: The RTS supports the principle and further development of Mobility-as-a-Service as the technology evolves, particularly through our Go-HI app.

14.4 Connected and Autonomous Vehicles

14.4.1 New vehicles are incorporating increasing levels of automation, where the driver is performing increasingly fewer tasks. There are six tiers of automation, ranging from ‘no automation’

through to **Connected and Autonomous Vehicles (CAV)**, where the vehicle is able to operate and perform functions without human intervention.

14.4.2 Currently, only partially automated vehicles are available on the market. In partially automated vehicles, the system takes control of most driving actions, but the driver is expected to remain alert and intervene where necessary. Higher levels of automation are however being developed and piloted with commercially driven advances in this sector being delivered by organisations such as Tesla, Google and other major firms who are competing to develop fully automated or 'driverless' vehicles. As such, it is plausible that higher standards of automated vehicles will move from pilot projects to operational within the lifetime of our RTS.

14.4.3 One of the immediate opportunities with respect to automation is autonomous buses. Indeed, the UK's first full autonomous bus service, CAVForth, launched in May 2023 running between Ferrytoll Park and Ride in Fife and Edinburgh Park Transport Interchange (see the case study below). Given that the driver accounts for the majority of bus operating costs, fully autonomous (and unstaffed) buses would offer an important opportunity improve the viability of 'thin' routes. Moreover, the demographic profile of bus drivers is ageing and there is an emerging shortage of bus drivers across the country (particularly in rural areas), so this option could also partially mitigate the risks posed by this.

14.4.4 Whilst there are clear benefits to CAVs, there remain many issues to overcome, for example the allocation of liabilities in the event of a collision. In addition, it is important that automation contributes to other goals, including the delivery of net zero. Moreover, given that automation is market-led, it is essential that there is policy, regulatory and legal framework which governs the introduction of such vehicles onto our roads.

Case Study: UKs First Autonomous Bus Service

Scotland's first autonomous bus service was launched by HITRANS in October 2022, part-funded by the Planning for Autonomous Vehicles (PAV) project, supported by the ERDF Interreg North Sea Region Programme. The vehicle travelled a three-kilometre route linking Inverness Campus with the Inverness Retail and Business Park.

Policy ST10d: The RTS supports opportunities for the more widespread adoption of Connected and Autonomous Vehicles and autonomous buses, whilst recognising the challenges posed in our region.

14.5 How does this Strategy Theme contribute to our RTS Objectives?

14.5.1 The table below summarises how this Strategy Theme contributes to our RTS Objectives:

Table 14.1: Contribution of Strategy Theme 10 to our RTS Objectives

RTS Strategy Objectives	
SO1: To make a just transition to a post-carbon and more environmentally sustainable transport network	✓
SO2: To transform and provide safe and accessible connections between and within our city, towns and villages, to enable walking, wheeling and cycling for all	✓
SO3: To widen access to public and shared transport and improve connectivity within and to / from the region	✓✓
SO4: To improve the quality and integration of public and shared transport within and from / to the region	✓
SO5: To ensure reliable, resilient, affordable and sustainable connectivity for all from / to our island, peninsular and remote communities	✓
SO6: To improve the efficiency, safety and resilience of our transport networks for people and freight and adapt to the impacts of climate change.	✓

14.5.2 Emerging technologies offer a range of potential benefits for our region and thus could make a positive contribution across our RTS Strategy Objectives in the future.

14.5.3 New technologies in aviation are expected to provide new markets for passenger and freight travel as well as improve efficiencies in current markets. Several examples are being explored in SATE – including large UAVs with payload capacities of 100kg, and Airlander, the world's most efficient large aircraft, that could help to deliver cost-effective, low-emission passenger transport and freight to the Highland and Island communities in the North of Scotland.

14.5.4 Mircomobility and MaaS offer improved opportunities to make more environmentally sustainable journeys **(SO1)**, including by wheeling and cycling **(SO2)**.

14.5.5 A combination of MaaS and CAVs, and in particular autonomous buses, offer the opportunity to expand public transport connectivity **(SO3)** and improve quality **(SO4)** and efficiency, safety and resilience **(SO6)**. These benefits would accrue to our mainland and island **(SO5)** communities.

15 Strategy Theme 11: Reducing the cost of travel, particularly for those most in need

15.1 Overview

15.1.1 A combination of distance, low volumes and, for passenger journeys, the frequent requirement for more than one connection (and sometimes mode) when making a journey means that cost of travel is major issue for some living in our region. Indeed, **transport poverty** is a major issue, particularly in our island and rural communities.

15.1.2 This Strategy Theme is therefore focused on policies that reduce the cost of travel, particularly for those most in need. There are different ways in which the cost of travel can be reduced, including universal reductions in fares, discounts targeted by either geography or person group or measures to improve cross-operator ticket acceptance. Ahead of setting out our policy position on these matters however, it is important to define what we mean by transport poverty.

15.1.3 The figure below sets out the policy areas covered under this theme:

Figure 15.1: Strategy Theme 11 – policy areas

15.2 Transport poverty

15.2.1 The European Parliament defines transport poverty as a:

- *"…lack of adequate transport services necessary to access general services and work, or the inability to pay for these services"*

15.2.2 Five distinct elements of transport poverty are identified:

- No transport **availability** (the lack of transport options or low frequency, also referred to as **mobility poverty**)

- No [physical] **accessibility** to transport
- Low transport **affordability**
- Too much **time spent travelling**
- Inadequate **transport conditions** (available transport options are dangerous or unsafe)[42]

15.2.3 As set out in the 'Case for Change' and alluded to throughout this Strategy, **transport availability, affordability and time spent travelling** are pervasive issues across our region, whilst **accessibility** and **quality** can be problems for some groups or in certain geographic areas. Almost all of these issues are ultimately reflected in cost, either in terms of public transport fares or through '**forced car ownership'**.

15.2.4 Recent research undertaken by the Scottish Government has found that 15% of people living in rural Scotland (or 170,000 people) are in relative poverty. **Fuel poverty** is a particular issue, with a **third of houses in remote rural Scotland estimated to be in extreme fuel poverty**, compared to only 11% of households in the rest of Scotland (it should be noted that this research was carried out prior to the steep increase in energy costs in 2022).[43] Moreover, island and peninsular communities in our region have additional costs associated with island-mainland travel (and, in some instances, inter-island travel), particularly given the commuter nature of some of our islands and peninsular communities (e.g., Rousay, Ardgour etc).

15.2.5 Transport cost, when considered in its broadest sense, and associated fuel poverty can therefore be a '**push' factor in out-migration** from communities which are already fragile. As well as being damaging for the communities concerned, it makes service delivery much more challenging, a point recently raised by The Highland Council in response to the 2022 Census.[44]

15.2.6 Whilst we know that transport poverty is a problem in our region, it is one that is ill-defined and poorly evidenced. In making the case for investment to address this issue and determining which actions would be most appropriate to address it, it is essential that work is done to better define and evidence the problem. This will allow us through our RTS Action Plan to develop and implement measures which will alleviate transport poverty in our region.

Policy ST11a: Transport poverty is a complex, dispersed and often hidden problem in our region. The RTS commits to define and evidence this problem and identify appropriate actions to be delivered by HITRANS and our partners.

15.3 Reduce public transport fares

15.3.1 The absolute level of public transport fares across all modes can be a barrier to travel and a contributory factor to transport poverty. This also acts as an incentive to visitors to travel by car, rather than using public transport either to get to or travel around region.

Bus and coach

15.3.2 Any reduction in fares would likely lead to a reduction in revenue – that is, the additional passengers generated would not cover the revenue lost from reducing the fare. Therefore, any reduction in fares is likely to be dependent on the provision of additional public funding, whether via subsidy or market intervention in accordance with the provisions of the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019.

[42] Kiss, M., *Understanding transport poverty* (European Parliamentary Research Services, 2021), pp. 1-2.

[43] Poverty in Rural Scotland: A review of evidence (Scottish Government, 2021), pp. 4-5.

[44] Highland populations at risk of being 'drained' of people - report - BBC News

Case Study: Capped bus fares in England

To support post-pandemic patronage recovery, the UK Government provided funding to cap single bus fares outside London at £2 until the end of 2024 (for participating operators), at which point the government will review the effectiveness of the policy. Early indications are that this initiative has been successful, with a Transport Focus survey finding that 11% of respondents recorded increased bus use. This could be a potential model for our region but would be dependent on the provision of additional external funding.

https://www.nationalworld.com/news/traffic-and-travel/when-does-ps2-bus-fare-cap-end-new-finish-date-for-low-cost-fare-as-travel-discount-extended-4098311

Rail

15.3.3 For communities living near the **railway network** in our region, the train service can be their equivalent of a bus and may be their only meaningful public transport connection. Despite the availability of the Highland Railcard, the cost of rail fares can still be more than the bus fare for some. Moreover, many island and peninsular residents seek to connect with rail services at Wemyss Bay, Gourock, Oban, Mallaig, Thurso and Aberdeen, with the cost of their rail ticket often exceeding their ferry fare.

15.3.4 Residents travelling outwith our region can also face significant fare costs as their journeys are generally long distance. In some instances, variable demand-based fares designed to maximise operator yield come into play, sometimes offering reduced costs for advanced booking, but also increasing costs for essential short notice travel.

15.3.5 As with bus services, any reduction in fares would in all likelihood lead to an increase in the overall operating deficit of the railway network, with the cost accruing to the Scottish Government as the ultimate owner and funder of Scotland's railway.

Publicly supported ferry services – passenger fares

15.3.6 With some limited exceptions (e.g., the Corran Ferry), all **ferry foot passengers** pay a fare for travel. This is a supplementary cost paid by island residents which is additive to onward transport costs when they arrive on the mainland. On several routes, such as those operated by Orkney Ferries, passengers can buy heavily discounted books of tickets. However, being able to do so is reliant on having the money up-front to buy these books, which discriminates against those on lower incomes.

15.3.7 **Reducing foot passenger fares, or removing them altogether**, would be beneficial to those living in island or peninsular communities, narrowing the cost differential which they face. It is often suggested that providing reduced or free fares for foot passengers could be a potential means of dissuading people from taking their car on the ferry. However, it is important to recognise that there is no practical means of charging car-based passengers but providing free fares for foot passengers. Whist the vehicle fare could still be applied (with a driver fare), car passengers could walk on as a foot passenger for free. The Corran Ferry is an example of where all passengers, whether on-foot or in a car, travel for free.

15.3.8 For those living in or travelling to the Orkney Islands, a reduction in the cost of onboard accommodation (in addition to the 'Islander' fare) would be beneficial. However, the practical limitations in terms of capacity are well understood and this may therefore only become a consideration as part of the future replacement of the current NIFS fleet.

Air services

15.3.9 For a small number of island communities, **publicly supported air services** provide the lifeline mode of travel and / or fulfil a critical role in meeting specific needs, such as

transporting children to and from school or allowing medical professionals to visit an island. Air travel is however generally more expensive than making the journey by sea (or overland in the context of Campbeltown and Caithness). Reducing fares to a level which is competitive with sea or land-based travel would be advantageous for communities.

15.3.10 The economics of the **commercial aviation network** in the region mean that fares can often be prohibitively high. The Scottish Government's Air Discount Scheme (ADS) provides a 50% reduction on core fares (i.e., pre-tax) for residents in certain parts of the region when travelling for a purpose other than business. The fares themselves are set by the airline on the basis of market conditions and vary by flight, time of booking etc. Fares could be reduced by increasing the level of the ADS discount or widening its eligibility to e.g., businesses.

Delivering public transport fares reductions

15.3.11 We **support the principle of reducing public transport fares** and recognise the benefits in terms of reducing transport poverty and encouraging modal shift. However, we also recognise several key challenges in providing lower fares:

- The majority of transport services in our region are either marginal or operate with a subsidy. Given low population density, it is highly unlikely that the revenue foregone from any reduction in fares would be offset by increased demand. There would therefore be an **additional cost to the public sector in either direct funding or subsidy to private operators** to account for this reduction in farebox revenue
- Making changes to the means by which fares are set and their absolute level can also be a **complex undertaking** and risks both unintended consequences and public acceptability issues
- Any fares reduction would need to be delivered in a way that is **compliant with competition law and subsidy control**, as well as within the **regulatory framework** governing each mode of transport

15.3.12 The above is not to say that reductions in public transport fares cannot be delivered, rather it is emphasising the importance of well-thought through analysis and appraisal to inform any reduction in fares.

Policy ST11b: Recognising that, for many in our region (and especially those living in our island communities), transport costs account for a high proportion of household income, the RTS supports a reduction in public transport fares and the introduction of payment plans for multi-journey tickets.

Policy ST11c: The comparative costs of public transport mean that residents and visitors to the region often choose to travel by car. The RTS therefore supports a reduction in the cost differential between travelling by public transport and car.

15.4 Expand Road Equivalent Tariff

15.4.1 Our RTS has a general presumption against increased car-based travel, recognising the importance of decarbonisation and the policy commitment to reduce car kilometres by 20% by 2030. However, **for most island residents, taking a car on the ferry for at least some journeys is essential**. It allows them to maximise time off-island and carry items such as luggage, pets, goods purchased on the mainland or livestock in trailers. The absolute level of car fares has long been recognised as a barrier to travel or an additional cost that island residents must bear, despite below average incomes. Indeed, this formed the basis of the Scottish Government's Road Equivalent Tariff policy, first introduced as a pilot in 2008.

15.4.2 There are numerous means by which car fares could be reduced, and this would merit a study in its own right - indeed, the specific dynamics of each route would ideally need to be

considered. It is though important to recognise: (i) the **capacity challenges** on many routes that any fares reduction could exacerbate; and (ii) the **risk of unintended consequences**, such as causing economic leakage from islands, with more money being spent elsewhere. There is a significant body of evidence on the impact of RET and its variability by community contained in the *Evaluation of Road Equivalent Tariff on the Clyde and Hebridean Network*, published by Transport Scotland in March 2020.[45] The principle of a general reduction in ferry car fares would be addressed through **Policy ST11c**.

15.4.3 Beyond this however**, we support the extension of the RET policy** to services to the Northern Isles and local authority operated services, again where this can be delivered within the law. An inequality between our island communities has emerged, whereby some islands have benefited from significant fares reductions associated with RET, whilst others have not. Whilst the RET fares system may evolve over time, we support an **equitable approach** to the setting of fares across all our island communities. We also support the principle that **no community should see an increase in their fares when RET is introduced**, albeit we acknowledge that there are again here significant complexities around which level of multi-journey ticket book discount to peg the RET fare at.

Policy ST11d: The RTS supports in principle the roll-out of Road Equivalent Tariff to any ferry routes on which it does not currently apply, including local authority services.

15.5 Cross-operator ticket acceptance

15.5.1 Many journeys to, from and within our region require one or more interchanges, often between modes. For example, a resident of Stornoway travelling to Glasgow without a car could make the journey using a combination of ferry, bus and rail. At present, almost all public transport journeys in our region are payable separately, which is both expensive and inconvenient for the passenger. It can also be complicated and confusing to find the cheapest fare.

15.5.2 This problem is of course common across most of the UK outwith London, where public transport continues to operate within a regulated rather than a commercial environment. However, the distances involved in many journeys and the frequent requirement for multiple interchanges make the absence of cross-operator ticket acceptance particularly problematic for our residents. To be clear, this is not simply a matter of convenience, which integrated / smart ticketing solutions will address, rather it is about **reducing the end-to-end cost of a journey** through, for example, **through ticketing** (e.g., 'Rail and Sail', expansion of PlusBus etc) and **fare capping**.

Policy ST11e: The RTS calls for greater cross-industry partnership working and regulatory reform to reduce the cost penalty for interchange within or between modes of transport.

15.6 Expanding the scope and geographic coverage of national fares policies

15.6.1 A consequence of low population density and public transport frequency is that residents of our region derive a **proportionally lower benefit from national policies and funding streams**, e.g., the National Concessionary Travel Scheme – this is a **clear inequality**. Indeed, we commissioned independent research on this topic in 2022, which confirmed that residents of our region experience lower levels of public transport connectivity and have fewer opportunities to use existing concessionary schemes. This is a location-based inequality and can give rise to social exclusion and / or 'forced' car ownership. This inequality can be

[45] https://www.transport.gov.scot/media/49397/evaluation-of-road-equivalent-tariff-on-the-clyde-and-hebridean-network.pdf

particularly stark for the most vulnerable groups such as the elderly, the young and people on low incomes.

15.6.2 There is therefore a case for extending:

- The **scope** of national fares policies – for example, where a train or ferry is the main mode of travel in an area due to no / limited bus service provision, there is an argument that the National Concessionary Travel Scheme card should be accepted on these services
- The **geographic coverage** of national or regionally / locally targeted fares policies – for example, expanding eligibility for the Highland Railcard

Policy ST11f: The RTS calls for the extension of the National Concessionary Travel Scheme and Under-22s Concessionary Travel Scheme to rail, ferry and air services where these are the main or only mode of public transport in an area.

15.7 Expansion of the Air Discount Scheme

15.7.1 The economics of the commercial aviation network in the region mean that fares can often be prohibitively high. **Retaining the ADS discount is essential** for our region. Its **expansion** would also be welcomed, particularly for **those on the lowest incomes or for high frequency users such as sports teams**.

15.7.2 When originally introduced in May 2006, the ADS incorporated travel for private and public sector business trips (including business travel for NHS staff), but this was discontinued from April 2011 due to a combination of cost and compliance with European State Aid legislation. However, work undertaken as part of the *Our Islands, Our Future* workstream in September 2016 indicated that **ADS for business travel could be reintroduced in a legally compliant manner** and for circa £1.7m per annum (2016 prices).[46]

15.7.3 Regional air travel is essential to many businesses in our region, reducing the distance-based cost disadvantage that they face. However, the high level of fares for those making (often short-notice) business trips affects both the commercial performance of private firms and the budgets of the public sector.

Policy ST11g: The RTS calls for the retention and expansion of the Air Discount Scheme, including to businesses in the region.

15.8 Equitable road pricing

15.8.1 We recognise that the vehicle fleet transformation from internal combustion engine vehicles to BEVs will have significant implications for fuel duty and Value Added Tax (VAT) collected by the UK Government through fuel sales. As EVs begin to account for an increasingly large share of the overall vehicle fleet, it is inevitable that the government will need to identify a replacement source of tax revenue.

15.8.2 Whilst no firm decision has been made on this yet (nor has it even been the subject of a public or Parliamentary debate), **national road pricing has been mooted as a potential successor to fuel duty / VAT**. We recognise that this may provide benefits for some, but there is also a **risk that a national model applied in our region would not reflect its unique characteristics**, in particular the long travel distances and the comparative importance of car travel. In a scenario where road pricing was introduced, it would be essential to ensure that it was applied in a manner that did not exacerbate existing inequalities

[46] https://www.transport.gov.scot/media/4026/itf-29-sep-2016-ads-business-user-eligibility-paper.pdf

or create new inequalities for those living in our region. In this way any system should recognise more and less 'avoidable' car use and charge accordingly.

Policy ST11h: National road pricing proposals may emerge in response to the reduction in fuel duty and Value Added Tax as a result of the mass adoption of electric vehicles. If this eventuality materialises, the RTS calls for a road pricing system that recognises the unique characteristics of our region.

15.9 How does this Strategy Theme contribute to our RTS Objectives?

15.9.1 The table below summarises how this Strategy Theme contributes to our RTS Objectives:

Table 15.1: Contribution of Strategy Theme 11 to our RTS Objectives

RTS Strategy Objectives	
SO1: To make a just transition to a post-carbon and more environmentally sustainable transport network	✓
SO2: To transform and provide safe and accessible connections between and within our city, towns and villages, to enable walking, wheeling and cycling for all	o
SO3: To widen access to public and shared transport and improve connectivity within and to / from the region	✓✓✓
SO4: To improve the quality and integration of public and shared transport within and from / to the region	✓
SO5: To ensure reliable, resilient, affordable and sustainable connectivity for all from / to our island, peninsular and remote communities	✓✓✓
SO6: To improve the efficiency, safety and resilience of our transport networks for people and freight and adapt to the impacts of climate change.	o

15.9.2 The high cost of travel for many journeys can either: (i) prevent a journey being made by public transport, generating additional vehicle kilometres; or (ii) prevent a journey being made altogether, which impacts on the life chances of our residents and the productivity of our businesses. This Strategy Theme would therefore make a major contribution in widening access to public and shared transport through reducing its cost, thus improving connectivity to, from and within our region **(SO3)**. By extension, achieving mode shift would support a just transition to a post-carbon and more environmentally sustainable transport network **(SO1)**.

15.9.3 Measures to reduce the cost of interchanging within and between modes of transport would also support **SO4**.

15.9.4 The cost of transport is a particular issue for our island and communities. Island residents often have to make long journeys on multiple modes or have to pay the cost of either taking a car on the ferry or an expensive flight. Measures to reduce the cost of travel would therefore strongly support **SO5**.

16 Delivering our Regional Transport Strategy

16.1 Overview

16.1.1 Our RTS is a long-term strategy intended to shape how transport infrastructure and services are provided across our diverse region. Publishing a strategy is however only the first step in delivering tangible outcomes for those who live and work in and visit our region. Its successful implementation will require an ongoing programme of work (including appraisals, business cases and design work), funding and political support. All of this will require close partnership working between HITRANS and our constituent members, partner RTPs, the Scottish and UK Governments, transport operators and other regional partners such as Highlands and Islands Enterprise.

16.1.2 This chapter therefore sets out the steps which we will undertake to deliver our RTS.

16.2 Developing an Action Plan

16.2.1 Across the 11 Strategy Themes, we have developed over 100 policies, which state our 'direction of travel' across all components of the transport system in our region. However, whilst our policies define the **desired outcomes**, they do not however state **how** these will be delivered. This is entirely appropriate as selecting a preferred option is a matter for a business case, which can reflect specific geographic considerations and available funding at a given point in time.

16.2.2 Subsequent to the adoption of the RTS, an accompanying **Action Plan** will therefore be developed. This will state the actions that we will take to progress the RTS and the timeframes within which each action will be progressed. The Action Plan will contain a combination of proposed appraisals / business cases, research studies, projects and programmes. It will focus on **actions that are regionally significant in nature** - i.e., those which are large scale or cross-boundary, either between authorities within our region or between our region and other RTP areas. Local issues will be a matter for the Local Transport Strategies of our constituent members.

16.2.3 Unlike the RTS itself, which provides a circa 20-year strategic framework, the **Action Plan will be regularly reviewed and updated** to reflect the changing status of projects, their differing stages in the project lifecycle and the need for new or amended actions to support a policy (e.g., in response to the emergence or development of new technology).

16.2.4 The **first Action Plan** will be **published immediately after the adoption of the RTS** and will **run to May 2027**, which is the date of the next Scottish Local Government Elections, at which point our Board will change. Thereafter, **each subsequent Action Plan will cover the five-year period between Scottish Local Government Elections**.

16.2.5 For each Action Plan period, we will set out our proposed programme of work by year and we will revisit this annually as part of our budget setting process.

16.3 Governance

16.3.1 Reflecting on our previous (2008) RTS, a major challenge in delivering our policy commitments and the cross-boundary schemes and projects which emerged from them was **governance**. Whilst we have a statutory role, our designation as a **'Level 1' RTP** means that we have very limited statutory powers and a lack of dedicated funding to support delivery of major projects within our RTS. This has two consequences:

- Coordinating and delivering cross-boundary projects within our region is challenging **as we require the financial and political buy-in of affected member local authorities**

and / or Transport Scotland. Whilst a local authority may support in principle what we propose, each of our members is subject to significant financial pressures and thus may be unable to fund regionally beneficial investments without detracting from local projects for which they have responsibility

- We have emphasised throughout our RTS the unique characteristics of our region. However, much of the funding allocated to our region is either **disbursed directly by the Scottish Government and its agencies** (e.g., the funding of the Clyde and Hebrides Ferry services) or **provided to local authorities or third parties but within a strict set of criteria**

16.3.2 In developing an intermediate refresh of our RTS in 2018, HITRANS undertook a **regional governance review, in partnership with our constituent local authorities**. This considered both how we deliver the RTS, opportunities for both greater collaboration and how services and projects could be delivered differently. Transport Scotland has also begun to review earlier work on transport governance as part of the commitments set out in the *Fair Fares Review*. On adoption of our RTS, we will work with both Transport Scotland and partner local authorities to identify improved transport governance opportunities and then seek to implement any recommendations over the first RTS Delivery Plan period.

17 RTS Monitoring and Evaluation

17.1 Overview

17.1.1 It will be crucial to continually monitor and periodically evaluate the RTS to understand its success in delivering the RTS Strategy Objectives. A set of KPIs linked to the Strategy Objectives has therefore been defined and set out below. The KPIs closely reflect those developed for the purposes of monitoring the National Transport Strategy 2, thus also allowing us to understand how we are performing with respect to national level indicators. These indicators will be used to measure the change in the performance of the transport system in our region against the baseline initially established in the 'Case for Change' Report, which was produced prior to the RTS being adopted.

17.1.2 Monitoring reports will be produced on a two-yearly basis setting out the transport and behavioural trends against the KPIs.

17.1.3 The Scottish Household Survey Travel Diary (SHSTD) publishes a range of local authority and regional transport partnership statistics annually, usually two years in arrears, i.e., results from 2021 were published in 2023. This is one source of monitoring data, but sample sizes are typically small, and some results are aggregated over a number of years reducing their effectiveness. This will therefore be supplemented by a new HITRANS Travel and Transport Survey (HTTS) which will be undertaken every two years and will monitor the main trends in travel across the region, views on different transport modes and the causal mechanisms which may drive changes in behaviour in line with the Strategy Objectives. There could be two versions of this – reflecting mainland and island communities.

17.2 Key Performance Indicators

17.2.1 The KPIs relative to each RTS Strategy Objective are set out below. For most KPIs, the data will have to be built-up from the level of either individual local authorities or specific geographic points (e.g., ferry routes and airports)

Strategy Objective 1: To make a just transition to a post-carbon and more environmentally sustainable transport network.

- Transport emissions in the HITRANS region (Department for Business Energy and Industrial Strategy
- Number of Air Quality Management Areas in the region (Scottish Transport Statistics)
- Proportion of road vehicle fleet which is ULEV (DfT Vehicle Licencing Statistics)
- Total public charging and rapid charging devices (DfT EV charging map)
- Number of kilometres of electrified rail track **or** number of battery-electric or alternatively fuelled rail rolling stock units (Network Rail and ScotRail)
- Number of battery-electric or alternatively fuelled vessels (CMAL and local authorities)
- Number of battery-electric or alternatively fuelled aircraft used on PSO air services (Transport Scotland and local authorities)
- Use of EVs by residents (HTTS)

Strategy Objective 2: To transform and provide safe and accessible connections between and within our city, towns and villages, to enable walking, wheeling and cycling for all.

- Number of bicycles available for private use by households (SHSTD)

- Adults (16+) – frequency of walking in previous seven days (SHSTD)
- Main mode of travel – walking (SHSTD)
- Main mode of travel – bicycle (SHSTD)
- Cycling mode share (SHSTD)
- Percentage of pupils cycling to primary school (Sustrans Hands-Up survey)
- Percentage of pupils cycling to secondary school (Sustrans Hands-Up survey)
- The level of, barriers to, and attitude to walking, wheeling and cycling will be monitored in the biennial (HTTS)

Strategy Objective 3: To widen access to public and shared transport and improve connectivity within and from / to the region.

- Passenger journeys by region for local bus services (Scottish Transport Statistics, although the figures for our region also include the Shetland Islands)
- Rail passengers by station (ORR estimates of station usage)
- Use of local bus services in previous month (SHSTD)
- Use of local train services in previous month (SHSTD)
- Main mode of travel – bus (SHSTD)
- Main mode of travel – rail (SHSTD)
- Number of taxi vehicles and private hire cars (Scottish Transport Statistics, local authority level)
- Number of taxi driver licences (Scottish Transport Statistics, local authority level)
- Number of wheelchair accessible taxis and private hire cars (Scottish Transport Statistics, local authority level)
- Terminal passengers by airport – Inverness, Passengers on selected domestic air routes to and from Inverness, Terminal passenger traffic by origin / destination – Inverness, Aircraft movements, by airport and type of movement – Inverness, and Air transport movements by airport - Inverness (Civil Aviation Authority reported in Scottish Transport Statistics)
- Residents' use of public transport (including barriers to travel) (HTTS)

Strategy Objective 4: To improve the quality and integration of public and shared transport within and from / to the region.

- Satisfaction with public transport (SHSTD or Transport Focus surveys, where the sample size is large enough)
- Residents' satisfaction with public transport, including integration (HTTS)
- Percentage of average weekly household expenditure on transport (SHSTD)
- Perceptions of safety and security on bus services (SHSTD)
- Perceptions of safety and security on train services (SHSTD)

Strategy Objective 5: To ensure reliable, resilient, affordable and sustainable connectivity for all from / to our island, peninsular and remote communities.

- Annual ferry passenger carryings by route (Scottish Transport Statistics)
- Annual ferry car carryings by route (Scottish Transport Statistics)

- Annual ferry commercial vehicle and coach carryings by route (Scottish Transport Statistics)
- Annual proportion of scheduled sailings cancelled, diverted or late by route (ferry operator data)
- Terminal passengers by airport – island and other regional airports, Terminal passenger traffic by origin / destination – island and other regional airports, Aircraft movements, by airport and type of movement – island and other regional airports, and Air transport movements by airport - island and other regional airports (Civil Aviation Authority reported in Scottish Transport Statistics)
- Island residents' use of and satisfaction with ferry and air services (HTTS)

Strategy Objective 6: To improve the efficiency, safety and resilience of our transport networks for people and freight and adapt to the impacts of climate change.

- Reported road collisions (Scottish Transport Statistics)
- Personal injury accidents, overall and by route section as per the 'Case for Change' report (Scottish Transport Statistics)
- Fatal and serious personal injury accidents per million vehicle kilometres, by route section as per the 'Case for Change' report (Scottish Transport Statistics)
- Residents' perceptions of safety (HTTS)
- Road journey times by time period / time of year (INRIX, for the 17 route sections identified in the 'Case for Change')
- Average freight lifted by UK HGVs in the HITRANS region (Scottish Transport Statistics)
- Foreign and domestic freight at ports in the HITRANS region (Scottish Transport Statistics)
- Breakdown of freight commodity at ports in the HITRANS region (Scottish Transport Statistics)
- Tonnage of freight carried, by airport (Civil Aviation Authority reported in Scottish Transport Statistics)