

Report to Partnership Meeting 25th April 2025

RESEARCH AND STRATEGY DELIVERY

Health and Transport Action Plans Update

Purpose of Report

To provide an update on progress made to establish a Health and Transport Action Plan for the Highlands and Islands, and to introduce the findings and recommendations of Western Isles Transport to Health Working Group Report.

Highlands and Islands Health and Transport Action Plan

Members approved a final version of the Highlands and Islands Health and Transport Action Plan (HTAP): Scoping Review at the HITRANS Partnership meeting in November 2025. A copy of the published version of this document is attached as Appendix A and can also be found on the HITRANS website at <https://hitrans.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/1.0-HTAP-Scoping-Review-Feb-2025.pdf>

HITRANS has subsequently written to each of the 5 NHS Boards and 6 local authorities that share a common geography with HITRANS and ZetTrans as well as the Scottish Ambulance Service seeking their support to consider the recommendations of the Scoping Review and to progress an HTAP for the Highlands and Islands. We have initially requested that each organisation nominates a senior representative to participate in a workshop to discuss the Scoping Review and identify both how an HTAP may be developed and the issues it should focus on.

The Scottish Government has also recently published its own Transport to Health Delivery Plan <https://www.gov.scot/publications/transport-health-delivery-plan/>. The establishment of an HTAP for the Highlands and Islands would offer a collaborative forum in which to address many of the commitments identified in this Plan.

Western Isles Transport to Health Working Group:

HITRANS has recently coordinated the activity of a short-life working group, convened at the request of the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care with a remit to “*consider the immediate issues and opportunities which have been identified across the Western Isles in relation to health services and transport, making recommendations for actions*”. The positive influence of the Benbecula Patient Partnership Group is noted; they were strong advocates for increased focus on issues of access to healthcare for residents, and their efforts to raise awareness led directly to the formation of the Working Group.

A wide variety of organisations contributed to the work of the group: public and private sector operators from both health and transport sectors and various patient representative groups.

The work of the group has enabled the collation of a range of relevant evidence which provides a much more robust case for change than was available previously. This included:

- Information on the factors which are working well;
- Data on the numbers of people travelling for healthcare, and of the locations and specialisms to/for what they are travelling;
- The challenges that patients and NHS staff face when travelling (including the case studies provided in the text box);
- The impacts that these challenges have for patients, staff and service providers;
- The constraints to change, in order to manage (where appropriate) expectations of what can be achieved.

Some of the evidence provided was felt to be particularly important in highlighting the scale of the challenges and also the opportunities for change.

This included the complexity and lengths of journeys that some patients face, even for treatment within the same Health Board area; many face journeys of several hours, with the longest (from Barra to Western Isles Hospital in Stornoway) being of more than nine hours each way on days when no Benbecula – Stornoway flights are operating.

Separately, data provided by NHS Western Isles gave the numbers of journeys being made by patients and the specialisms for which they are travelling.

In the course of a year, patients travelled to receive 54 types of healthcare treatment. However, over three quarters of the journeys made were for one of nine medical specialisms, as shown on the table below. There are constraints as to where and when healthcare services are provided, but this data provides a useful guide to which services it is worth giving particular emphasis to if the need for patient travel is to be reduced.

Case studies

“The journeys involved a great deal of anxiety about weather and availability of seats or space on the ferry, and about being stranded away from home over Christmas.”

“I was scheduled to travel to Stornoway from Uist 17 times for chemotherapy. Three of the flights booked were cancelled, another five flights were delayed.”

“At first I was not told about the patient accommodation at Raigmore and could only find a very expensive hotel as I was recalled at short notice over a holiday weekend.”

“Expectant mothers have to travel away from home, sometimes for weeks, around the time of their due date. They can claim for accommodation, but only to a maximum of £60 per night, which does not cover commercial rates. And no travel or accommodation expenses are reimbursed for their partners/ escorts.”

Speciality	Total journeys	Proportion of all journeys	Cumulative total of journeys
Diagnostic radiography	396	20%	20%
General Surgery	304	16%	36%
Ophthalmology	227	12%	48%
Trauma & Orthopaedic	179	9%	57%
Ear, Nose & Throat	104	5%	62%
Medical Oncology	83	4%	66%
Obstetrics	71	4%	70%

Urology	69	4%	73%
Gynaecology	85	4%	78%
45 other specialisms	434	22%	100%

Recommendations

The Working Group made 18 recommendations, grouped according to whether they relate to:

- Improved partnership working and evidence gathering;
- Flight routes, schedules and aircraft;
- Other transport services or for patient care whilst travelling;
- The delivery of healthcare services.

The work of the group has been broadly welcomed by representatives of members of the public, and the cross-sectoral discussions that the group facilitated has already led to a number of the recommended actions being progressed including the extension of the Urgent Medical Protocol for ferry access. This extends provision (by which patients travelling to/from healthcare appointments but were unable to book their vehicles onto a ferry were supported to travel as a foot passenger then continue their journeys by taxi) which was previously available only for island – mainland journeys to island – island services, hence is now available for travel across the Sounds of Harris and Barra.

Hebridean Airways (Airtask) who operate the current PSO have also undertaken a trial of a new aircraft on the route. In February, they trialled the Tecnam 2012 at Stornoway, Benbecula and Barra. This aircraft would offer a number of improvements including increased capacity and accessibility. Hebridean Airways are now currently working with partners to review the trial to fully understand what would be required to introduce an alternative aircraft as part of the overall business case.

A copy of the final working group that sets out the full findings and recommendations are attached as Appendix B to this report and are also available at <https://hitrans.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/8.0-HITRANS-WITnHWG-report-March-25.pdf>

Recommendations

Members are invited to:

1. Note this report

RISK REGISTER

RTS Delivery

Impact - Positive

Comment – Establishing a Health and Transport Action Plan is one of the key actions identified in the draft Delivery Plan for the updated Regional Transport Strategy. The working group established within the Western Isles has offered an early opportunity to advance key issues identified in the Scoping Review and those set out in the Government’s Transport to Health Delivery Plan.

Policy

Impact – Positive

Comment – This work supports a number of National Transport Strategy priorities in particular *Improving our Health and Wellbeing* and policies within our updated Regional Transport Strategy including “facilitating access to public and personal services such as health, education, retail and banking. Access to healthcare facilities is particularly important in this respect given the pressure on, and challenges in, the delivery of patient transport” and Policy ST1i:

- **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.

Financial

Impact –

Comment – Funding of up to £20,000 from the HITRANS Business Plan for 2024/25 has been used to support the initial scoping review to help establish a Health and Transport Action Plan and the Western Isles short life working group.

Equality

Impact – Positive

Comment – By Establishing a Health and Transport Action Plan, we will help facilitate closer and more cohesive working across public bodies in relation to transport for medical purposes. Access to healthcare is most challenging in the remote, rural and island areas of the HITRANS region. This is exacerbated by the fact that the aging demographics within many of these areas have the highest demand for health and social care.

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