

HI LIGHTS

NEWSLETTER SPRING 2025

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WELCOME

Welcome to the Spring edition of HITRANS *HIGHLIGHTS*, our newsletter which keeps you informed about the work of the regional transport partnership and records the main outcomes of our recent board meeting held in Inverness.

More detailed information about our work is available on our website:

www.hitrans.org.uk

and X (formerly Twitter) @HITRANS_RTP

LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/company/hitrans/>

POINTS CAN MEAN PRIZES FOR MORE ACTIVE TRAVEL

As well as the health, economic and environmental benefits, active travel can also bring other rewards.

The free Hltravel BetterPoints app launched in April for people working or studying in Highland, Argyll and Bute, Moray, Orkney and the Western Isles.

To mark the launch, all Hltravel BetterPoints members were given the chance to earn a share of £600 of prizes before the end of May, which is National Walking Month.

Every journey by walking, wheeling, cycling or running each week is an entry into the prize draw for a share of £100 until June 1.

The app automatically records journeys on foot, bike and wheelchair, as well as public transport, and counts whether the national weekly physical activity goal of 150 minutes is being met.



BetterPoints are then awarded which can be spent at supporting local businesses, donated to charity or redeemed for many household-name brands.

CASE MADE FOR ADDITIONAL LITTLE MINCH FERRY SAILINGS

HITRANS has called for three daily return ferry services in the Little Minch as an essential move towards unlocking the full economic potential of the areas served.

It followed consultations with individuals and organisations based in or operating in Uist or Harris.

Research was also carried out on potential future links by new vessels between Uig and Tarbert and between Uig and Lochmaddy next summer.

HITRANS says a proposed service, with just two sailings per day, by two new CalMac ferries will mean residents facing limited flexibility and unreliable scheduling.



However, adding a third sailing would reduce current constraints and be more convenient for users, particularly those travelling for work, education, medical appointments, or other essential activities.

Other benefits include –

- Reducing operating costs for businesses by avoiding overnight stays when scheduling deliveries and services
- Increasing visits to the islands, including day trips
- Tapping into the burgeoning visitor market in Skye
- Allowing islanders more opportunities to visit the mainland
- Attracting and retaining more people to live and work in the islands
- The potential to support major economic investment in the islands including Spaceport 1 in Uist and over £8 billion in renewable energy projects

In a letter to Jennifer Dewar, CalMac Ferries' timetable planning lead, Partnership Director Ranald Robertson said three sailings would be a step forward in improving accessibility, supporting local businesses and driving economic growth.

It would bring tangible benefits by reducing operational costs for businesses, improving the visitor experience and making the islands more accessible to residents.

It is argued tourists are often deterred from visiting the islands due to limited travel options and time they can spend there.

More frequent sailings would help attract more visitors, encouraging longer stays and greater spending on services and attractions.

HITRANS research showed three daily sailings would provide a day trip of five hours 45 minutes in either Harris or Uist, and allow Harris and Uist residents around 11 hours on the mainland before travelling back on the last ferry.

It would also open up a day trip market from Skye.

HITRANS says the existing two-sailings plan raises the possibility of the £115 million ferries being left as “underemployed assets” which could represent poor utilisation of critical and expensive infrastructure.

Mr Robertson's letter also said the timetable favoured by Calmac Ferries Limited represents a “significant negative impact” on public transport connectivity.

He said it would abandon decades-long connections between Uig and the Scottish Citylink services, which provide vital links to Portree, Inverness and Glasgow.

This contrasts starkly with the objectives of the Islands Connectivity Plan and runs counter to the Scottish Government's commitment to reducing car kilometres by 20% by 2030.

HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS' AVIATION PROJECTS GIVEN NATIONAL FOCUS

Jayne Golding's expertise in sustainable travel and work leading the Sustainable Aviation Test Environment (SATE) programme has led to UK recognition.

She has been appointed a member of the recently-renewed Future of Flight Industry Group, chaired by UK Government Minister for Aviation, Mike Kane.

It means the Highlands and Islands will be at the forefront of developing green innovations in aviation, including drone technology.

SATE established the UK's first operationally based low-carbon aviation test centre, based at Kirkwall Airport.

Led by HITRANS, it brings together a national consortium of private and public sector bodies, academics and communities to devise state-of-the-art technology to help economic growth.

SATE works with a number of Highlands and Islands communities to match sustainable innovation with the needs of rural and island areas.

This ranges from new hybrid airships, long distance unmanned cargo drones, electric airplanes and seaplanes, to aircraft powered by hydrogen.

The Future of Flight Industry Group is a strategic forum for industry leaders and UK communities.

It collaborates on the development and delivery of a Future of Flight Plan, setting out the actions that industry, government and other stakeholders need to take to maximise the benefits of upcoming technologies.

Jayne says she is honoured to have been appointed to the group and help accelerate growth of Future of Flight safely and securely in the UK, while highlighting regional needs and opportunities.

UPDATE ON HYBRID-ELECTRIC AIRPLANE DEVELOPMENT

Regional air travel using a hybrid-electric plane could be possible by the end of the decade, the partnership board was told.

The board was given an update on the partnership between Loganair and Swedish hybrid-electric airplane manufacturer Heart Aerospace aimed at decarbonising regional air travel.

The collaboration is exploring the case for the ES-30, a hybrid-electric aircraft with the capacity to carry up to 30 passengers.

The ES-30 will have a fully electric zero-emissions range of 200km and an extended hybrid range of 400km.

A presentation by both companies informed the board the aircraft has the potential to significantly reduce carbon emissions while offering cost-effective air travel.

It is hoped to have an aircraft ready by the end of the decade, although this timeline is said to be "difficult and challenging".

Heart Aerospace already has 250 orders for the ES-30, with options and purchase rights for an additional 120 planes.

NEW ACTIVE TRAVEL MAP FOR BADENOCH AND STRATHSPEY

An updated active travel map is encouraging Badenoch and Strathspey's residents and visitors make short journeys by walking, cycling or wheeling.



HITRANS first produced the map in 2020 to highlight the health, economic and environmental benefits from active travel.

It proved so popular, that this year it has more than doubled the number of copies available from 7,000 to 15,000.

They can be picked up at villages including Dalwhinnie, Boat of Garten, Kingussie, Aviemore and Grantown-on-Spey.

The foldable maps help residents consider more active ways to travel for journeys to school, shops or leisure activities.

They can also assist tourists visiting the Strath's many scenic villages and sites by bike or foot.

Sheena Corcoran, HITRANS' smart travel choices promotion and marketing officer, said "Active travel can benefit health, save money and reduce air and noise pollution."

Key sites that are on walking or cycling routes in the area include Loch Morlich, the Reindeer Centre, Loch Garten Nature Centre, Ruthven Barracks, River Feshie, Insh Marshes Nature Reserve, Strathspey Steam Railway, Rothiemurchus, Alvie and Dalraddy Estate, Landmark Visitor Centre, and the Highland Folk Museum.

Mikes Bikes (Aviemore) and the Apiary Café in Dalwhinnie are among the many businesses in the area who are enthusiastic about the new resource.

The Badenoch and Strathspey Active Travel Map has been produced with funding from Transport Scotland's active travel People and Place Programme.

ROUTE AND BRANCH RAIL STRATEGY

HITRANS will soon be seeking a consultant to develop its rail strategy which will identify improvements to the network and encourage more train travel as part of the journey to net zero.

The work, costing an estimated £40,000-£50,000, will produce a document to complement HITRANS' Regional Transport Strategy.

It will focus on a number of key issues including journey times and frequency and scheduling of services.

It will also examine access, route capacity and capability, as well as terminal capacity and integration with other modes of transport and rail freight.



EXPANDING THE EV CHARGING NETWORK IN THE NORTH WEST

The electric vehicle charging network in the north west Highlands is not working as it could and needs to improve before it can be scaled up.

A HITRANS strategy aims to help collaborative working with four local authorities in Orkney, Shetland, Argyll and Bute and the Western Isles to maintain and upgrade the network.

Among possible solutions under investigation are using locally-generated energy to power chargers and innovative technologies such as battery storage and mobile chargers.

Strategically placing EV charging points at locations that promote onward journeys, including ferry terminals and key population centres, could also improve the situation.

In addition, a shared E-car club model is seen to be a key opportunity to help EV uptake.

Rural areas have a heavier reliance on personal cars and therefore a higher need to reduce emissions.

They also have low population density and high tourism figures, which puts pressure on the limited capacity.

Currently, fuel poverty in the north west is among the highest in the UK despite there being abundant renewable energy production.

There are at present 36 EV charges in Argyll and Bute, which has a population of 87,810 and 461,000 annual visitors.

The Western Isles, with a population of 26,720 and 219,000 visitors, has 31 EV chargers.

Orkney (22,270 population and 192,000 visitors) has 30 charges and Shetland (22,900 population and 80,000 visitors) has 26 chargers.

Phase One of the strategy focuses on maintaining existing assets, while Phase Two will explore collaboration to increase charge point use, improve and expand infrastructure and make better use of energy capacity.

Through the Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Funding (EVIF) Programme, councils are now required to leverage in private sector funding to enable delivery of infrastructure at the pace and scale required to meet demand, and encourage more car users to switch to EVs.

Councils can access £30 million worth of public funding and aims to leverage in a further £30 million of private sector investment.

The public funding aims to provide support in achieving a Just Transition where commercial opportunities are challenging.

HITRANS has commissioned a report into the telecommunication options available in remote and rural areas.

A connectivity plan for each site would help identify the most suitable communication for each site, which could reduce fault, help with remote maintenance and improve successful charging sessions.

FORT WILLIAM TRANSPORT PLAN – CONSULTANTS ABOUT TO BE APPOINTED

Consultants are expected to be appointed soon to develop an integrated transport plan (ITP) for Fort William.

The need for upgrades in the town to ease traffic congestion and improve journey times on the A82 and A830 has been an issue for many years.

The Fort William Strategic Transport Study (Pre-Appraisal, the Case for Change) Report was published by HITRANS in August 2018.

In publishing the second Strategic Transport Projects Review, Transport Scotland recommended the development of an Integrated Transport Plan (ITP) for Fort William in December 2022.

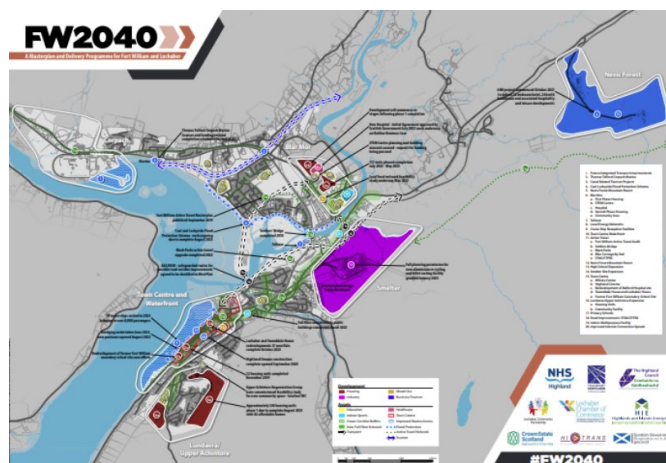
In the latest update on the plan, HITRANS partnership manager Neil MacRae told the partnership board Transport Scotland's Land-use and Transport Integration in Scotland (LATIS) framework is being used to procure consultants with suitable experience and expertise to undertake the appraisal and develop the ITP.

The consultants will need to show how they will incorporate stakeholder engagement and public consultation as required by Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidance (STAG).

Traffic congestion and its effect on journey times - which can be exacerbated by high seasonal volumes of traffic - are key concerns for people who live and work in Fort William and the surrounding area.

They include emergency services, with reports of staff being unable to reach work due to traffic congestion, as well as delays to emergency vehicles accessing the road network.

Local business also stated that network constraints have affected decisions to expand within the area.



HITRANS ACTIVE TRAVEL NETWORKING CONFERENCE

On 26th February 2025, HITRANS hosted a highly successful networking conference, bringing together professionals and stakeholders from across the region to discuss active travel initiatives. With 80 attendees making the journey from across the HITRANS region and beyond—the event was a fantastic opportunity to exchange ideas, celebrate achievements, and foster collaboration.

The day featured outstanding presentations that showcased the breadth of active travel projects in the region. Engagement was high, with thought-provoking questions in the Q&A sessions and dynamic discussions during breaks. Attendees praised the event for achieving its key aims: bringing people together, celebrating success, and sharing knowledge.



NEED FOR BEHAVIOUR CHANGES ADDRESSED IN NEW STRATEGY

A five-year plan aims to get more people walking, cycling, wheeling and using public transport by making active travel safer and more accessible.

The Behaviour Change Strategy has been developed to deliver Transport Scotland's People and Place Programme with themes including active schools and workplaces, accessibility and inclusion, capacity and capability and sustainable transport.

It seeks to increase the number of people walking, cycling or wheeling for short journeys, or taking on multi-modal journeys – eg walking to the bus stop or cycling to the train station.

In addition, it wants to see a rise in people opting to take public transport for longer journeys.

The last Census in 2022 showed across Scotland 45.9% of people took a car or van to work.

In the HITRANS area the figures are generally higher – 54.2% (Western Isles), 49.6% (Highland), 45.8% (Argyll and Bute), 49.8% (Orkney) and 51.9% (Moray).

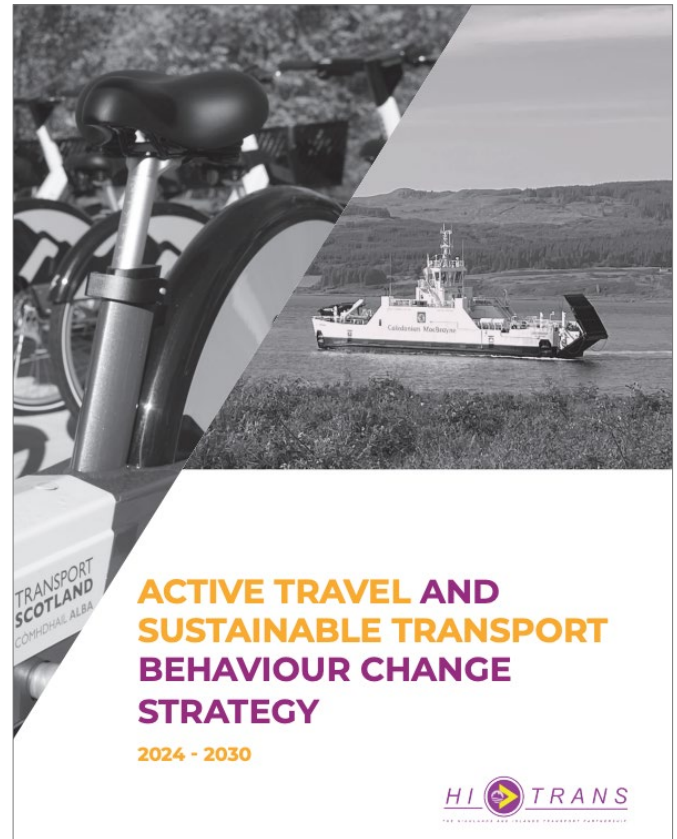
At the same time, 5.7% of people across Scotland took a bus to work, compared to 2.3% in the Western Isles, 2.2% in Highland, 2% in Argyll and Bute and Moray and 1.3% in Orkney.

Numbers walking to work were 4.8% (Western Isles), 8.8% (Highland), 10.1% (Argyll and Bute), 11% (Orkney) and 8.8% (Moray), compared to the Scottish average of 7.3%.

And those cycling were 0.5% (Western Isles), 2.3% (Highland), 1.2% (Argyll and Bute), 1.4% (Orkney) and 1.8% (Moray), compared to 1.4% across Scotland.

The report highlights safety issues being major barriers preventing more people from walking, wheeling and cycling to services, particularly in rural areas, due to a lack of footways and cycleways.

It will support partners, including councils, employers and the NHS to link walking, wheeling, cycling and sustainable transport to make it easier to travel to school, college, leisure and work.



Areas for action include infrastructure and safety improvements, looking at ways to integrate walking, wheeling and cycling with public transport, improving vehicle driver behaviour and creating a network of Quiet Routes.

Target audiences include nursery and school-age pupils, and working age-adults in workplaces, colleges and universities.

Under-represented and minority groups, who face the greatest barriers to active travel, will be involved to ensure behaviour changes activities are inclusive.

Tourists will also be encouraged to use active travel and public transport rather than private cars to explore the area.

HITRANS will share an annual delivery plan with partners based on its allocation of funding.

It will also produce an annual report on the strategy's progress.

WESTERN ISLES TRANSPORT TO HEALTH ACTION PLAN PUBLISHED

HITRANS has published a blueprint recommending actions for making it easier for patients in Uist and Barra to attend critical healthcare appointments at the Western Isles Hospital in Stornoway and to support travel by clinicians through improved transport links, particularly inter-island air services.

Commissioned by the Western Isles Transport and Health Working Group, the report sets out 17 recommendations. The Working Group partners are now being invited to consider the findings and recommendations ahead of a meeting next month to agree priorities for future action and continued partnership working.

The working group was set up as an action from a meeting led by Cabinet Secretary for Health Neil Gray MSP in August 2024. Mr Gray travelled to Uist following representations being made to him by the Benbecula Patient Partnership Group regarding the real challenges being faced by Uist patients travelling for health purposes within the Western Isles. The Working Group has focused on access to healthcare for Uist and Barra (Berneray, North Uist, Baleshare, Grimsay, Benbecula, South Uist,

Eriskay, Barra and Vatersay), where access issues are considered to be most challenging.

Significantly upgrading inter-island air travel to accommodate hospital appointments and ensure that clinicians can more readily attend clinics are considered to be priorities.

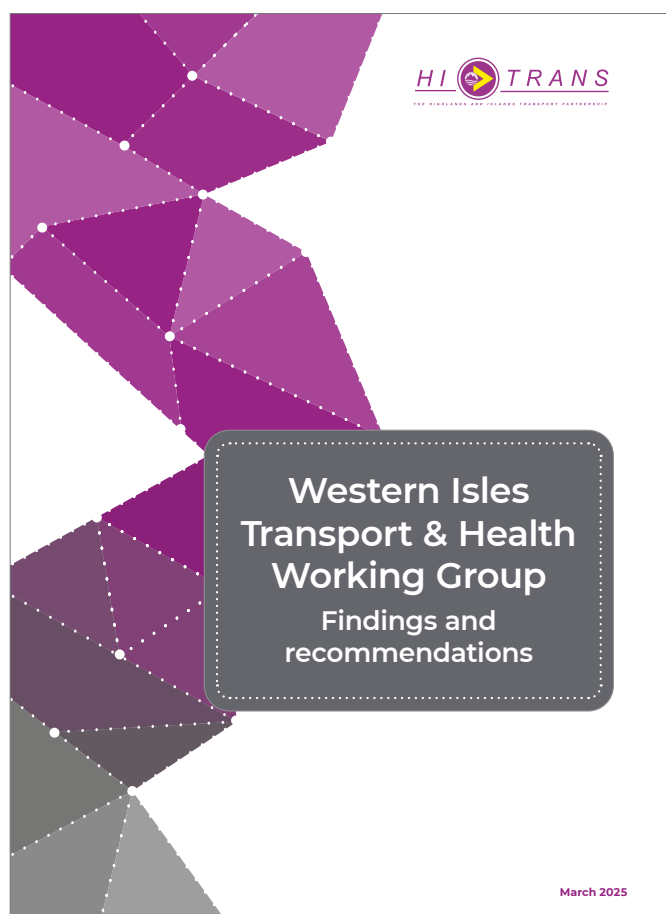
A recommendation that has already been progressed by Hebridean Airways (Airtask) is a trial of operating a larger aircraft on the Benbecula – Stornoway service. The successful trial demonstrated the potential benefits of using an alternative aircraft whose benefits includes increased capacity and improved accessibility. Airtask are currently undertaking a detailed review of the business case for introducing such an aircraft on the route.

Another recommendation is for the Benbecula – Stornoway air service to operate Monday – Friday, instead of Monday, Tuesday and Friday. Allowing NHS staff to directly book flights, rather than the requirement to use a travel agent, is seen as another benefit for patients.

The Western Isles Transport and Health Working Group has included representation from:

- HITRANS (which also provided a coordination and secretariat function);
- Patients' representatives from Uist, Barra & Vatersay;
- NHS Western Isles (NHSWI);
- Comhairle Nan Eilean Siar (CnES);
- Airtask;
- Loganair;
- Highlands and Islands Airport Limited;
- CalMac;
- Scottish Ambulance Service;
- Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland;
- Scottish Government Transport to Health team;
- Transport Scotland.

The report states that: "it is inter-island transport for which dominant problems arise. Many patients face long, stressful, tiring and uncomfortable journeys. All inter-island journeys require multiple journey legs (typically car/taxi, followed by flight/ferry and another car/taxi journey). Most journey legs involve some element of uncertainty/worry and discomfort, both during travel and whilst waiting for connections. Problems are typically more severe for people with restricted mobility, that have mental



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wellbeing issues, are in pain, or are in need of regular comfort breaks.

“Journeys home are commonly more challenging than those to the appointment, as the patient may be recovering from treatment, and/or the discharge time may be outwith the patient’s control and not convenient for transport choices. Typical journey options and travel times between Uist and Barra, Western Isles Hospital and Raigmore Hospital are typically a minimum of two hours (from Benbecula to Western Isles Hospital on days when flights are available) to up to nine hours (from Barra to Western Isles Hospital on days when planes don’t operate).

“People with restricted mobility, especially but not only those that are post-surgery, find it difficult to access some transport services. The BN Islander aircraft now in use on the Benbecula – Stornoway route is a particular concern, which has an arrangement of steps, relatively small doorway and seat layout that can be challenging for many people.”

The report also highlights the need for the timing of air services to be reviewed to ensure that clinicians can get the most out of their visits to clinics in the Western Isles.

The full report and the list of recommendations is available <https://shorturl.at/tv3pR>.

TEAM NEWS – HITRANS WORK SHORTLISTED AT AWARDS

HITRANS has been shortlisted in three categories at the Scottish Transport Awards which will take place in June. The Sustainable Aviation Test Environment (SATE) programme has been shortlisted in the Transport Team/ Partnership of the Year category; HITRANS Hi-Bike has been shortlisted in the Contribution to Sustainable Transport category, while HITRANS join partner Local Authority Orkney Islands Council in the shortlist for Transport Authority of the Year.

The Awards take place in Glasgow on 19th June.

NEW GRANT SCHEMES OFFER MORE FUNDING FOR ACTIVE TRAVEL PROJECTS

Two new grant schemes are making it more attractive for people to walk, cycle or wheel to work.

A second round of the Workplace Active Travel Infrastructure Grant launched in April with a larger budget for 2025 after a successful first year.

Delivered by HITRANS, it is open to businesses, charities, public sector bodies and not-for-profit organisations in Highland, Moray, Orkney, the Western Isles and most of Argyll and Bute.

Money can be used for capital improvements, such as secure cycle shelters, bike repair stations, improved changing and showering areas, or drying space for outdoor clothing.

This can make a big difference for staff who face barriers around storage, comfort, or security.

Grants typically range from £500 to £10,000 per site, although projects outside this range can be considered.

Applications are welcome from individual workplace sites or departments within larger organisations.

An online information webinar was held, featuring a live Q&A, to help people decide how a grant can help ahead of the application deadline on June 21.

It also showcased examples from last year’s successful projects.

HITRANS is offering the grant with funding from Transport Scotland’s People and Place Programme.

The programme also funds the Community Cycle Parking Grant which also opened in April and has a June 21 deadline for applications.

It supports improvements in places like transport hubs (eg bus stations, ferry terminals etc), schools, residential areas and community venues.

Local authorities and community organisations can apply for items such as sheltered cycle parking or public bike repair stands.

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WE HOPE YOU ENJOYED
the latest issue of our newsletter.



The Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership (HITRANS)
Inverness Town House, Inverness, IV1 1JJ

Phone – 01463 719002
Email – info@hitrans.org.uk