

# Proposal for Enhancing Accessibility through Pilot Deployments of Automated Passenger Services

**Submitted by:**

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## 1. Introduction

The Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership (HITRANS) welcomes the UK Government's consultation on the Automated Passenger Services (APS) permitting scheme as part of the wider implementation of the Automated Vehicles (AV) Act 2024. We are particularly encouraged by the Government's ambition to support the deployment of commercial self-driving services and place safety, accessibility, and innovation at the heart of future legislation.

As a regional transport partnership with a strategic remit to improve connectivity across some of Scotland's most rural and logistically complex communities, HITRANS believes strongly that automated vehicle (AV) pilots must include deployments in areas where **public transport options are currently limited or absent**. This presents an opportunity to test AV technologies in diverse environments while also delivering tangible benefits to communities that are currently underserved.

## 2. About HITRANS and our Commitment to Innovation

HITRANS serves the Highlands and Islands of Scotland—a region that spans from **North Ronaldsay to Machrihanish and from Vatersay to Cullen**. Though home to only **10% of Scotland's population**, our region represents **40% of the country's landmass**, creating unique challenges for transport and connectivity.

### Strategic Context

Our newly submitted Regional Transport Strategy (RTS), endorsed by our five partner councils and key stakeholders, is built around **six strategic objectives and 11 thematic priorities**. Among them, the theme "**Embrace New Technologies**" is central to our efforts to shape a **just transition to a post-carbon, sustainable transport future**. This includes ensuring that innovation in transport systems is inclusive of rural realities—not just metropolitan models.

We believe transport technology should be tested in **Edinbane as well as Edinburgh**. A solution that performs well in the rural Highlands will almost certainly adapt successfully to urban environments—but the reverse is often not true.

## 3. HITRANS' Experience with Connected and Autonomous Vehicles (CAV)

HITRANS has been a pioneer in testing the feasibility and societal value of CAV technologies within Scotland. With support from UKRI and in partnership with leading institutions and private sector innovators, HITRANS has:

- Delivered **two CAV pilot routes**:
  - Inverness Airport Terminal to Inverness Airport Station
  - Inverness College UHI Campus to the National Treatment Centre and Retail/Business Park
- Modelled a further extended route connecting to Raigmore Hospital
- Explored **responsible business models** and community integration with the University of Glasgow's Adam Smith Business School
- Worked with partners including Aurrigo, Navya, Stagecoach, and Darwin to understand the **connectivity and infrastructure demands** of CAV in rural and mixed-use settings

Our findings underscore the potential of AV services to support rural mobility needs, particularly by:

- Offering flexible, **on-demand transport**
- Reducing **transport poverty**
- Operating efficiently on **low-traffic, single-track** rural roads with national speed limits and weather challenges

## 4. Proposal: Prioritising Accessibility in Pilot Deployment Permits

As the Government moves forward with its APS permitting scheme, HITRANS proposes that **accessibility for underserved or isolated communities** be formally prioritised in the awarding of pilot deployment permits.

### Proposal Objectives

1. **Broaden the testing environment** for automated vehicles to include a range of urban, semi-urban, and rural settings
2. **Accelerate deployment in areas with limited or no public transport**, ensuring communities can directly benefit from innovation
3. **Improve real-world understanding** of how AV technology functions in challenging physical and climatic conditions
4. **Support inclusion and access** for older adults, disabled persons, and those facing transport barriers

### Why Rural Pilots Matter

- They **stress-test** AV performance in narrow, variable road conditions
- They demonstrate **public value** in areas with few alternatives
- They help develop **business and service models** adapted to decentralised populations
- They improve **public confidence** and **political support** for wider deployment

## 5. HITRANS' Offer of Collaboration

HITRANS is committed to supporting both Government and industry in the safe, effective, and equitable roll-out of automated passenger services. Our region offers a **unique and proven environment for innovation**, and we propose to collaborate with permit applicants and national bodies to ensure pilot deployments deliver both meaningful testing outcomes and real benefits for communities.

### Highlands and Islands:

#### A Proven Innovation Testbed

The potential for our region to serve as a **living laboratory for innovation** has already been demonstrated through the **Sustainable Aviation Test Environment (SATE)**—a UKRI Future Flight Challenge-funded project led by HITRANS. SATE brought together a wide range of partners to test low- and zero-carbon aircraft in live environments across the Highlands and Islands, proving the area's suitability as a **national exemplar for early-stage, high-impact transport innovation**.

Just as SATE has shown that remote and rural areas are ideal for developing and validating new models of aviation, we believe that the **deployment of connected and autonomous vehicle (CAV) technologies** can follow a similar approach. By using our region as a proving ground, developers can:

- Assess how AV systems perform in complex, real-world conditions
- Collaborate with stakeholders across the public, private, and academic sectors
- Create replicable business and service models that can scale to other regions
- Build public trust and generate meaningful community insights

## Our Commitment

As part of our support for CCAV deployments, HITRANS can:

- Identify and help prepare suitable pilot sites across the Highlands and Islands with a range of road types, accessibility challenges, and transport needs
- Facilitate local authority engagement and permissions
- Coordinate with community groups and accessibility advocates to ensure deployments are inclusive
- Support data gathering, impact evaluation, and knowledge exchange with UK partners
- Help extend pilots into urban and semi-urban environments in our region, recognising the importance of diverse deployment scenarios
- We believe this collaborative approach builds on the successful model demonstrated by SATE and is fully aligned with the UK Government's ambition to position the country at the forefront of sustainable, inclusive mobility innovation.

## 6. Alignment with Government Priorities

Our proposal aligns closely with several key elements of the APS permitting framework, including:

- The need to enhance accessibility
- The intention to build a robust evidence base through pilot activity
- The requirement for comprehensive testing environments that reflect the UK's transport diversity
- The emphasis on safe, sustainable deployment and a just transition

## 7. Conclusion

The upcoming APS permitting scheme offers a unique opportunity to ensure that no community is left behind in the evolution of transport technology. HITRANS urges the Government to prioritise accessibility and regional inclusion as core criteria for pilot deployment approval—and we stand ready to work with partners to ensure that AV pilots are not only innovative, but also impactful.

We look forward to contributing to the ongoing consultation and engaging in further discussion.





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