

Report to Partnership Meeting 12 September 2025

PARTNERSHIP

HITRANS RESPONSE TO “FUTURE OF REGIONAL EMPOWERMENT IN SCOTLAND

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To provide an update to Members on the Scottish Government’s current engagement on the future of Regional Empowerment in Scotland, and to outline the response submitted by HITRANS officers reflecting the role of Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs) in any future regional governance and delivery landscape.

BACKGROUND

The Scottish Government is undertaking a process of engagement with stakeholders to explore options for devolving further elements of decision-making and delivery to Regional Economic Partnerships (REPs). This work builds on the 2022 Regional Economic Policy Review and supports commitments set out in the 2025/26 Programme for Government.

As part of this national conversation, the Scottish Government is seeking views from a wide range of organisations—including Regional Transport Partnerships—on how future regional models might evolve, including powers, funding, and delivery structures.

HITRANS, as one of seven statutory Regional Transport Partnerships in Scotland, is a long-established mechanism for strategic collaboration at the regional level and has a proven track record of delivering investment and innovation in transport. This report sets out the response submitted by officers to ensure that the voice of transport, and particularly rural and island transport, is fully considered in shaping the future regional governance framework. This submission was made following a discussion that covered these items with members of the team leading the work on behalf of Scottish Government on 28th July 2025.

Introduction

HITRANS welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Government’s engagement on the future of regional empowerment. As the statutory Regional Transport Partnership (RTP) for the Highlands and Islands, we have a critical role in supporting inclusive economic growth, social wellbeing, environmental sustainability, and connectivity across a uniquely complex and rural geography.

In our submission to the Local Governance Review, we set out a clear aspiration for more direct responsibility across all areas of transport policy and delivery that affect our region. We reaffirm that position here, advocating for a clearer and enhanced role for RTPs in

regional decision-making—particularly as it relates to enabling the ambitions of the Regional Economic Partnership (REP), and advancing integrated place-based approaches through transport, housing, health, and education.

Vision for Regional Delivery: Short, Medium and Long Term

Our vision is for a **regionally empowered, place-based model of delivery** where HITRANS—as an established statutory body—plays a more direct and accountable leadership role across transport policy, funding, and delivery within the Highlands and Islands.

Short-Term:

To establish momentum toward longer-term regional empowerment, we recommend the following immediate actions:

- **Devolve all Active Travel and Behaviour Change funding** to RTPs such as HITRANS. These interventions are inherently local and benefit from regional tailoring, particularly in rural and island settings where modal shift requires bespoke solutions.
- **Devolve the Bus Partnership Fund (capital)** to RTPs. For regions like the Highlands and Islands, this funding should be **weighted more heavily on geographic area rather than population**, to reflect the higher per capita cost of infrastructure and operations in dispersed and remote communities.
- Ensure that **adequate revenue funding** is provided to **support rural and island public transport services**. The lack of sustainable operating subsidies is a major barrier to connectivity, and delivery through the RTP will allow for coordinated infrastructure and service delivery aligned with **REP priorities**—particularly around inclusive economic growth and access to education, healthcare, and employment.
- Formalise a **Partnership Agreement or Concordat** between HITRANS and the **Regional Economic Partnership** to institutionalise joint working, strategic alignment, and collaborative governance.
- Pilot **devolved decision-making** at the regional level for smaller-scale transport interventions (e.g. community transport, demand-responsive services, mobility hubs), testing models that could be scaled across other regions.

Medium-Term:

- Expand the statutory remit of RTPs to enable **integrated planning and delivery across all transport modes**, including bus, ferry, rail, and aviation, working closely with operators, communities, and third-sector partners.
- Establish a **regional transport investment fund** administered by RTPs, aligned with Regional Economic Strategies and designed to reflect local priorities and spatial challenges.
- Embed RTPs more deeply in **cross-sector regional governance structures**, including joint planning with housing, health, and skills delivery bodies. This will support the delivery of integrated, resilient, and inclusive regional infrastructure.

Long-Term:

- Move toward a position where the **Regional Transport Strategy** becomes the **primary framework guiding transport investment decisions** in the region, rather than relying predominantly on national documents such as the **Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR)**. This shift would better reflect local and regional priorities, support place-based economic strategies, and ensure that investment decisions are made closer to the communities they affect.
- Develop a fully integrated regional governance model, where RTPs are part of a wider, democratically accountable **regional structure**, coordinating across transport, economic development, housing, healthcare and education in alignment with REP objectives.

Powers, Funding and Structures Required

Powers:

- Greater statutory autonomy over **regional transport planning and investment**, including rail and ferry input, and bus franchising powers under the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019.
- Formal powers to lead on integration between transport and other regional enablers (e.g. economic development, planning, housing).
- Strengthened statutory alignment between RTPs and REPs to prevent fragmentation.

Funding:

- Consolidated, multi-year funding settlements directly allocated to RTPs.
- Devolved access to funding currently managed nationally, including Active Travel, Bus Partnership Fund, and community transport innovation.
- Consideration of **alternative funding models**, such as local levies or hypothecated revenue streams, adapted to rural contexts.

Structures and Governance:

- Utilise and **empower the existing RTP statutory framework**, avoiding the need for new governance entities.
- Establish a **clear and structured way of working between RTPs and Transport Scotland**, one that **fosters confidence in the principle of subsidiarity** and enables mutual trust and cooperation. This relationship must:
 - Recognise the value of regional leadership in delivering national outcomes;
 - Support RTPs in delivering local and regional objectives aligned to the **National Performance Framework**;
 - Ensure that the **National Transport Strategy (NTS)** is **informed by, and responsive to, regional strategies**, allowing for a **sybiotic relationship** between national and regional policy.
- Create formal mechanisms for collaboration with REPs, NHS Boards, Skills Providers and local authorities—e.g., through partnership agreements or concordats.
- Ensure regional delivery teams are **appropriately resourced** to manage expanded responsibilities.

Community Wealth Building and Place-Based Working

Transport is a critical enabler of Community Wealth Building, particularly in the Highlands and Islands where communities are often remote, dispersed, and reliant on well-integrated services.

Our Regional Transport Strategy (2025) makes clear that regional transport must:

- Enable **fair access to employment, education and services**;
- Support **local economies and community resilience**;
- Promote **modal shift and decarbonisation**;
- Align with **wider public service delivery**, particularly healthcare and education.

A more regionally empowered model ensures that transport contributes meaningfully to the REP's economic ambitions, while also improving social outcomes and reducing inequalities.

Immediate Priorities for Scottish Government Action

- **Devolve funding and decision-making** for Active Travel, Behaviour Change and Bus Infrastructure to RTPs immediately, with appropriate weighting for rurality and geography.
- Support **revenue funding models** for rural and island public transport that can be aligned through RTP delivery.
- Endorse and help formalise **regional partnership agreements** between RTPs and REPs.
- Make a policy commitment that **Regional Transport Strategies will increasingly guide investment priorities**, reducing reliance on centrally produced plans.
- Ensure a formalised relationship between RTPs and Transport Scotland that supports subsidiarity and coherence with national frameworks.

Future Role of HITRANS

HITRANS is well placed to lead on regional transport delivery:

- As a **statutory partnership**, it already has a clear governance structure, regional remit, and strong accountability.
- We have a **track record of collaborative delivery** across multiple sectors and geographies.
- With expanded responsibilities, HITRANS can act as a **regional integrator**, bringing together infrastructure, operations, planning, and community engagement in alignment with REP ambitions.

Conclusion

As set out in the new Regional Transport Strategy HITRANS believe that empowering RTPs to lead on transport planning and delivery offers a practical and achievable model for regional empowerment. This approach builds on existing statutory structures and governance and

enables place-based, locally accountable delivery that supports the broader ambitions of the Regional Economic Partnership and the Scottish Government.

RISK REGISTER

Category	Impact	Comment
RTS Delivery	Positive	Supports closer alignment between transport strategy and regional policy.
Policy	Positive	Reinforces the role of RTPs within Scotland's evolving regional landscape.
Financial	Neutral	No immediate budget implications but signals future resource asks.
Equality	Positive	Advocates for transport-led inclusion in regional development models.

RECOMMENDATION

Members are asked to note the report.

Report by:	Ranald Robertson
Designation:	Partnership Director
Date:	28 th July 2025