

HI **LIGHTS**

NEWSLETTER AUTUMN 2025

AWARDS TO COMMUNITY TRAVEL
PROJECTS p4

REGIONAL TRANSPORT
STRATEGY p6

FORT WILLIAM TRANSPORT
PLAN p10

WELCOME

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

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/>

CELEBRATING THE BENEFITS OF WALKING TO SCHOOL IN THE WESTERN ISLES

A celebration event was held for Western Isles pupils to highlight the physical, mental, social and environment benefits of walking.

HITRANS hosted the event in Stornoway Library to mark the end of Walk to School Week and congratulate those who took part.

Children were invited to come along and have a look at the new active travel-themed books in the library.

There was also a storytelling session and goody bags for all those who attended. Pupils from Stornoway Primary and schools in Tong, Breasclete and Laxdale in Lewis, as well as those from Balivanich School in Benbecula, took part in the initiative aimed at encouraging more active travel.



Walk to School Week is an annual five-day walking challenge where pupils across Scotland are encouraged to walk, cycle, scoot, or wheel to school each day to feel the benefits of getting active before the school day.

More than 250,000 pupils signed up to this year's challenge and its theme, The Great Space Walk.

REWARDS FOR GETTING ACTIVE DURING BIKE WEEK

Winning an electric bike was one of the incentives to get more active during Bike Week in June.

Other rewards were on offer for walking, wheeling and using public transport.



The Hltravel BetterPoints app, launched in May and funded by HITRANS, allows everyone who lives, works or studies in Highland, Argyll and Bute, Moray, Orkney and the Western Isles to win awards for greener and healthier journeys.

Healthy choices earn BetterPoints which can be spent at local businesses, donated to charity or be redeemed for many household-name brands.

During Bike Week all journeys taken on a bicycle and recorded on the Hltravel BetterPoints app were entered into a prize draw.

There was a chance to win an e-bike made by leading manufacturer Batribike and worth £750, while another two winners collected £50 in BetterPoints.

People who cycled regularly could earn £5 in BetterPoints in a daily draw, while every bike trip during the week earned a ticket into the draw for 25,000 BetterPoints (£25).

In addition, anyone walking, wheeling, cycling or taking public transport was entered into a Bike Week prize draw to win one of 10 free monthly HI-BIKE passes to use on the public e-bike service across Inverness or Fort William.

Collectively, users cycled 20,000 miles and walked and wheeled 62,000 miles and taken public transport for 128,000 miles.

In doing so, they completed more than 90,000 sustainable journeys, avoided 45 tonnes of CO2 and burnt over 7.5 million calories.

KIRKWALL AUTOLINK PROJECT

Early assessments of a driverless shuttle service linking key locations in Orkney have highlighted its potential to provide sustainable, cost-effective and inclusive transport in rural and island areas.

A feasibility study is underway into the Kirkwall Autolink, one of 14 projects in the UK funded through the Connected and Automated Mobility (CAM) programme.

It is exploring the feasibility of deploying an autonomous shuttle connecting key transport hubs including the harbour and airport.

Orkney is seen as a good testbed for understanding how autonomous services can support connectivity in non-urban environments.

The study aims to demonstrate how they can address challenges such as social isolation, driver shortages, and transport emissions in rural areas

HITRANS believes automated vehicle (AV) pilots must include areas with limited or no public transport options and has offered to identify study areas.

It says the upcoming consultation on the Automated Passenger Services (APS) permitting scheme is a unique opportunity to ensure that no community is left behind in the evolution of transport technology.

NEW ROSS COUNTY MATCHDAY BUSES MAKE HOME DEBUT – AS ICT SERVICE RETURNS

HITRANS helped promote matchday bus services for supporters of both Inverness Caledonian Thistle and Ross County this season.

A new Stagecoach service ferrying Ross County supporters from Inverness, Conon Bridge and Maryburgh to games in Dingwall kicked off in August for the first home league match.

ICT's opening home tie also saw matchday buses re-start to take fans to the newly-named Sarens PSG Stadium.

HITRANS supported both sets of fans by printing thousands of leaflets promoting the Stagecoach services and encouraging fans to get on board.

The leaflets were distributed on the buses and also at both grounds on match days.

For both set of supporters, there are two buses running on Saturdays to each stadium and two returning after the games.

The buses give supporters an easy and convenient option to attend matches without the need to drive.

In the case of ICT fans, it also allows them to enjoy Bar 94 at the stadium before and after games.

Buses will also operate for games that start at times other than 3pm on Saturdays.

Neil MacRae, HITRANS' senior partnership manager, said: *"The new Ross County service, and the return of the ICT service, are ideal ways for Ross County and Inverness Caley Thistle supporters to follow their teams without the need to take their cars."*

"HITRANS encourages the use of public transport and the need to reduce the number of vehicles on the roads. This is a safe and convenient way of achieving that while helping more people attend home matches."



HITRANS RECEIVES RECOGNITION AT NATIONAL TRANSPORT AWARDS

HITRANS has received recognition for its work over the last 12 months at the National Transport Awards in London. HITRANS was shortlisted in two categories with them receiving a highly commended award in the John Prescott Regional Transport Authority of the Year category that was won by Transport for Greater Manchester.

HITRANS Demand Responsive Transport app which supports Moove Flexi and m.connect in Moray was also shortlisted in the Digital and Technology excellence in Transport Category.

HITRANS AWARDS MORE THAN £500,000 TO COMMUNITY ACTIVE TRAVEL PROJECTS

Free or pay-what-you-can bikes, cycle repair sessions and safe routes to school are among community-led projects across the Highlands and Islands receiving vital funding to promote active travel.

HITRANS has £2.4 million of Transport Scotland's People and Place Programme money to support initiatives which encourage people to walk, wheel or cycle, or use public transport.

Ten community schemes in Highland, Moray, the Western Isles and Argyll and Bute are sharing £583,822.

Another £159,705 is contributing to eight behaviour change staff in Highland, Orkney and Western Isles councils as well as in the Cairngorms National Park Authority and Dunoon Community Development Trust.

Other funds allocated include transport integration with the Community Cycle Parking Grant (£245,000), workplace support such as the Workplace Active Travel Infrastructure Grant (£90,000), management of Inverness and Fort William HI-BIKE scheme and expansion into Elgin (£413,000), the Fort William Way Finding Project (£46,000) and project management costs (£530,700).

Highlights include –

- The Living Streets WOW walk to school challenge was delivered to 37 primary schools at the end of the summer term, with over 6,000 pupils logging journeys and an average rate of 84% active travel.
- Grants totalling £243,000 were awarded for the Cycle Parking Programme
- The Access to Bikes Fund supported 14 projects in the first quarter of 25/26

In Argyll & Bute four projects are sharing £151,657.

Argyll and the Isles Coast and Countryside Trust (ACT), which received £48,657, has refurbished more than 300 bicycles and given them away since 2021, while over 3,500kg of unused bicycles (and parts) has been diverted from landfill.

A £46,000 award to Adventure Oban allows the charity to continue its Active Routes to School project.

Other initiatives include employing an active travel coordinator and community development officer, and developing a series of led walks and rides, family cycle training, bike and walking buses to schools.

An award of £11,000 to Dunoon Community Development Trust means Cycling UK's Dunoon Bothy Project will continue under the new name of Dunoon on the Move.

The programme of walks, cycles, training and e-bike loans is supported by project co-ordinator, Sara Hawley, and trained volunteers.

Fyne Futures, receives £46,000 and plans to consult on an active travel changing behaviour action plan.

It will also buy bikes, equipment and parts to enable unemployed and low-income people to access cycling.

In Highland, two projects have received funding amounting to £110,268.

Lochaber Environmental Group's Fort William Bike Shed offers bike refurbishment, a cycle 'library', along with training, and a 'Fix Your Own Bike' service.

Since 2020, more than 400 bikes have been sold or donated, and over 350kg of bicycles parts have been refurbished or recycled so far this year.

An award of £18,768 went to the Strathspey Pedal Initiative (SPIN) which has seen over 100 refurbished bikes sold, donated or recycled, while more than 350kg of bicycle frames and parts have been recycled since January 1.

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In the Western Isles, the Embark Community Activities Project in Stornoway, received £40,570.

The project helps remove barriers to accessing walking, wheeling and cycling, particularly for those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged and who may have additional support needs.

It has launched a children's cycle library to tackle rising levels of poverty and now has a fleet of 106, including bikes, e-bikes, e-tandems and trikes.

Another £181, 875 has gone to two projects in Moray.

Outfit Moray's Bike Revolution project received £75,810 to support cycling skills, safety, inclusion, repair and maintenance and active travel in schools and the wider community.

Since 2019, Outfit Moray has seen a 233% increase in school engagement with more than 2,000 pupils reached last year through cycling sessions.

A total of 44 primary schools across Moray now engage in Bikeability 1 and 2, Learn to Cycle, and Bike Dr activities.

An award of £106,065 goes to Cycling UK's Moray Bothy, part of the charity's Connecting Communities programme, which works to overcome barriers to walking, wheeling and cycling in rural and island areas.

Between 2021 and 2025, Cycling UK delivered 854 cycling activities in Moray, reaching 3,551 participants and helping many switch from car to cycle for short, local trips.

Schools in the islands and in Moray also share £99,452 awarded to Living Streets for WOW – its walk to school programme.

The funding is helping 18 schools in Moray, working with 4,029 pupils and five schools in the Western Isles reaching 750 pupils.

REGIONAL TRANSPORT STRATEGY

Our RTS sets out a bold 20-year vision to improve transport across the Highlands and Islands.

It was adopted by partnership members following confirmation of Ministerial approval in May. A 1st Delivery Plan sets out a series of actions to help deliver the strategy's objectives.

The RTS tackles long-standing challenges of reliability, resilience, and connectivity, while aiming to unlock major economic opportunities.

The area's transport network is under strain from ageing infrastructure, climate change, centralised services and rising demand.

Key actions that HITRANS will seek to implement by summer 2027 include-

- Advocate for the early completion of committed strategic transport projects including A9 dualling, A83 at Rest and Be Thankful and A96 dualling between Inverness and Auldearn and bypasses of Elgin and Keith.

- Develop regional rail and bus strategies to accompany the RTS
- Expand HI-Bike e-bike share scheme within Inverness, Fort William and into Elgin
- Work with partners to improve transport integration at key interchanges including Inverness, Oban and Fort William.
- Expand the Sustainable Aviation Test Environment (SATE) across the Highlands & Islands with the aim of integrating sustainable aviation
- Support The Highland Council in developing the business case to procure an improved PSO contract for Wick Airport

Copies of the Regional Transport Strategy and 1st Delivery Plan can be found on the HITRANS website at www.hitrans.org.uk/regional-transport-strategy

HEALTH AND TRANSPORT PLAN

HITRANS is to lead efforts to establish a Health & Transport Action Plan (HTAP) for the Highlands & Islands and Shetland.

A scoping review commissioned in late 2024 identified that a HTAP could add value in the region.

This was supported by a workshop convened by HITRANS in June that improving access to healthcare should be the key focus of an HTAP.

HITRANS is recommended to lead the exploration of the opportunity in more detail in conjunction with potential partners and seek financial support from the government.

It is felt an HTAP should have one clear regional governance structure with committed input from key partners, including councils, health boards and the Scottish Ambulance Service.

There should be links to other partners, including community planning partnerships, health

and social care partnerships and third sector organisations.

The HTAP would set out how partners will collectively identify priority actions and budgets and monitor progress, identify budgets and monitor investment/expenditure.

Recent work to improve transport to healthcare in the Western isles could be used as a model for a future HTAP.

In that, a range of partners came together to share information on community needs, constraints and opportunities in transport and healthcare services.

It led to several actions being identified and work is underway to deliver them including funding to support the introduction of a new larger and more accessible aircraft that is scheduled to come into operation on the Stornoway to Benbecula PSO that later this year.

INVERNESS STATION MASTERPLAN

HITRANS commissioned Austin Smith Lord to undertake the Inverness Bus Station and car park feasibility study and a draft report is now being reviewed by key stakeholders.

It identifies a number of significant opportunities about how to upgrade existing provision for bus, coach and car parking and how to improve integration with the Rail Station to deliver a transport interchange fit for the future of Inverness and the surrounding regions transport needs.

Following approval of the final report there will be significant stakeholder and public engagement on the proposals to give local people a meaningful voice in the future of the city's public transport hub ahead of any more detailed appraisal work on potential options being progressed.

OBAN INTEGRATED TRAVEL GATEWAY PLAN

A new design is being developed to create a strategic integrated travel gateway for Oban.

The project will improve connection of the rail station, bus terminus and ferry terminal that will be a focal point for the wider town centre regeneration and for sustainable economic growth and social inclusion.

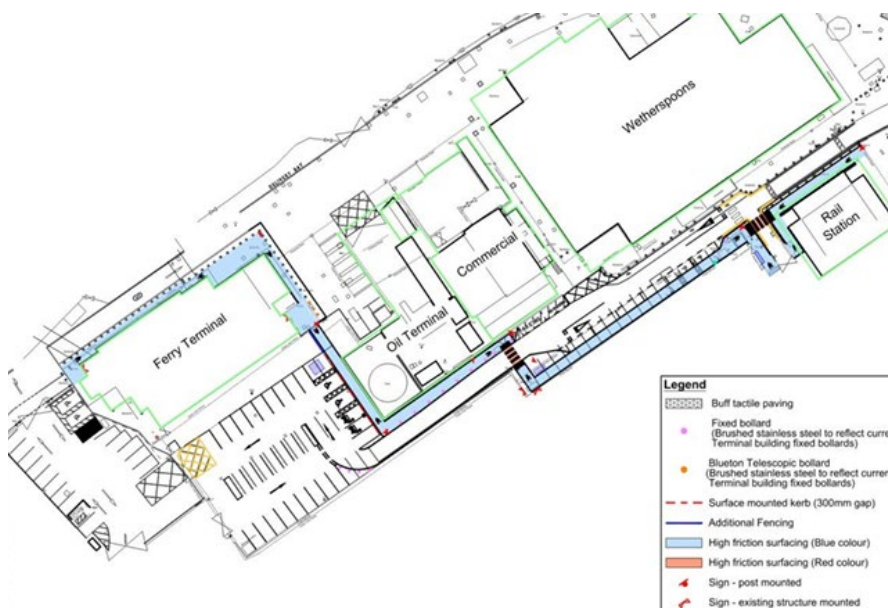
Improvements include a high-quality walkway with CCTV between the rail station and ferry terminal.

Better signage and wayfinding will be provided to key destinations including the town centre, buses and taxis, rail platforms and the ferry terminal.

Specific crossing points will be delivered between the rail station and the ferry terminal and support the increase of walking and wheeling trips to the rail station to 50% and the reduction in trips by car to 10%.

Ove Arup & Partners Ltd (Arup) was commissioned by HITRANS to develop the design and led to the submission of an Active Travel Infrastructure Fund (ATIF) bid which is being considered by Transport Scotland.

Funding would conclude the design and implement the planned improvements identified following consultation and surveys.



Oban is one of the key transport hubs for island communities accessing mainland Scotland.

However, previous surveys have identified a lack of integration between the rail station and the ferry terminal, as well as insufficient signage, crossings and walkways.

It is felt this gives a poor first impression of Oban by first time visitors.

LOW VOLUME AIR SERVICES IN THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS

Detailed analysis of low-volume air routes will help devise long-term air services strategies for the Highlands and Islands.

HITRANS commissioned Reference Economic Consultants to undertake a review of nine selected air routes- Benbecula to Stornoway and Glasgow, Inverness to Birmingham and Manchester, Wick to Aberdeen and Edinburgh, Stornoway to Inverness, Aberdeen to Stornoway and Glasgow to Islay between 2014 and 2024.

Passenger demand showed general growth up to 2019, followed by a sharp fall during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Recovery has been mixed, with some routes returning to near pre-pandemic levels, while others remain significantly below.

Service frequency and aircraft types have shifted over time, often influenced by operator changes and commercial pressures.

In several cases, aircraft size has increased while frequency has decreased, affecting accessibility.

Load factors on many routes remain low, particularly on intra-regional services. This underscores the challenge of sustaining commercial viability without public support.

Public Service Obligation (PSO) arrangements, including those on the Wick–Aberdeen route, have played a key role in restoring or retaining air access in some communities.

Seasonality of demand varies across routes, more pronounced on services with a tourism component. However, many routes show year-round usage consistent with essential travel needs.

Further work is planned to expand the analysis to cover other routes – Kirkwall–Inverness, Stornoway–Edinburgh and those from Barra, Campbeltown and Tiree to Glasgow.

This will support HITRANS and partners in shaping future business cases and pressing for rural and island connectivity in national aviation policy.

MORAY WELCOMES BIKE-FRIENDLY BUSES

Buses serving a key route in Moray have been fitted with new bike racks in a significant move for connected travel in the area.

In all, 26 racks have been installed on buses on the 35/X35 route covering Aberdeen to Elgin via Macduff, as well as the 201 route to and from Aberdeen and Braemar.

It makes it easier for bike riders to combine both modes of travel, extend their cycling trip, travel further, and access off-road routes in rural locations.

Combining a bike ride with a bus trip can help attract new and casual riders by making it easier for people to adapt their journey.

It also improves facilities for the growing cycling tourism market.

Each bus has bike racks designed to accommodate two standard bicycles, including mountain bikes. They are free to use on a first-come, first-served basis.

The initiative is jointly funded by HITRANS and Nestrans, through People and Place Funding, Aberdeenshire Council and the Cairngorms National Park Authority through their Cairngorms 2030 programme, made possible by The National Lottery Heritage Fund. Stagecoach have led the installation and certification of the racks.

STUDY IDENTIFIES EXTRA PASSENGER SERVICES FOR WEST HIGHLAND LINE

A new study has identified that additional rail passenger services could operate on the West Highland Line from Monday to Friday as part of a transport plan for Fort William.

The extra provision is seen as a way of reducing congestion in the town, particularly during the busy summer tourist season.



According to the study by consultants SYSTRA, the services, provided by an additional two-car Class 156 train, could run within the boundaries of Rannoch and Mallaig, with a focus between Fort William and Glenfinnan.

They could help promote sustainable tourism, reduce congestion and improve access to schools. To accommodate the extra services a number of minor re-timings would be required to other services.

SYSTRA believes these to be acceptable to other operators, although further discussions would be needed.

It could include an extra 15.50 departure from Banavie to cater for school traffic from the nearby Lochaber High School.

The new services, as well as supporting access to Glenfinnan, also provide wider connectivity benefits to the area.

For example, a 07:52 arrival in Mallaig would provide a new ferry connection to Armadale (09:00 Monday and Thursdays, 08:30 Tuesday and Wednesday, 09:30 Friday), and to Lochboisdale (09:45 Monday/09:50 Saturday).

The timing of the services also fit well with steam train services through Glenfinnan which is a major tourist attraction.

SYSTRA now plans to take the findings to the next stage which could involve detailed timetable and rolling stock diagram production across a full week.

MILESTONE REACHED IN DEVELOPMENT OF FORT WILLIAM TRANSPORT PLAN

Consultants have been appointed to develop an integrated transport plan (ITP) for Fort William in a major step forward for the project.

The need for upgrades in the town to ease traffic congestion, improve journey times and increase the resilience of the A82 and A830 and other strategic transport links has been an issue for many years.

Delays which can be exacerbated by high seasonal traffic and a lack of any alternatives when there is disruption, are key concerns for people who live and work in and around Fort William.

Emergency services have reported delays to vehicles accessing roads, while local businesses have said network constraints have affected decisions to expand.

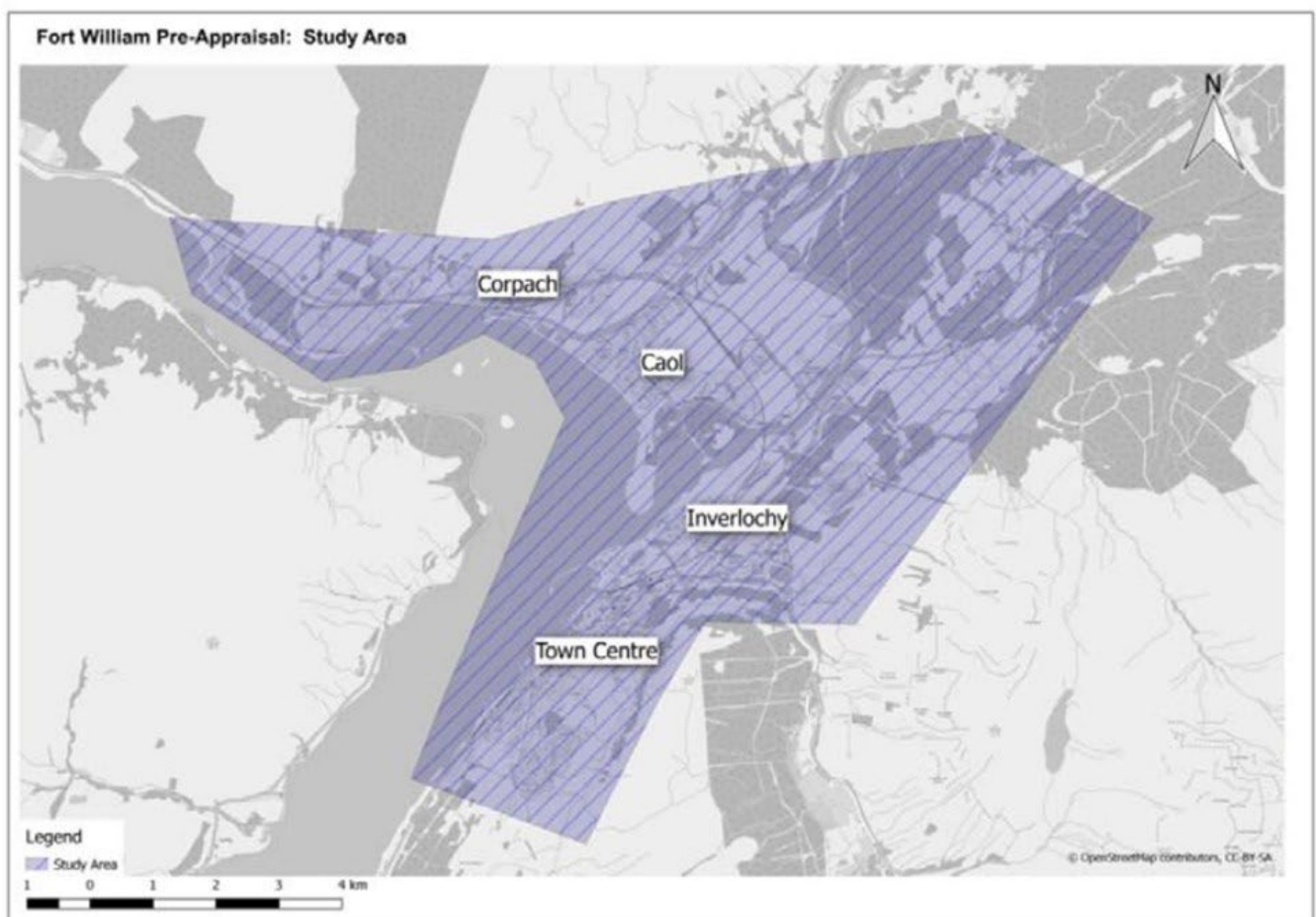
Scotland's second Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR2) was published in December 2022 and recommended the development of an Integrated Transport Plan (ITP) for Fort William.

A comprehensive plan will now establish a proposed package of interventions, priorities, direction, responsibilities, funding sources and process for change for the area.

It will be developed by a partnership of AECOM and Stantec, two global infrastructure consulting companies.

A Client Delivery Group was established in January 2025 to help oversee and manage the project. It is led by HITRANS with Transport Scotland and The Highland Council as well as Highlands and Islands Enterprise and FW2040 also members.

The project is being funded by Transport Scotland, HITRANS and The Highland Council.



DIRECT AWARD OF NEW FERRY SERVICES – QUESTIONS FOR TRANSPORT SCOTLAND FROM FERRY STAKEHOLDERS

Questions about transparency, accountability and community need gathered through the Ferry Stakeholder Group (FSG) meetings HITRANS support have been put to the Scottish government following the direct award to CalMac Ferries Ltd of the new Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Service (CHFS3).

The award, worth around £3.9 billion, was made in May and starts from October 1.

In a consultation submission, ferry stakeholder groups ask why a direct award was chosen instead of an open competitive tender?

Other questions relating to the new model include-

- How can communities, user groups, and councils hold CalMac, CMAL, and Transport Scotland to account?
- What specific mechanisms will Ministers use to monitor and enforce accountability?
- How will transparency be ensured in decision-making and resource allocation?
- Will there be a CHFS3 ombudsman to provide independent oversight?
- Will the ferry service management board include ferry user group and island community representatives
- Can operational management roles be relocated to island communities for greater accountability?

The FSG submission also asks how CHFS3 will reduce car dependency, particularly for tourists? And will there be collaboration with bus/coach providers to coordinate schedules, enable joint ticketing and improve access for foot passengers?

The submission further calls for other critical issues to be addressed including –

- A robust system to measure unmet demand and lost travel opportunities, including those for islanders, young families and commercial freight
- A commitment to transparent and meaningful use of the Islands Community Impact Assessments (ICIA) process, with published outcomes.
- Road Equivalent Tariff must be protected and fares remain affordable, with recent increases urgently reviewed
- The contract must include a transparent, public 10-year delivery plan with timelines, named responsibilities and community-informed goals, including the ability to adapt to future needs.
- Senior leadership must remain directly accountable and engaged and not be a buffer to avoid scrutiny.

HITRANS will continue to monitor developments and seek assurance from Transport Scotland that stakeholder priorities are reflected in the final governance, reporting and operational delivery arrangements.

BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE EVALUATION

The Behaviour Change Strategy was developed to deliver Transport Scotland's People and Place Programme, aiming to increase the number of people walking, cycling or wheeling for short journeys, or taking on multi-modal journeys.

In 2024–25, HITRANS supported more than 20 projects across four strategic themes - active schools & young people, active workplaces, accessibility & inclusion and capacity & capability building.

These projects engaged thousands of participants, improved cycling and walking facilities, and helped build a more inclusive active and sustainable travel culture across the region.

Highlights included nearly 230,000 pupil journeys logged through the WOW Travel Tracker, hundreds of staff engaged through workplace initiatives and more than 100 refurbished bikes distributed to households across the region.

Projects also delivered critical infrastructure such as shelters, pool bikes and e-bike charging.

Evaluation findings consistently showed increased participation in active travel, improved perceptions of safety, and reduced barriers to access.

In all, there were 14,000 participants across age groups from preschool to 50+, with strong engagement from schools, workplaces and community groups.

New or upgraded infrastructure (bike parking, adapted bikes, counters) was installed in more than 30 locations

Outputs include –

- More than 80 inclusive cycling sessions were delivered.
- More than 2,900 attendances in cycling initiatives ((Outfit Moray alone)
- 130 bikes refurbished and re-homed either for free or at low cost in Strathspey, Argyll and Fort William
- Workplace travel plans implemented in NHS and the private sector with engagement with more than 8,000 employees

Among the lessons learned are that access to bikes is essential, with free or low-cost access to bikes and adaptive equipment helping to dramatically increase uptake.

Schools' engagement is a gateway, building lifelong habits and normalising active travel.

Workplace support needs to go beyond surveys and facilities and visible encouragement matter.

Community-based organisations are well placed to reach a wide demographic across the area.

Monitoring infrastructure is critical to measure changes in travel behaviour over time, but local authorities often lack the capacity to install counters and analyse the data

HITRANS APPOINTS EV CHARGE POINT NETWORK OPERATOR

HITRANS is to help drive the expansion of the electric vehicle charging network across parts of the Highlands and Islands.

It now provides a central EV infrastructure resource for the councils in Argyll and Bute, the Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland.

As the publicly-funded Charge Point Scotland (CPS) contract comes to an end, charge points are required to migrate to new operators.

Local Authorities have to lever in private sector funding to enable delivery of infrastructure to meet demand and encourage further EV use.

HITRANS has now procured a Charge Point Network Operator (CPNO), seen as an essential step towards securing greater private investment to expand the network.

Scottish Power Energy Retail Ltd successfully bid for the contract and will help HITRANS and councils build a more reliable and customer-focused network, particularly in rural and island areas.

Scottish Power utilises the back office Fuuse, with features such as customisable charge point configuration, flexible tariff structures, real-time monitoring, increasing automation and the capacity to share chargers.

The councils will continue to set their own tariffs, collect payment from customers and be kept up to date with fault resolution.

Further network developments under investigation include using locally-generated energy to power chargers and innovative technologies such as battery storage. Scottish Power also affords expertise here, in energy generation, distribution and innovation.

There are at present 37 EV charges in Argyll and Bute, 31 in the Western Isles, 30 in Orkney and 27 in Shetland.

Approximately 60 chargers are to be migrated to the new CPNO this winter, with 60 more to be replaced and then migrated in the first half of 2026.

Council-operated public EV charging units in Highland, Moray, Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire are currently moving from Charge Point Scotland to a new operator, EZO.

Drivers travelling through the HITRANS area will be able to seamlessly charge at EZO and Scottish Power chargers via roaming partners such as Octopus Electroverse, retaining EV charging connectivity across the region.

CPS customers can re-register their RFID cards so they continue to work on Scottish Power's network, or they will be able to request new RFID cards from Scottish Power.

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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