

HITRANS KEY ASKS FOR SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT ELECTION 2026



Contents

Our Vision	03
1. Build on the People and Place Programme: Devolve Key Transport Funds to RTPs by 2027	03
2. Guarantee Sustainable Revenue Support for Rural and Island Transport Services	04
3. Reform Concessionary Fares to make them Fair	04
4. Expand RTP Powers and Remit for Integrated Delivery Across All Modes	05
5. Create a Regional Transport Investment Fund Aligned with Regional Economic Strategies	05
6. Move to Enhanced Regional Governance of Transport	06
Governance and Engagement	06
Infrastructure and Economic Priorities	06
Conclusion	07

Our Vision

HITRANS advocates for a regionally empowered, place-based transport delivery model—where Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs), as established and accountable bodies, play a direct, accountable leadership role across transport policy, funding, and delivery. This enhanced regional governance of transport must reflect the unique challenges and opportunities in rural and island areas and support national priorities through local empowerment.



1. Build on the People and Place Programme: Devolve Key Transport Funds to RTPs by 2027

Ask:

Commit to devolving core transport delivery funds to RTPs and Local Transport Authorities by 2027, building on the proven success of the Scottish Government/Transport Scotland and RTP partnership under the People and Place Programme.

Funds to be devolved should include:

- Bus Infrastructure Fund
- Active Travel Infrastructure Fund (Tier 1 to LTAs, Tier 2 to RTP)
- Public Service Obligation (PSO) support
- Air Discount Scheme
- Behaviour Change and Mobility Innovation Funds
- Plugged in Communities
- Support for ferry services, including the Local Authority (LA) ferry replacement programme

Rationale:

These funds are ideally suited to regional tailoring, especially in rural and island contexts. Devolving them to RTPs will:

- Enable bespoke local solutions and better outcomes;
- Improve cost-effectiveness through place-based planning. Built on strong community involvement;
- Use Local Place Plans as a foundation to advance transport planning, and empowering communities to shape, prioritise, and deliver the transport solutions that will deliver the most for them;
- Embed regional accountability for delivery;
- Align investment with Regional Economic and Transport Strategies;
- Work across funding silos to bring greater complementarity across funds creating synergies across modes and allowing joined up solutions with greater impact than current siloed approaches;
- Ensure that investment in ferry services, including LA ferry replacement, is fully integrated with wider regional strategies.

2. Guarantee Sustainable Revenue Support for Rural and Island Transport Services

Ask:

Introduce a dedicated, ring-fenced multi-year revenue funding stream to support essential lifeline rural and island public transport services – including community transport / DRT, bus, rail, air, and ferry services (with explicit recognition of LA ferry replacement needs) – administered via RTPs to ensure coordination and alignment with regional needs.

Rationale:

Sustainable services cannot be delivered without sustainable operating funding. Revenue support is essential to address:

- Service viability in sparsely populated areas where costs are high and fare income is limited;
- Reliable access to education, healthcare, employment and training opportunities;
- Community resilience and social equity leaving no community isolated.
- Tackling transport poverty and reducing car reliance.
- Enabling innovation and new models of service provision.
- Provide certainty to staff, operators and communities through stable multi year funding.

RTPs are best placed to align funding with regional priorities and deliver coordinated infrastructure and service planning across public and third-sector partners.

3. Reform Concessionary Fares to make them Fair

Ask:

Commit to reforming Scotland's concessionary travel scheme to ensure equitable access for rural and island communities. This should include:

- Extending concessionary entitlements to community transport and equivalent essential services in rural areas, such as local ferries and connecting rail (where bus services are not available);
- Reviewing eligibility (e.g. raising the general entitlement age gradually to the state pension age and prioritising local bus use in urban areas), with any phased approach ensuring that current passholders do not lose their existing entitlement;
- Ensuring the scheme better reflects geographic realities and delivers fair value across all regions; and
- Guaranteeing that any extension of eligibility is matched with sufficient and sustainable funding so that reimbursement rates are not reduced further. Current underfunding has already resulted in unintended consequences such as higher fares for fare payers, reduced service levels, service withdrawals, and increased burdens on Local Authorities where supported services are required.

Rationale:

The current concessionary scheme disproportionately benefits urban areas with dense bus networks, while rural and island residents—who often rely on ferries and trains as their lifeline services—receive significantly less value. For example, under the Under-22 scheme, an Edinburgh resident receives twenty times the benefit of someone in the Western Isles. Reforming the scheme will:

- Create a genuinely universal entitlement that reflects the diversity of Scotland's transport needs;
- Ensure island residents (e.g. Jura, Easdale, Luing, Iona) can use concessionary travel on their local ferry and onward bus;
- Deliver a fairer, more sustainable, and more inclusive approach to concessionary travel while retaining the core benefit of making those regular daily journeys by public transport free at the point of use to passengers who qualify.



4. Expand RTP Powers and Remit for Integrated Delivery Across All Modes

Ask:

By 2028, expand RTP powers to include:

- Integrated transport planning across all modes (bus, ferry, rail, aviation);
- Bus franchising under the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019;
- Leadership on integration between transport and planning, housing, healthcare, and economic development.

Rationale:

Transport doesn't operate in isolation. Integrated, cross-sector planning powers will enable RTPs to:

- Deliver joined-up, efficient infrastructure;
- Reduce duplication and fragmentation;
- Align services with broader community needs and spatial strategies;
- Ensure ferry services, including vessel replacement and port infrastructure funding, are planned in tandem with other lifeline services.

5. Create a Regional Transport Investment Fund Aligned with Regional Economic Strategies

Ask:

Establish a Regional Transport Investment Fund, administered by RTPs, with allocations linked to Regional Economic Strategies and spatial priorities. Work with local authorities to agree programme and deliver as a partnership in a similar approach to the People and Place Programme.

Rationale:

Current funding models are too centralised. A regional fund would:

- Reflect local priorities, demographic challenges and geographic realities;
- Support innovation in transport delivery making better use of new and emerging technology;
- Enable long-term, strategic investment decisions;
- Cover both short-term measures to improve the community voice in ferry decision-making and long-term reforms around bundling ferry services, ownership of infrastructure, and funding of vessels.

For regions like the Highlands and Islands, investment must reflect higher per capita costs associated with remoteness and scale.



6. Move to Enhanced Regional Governance of Transport

Ask:

Commit to a long-term policy shift where Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs), through their Regional Transport Strategies (RTS), are empowered as the **primary framework for transport investment and delivery** – reducing reliance on centrally produced documents such as the Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR).

Rationale:

Enhanced regional governance will ensure that:

- Investment decisions are shaped by those closest to community needs;
- Regional priorities—across bus, ferry, rail, and aviation—are given appropriate weight;
- Local accountability and transparency are strengthened;
- Governance reforms embed stronger community representation, especially for lifeline ferry and air services;
- A platform is created for long-term reforms on ferry bundling, ownership of infrastructure, and funding of vessels.

Governance and Engagement

Alongside these five core asks, there is a pressing need for reform in governance and engagement:

- Consultation mechanisms must be significantly improved for the Northern Isles Ferry Service contract and the Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Service contract. Communities must be engaged meaningfully, including in advance of vessel specifications.
- Boards of organisations under Ministerial control that deliver lifeline transport services must undergo a fundamental revamp to ensure affected communities are properly represented.
- Stronger community voice should be embedded immediately through short-term measures, with a longer-term review to identify the best governance approach for ferry bundling, ownership, and funding.



Infrastructure and Economic Priorities

A strong national commitment is required for major infrastructure projects that are critical to regional economic growth and connectivity:

- Highland Mainline improvements
- Aberdeen to Inverness rail enhancements
- A9 and A96 dualling
- A82, A85 and A83 upgrades
- Climate Resilience Investment in lifeline infrastructure.

Equally, targeted investment in the Grid and Renewables sectors is essential. These priorities must be aligned with and supported through the Regional Transport Organisation (RTO) project to unlock transformational economic opportunities for the Highlands and Islands. With the transmission of so much of the Highlands and Islands renewable energy to the rest of the UK there is a place for the enabling infrastructure to be funded by UK Government to secure the energy transition opportunity.

Conclusion

These six asks, together with strengthened governance, ferry service reform, and strategic infrastructure commitments, represent a phased and pragmatic pathway toward enhanced regional governance of transport. They build on existing partnerships, deliver better value for money, and achieve real progress on Scotland's transport decarbonisation, inclusion, and economic goals.

HITRANS calls on all parties to commit to this vision in their 2026 manifestos and to support a more resilient, integrated, and equitable transport future for Scotland's rural and island communities—supported by enhanced regional governance.





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