

RESEARCH AND STRATEGY DELIVERY

Report to Partnership Meeting 7 November 2025

Route and Branch

Purpose of Report

To inform the Board on the status of Route & Branch - a rail development strategy for the Highlands and Islands

Background

In 2006 HITRANS, HIE and Highland Rail Partnership funded Room for Growth, a major report making the case for rail development in the HITRANS area. This led to two STPR1 projects being taken forward: Highland Main Line and Aberdeen-Inverness, although both have not been delivered as planned.

Now with the HITRANS Regional Transport Strategy 2025 in place, the focus moves to each mode and the response to the NZ challenge.

All Change

Since 2014 a number of significant changes have occurred, including:

- the establishment of Scotland's Railway bringing Network Rail Scotland and ScotRail into an alliance
- changed travel behaviour as a result of Covid
- the nationalisation of ScotRail and Caledonian Sleepers
- the nationalisation of LNER
- the drive to Net Zero 2045
- the 20% vehicle miles reduction target
- the Rail Decarbonisation Action Plan
- rail freight growth targets from DfT and Scottish Government
- the establishment of Community Rail Partnerships
- the creation of Scottish Rail Holdings
- Far North Line Review Team and West Highland Line Review Group
- Request to Stop
- Inverness Airport Station
- Inverness and Cromarty Forth Green Freeport
- Inverness Station Masterplan
- Fort William 2040

With the finalisation of our 2024 Regional Transport Strategy, it is now time to create a rail-specific daughter document to our RTS.

Drivers of Change

There are a number of key drivers that will result in changes to our rail network:

- the refreshed Decarbonisation Action Plan
- rolling stock replacement programme
- STPR2
- fares reform and ticketing developments
- focus on resilience impacted by climate change
- Rail Reform and Great British Railways
- signalling renewals
- tourism trends
- energy developments

Strategy

HITRANS has appointed consultant Systra to produce a rail development strategy for the HITRANS area.

The study will identify shortcomings in our network and identify areas for development so that the railway plays its role in the move to Net Zero. Key to this will be decarbonised rolling stock and efficient freight on rail. We will work with colleagues at Nestrans, Tactran and SPT where we have overlapping interests.

Reporting

The piece of work will report at the end of Q1 2026.

RISK REGISTER

RTS Delivery

Impact – Mode shift, integration, economy, climate change resilience

Policy

Impact – Decarbonisation, transport efficiency, freight growth targets, geographical competitiveness

Financial

Impact – Route&Branch is fully funded by HITRANS

Equality

Impact – Access to the network for all

Recommendation

1. Members are asked to note the report.

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Date:	28 October 2025