

Report to Partnership Meeting 7 November 2025

PARTNERSHIP

HITRANS Key Asks Report

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To present to Members HITRANS' proposed Key Asks for inclusion in party manifestos for the 2026 Scottish Parliament Election, reflecting the Partnership's vision for enhanced regional governance of transport, tailored to the needs of rural and island communities.

BACKGROUND

HITRANS, as the statutory Regional Transport Partnership for the Highlands and Islands, has consistently advocated for stronger regional leadership in transport planning, funding, and delivery. Informed by the Regional Transport Strategy and building on collaboration with the Scottish Government and Transport Scotland through programmes such as the People and Place Programme, HITRANS has identified six Key Asks which should shape the debate in the run-up to the 2026 Scottish Parliament Election.

INTRODUCTION

Our vision is for a regionally empowered, place-based model of delivery where RTPs play a direct and accountable leadership role across transport policy, funding, and delivery. This approach will enable tailored solutions for rural and island communities while delivering national priorities on inclusion, decarbonisation, and economic growth.

The full Regional Key Asks report is included as the Appendix to this report and is summarised in the report itself.

KEY ASKS

1. Devolve Key Transport Funds to RTPs by 2027

Commit to devolving core transport delivery funds held by Transport Scotland (bus, active travel, PSO, air discounts, behaviour change, ferry support, etc.) directly to RTPs. This will embed accountability, enable local tailoring, and integrate ferry investment with wider strategies.

2. Guarantee Sustainable Revenue for Rural and Island Transport Services

Introduce a dedicated, ring-fenced multi-year revenue stream for lifeline rural and island bus, rail, air, ferry, and community transport services, administered via RTPs to align with regional needs and priorities.

3. Reform Concessionary Fares to Make Them Fair

Redesign Scotland's concessionary scheme to reflect geographic realities by extending coverage to ferries, connecting rail, and community transport, while ensuring equity and sustainable funding.

4. Expand RTP Powers and Remit by 2028

Extend RTP powers to cover integrated transport planning across all modes, bus franchising, and integration with housing, healthcare, and economic development.

5. Create a Regional Transport Investment Fund

Establish a fund administered by RTPs, aligned with Regional Economic Strategies, enabling long-term strategic investment and reflecting the higher costs of remote delivery.

6. Move to Enhanced Regional Governance of Transport

Commit to Regional Transport Strategies becoming the primary framework for transport investment and delivery, reducing reliance on centralised documents such as STPR.

GOVERNANCE AND INFRASTRUCTURE PRIORITIES

In addition to the six core asks, HITRANS calls for reforms to ferry governance and community engagement, along with national commitments to major infrastructure projects (Highland Mainline, Aberdeen–Inverness rail, A9/A96 dualling, A82/A85/A83 upgrades) and climate resilience. Investment in grid and renewables must also be aligned with transport priorities to unlock economic opportunity.

CONCLUSION

These proposals set out a pragmatic and phased pathway to enhanced regional governance of transport. They build on existing partnerships, improve accountability, and support a resilient, inclusive and decarbonised transport future for the Highlands and Islands. The full detail of the Key Asks is provided in Appendix 1 to this report.

RISK REGISTER

Category	Impact	Comment
Policy	Positive	Strengthens RTP role in future regional governance and ensures transport voice is central.
Financial	Neutral	No immediate implications, but signals significant future asks around funding devolution.
Equality	Positive	Advances equity for rural and island communities through fairer funding and concessionary reform.

RECOMMENDATION

Members are asked to note the report and endorse the Key Asks as the basis for HITRANS engagement with political parties in advance of the 2026 Scottish Parliament Election. Members should also note that the full Key Asks document will be appended as Appendix 1.

Report by: Ranald Robertson
Designation: Partnership Director
Date: 1st September 2025
Background paper: Appendix 1 - HITRANS Key Asks for Scottish Parliament Election 2026

Appendix - HITRANS: Key Asks for Scottish Parliament Election 2026

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 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 2 Challenge Fund)
- 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.**
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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 **all** 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, Raasay, Eigg and Rum) 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.
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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.**
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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.
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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.
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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.

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.