

Report to Partnership Meeting – 7 November 2025**RESEARCH AND STRATEGY DELIVERY****Regional Bus Strategy****Purpose of Report**

To seek approval for the preparation of a **Regional Bus Strategy (RBS)** as recommended in the **Regional Transport Strategy (RTS) Delivery Plan**, and to outline the purpose, governance, scope, and resource requirements for this work.

The RBS will establish a coherent policy and delivery framework for improving bus and coach services across the Highlands and Islands. It will define regional priorities, guide investment and partnership activity, and act as a foundation for influencing future national policy and funding.

The Strategy will also embed the principle of **Decent or Minimum Mobility** as a core benchmark for equitable access across the region.

Background

Buses are the most widely used form of public transport in the Highlands and Islands, providing vital connections to employment, education, healthcare, and social activities. However, the sector faces significant and growing challenges.

Bus patronage has not yet recovered to pre-pandemic levels in many areas, while **driver recruitment and retention difficulties** have created acute operational pressures for local operators. Shortages of qualified staff have resulted in timetable reductions, service cancellations, and, in some cases, the withdrawal of commercially operated routes. These pressures threaten the sustainability of existing networks and increase reliance on local authority support to maintain socially necessary services.

The **RTS Delivery Plan** identifies the development of a **Regional Bus Strategy** as a key action to strengthen coordination, define regional priorities, and shape investment decisions. This work supports the objectives of the **National Transport Strategy**, Scotland's **Just Transition Plan**, and the **Bus Decarbonisation Taskforce**.

The Strategy also comes at a time of important policy change at UK level. The **UK Government's Bus Services Bill**, which recently received Royal Assent, introduces new powers for local authorities in England to develop franchising and enhanced partnerships, as well as stronger requirements for data sharing, performance reporting, and passenger engagement. While the legislation applies to England, it sets out a framework that may inform the future direction of Scottish Government transport policy. The RBS provides an opportunity for HITRANS to assess the relevance of these developments to our region and ensure that Scottish policy reflects the distinctive challenges and opportunities of rural and island areas.

Recent independent academic research, “*Quantifying Minimum Mobility*” (Arnz et al., 2025), published in *Energy Research and Social Science*, explores the concept of a minimum mobility baseline as a foundation for equitable transport systems. The research argues that mobility should be treated as a social right, establishing a guaranteed level of provision before further considerations such as comfort or convenience are addressed. The findings are particularly relevant to the Highlands and Islands, where dispersed settlements and long travel distances make car dependence acute. Informed by these insights, the RBS will seek to define what constitutes a “**Decent Mobility**” standard for our region and identify practical actions to achieve it through improved bus networks, integration, and community-led solutions.

Purpose and Objectives of the Strategy

The Regional Bus Strategy will:

- Establish a shared **regional vision** for the role of bus and coach services in supporting inclusive, sustainable mobility.
- Embed the **principle of Decent / Minimum Mobility** as a benchmark for policy and investment.
- Identify **passenger priorities** including affordability, reliability, accessibility, and integration.
- Develop a **delivery plan** outlining short-, medium-, and long-term actions.
- Inform regional and national **policy and funding** decisions.
- Support **advocacy** for fair investment and improved governance arrangements.
- Explore innovative **operational models**, including demand-responsive and community-based approaches.

Key Outputs:

- Regional Bus Strategy and supporting evidence base.
- Regional Delivery Plan with costed, prioritised actions.
- Collaborative framework between **HITRANS, Local Authorities, Operators, and Transport Scotland**.

Governance

A **Regional Bus Strategy Steering Group** will be established to oversee the work. It is Membership will include:

- HITRANS (Chair)
- Local Authorities (transport, education, and planning)
- Bus and Coach Operators
- Transport Scotland
- Confederation of Passenger Transport (CPT)
- NHS representatives
- Community Transport Association
- Bus Users Scotland

The Steering Group will guide development of the case for change, stakeholder engagement, and drafting of the final Strategy.

Scope of the Strategy

1. Case for Change

The first phase will define the **Case for Change**, supported by a comprehensive evidence baseline. It will assess service coverage, patronage trends, fares, reliability, and performance, as well as the impact of workforce shortages on operational stability. Analysis will also examine rural accessibility, demographic change, and emerging patterns of travel demand.

Drawing from the concept of ***Decent Mobility***, this phase will identify a baseline level of accessibility that should be guaranteed across the region, recognising differences between urban, rural, and island contexts.

2. Stakeholder Engagement

Following completion of the baseline, HITRANS will convene a regional stakeholder workshop to support the development of the draft Regional Bus Strategy. Stakeholders will include:

- Local Authorities – transport, education, planning
- Bus, coach, and community transport operators
- Transport Scotland
- CPT
- MACS
- NHS
- Neighbouring RTPs
- Passenger and disability groups
- Transport Forums and community bodies
- Tourism and visitor economy partners
- Bus Users Scotland
- Passenger Focus

3. Draft Strategy Development

The draft RBS will include:

- Vision, objectives, and guiding principles
- Thematic policies and recommended actions
- Implementation framework and delivery plan
- Monitoring and evaluation proposals

4. Consultation

The draft strategy will be developed in partnership through the proposed broad representation of the steering group and through the key stakeholder workshop. The final draft strategy will then be issued for public consultation to ensure transparency and local ownership of the final strategy and delivery plan.

Key Themes and Areas of Focus

- Passenger priorities (affordability, reliability, accessibility)
- Funding and investment models
- Network design and coverage
- Operational models and governance
- Driver recruitment and workforce resilience
- Local and inter-urban services
- Coach market and visitor demand
- Community and flexible transport
- Integration including with rail, active travel, and health transport

- Ticketing and fares integration
- Decarbonisation and fleet transition
- Accessibility and inclusion
- Marketing, information, and behaviour change
- Embedding Decent / Minimum Mobility standards

Budget and Procurement

A total budget of **£50,000** is proposed to deliver the Regional Bus Strategy. This will support:

- Desktop review, data collection and analysis
- Stakeholder engagement and facilitation
- Drafting, consultation, and publication
- Specialist consultancy input

Procurement will follow HITRANS' standard procedures, with appointment of a consultant team experienced in regional bus planning, inclusive mobility, and transport policy.

Risk Register

Area	Impact	Comment
RTS Delivery	Positive	Advances RTS objectives on public transport and equitable mobility.
Policy	Positive	Aligns with emerging national and UK policy, including the Bus Services Bill and Just Transition agenda.
Financial	Neutral/Positive	Funded within RTS Delivery Plan; Officers will explore potential for joint funding for elements or complimentary work with external partners.
Equality	Positive	Embedding improved mobility enhances inclusion and accessibility for rural and disadvantaged groups.

Recommendation

Members are invited to:

1. Note the legislative and policy context, including the UK Government's Bus Services Bill and relevant academic research on Decent Mobility.
2. Approve the proposed purpose, governance, scope, and budget for the Regional Bus Strategy.
3. Endorse inclusion of *Decent / Minimum Mobility* principle within the Strategy.
4. Agree that HITRANS establish a Steering Group and procure specialist support to undertake the work.

Report by: Neil MacRae
Designation: Senior Partnership Manager
Date: 29 October 2025