

# HIGHLIGHTS

NEWSLETTER WINTER 2025/2026

SUSTAINABLE AVIATION  
PROJECTS NEW FUNDING p3

REGIONAL BUS  
STRATEGY p4-5

SIX KEY REQUESTS OF  
PARLIAMENTARY CANDIDATES p10

## WELCOME

Welcome to the Winter 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](http://www.hitrans.org.uk)

and X (formerly Twitter) @HITRANS\_RTP

LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/company/hitrans/>

## WELCOME FOR BUS FARE CAP PILOT ANNOUNCED FOR HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS

HITRANS has welcomed a year-long £2 bus fare cap pilot across the region following a £10 million investment by the Scottish Government.

The pilot aims to make bus travel more affordable and accessible, while encouraging greater use of public transport.

It will also deliver better value for money and support lower-income passengers.

Following a successful Expression of Interest process, the Scottish Government will work with HITRANS and ZetTrans to deliver the pilot in Highland, Moray, Argyll and Bute, the Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland.

Transport Scotland will now move into an initial co-design and mobilisation phase, including agreement of technical and operational arrangements.

Ranald Robertson, HITRANS Partnership Director



for HITRANS said: “We are delighted this joint expression of interest has been successful and that work can start on rolling out the pilot across the Highlands and Islands.

“A fare cap will help make bus travel more affordable and therefore more attractive to more people.

“It will assist efforts to encourage a shift from car use and make travel routes more sustainable, particularly, in rural areas.”

## EV CHARGING NETWORK CHANGES - CUSTOMER ACTION NEEDED

The back-office provision for the council-owned public charging networks in Argyll and Bute, the Western Isles, Orkney and the Shetland Islands is moving from ChargePlace Scotland to ScottishPower in February.

This is because ChargePlace Scotland is ceasing operations in 2026.

Local and visiting customers will need to take action to ensure they can still charge both during and after this move.



HITRANS have published further information about the move and the action required here: <https://hitrans.org.uk/notice-for-ev-drivers-customer-action-required-as-charging-networks-change-2/>

We would be grateful if you can share this information with any user groups that you can.

## RENEWABLE ENERGY TRANSPORT OPPORTUNITIES

The potential transport impacts of a series of renewable energy projects in the Highlands and Islands are to be captured in a new study.

The partnership board agreed to fund the work due to the scale of recent and expected developments in the sector.

A recent report from the Highlands and Islands Regional Economic Partnership highlighted a potential £100 billion of expenditure in renewables in the area moving towards Net Zero 2045.

This could bring in 17,930 direct operational FTE jobs and 114,000 FTE job years in wind, hydro pumped storage, hydrogen, marine energy, space, marine biotechnology and processing, life sciences and nature capital.

The proposed investment is more in real terms than the oil boom of the 1970s which brought enhancements in road, rail and marine.

HITRANS believes the transport network will be heavily impacted by the increase in activity, particularly with a number of developments occurring at the same time requiring the same roads, trucks, rails and ships.

For example, the A9 at Golspie during pylon line construction will experience a 400% increase in HGVs.

The Spittal-Loch Buidhe section will require 1.5mt of aggregates and there will be more workers moving, including around camps planned at Ashaig, East Sutherland and Spittal.

# SUSTAINABLE AVIATION PROJECTS AWARDED NEW FUNDING

Next-generation aviation innovations such as cargo-carrying drones and electric planes are getting closer to taking off regularly in the Highlands and Island due to new government funding.

The area is already testing a series of state-of-the-art technologies that could overcome historic challenges of remoteness and cost of connectivity.

New support will help bring projects from the test and demonstration stage to commercial development.

HITRANS was successful in attracting funds from a £4.4 million investment announced in September by the UK Government.

The HITRANS-led Sustainable Aviation Test Environment (SATE) project, which established the UK's first operational low-carbon aviation test centre at Kirkwall Airport, will deliver a sustainable aviation strategy for the region.



It has been granted a new round of funding through the Future Flight Regional Demonstrator fund.

It receives £35,164 towards the £199,912 value of the regional pathway to sustainable aviation project.

HITRANS will also help deliver the ALBUM project, which will develop the use of uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs) operating beyond visual line of sight (BVLOS) to support cargo and logistics operations.

Its budget for this project is £77,780.

This represents a continuation of the strong financial return already achieved through SATE Phase 1 and Phase 2, where HITRANS secured over £1 million in direct funding.

The Highlands and Islands is recognised as being uniquely placed for the work, due to its dispersed populations, remote and rural communities and energy infrastructure challenges.

It is therefore dependent on aviation for access to key services such as employment, education, healthcare and social and leisure activities.

HITRANS' dual role, as a leader and as a partner puts it at the forefront of the UK's efforts to decarbonise aviation and demonstrates the national importance of the Highlands and Islands as a living testbed for next-generation transport.

The pioneering SATE work will further develop the Orkney airspace test zone to support the commercial integration of drone operations.

This will create a roadmap for new technologies to eventually help support lifeline services as well as net zero ambitions and bring economic development to the area.

Among the future uses of drone and low-carbon aircrafts could be in the rapid delivery of medicines, such as chemotherapy drugs.

It could also help high-value, time-sensitive industries including seafood and aquaculture.

The new funding will also help develop-

- hydrogen and electric aircraft for short-haul routes
- uncrewed aviation systems supporting logistics, freight and emergency response.
- work on airport infrastructure and airspace integration to enable safe deployment of zero-emission aircraft.
- cross-sector partnerships to address supply chain, regulatory and environmental challenges.





## REGIONAL BUS STRATEGY

A new plan is being devised to improve bus and coach services across the Highlands and Islands.

The partnership board gave the go-ahead for a Regional Bus Strategy (RBS) as recommended in the Regional Transport Strategy (RTS) Delivery Plan.

It will define regional priorities, shape investment decisions and influence future national policy and funding.

The strategy is particularly relevant to the Highlands and Islands, where dispersed settlements and long journeys make car dependence acute.

Buses are the most widely used form of public transport in the region, providing vital connections to employment, education, healthcare and social activities.

But the sector faces significant and growing challenges, including recruiting and retaining drivers and passenger levels not yet returning to pre-pandemic levels in many areas.

Staff shortages have led to timetable reductions, service cancellations, and, in some cases, the withdrawal of commercial routes.

These pressures threaten the sustainability of existing networks and increase reliance on local authority support to maintain socially necessary services.

The £50,000 strategy will also embed the principle of Decent or Minimum Mobility as a core benchmark for equitable access across the region.

Recent research suggests 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 RBS will seek to define what constitutes a 'decent mobility' standard for our region and identify actions to achieve it through improved bus networks, integration and community-led solutions.

The work will be overseen by a steering group chaired by HITRANS and also include Transport Scotland, local authorities, bus and coach operators, the Confederation of Passenger Transport, NHS representatives, Community Transport Association and Bus Users Scotland.

The RBS will –

- Establish a shared regional vision for the role of bus and coach services in supporting inclusive, sustainable mobility.
- Identify passenger priorities including affordability, reliability, accessibility and integration.

*continues on next page*

- Develop a delivery plan for the short, medium and long-term .
- Explore innovative models, including demand-responsive and community-based services.
- Inform regional and national policy and funding decisions.

The first phase will define the case for change, supported by comprehensive evidence.

It will assess service coverage, usage 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.

HITRANS will then convene a regional stakeholder workshop to help develop a draft strategy.

Public consultation will ensure transparency and local ownership of the final strategy and delivery plan.

Key themes include –

- 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

The strategy also comes at a time of important policy change at UK level.

The UK Government's Bus Services Bill 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.

This legislation may inform the future direction of Scottish Government transport policy.

The RBS therefore provides an opportunity for HITRANS to ensure the Scottish policy reflects the distinctive challenges and opportunities of rural and island areas.

## YOUR BUS JOURNEY SURVEY

The need to make bus services in the Highlands and Islands more reliable, affordable and better connected have been made clear in a new survey.

The interim findings have been released from the Your Bus Journey (YBJ) Survey 2025, undertaken by Transport Focus, which gathered evidence from passengers across Scotland.

Passenger satisfaction levels generally remain strong, with nine in ten respondents saying they were satisfied with their bus journey.

Punctuality of services, the professionalism of drivers and the overall length of journey time were key factors.

However, concerns remain about value for money, with only three-quarters of fare payers indicating they were satisfied with the price paid for their journey.

In the HITRANS area, the satisfaction level is slightly lower than the national average, highlighting that dispersed populations, long distances and fewer alternatives make flaws more keenly felt.

Passengers in the region reported particular difficulties with evening and weekend services, which were consistently described as insufficient to meet social, educational, and employment needs.

Reliability concerns, such as delays and cancellations, were also reported more frequently in rural and island communities where alternatives are limited.

For island residents, the coordination of bus services with ferry and rail timetables was a critical issue.

Affordability was another recurring theme. While concessionary travel has reduced costs for younger and older residents, those paying standard fares for longer-distance journeys were more likely to be unhappy regarding value for money.

Despite the challenges there are also opportunities, with strong support for piloting more flexible, demand-responsive models of bus services.

This is particularly relevant in areas where conventional fixed routes cannot realistically meet the needs of small or dispersed populations.

It is clear there is an appetite for better integration between bus, rail, ferry and active travel.

The results reinforce the strategic direction already being pursued by HITRANS through the Regional Bus Strategy and inform its next phase.

They highlight the importance of innovative thinking, community engagement and continuing to press nationally for policies such as minimum mobility guarantees that recognise the distinct needs of rural and island populations.

HITRANS will also explore opportunities to develop pilot projects that test hybrid services, combining demand-responsive transport with conventional fixed routes.

Engagement with local authorities, operators and community groups will be essential, while pressing for minimum mobility guarantees.

# OPPORTUNITY TO COLLABORATE WITH NHS ON COMMUNITY TRANSPORT

HITRANS is to press for greater collaboration with the NHS in community transport to help overcome inequalities, particularly in remote and island areas.

The partnership board heard key findings from the Community Transport Association's Healthy Communities Scotland (2025) report.

Community Transport plays a major role in delivering non-emergency patient transport and helping people to live healthier lives.

It is estimated that in 2022 there were more than 890,000 community transport journeys in Scotland each year.

This includes around 329,300 journeys to health-related destinations, plus about 204,700 to social care-related destinations.

Many of these passengers would have been unable to travel without community transport.

However, operators overwhelmingly report a lack of communication, collaboration or partnership working. Most are not connected with local health and social care stakeholders or services and are not part of local health and social care decision-making or policymaking.

The research, based on FOI requests to all 14 NHS boards, finds low compliance, limited collaboration and a significant reliance on private taxis rather than community transport.

It shows only half of NHS boards have community benefit policies and fewer work directly with community transport.

The report reveals no NHS board has published the required compliance reports and that more than £20.9 million has been spent on taxis in the past five years – six times more than on non-profit community transport.

A total of 26% of community transport operators fear closure within three years due to rising demand and lack of sustainable funding.

For HITRANS, the CTA report underlines the critical role of community transport in ensuring access to health and social care across Scotland.

Without stronger support and partnership, there is a real risk of losing lifeline services.

There is concern about worsening health inequalities, particularly in remote and island communities where access challenges are most acute.

With work now underway on a Highlands and Islands Health and Transport Action Plan, HITRANS is well placed to help support increased collaboration and innovation between the NHS and community transport providers.





## ACTIVE TRAVEL INFRASTRUCTURE FUND

Transport Scotland has confirmed funding for two community-led projects which HITRANS submitted to the Active Travel Infrastructure Fund (ATIF) in February.

One is to construct Slighe an lochdar in South Uist, a project initiated by lochdar Community Council which had been designed through Sustrans Places for Everyone fund, which is now closed. This will provide a traffic free route connecting the Primary School, shop, community centre and housing in the crofting settlement of lochdar.

The other project will progress preparatory stages for full design of the Skye Cycle Way route connecting Broadford and Kyleakin, with a view to completing the full detailed design in 2026-27, subject to further funding. The Skye Cycle Way is comprised of sections of abandoned old single track road adjacent to the A87 trunk road and

new sections of connecting path, and has been a long-time aspiration for Broadford and Strath Community Company. This project was also previously supported by funding through Places for Everyone for feasibility and design. HITRANS is pleased to be working with both organisations in supporting these projects.





# MORE ACTION TO PRESS FOR RETURN OF VITAL NAVIGATION SERVICE

A campaign is to be stepped up to restore UK access to a European navigation service that provides lifeline technology for fragile island and remote communities.

In June, HITRANS wrote to the Minister for Aviation to highlight the urgent need for the UK Government to rejoin the European Geostationary Navigation Overlay Service (EGNOS) that increases the accuracy of GPS signals.

The satellite system allows flights to land in low visibility and bad weather.

The UK is currently the only G20 nation without aviation satellite navigation capability.

It is vital for communities such as Barra, Islay and Tiree where conventional alternatives for air services are limited.

The withdrawal from EGNOS has led to a sharp rise in weather-related cancellations.

This includes in Barra where services are already constrained by the unique beach runway.

Disruption to air services is also a concern on Islay and other communities with smaller airports, with business activity, tourism and access to vital mainland medical services affected.

In addition, the absence of EGNOS compromises the reliability of emergency operations such as air ambulance flights.

HITRANS says this is directly affecting social equity and community viability.

It argues that the cost of rejoining the system - an estimated £30 million a year - is modest compared to the £15 billion recently committed by Government to wider transport investment.



In a reply to HITRANS in September, the Minister said the Government is still considering its options following the withdrawal from EGNOS and the UK's aviation system continues to operate safely.

HITRANS says the Government's unwillingness to engage directly leaves islanders with little reassurance that their concerns are understood or being acted upon.

It plans to keep the pressure on by working with MPs representing island and peripheral constituencies, devolved administrations, airline operators and communities to make the case for rejoining EGNOS.

# SIX KEY REQUESTS OF PARLIAMENTARY CANDIDATES TO HELP RURAL AND ISLAND COMMUNITIES

We have put forward six Key Asks for parties to include in their manifestos for the 2026 Scottish Parliament Election.

Our vision is for a regionally-empowered model where regional transport partnerships (RTPs) are direct and accountable leaders across transport policy, funding and delivery.

This would provide tailored solutions for rural and island communities, while delivering national priorities on inclusion, decarbonisation and economic growth.

## 1. Devolve key transport funds to RTPs by 2027

Commit to devolve core transport funds held by Transport Scotland (bus, active travel, PSO, air discounts, behaviour change, ferry support, etc.) directly to RTPs.

This would –

- Enable bespoke local solutions, be more cost-effective and provide better outcomes.
- Use local plans to empower communities to shape, prioritise and deliver transport services.
- Provide joined-up solutions with a greater impact than the current approach
- Ensure investment in ferry services, including council ferry replacements, is integrated with wider regional 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 by RTPs.

This would help provide-

- 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.
- Measures to tackle transport poverty and reduce car reliance.
- Innovative and new service models
- Certainty to staff, operators and communities

## 3. Reform concessionary fares to make them fair

Redesign Scotland's concessionary scheme to make it fairer by extending coverage to ferries, connecting rail and community transport.

The current scheme disproportionately benefits urban areas with dense bus networks, while rural and island residents receive significantly less value on lifeline ferry and train services.

For example, under the Under-22 scheme, an Edinburgh resident receives 20 times the benefit of someone in the Western Isles.

Concessionary entitlements should be extended to community transport and other essential services in rural areas, including local ferries and connecting rail or bus services.

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

## 4. Expand RTP powers and remit by 2028

This would allow RTPs to cover integrated transport planning across all modes, bus franchising, as well as integration with housing, healthcare and economic development.

Cross-sector planning powers will enable RTPs to –

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

*continues on next page*

### 5. Create a Regional Transport Investment Fund

Administered by RTPs and aligned with local economic strategies, this would enable long-term strategic investment reflecting the higher costs of remote delivery.

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

- Reflect local priorities, demographic challenges and geographic realities
- Support innovation in transport delivery and make better use of new and emerging technology
- Enable long-term, strategic investment decisions
- Cover both short and long-term measures to improve the community voice in ferry decision-making

### 6. Move to enhanced regional governance of transport

Commit to regional transport strategies as the primary framework for transport investment and delivery, reducing reliance on centralised documents such as the strategic transport projects review (STPR).

This would ensure investment decisions are shaped by those closest to community needs and appropriate weight is given to regional priorities in bus, ferry, rail and aviation.

It would also strengthen local representation, accountability and transparency and create a platform for long-term reforms.

In addition, HITRANS calls for reforms to ferry governance and community engagement, along with national commitments to major infrastructure projects.

This includes the 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.

## HITRANS KEY ASKS FOR SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT ELECTION 2026





# EMPOWERING RURAL COMMUNITIES

HITRANS has secured additional funding to help deliver a key research and innovation project.

The region is one of six simplified rural socio-ecological systems (SIMSES) under Horizon Europe, and HITRANS is one of more than 50 partners from across Europe and Africa included in the project.

The climate smart, ecosystem-enhancing and knowledge-based rural expertise and training centres (RURALITIES), which run to September 2027, aims to empower rural areas using innovation and technologies.

Lessons learned will be shared in other rural communities and resources created to leave the legacy of best practices in innovation and policy change.

HITRANS now has a second role in the project as a Work Package leader, with an aim to enhance regional transport, promote economic growth and reduce barriers to employment, learning, social, leisure, health and cultural activities in the region.

The partnership is working on a data mapping collaboration to build a real time model of journeys to show supply and demand across the year.

The model will be used to improve local connectivity and better integrate transport systems.

It will also enable funding applications for innovative, lower-carbon transport solutions.

Robert Gordon University has joined the project as an academic partner for Smart Mobility Solutions for Rural and Island Transport Optimisation.

Work has started on journey tracking in Stronsay and Westray in Orkney, with volunteers carrying small trackers either in their vehicle or on their person.

Rousay is also joining the project and data will be collected to at least March 2026.

A fixed tracker (LIDAR) is being investigated and tested to map all movement from a fixed location.

This will allow analysis of all traffic and movement through one point which will expand the data already being collected from the individual trackers.

A total of 117,853 data samples were collected by September 2025 and work continues to gather information.

The main goal of RURALITIES is to have a bank of resources that rural communities can access, learn from and build upon along with accessible expertise centres.

Best practices and models will be replicated for effective change which can drive policy change to support rural areas.

HITRANS' additional work has seen the budget increase from £311,111.95 to £432,303.42.

# *HI*•LIGHTS

**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](mailto:info@hitrans.org.uk)