

HIGHLIGHTS

NEWSLETTER SPRING 2026

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WELCOME

Welcome to the Spring 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

and X (formerly Twitter) [@HITRANS_RTP](https://twitter.com/HITRANS_RTP)

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

WINDRACERS AND HITRANS PARTNER TO EXPAND DRONE AIR CARGO

A new agreement between HITRANS and Windracers will help accelerate the use of air cargo drones across the region.

Under a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), projects will be identified where unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) can deliver social, economic and environmental benefits for people and businesses.

The agreement reflects a shared focus on how autonomous aviation can respond to the specific transport needs of remote and rural regions.

Support from Innovate UK's Sustainable Aviation Test Environment (SATE) programme brought Windracers and HITRANS together through a series of funded operations to demonstrate the uses of UAS cargo.

The MoU marks the next step in the relationship, moving from programme-led collaboration towards a long-term, locally-led operational model.



The Highlands and Islands is uniquely placed for this work, with much of the region characterised by dispersed populations and remote and rural communities and services.

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

In future, UAS could help with the rapid delivery of medicines and also assist high-value, time-sensitive industries such as seafood and aquaculture.

The partnership also highlights the role of public funding in supporting the transition of proven drone capability into long-term UAS operations within the UK.



TRIBUTE TO 'INSPIRATIONAL LEADER' CHARLIE KING

Charlie King, who died in February, chaired HITRANS during the significant transition from a voluntary body to a statutory Regional Transport Partnership.

Partnership Director Ranald Robertson paid tribute to Charlie, a former Highland Council councillor, for his contribution to the RTP and transport issues in the Highlands.

He said: "At a time of uncertainty and change, he brought ambition, determination and absolute clarity of purpose.

"He believed passionately that the Highlands and Islands deserved a transport system equal to the needs and aspirations of its people, and he worked tirelessly to ensure that our new statutory status was not merely a change in structure, but a step-change in impact.

"Charlie was an inspirational leader. He combined strategic vision with a deep understanding of the communities we serve.

"He set high standards for the organisation and for those of us privileged to work alongside him.

"His expectation was always that HITRANS should be bold for the region — ambitious in thought, determined in delivery and unwavering in its commitment to improving connectivity and opportunity across the Highlands and Islands."

Mr Robertson said the culture of ambition and regional pride that Charlie instilled continues to guide HITRANS today.

"We strive to live up to the example he set — to be courageous in our advocacy, collaborative in our partnerships, and relentless in our efforts to make transport in the Highlands and Islands the very best it can be.

"Charlie's contribution to local government and to regional transport will endure through the projects advanced under his stewardship and through the many people he inspired and mentored along the way.

"The improvement to the A830 will stand as a very particular lasting legacy to his work. He will be greatly missed."



HI-BIKE SCHEME ACCELERATES IN INVERNESS AND FORT WILLIAM IN 2025

New figures show the HI-BIKE share scheme is growing in popularity among local commuters and visitors.

Cyclists using the bikes in Inverness and Fort William travelled the equivalent of almost three times around the world in 2025.

They made 33,838 trips using the power-assisted bikes, with 71,175 miles covered in the area throughout the year.

Journeys ranged from short trips to connect to other forms of transport, to longer sight-seeing excursions.

There are currently 70 bikes available for hire across the scheme at 27 docking stations where cycles can be accessed 24/7 via an app.

Eighteen of the docking stations enable bicycle recharging, while riders can end their journeys at locations without a charging dock at nine virtual stations.

Inverness has eight chargeable docking stations and five virtual stations.

Fort William has 10 charging stations and four dockless stations.

Each station has been strategically located to serve workplaces, transport hubs, universities and residential areas.

Plans are underway to expand the HI-BIKE project into Elgin and Aviemore in partnership with Cairngorms National Park.

HITRANS' figures show:

- August and September had the highest number of overall trips at 5,269 and 5,257 respectively
- The next busiest months were October, July and May.
- Average e-bike trips ranged from 1.85–2.52 miles
- The most popular locations to travel to and from were Inverness Train Station, Fort William Travel Centre and Caol.

Membership of the scheme grew from 3,573 in 2024 to 4,334 in 2025.



PUBLIC CONSULTATION LAUNCHED ON FORT WILLIAM TRANSPORT PLAN

Residents and businesses have been given the opportunity to help shape a future transport vision for Fort William.

A consultation on the Fort William Integrated Transport Plan (ITP), aimed at improving infrastructure and connectivity in and around the town, closed on April 13.

The ITP plans to support a connected, inclusive, safe and resilient Fort William.

Leaflets promoting the consultation were sent to every household in the study area which covers Fort William, Caol, Inverlochy, Banavie and Corpach.

In addition, a dedicated email address has been set up to allow direct feedback to the project team - FortWilliamITP@aecom.com.

The study is led by HITRANS which commissioned AECOM in partnership with Stantec to develop the ITP.

It seeks to address long-standing issues including the reliability and resilience of the trunk road network in the town.

Following feedback and the appraisal of all the different options, an action plan will be developed as a preferred way forward.

As part of the consultation, an informal drop-in event was held on March 17 in the Nevis Centre with local residents and business invited to view designs and speak directly with the project team.

Transport Scotland and The Highland Council are also providing funding to support the work.

It will look at journey times and seasonal congestion on the A82 and A830 and how it impacts on drivers, public transport and businesses.

Other problems include a lack of alternative routes during road closures, poor bus accessibility and limited local rail services and Central Belt connections.

MORE FUNDING FOR ACTIVE TRAVEL PROJECTS

New funding is being made available to help employers, organisations and communities make it easier to walk, cycle, or wheel for work and local journeys.

Building on the success of the programme started last year, the Workplace Active Travel Infrastructure Grant and Community Cycle Parking Grant launched in February to support local projects across the region.

Delivered by HITRANS, the grant schemes are open to businesses, charities, public sector bodies and not-for-profit organisations across Highland, Moray, Orkney, Western Isles and most of Argyll and Bute.

Across both grant schemes, HITRANS has allocated almost £350,000 during the current funding period (2025/26) to support workplace and community-based active travel infrastructure in the region.

Last year, 14 workplace projects across the HITRANS area received around £92,000 in grants to support small and medium businesses, charities and public sector organisations such as local authorities and NHS boards.

Projects include:

- Installing new cycling infrastructure and improving existing facilities
- Adding bike repair stands
- Providing workplace e-bikes and storage for staff use
- Upgrading changing facilities and showering areas
- Hosting Dr Bike sessions with local bike mechanics

The projects make cycling to work easier, safer and more enjoyable, while providing protected bike storage at workplaces.

They also contribute to healthier, more active lifestyles, helping staff stay active as part of their daily routines.

Last year, 12 projects were funded through the Community Cycle Parking Grant, including two multi-project applications from Highland Council and Moray Council.

A total of £257,000 was allocated to support the provision of new cycle parking facilities.

Funded projects included:

- Cycle parking at five schools across the region
- Bespoke covered cycle shelters at six leisure centres in the Highlands
- Cycle parking at a children's residential facility in Kirkwall
- Cycle parking and repair stands installed across Moray
- An e-bike storage hub in Nairn

The projects are improving access to safe and secure cycle parking in community locations, making it easier for people to choose cycling for everyday journeys.

While some projects are already complete, others are still being delivered and will continue to strengthen local active travel provision.

New this year, applicants are able to complete submissions via HITRANS' online application portal.

This allows users to save applications, total project costs automatically and receive and provide updates on progress, making it easy to take part in these projects.

To support applicants, HITRANS hosted an online information webinar on March 4, covering both grant funds.

It showcased examples from last year's successful projects and provided an opportunity for prospective applicants to ask questions.

Applications should be submitted via the online portal by April 30 for the Community Cycle Parking Grant and by May 15 for the Workplace Active Travel Infrastructure Grant.

HITRANS is offering the grants with funding from Transport Scotland's People and Place Programme.

CORE AND RTS REVENUE BUDGET

HITRANS faces a challenge in meeting key targets due to funding constraints.

Despite stable funding levels from central and local government, a significant rise in inflation has led to a substantial increase in operational costs.

A report to the Partnership board showed that there has been no corresponding increase in funding to meet these rising costs, particularly for staff salaries and other core operational expenses, making it harder to deliver services and meet increasingly complex transport and economic demands.

It said if it is not adequately resourced, HITRANS risks failing to meet its strategic objectives.

It would undermine the delivery of critical key performances indicators (KPIs), hinder behavioural change towards sustainable transport and damage the economic and social fabric of the Highlands and Islands.

HITRANS has successfully attracted third-party income to supplement its operational and delivery funding, including from the Bus Route Development Grant, Bus Investment Fund, MaaS Investment Fund, Islands Team Funding, multiple EU funds, and UKRI / Innovate UK.

While this has brought in additional support, it is not a sustainable or reliable solution to the funding gap.

This ongoing uncertainty makes long-term planning increasingly difficult.

It impacts on efforts to drive behavioural change and potentially on economic and social wellbeing across the Highlands and Islands.

Without sufficient resources, HITRANS will face challenges in meeting the ambitious targets outlined in the Regional Transport Strategy (RTS) and National Transport Strategy (NTS).

The ability to deliver planned improvements in public transport infrastructure, services, and integration is contingent on adequate funding.

Therefore, securing appropriate and sustainable funding for HITRANS is essential to ensure the success of both existing and future transport strategies.

The partnership director and treasurer will prepare the final Medium Term Financial Plan for inclusion in the 2026/27 Business Plan that will be taken to the April board meeting.



CONCERNS OVER AIR DEPARTURE TAX PLANS

HITRANS has made representations to the Scottish Government on the proposed Air Departure Tax (ADT) amid concerns over how it could impact some air services and connectivity in the Highlands and Islands.

ADT is a tax payable by aircraft operators using Scottish airports and is proposed to replace UK Air Passenger Duty (APD).

The introduction of ADT was deferred in 2018 but it is now planned to come into effect on April 1 2027.

At that time APD will be 'turned off' in Scotland. ADT rates and bands would match those of the UK Government's APD for the first year of operation in 2027-28. Rates and bands for 2028-29 will be set out at the 2027-28 Scottish budget.

Passengers departing from Highlands and Islands airports are currently exempt from APD, reflecting the importance of aviation for remote and island communities with limited.

A consultation which has recently closed, sought views on the Scottish Government's proposals for a Highlands and Islands exemption from ADT.

Under APD rules, all flights from H&I airports are exempt, no matter their destination (including connecting flights).

International and connecting flights from any H&I airport to any destination across are currently exempt from APD on the entire outbound journey.

Proposed ADT rules would remove international flights from the exemption, making them liable to the tax.

This includes connecting flights to international destinations, ie the entire journey will be taxable, based on the final destination.

ADT plans would retain the tax-exempt status of flights from H&I airports to the rest of the UK (including connecting flights).

It would also extend the exemption to outward legs of flights from other Scottish airports to H&I airports.

HITRANS has submitted a response to the consultation in partnership with HIAL, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and The Highland Council welcoming the extension of the exemption to cover inbound and outbound flights to the Highlands and Islands from any Scottish airport.

However, the response also flagged significant concerns about the potential impact of the proposal to remove the exemption for direct and connecting international flights from airports in the Highlands and Islands.

The response highlighted that this proposal could have a detrimental effect on a small number of key routes from Inverness Airport in particular that took many years to establish and are vital to the region's connectivity and economic development and that it was directly at odds with wider Scottish Government stated objectives for the Highlands and Islands economy.

Our evidence sets out clearly the consequences of increased costs on these routes: higher fares, reduced passenger numbers, lower route profitability, reduced frequencies, and the potential undermining of route viability altogether.

The consultation document states that the change is intended to achieve parity between Scottish airports for international travel.



PUBLIC SERVICE OBLIGATIONS

A new report could be used to influence policy discussions on lifeline aviation and regional equality.

It provides a detailed examination of how Public Service Obligations (PSOs) are used internationally to sustain essential air connectivity for remote, rural and island regions where commercial provision alone cannot deliver regular, affordable or reliable services.

Prepared by HITRANS officers and developed following discussion at a workshop in Elgin in November, the research focuses on two PSO systems in Norway and Greece.

Both address challenging geographies comparable to the Highlands and Islands, and have evolved into stable, long-term policy instruments embedded within wider national objectives.

The report describes a centrally-funded and nationally-integrated PSO framework in Norway that treats regional aviation as a public utility and a core component of regional development and social cohesion policy.

The Norwegian model ensures that no resident lives more than 90 minutes from scheduled air services and provides consistent fare regulation, high reliability and long-term funding certainty.

The report highlights how this approach has delivered strong value for money while also creating a platform for innovation, particularly in relation to the early adoption of zero-emission and low-emission aircraft on short regional routes.

The Greek case study examines a large-scale archipelagic PSO system serving over 200 inhabited islands.

The report highlights how Greece combines national funding with cohesion-style support to maintain year-round connectivity between islands and the mainland.

Key features include clearly defined service obligations, fare ceilings for residents, multi-year contracts and robust governance arrangements.

Despite operating across a highly fragmented geography, the Greek system has achieved stable costs, transparent procurement and measurable social benefit.

The report identifies strong parallels between the challenges faced in Norway and Greece and those experienced in the Highlands and Islands.

This includes dispersed populations, long travel distances, weather dependency and the essential role of aviation in accessing healthcare, education, employment and public services.

It suggests that Scotland could benefit from moving towards a more unified and strategic PSO framework, integrating the current mix of Scottish Government PSOs, local authority-supported air services and the Air Discount Scheme.

Public service obligations continued

This approach could improve affordability through consistent fare regulation, enhance transparency and accountability, support environmental transition, and align aviation policy more closely with wider objectives on social inclusion and regional equity.

The report does not advocate immediate structural change. Instead, it provides an evidence-based foundation to support informed discussion and future policy development.

This includes-

- Reinforcing the principle that air connectivity should be treated as core public infrastructure, not discretionary transport provision.
- Strengthening the evidence base underpinning HITRANS' work on inclusive growth and social equity.
- Helping with ongoing discussions on regional leadership and subsidiarity.
- Supporting HITRANS' ambition to align connectivity policy with climate and environmental objectives.
- Providing the partnership with an evidence-led advocacy tool for policy discussions on lifeline aviation.

ROLLING STOCK REPLACEMENT DELAYS

The 'unacceptable' state of trains in the Highlands is to be raised with the Cabinet Secretary for Transport.

Conditions on rail journeys were highlighted by board members as they discussed delays to replacing rolling stock.

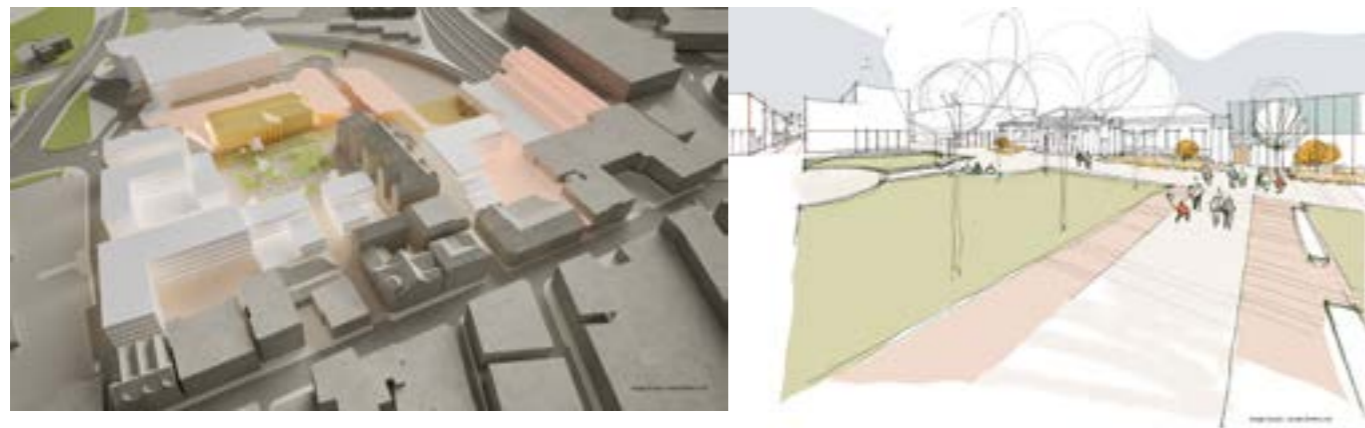
The board meeting heard of icicles inside trains and passengers carrying sleeping bags and heaters in an effort to keep warm.

In November, Transport Scotland published Rail Recharged: Scotland's Fleet Transition Strategy which revealed the deadline for the removal of all diesel-powered trains in Scotland is revised from 2035 to 2045.

InterCity HSTs are to be replaced by either younger, lower-emission diesel trains taken from elsewhere or the introduction of bi-mode electro-diesel trains.

The diesel InterCity HSTs are 50 years old and have high fuel consumption. They have been dogged by poor performance since their introduction into the ScotRail fleet.

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VIEWS WANTED ON INVERNESS TRANSPORT HUB

Public views are being sought on the latest plans to create a major transport hub and gateway to Inverness city centre.

HITRANS commissioned the Inverness Interchange Bus Station and Car Park Feasibility Study to help explore a range of options for the creation of a strategic multi-modal transport interchange.

These include a reconfigured bus and coach station, a replacement Rose Street multi-storey car park and active travel hub.

The Station Quarter development could be a landmark destination with new civic space to enhance the setting of the historic, A-listed library which is being retained.

Highland Council's city of Inverness committee welcomed the study findings in February and agreed that a public consultation should begin.

The recent purchase of the former Post Office sorting office by Network Rail means that much of Farraline Park, and between it and the railway station, is now within public ownership.

This, combined with Highland Council's need to consider future options for the Rose Street car park, provides an opportunity to rethink how the area is developed.

Key findings of the study highlight the bus station and multi-storey car park need to be replaced.

The bus station is too small and inefficient with just seven stances, operating as 14 stances with 'double stacking'.

This causes pedestrian/vehicle conflicts and fails to meet standards of accessibility, quality of passenger experience, operational efficiency and safety.

The condition of the car park's structure means it does not meet modern standards and has a limited future.

Initial analysis shows a replacement bus station with at least 14 stances, and ideally 16, could be located within the Station Quarter.

A new 850-space car park could be created at the existing TK Maxx and railway station car parks, to meet future demand including for EVs.

Twelve development options have been refined to three, involving the creation of 15 or 16 bus stances either east or north-east of the library and the car park rebuilt at or north of the station quarter.

HI LIGHTS

WE HOPE YOU ENJOYED
the latest issue of our newsletter.



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