



Minute of Meeting held in the Chamber,
The Town House, Inverness and virtually
through MS Teams on Friday 6 February
2026 at 9.30am

PRESENT

Uisdean Robertson, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Chair)
Amber Dunbar, Moray Council (Vice-Chair)
Kristopher Leask, Orkney Islands Council
Ian Brown, The Highland Council (Substitute Member)
John Armour, Argyll and Bute Council
Naomi Bremner, Non-Councillor Member
Shona Maclennan, Non-Councillor Member
Robert Andrew, Non-Councillor Member

APOLOGIES

Ken Gowans, The Highland Council
Michael Green The Highland Council
Julie Cromarty, The Highland Council
Paul Reid, The Highland Council
Gordon Blair, Argyll and Bute Council

IN ATTENDANCE

Ranald Robertson, Partnership Director
Frank Roach, Partnership Manager
Neil MacRae, Senior Partnership Manager
Jennifer Johnston, Highland Council
Nicole Wallace, The Highland Council
Gareth Waterson, Orkney Islands Council
Laura Cromarty, Orkney Islands Council
Colm Fraser, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar
Linda Cunningham, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar
Timothy Mackay, Moray Council
Fergus Murray, Argyll and Bute Council
Nicholas Sobey, HIE
Vikki Trelfer, HITRANS
Gemma Robinson, HITRANS
John Ross, HITRANS
Dawn Gillies, HITRANS
Derek Mackay, Partnership Secretary
Claire Harper, HITRANS
Adam Hahr, Audit Scotland
Rhiannon Merrit, Prosper Scotland
Stewart Wilson, Scottish Government
Martin Davidson, Scottish Government
Lucas Princ, Windracers
Simon Muderack, Windracers

The Chair ruled the appendix to items 3, 4, 16 and item 23 as Urgent Items to allow them to be considered prior to the next scheduled meeting of HITRANS.

Declaration of
Interests

Shona Maclennan declared an interest in item 8 as Chair of a Community Council making a funding bid for Active Travel funding.

MINUTES

- Minute of Meeting of 7 November 2025 1 The Minute of Meeting of 7 November 2025 was **approved**.
- Matters Arising 2 Mr Neil Macrae indicated that the introduction of the £2 bus fare cap pilot for the Highlands and Islands would delay the advancement of the Regional Bus Strategy.

It was agreed to note the update.

FINANCE

- Revenue Budget Monitoring Report – 1 April 2025 to 31 December 2025 3 With reference to item 4 of the Minute of Meeting of 6 November 2025, Ms Jennifer Johnston, Partnership Treasurer, submitted a Report setting out the revenue monitoring position for the period 1 April 2025 to 31 December 2025 and the projected year end position.

It was agreed to approve the Report and schedule detailing the revenue monitoring position for the period to 31 December 2025.

- Revenue Budget Proposal 2026/2027 4 Ms Jennifer Johnston, Finance Manager on behalf of the Partnership Treasurer, submitted a Report which detailed the proposed revenue budget 2026/27 covering the Partnership's running costs and research and strategy development programme costs, together with the income from Partner Councils, the Scottish Government and other external agencies to cover these costs.

It was agreed to approve the Revenue Budget 2026/27 as detailed at Appendix 1 of the Report.

- Medium Term Financial Plan 5 Mr Ranald Robertson, Partnership Director, submitted a Report which detailed HITRANS draft Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP). The Report stated that by establishing a rolling Medium Term Financial Plan that is explicitly linked to financial risk, sustainability and delivery considerations, HITRANS is strengthening its ability to anticipate and respond to funding volatility, align resources with strategic priorities, and make informed decisions about future service delivery. The Report highlighted that this approach provided a clear line of sight between financial planning, organisational sustainability and the risks to achieving regional and national transport outcomes, as set out within the Report.

It was agreed:

- (1) to note the Report; and**
- (2) to delegate preparation of the final Medium Term Financial Plan to the Finance Manager / Partnership Treasurer and Partnership Director and for this to be included in the 2026/27 Business Plan that would be taken to the April 2026 Partnership Meeting for approval by the Partnership Board.**

RESEARCH AND STRATEGY DELIVERY

- Research/Strategy Development Programme for 2025/26 6 With reference to item 5 of the Minute of Meeting of 7 November 2025, Mr Ranald Robertson, Partnership Director, submitted a Report which provided an update on progress on delivering the Research and Strategy Development programme and sought approval of amendments to the programme to reflect commitments made and changing

priorities and funding opportunities identified since approval of the 2025/26 Business Plan.

It was agreed to approve the amendments to the Research and Strategy Development Programme 2025/26 as detailed in the Appendix to the Report.

Research,
Development and
Delivery Draft
Programme for
2026/27

7 Mr Ranald Robertson, Partnership Director, submitted a Report which detailed the provisional Research, Development and Delivery activities to be taken forward by HITRANS in 2026/27. The Report contained a provisional programme but there was still scope for further projects to be included and budget allocation to be adjusted. The Programme would be further developed within the 2026/27 Business Plan.

It was agreed to:

- (1) note the Report;**
- (2) approve the draft Programme as detailed in the Report;**
- (3) consider projects that could be added to the draft Programme: and**
- (4) delegate responsibility to the Chair and Partnership Director to finalise the Programme for inclusion in the 2026/27 Business Plan which would be tabled at the April Partnership Board Meeting.**

Shona MacLennan declared an interest in the following item as Chair of a Community Council making a funding bid for Active Travel funding.

Active Travel Update

8 With reference to item 10 of the Minute of Meeting of 7 November 2025, Ms Vikki Trelfer, Active Travel Team Leader, submitted a Report which provided an update on the delivery of the People and Place Programme funded by Transport Scotland, and other Active Travel projects in which HITRANS and Partner Local Authorities were involved.

It was agreed to note the Report.

International Best
Practice in the use of
Air PSOs

9 Mr Ranald Robertson, Partnership Director, submitted a Report detailing the HITRANS evaluation report, International Best Practice in the Use of Public Service Obligations (PSOs) to support air connectivity to remote, rural and island regions. The research which formed the basis of the evaluation report focused on two mature PSO systems in Norway and Greece as they operated at scale, addressed challenging geographies comparable to the Highlands and Islands and have evolved into stable, long-term policy instruments embedded within wider national objectives.

The evaluation report provided Members with a structured international evidence base to support informed discussion on the role of Public Service Obligations in sustaining essential air connectivity for remote, rural and island communities.

It was agreed to:

- (1) note the Report on international best practice in the use of Public Service Obligations;**
- (2) note that the Report had been developed following discussion at the workshop held in Elgin on 6 November 2025; and**
- (3) endorse the Report for use as a strategic evidence base to inform future policy engagement and advocacy by HITRANS.**

Regional £2 Bus Fare Cap Regional Pilot	10	<p>Mr Ranald Robertson, Partnership Director, submitted a Report to advise members that HITRANS, working in Partnership with ZetTrans, had been selected by the Scottish Government and Transport Scotland to deliver the £2 Regional Bus Fare Cap Pilot across the Highlands, Moray, Argyll and Bute, and the island communities of the Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland.</p> <p>The Report stated that the pilot was supported by £10 million of Scottish Government investment and would operate for a 12-month period from January 2026. The Report indicated that it aimed to improve the affordability and accessibility of bus travel, support lower-income passengers, encourage increased use of public transport, and strengthen the sustainability of local bus services.</p> <p>It was agreed to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) note the successful selection of HITRANS, in partnership with ZetTrans, to deliver the £2 Regional Bus Fare Cap Pilot; (2) recognise the strategic role played by HITRANS in developing the successful Expression of Interest; and (3) support officers in progressing joint delivery with Transport Scotland, local authorities and operators.
Sustainable Aviation Projects Update	11	<p>Ms Dawn Gillies, Sustainable Aviation Development Manager and Ms Jayne Gourlay, SATE Project Coordinator, submitted a Report providing an update in relation sustainable aviation projects. The Report indicated that HHS Grampian North Innovation Hub had joined the project as a consortium partner. HITRANS had been successful in securing funding for the next generation of aviation technology projects. HITRANS was working with partners to determine future flight projects across the region and had submitted funding bids to the Inverness and Highlands City Region Deal and Island Centre for Net Zero. The Report further indicated that the Sustainable Aviation Test Environment project had been shortlisted for The Engineer's C2I award in the aerospace and defence category.</p> <p>It was agreed to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) note HITRANS' success in securing a new SATE consortium partner; (2) note HITRANS' success in being nominated for a Collaborate and Innovate (C2I) award; and (3) support continued engagement in the UK Research and Innovation Future Flight programme as a platform for advancing sustainable aviation solutions for the Highlands & Islands.
Regional Rail Update	12	<p>With reference to item 7 of the Minute of Meeting of 12 September 2026, Mr Frank Roach submitted a Report which provided an update on rail matters across the HITRANS area. Transport Scotland had published Rail Recharged: Scotland's Fleet Transition Strategy which revised the deadline for removal of all diesel-powered trains in Scotland to 2045, having previously been 2035. The Report indicated that diesel trains would remain on rural routes until at least 2035. Members raised the issues in relation to inadequate heating on the West Coast rail line which continued to generate negative publicity and were the subject of numerous complaints from passengers.</p> <p>Following a recent summit in relation to Faslane Station, Network Rail, Transport Scotland and Scotrail would undertake further work on feasibility and capacity and the summit would reconvene following Easter.</p>

It was agreed:

- (1) to note the Report; and**
- (2) that the Chair and the Partnership Director would make representations to the Cabinet Secretary for Transport seeking acceleration of the replacement programme for the class 156 trains on the West Highland rail lines.**

Renewable Energy
Transport
Opportunities Study
Progress

13

With reference to item 11 of the Minute of Meeting of 7 November 2026, Mr Frank Roach, Partnership Manager submitted a Report which provided an update on the project to raise awareness of potential transport impacts arising from the increased activity in the renewables sector across the Highlands and Islands.

The Report indicated that following discussions with Transport Scotland, Highland Council, the Road Haulage Association and some developers, HITRANS proposed to draw up a brief for a piece of work to support the objectives noted within the Report. This would consider:

- Targets for renewables generation.
- Timescales for developments.
- Future OHL capacity.
- Road (trunk and local), rail and ports/waterways capacities and constraints
- Aggregates availability.
- A mechanism for determining origin and destination of materials required on site.
- How an infrastructure levy could be applied.
- And – how to pull this together into an end product.

It was agreed to note the Report.

Public Transport
Information Shared
Service Progress
Report

14

Mr Robert Wilson, Public Transport information Officer and Mr Neil Macrae, Partnership Manager submitted a Report which provided an update on the shared service operating model for co-ordinating the provision of public transport information across the HITRANS area and proposals to support this going forward.

It was agreed:

- (1) to note the Report;**
- (2) that the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between HITRANS and Partner Councils for the Public Transport Shared Service be reviewed and an updated MoU submitted for consideration at a future Partnership meeting; and**
- (3) that the cost of inputting manual registrations be accounted for in the updated Memorandum of Understanding.**

Electric Vehicle
Infrastructure Fund
Shared Service Update

15

With reference to item 11 of the Minute of meeting of 12 September 2025, Ms Gemma Robinson, EVIF Project Manager submitted a Report which provided an update on regional activity in respect of the project management shared service under the Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Fund (EVIF). The shared service covered Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Orkney Islands Council, Shetland Islands Council and Argyll and Bute Council. The Report stated that HITRANS had appointed Scottish Power as the Charge Point Network operator for the shared service region. This was required as the current provider (Charge Place Scotland) was due to cease operations in 2026.

The Report indicated that the phase 2 expansion strategy was currently being drafted for consideration by key stakeholders.

It was agreed to note the Report.

Air Departure Tax Consultation 16 Mr Martin Davidson and Mr Stewart Wilson, Scottish Government delivered a presentation to the HITRANS Partnership Board providing an overview of the Scottish Government Consultation on delivering Scotland's Air Departure Tax (ADT). The consultation sought views and evidence on the implementation of ADT, and feedback to inform the implementation and direction of future policy for ADT. The presentation covered the following points:

- An overview on the ADT timeline
- Outline of ADT proposals
- The Highlands and Islands Exemptions
- Examples of practical implications
- Update on the private jet supplement
- Future policy considerations
- Block grant adjustment

The respondent information form for the consultation was provided at Appendix B to the Report. The deadline for responses to the consultation was 26 March 2026.

It was agreed:

- (1) to note the presentation;**
- (2) note the forthcoming Scottish Government consultation on Air Departure Tax and the proposed changes to the Highlands and Islands exemption; and**
- (3) authorise HITRANS officers to prepare a draft response on behalf of the Partnership**

Consultation on the Introduction of Electric Vehicle Excise Duty (eVED) 17 Mr Neil Macrae, Senior Partnership Manager, submitted a Report detailing the UK Governments Consultation on the Introduction of Electric Vehicle Excise Duty (eVED) and seeking approval of the HITRANS response for submission ahead of the consultation deadline of 18 March 2026.

The Report stated that the consultation proposed the introduction of a mileage-based tax, applied in addition to existing Vehicle Excise Duty (VED), for Electric vehicles (EVs) and Plug-in Hybrid Electric Vehicles (PHEVs). Key features of the proposed scheme included:

- Application to all UK-registered EV and PHEV cars from April 2028;
- A rate of 3 pence per mile for fully electric cars;
- A reduced rate of 1.5 pence per mile for plug-in hybrid vehicles;
- Integration of eVED into the existing VED system, administered by the DVLA;
- Annual mileage estimation by motorists at VED renewal, with reconciliation against actual mileage;
- Mileage verification primarily through existing MOT processes, with additional checks for vehicles below MOT age; and
- Explicit confirmation that there will be no requirement for tracking technology, and no need to report where or when miles are driven.

The HITRANS draft response was provided at Appendix A to the Report and sought to articulate the distinctive circumstances of the region, including any potential unintended impacts and appropriate mitigation measures.

It was agreed to:

- (1) note the Report;**
- (2) approve HITRANS proposed response to the Consultation on the Introduction of Electric Vehicle Excise Duty (eVED) as outlined in Appendix A to the Report; and**
- (3) delegate responsibility for submitting HITRANS a finalised response on behalf of HITRANS to the Chair and Partnership Director.**

Inverness Interchange 18
Bus & Car Park
Feasibility Study

Mr Neil Macrae and Mr Frank Roach submitted a Joint Report detailing the findings of the feasibility study commissioned by HITRANS to explore the creation of a strategic multi-modal transport interchange within the Inverness Station Masterplan area. The Report outlined the study objectives, key findings and provided an overview of identified options. The Report stated that Partners were keen to engage wider and share the findings of the feasibility work and present indicative options that established a series of key design principles, namely:

- Seeking to re-locate a new bus and coach station with sufficient capacity for current and projected demand and improve interchange with rail station.
- Re-provide a circa 850 multi-storey car park (MSCP) to the north of the study area.
- Establish a pedestrian first zone around the 'Station Quarter' including a traffic-free new civic square at Farraline Park.
- Promote a mixed-use city centre regeneration masterplan for the 'Station Quarter'.

The Report further stated that there was work required to formalise existing working partnership working, and that it would also be necessary to undertake additional site constraints analysis and seek property market advice that would help inform indicative phasing and costings.

It was agreed:

- (1) to note the Report and the findings of the Inverness Interchange Feasibility Study; and**
- (2) that HITRANS continues to work in collaboration with The Highland Council and Network Rail to progress the Business Case for the Inverness Interchange and wider Inverness Station Masterplan.**

CONSULTATION

UK Emissions Trading 19
Scheme Consultation
Response

Mr Ranald Robertson, Partnership Manager, submitted a Report detailing the response submitted by HITRANS to the UK Government consultation on UK Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) – Regional Aviation Connectivity, which considered the potential impacts of removing aviation free allocation on domestic air services.

The Report stated that the HITRANS' response set out clear evidence that the removal of free allocation risked undermining regional and island connectivity unless appropriate exceptions of mitigation measures were applied. The full HITRANS' response was provided in the Appendix to the Report.

It was agreed:

- (1) to note the response submitted by HITRANS to the UK Emission Trading Scheme Regional Aviation Connectivity consultation;**
- (2) to endorse the principles set out in the response, particularly the need to protect essential air connectivity for the Highlands and Islands; and**
- (3) that officers continue to engage with the UK ETS Authority and relevant partners as the policy develops.**

Climate Change Plan Consultation Response 20 With reference to item 23 of the Minute of Meeting of 7 November 2025, Mr Neil Macrae, Senior Partnership Manager, submitted a Report detailing the HITRANS' response to the consultation on the draft Climate Change Plan (CCP) 2026-2040. The Report stated that the Scottish Government's Draft Climate Change Plan (CCP) 2026-2040 outlined a framework for achieving Scotland's statutory target of net zero emissions by 2045. The Plan detailed national carbon budgets and key policy measures across sectors including transport, buildings, energy supply, waste, agriculture, and land use. The HITRANS submission was provided in full at Appendix A to the Report.

It was agreed to

- (1) note the Report; and**
- (2) homologate the HITRANS response to the Climate Change Plan 2026-2040 consultation.**

PARTNERSHIP

Risk Management: Risk Register Update February 2026 21 With reference to item 20 of the Minute of Meeting of 25 April 2025, Mr Ranald Robertson, Partnership Director, submitted a Report seeking approval of the review of the Strategic Management/Operations and Financial Risks faced by the Partnership ensuring significant risks were identified, evaluated and controlled.

The HITRANS Risk Register February 2026 was provided as an appendix to the Report. The Report stated that the risks faced by the Partnership, as reflected in the Risk Register, would continue to be monitored by HITRANS Officers and Advisors and subsequently presented for monitoring and approval on at least an annual basis.

It was agreed to approve adoption of the HITRANS Risk Register February 2026 as detailed in the Appendix to the Report.

Windracers 22 Mr Lukas Princ and Mr Simon Muderack, SATE project, gave a presentation detailing the services provided by Windracers and detailing proposals to expand drone air cargo across the Highlands and Islands.

It was agreed:

- (1) to note the update; and**
- (2) approve the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Windracers and HITRANS for signing.**

URGENT ITEM

Review of HITRANS Contract Standing Orders 23 With reference to item 19 of the Minute of Meeting of 12 November 2021, Mr Ranald Robertson, Partnership Director, submitted a Report seeking approval to adopt The Highland Council Contract Standing Orders 2025 for HITRANS procurement activity. The

updated Contract Standing Orders were provided in the Appendix to the Report and would replace the Contract Standing Orders previously adopted by HITRANS.

It was agreed to:

- (1) approve the adoption of The Highland Council Contract Standing Orders 2025 for HITRANS procurement activity homologating this to align with Highland Council where this version of standing orders applied from 1 April 2025; and**
- (2) note that Financial Regulations remain unchanged from the version previously approved by the Partnership Board in 2021.**