

Item:
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Report to Partnership Board – 24 April 2026

Research and Strategy Delivery

Kirkwall AutoLink Project Update

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To update Members on progress with the Kirkwall AutoLink project, including outcomes from the February 2026 demonstrator, and to set this work within the wider strategic context for autonomous vehicle deployment in rural and island areas.

BACKGROUND

The Kirkwall AutoLink project is an Innovate UK CAM Pathfinder Feasibility Study exploring the introduction of an autonomous shuttle service linking key transport hubs in Kirkwall.

The project contributes to the UK Government's wider Connected and Automated Mobility programme and aligns with emerging regulatory frameworks under the Automated Vehicles Act 2024.

HITRANS' strategic position on autonomous vehicles is set out in the accompanying Position Statement (March 2026).

PROJECT UPDATE

Demonstrator Activity

A public demonstrator event was delivered in Kirkwall in February 2026, allowing stakeholders and members of the public to experience autonomous shuttle technology first-hand.

This activity:

- Demonstrated operational feasibility in a rural island setting
- Generated valuable user feedback pre and post journey
- Raised awareness and understanding of autonomous mobility, and how it can provide solutions in the local area

Images and evidence from the demonstrator are included within the Position Statement (Appendix A).

Crucially, the event positively shifted most local perceptions of AV once people experienced the technology firsthand.

Key Messages

- Autonomous shuttles have clear potential in rural mobility contexts, particularly where traditional services are limited
- Rural deployments offer valuable real-world testing environments for AV technologies
- Early-stage demonstrators are critical in building public confidence and stakeholder support

The work reinforces HITRANS' view that rural and island areas should be prioritised in early AV deployment programmes to ensure inclusive innovation.

Next Steps

- Completion of feasibility study outputs and business case
- Engagement with UK Government and industry partners on future deployment opportunities
- Identification of potential funding routes for pilot deployment
- Continued alignment with national AV policy and regulatory development

BUDGET

HITRANS allocation: £32,967

Funding source: Innovate UK (100% funded)

RISK REGISTER

RTS Delivery

Impact – Positive

Comment – Supports innovation and rural connectivity priorities.

Policy

Impact – Positive

Comment – Informs development of AV regulatory and deployment frameworks.

Financial

Impact – Neutral

Comment – No financial risk at feasibility stage.

Equality

Impact – Positive

Comment – Supports inclusive access to transport in remote areas.

RECOMMENDATION

1. Members are asked to note the report.

Report by: Jayne Gourlay / Ranald Robertson

Designation: SATE Coordinator / Partnership Director

Date: 26 March 2026

Appendix A – HITRANS Position Statement: Autonomous Vehicles and Rural Mobility



HITRANS Position Statement: Autonomous Vehicles and Rural Mobility



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1. Introduction

The Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership (HITRANS) welcomes the UK Government's ambition to support the deployment of commercial self-driving services and place safety, accessibility, and innovation at the heart of future transport legislation, including through the [Automated Vehicles \(AV\) Act 2024](#).

As a regional transport partnership with a strategic remit to improve connectivity across some of Scotland's most rural and logistically complex communities, HITRANS believes strongly that automated vehicle (AV) pilots must include deployments in areas where [public transport options are currently limited or absent](#). This presents an opportunity to test AV technologies in diverse environments while also delivering tangible benefits to communities that are currently underserved.

2. About HITRANS and Our Commitment to Innovation

HITRANS serves the Highlands and Islands of Scotland - a region that spans from [North Ronaldsay to Machrihanish and from Vatersay to Cullen](#). Though home to only [10% of Scotland's population](#), our region represents [40% of the country's landmass](#), creating unique challenges for transport and connectivity.

Strategic Context

Our newly submitted Regional Transport Strategy (RTS), endorsed by our five partner councils and key stakeholders, is built around [six strategic objectives and 11 thematic priorities](#). Among them, the theme "Embrace New Technologies" is central to our efforts to shape a [just transition to a post-carbon, sustainable transport future](#). This includes ensuring that innovation in transport systems is [inclusive of rural realities - not just metropolitan models](#).

We believe transport technology should be tested in [Edinbane as well as Edinburgh](#). A solution that performs well in the rural Highlands will almost certainly adapt successfully to urban environments, but the reverse is often not true.

3. HITRANS' Experience with Connected and Autonomous Vehicles (CAV)

HITRANS has been a pioneer in testing the feasibility and societal value of CAV technologies within Scotland. With support from EU North Sea Region Programme, UKRI and in partnership with leading institutions and private sector innovators, HITRANS has:

- Delivered two CAV pilot routes:
 - Inverness Airport Terminal to Inverness Airport Train Station
 - Inverness College UHI Campus to the National Treatment Centre and Retail/Business Park with the route used for two separate trials. A longer term (8 month) deployment of a Navya shuttle funded through the EU INTERREG North Sea programme under the PAV project which HITRANS led and in partnership with Aurrigo and University of Glasgow testing an Aurrigo Shuttle for a shorter week long trial.
- Modelled a further extended route connecting to Raigmore Hospital
- Explored responsible business models and community integration with the University of Glasgow's Adam Smith Business School
- Worked with partners including Aurrigo, Navya, Stagecoach, and Darwin to understand the connectivity and infrastructure demands of CAV in rural and mixed-use settings
- Currently supporting the Kirkwall AutoLink project in Orkney - an Innovate UK-funded feasibility study with Urban Foresight and Aurrigo, exploring whether a zero-emission autonomous shuttle could provide a practical, accessible link between Kirkwall town centre and the airport, operating across a mixed-speed road environment in a rural island setting

Our findings underscore the potential of AV services to support rural mobility needs, particularly by:

- Offering flexible, on-demand transport
- Reducing transport poverty and tackling social isolation in communities with limited or no alternative means of travel
- Operating efficiently on low-traffic, single-track rural roads with national speed limits and weather challenges



Figure 2. autonomous shuttle on UHI Campus, Inverness, October 2022.

4. The Case for Prioritising Rural and Island Deployment

As the Government moves forward with its APS permitting scheme, HITRANS proposes that **accessibility for underserved or isolated communities** be formally prioritised in the awarding of pilot deployment permits.

Proposal Objectives

1. **Broaden the testing environment** for automated vehicles to include a range of urban, semi-urban, and rural settings
2. **Accelerate deployment in areas with limited or no public transport**, ensuring communities can directly benefit from innovation
3. **Improve real-world understanding** of how AV technology functions in challenging physical and climatic conditions
4. **Support inclusion and access** for older adults, disabled persons, and those facing transport barriers

Why Rural Pilots Matter

- They **stress-test** AV performance in narrow, variable road conditions
- They demonstrate **public value** in areas with few alternatives
- They help develop **business and service models** adapted to decentralised populations
- They improve **public confidence** and **political support** for wider deployment



Figure 2 Aurrigo's autonomous pod trialling the Inverness Airport to the Inverness Airport Train Station route, Inverness, August 2024.

5. HITRANS' Offer of Collaboration

HITRANS is committed to supporting both Government and industry in the safe, effective, and equitable roll-out of automated passenger services. Our region offers a **unique and proven environment for innovation**, and we propose to collaborate with permit applicants and national bodies to ensure pilot deployments deliver both meaningful testing outcomes and real benefits for communities.

Highlands and Islands: A Proven Innovation Testbed

The potential for our region to serve as a **living laboratory for innovation** has already been demonstrated through the **Sustainable Aviation Test Environment (SATE)** - a UKRI Future Flight Challenge-funded project led by HITRANS. SATE brought together a wide range of consortium partners to test low and zero-carbon aircraft in live environments across the Highlands and Islands, proving the

area's suitability as a national exemplar for early-stage, high-impact transport innovation.

Just as SATE has shown that remote and rural areas are ideal for developing and validating new models of aviation, we believe that the deployment of connected and autonomous vehicle (CAV) technologies can follow a similar approach. By using our region as a proving ground, developers can:

- Assess how AV systems perform in complex, real-world conditions
- Collaborate with stakeholders across the public, private, and academic sectors
- Create replicable business and service models that can scale to other regions
- Build public trust and generate meaningful community insights

Our Commitment

HITRANS can:

- Identify and help prepare suitable pilot sites across the Highlands and Islands with a range of road types, accessibility challenges, and transport needs
- Facilitate local authority engagement and permissions
- Coordinate with community groups and accessibility advocates to ensure deployments are inclusive
- Support data gathering, impact evaluation, and knowledge exchange with UK partners
- Help extend pilots into urban and semi-urban environments in our region, recognising the importance of diverse deployment scenarios
- Use demonstrator activity as part of the pathway to deployment, helping residents, stakeholders and decision-makers experience the technology in practice and identify the local use cases where automated services can add most value
- Share learning and insights with other regional transport bodies, UK partners and policymakers to support the development of transferable frameworks for rural and island AV deployment

We believe this collaborative approach builds on the successful model demonstrated by SATE and is fully aligned with the UK Government's ambition to position the country at the forefront of sustainable, inclusive mobility innovation.

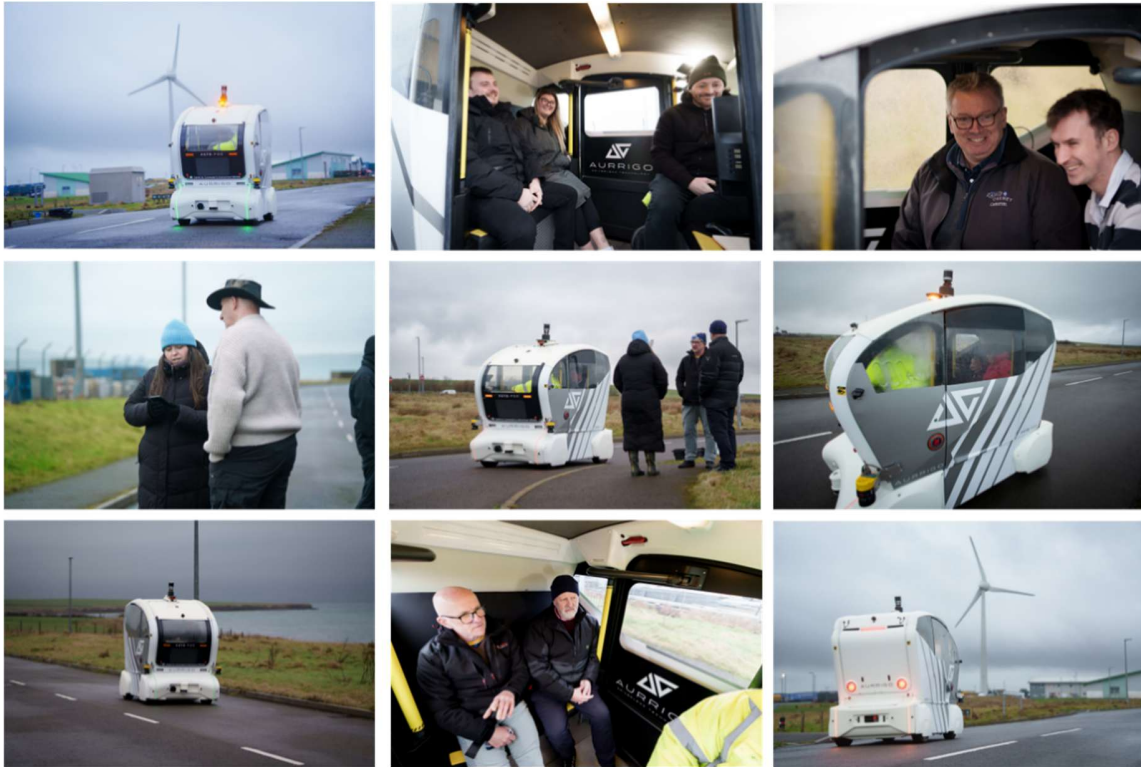


Figure 3 Members of the public experiencing the Aurrigo autonomous pod at the Kirkwall AutoLink demonstrator event, Orkney, February 2026.

6. Alignment with National Policy Priorities

HITRANS' position aligns with the direction of travel in UK and Scottish transport policy, including:

- The need to **enhance accessibility**
- The intention to build a **robust evidence base** through pilot activity
- The requirement for **comprehensive testing environments** that reflect the UK's transport diversity
- The emphasis on **safe, sustainable deployment** and a just transition
- The importance of **place-based evidence in shaping emerging regulation** - as the UK framework for No User in Charge services continues to develop, real-world rural pilots can make a valuable contribution to ensuring that standards and operating models work for communities beyond urban centres.

7. Conclusion

Autonomous vehicle technology has the potential to transform mobility for some of the UK's most undeserved communities. HITRANS is keen to work with decision-makers and industry partners to ensure that accessibility and regional inclusion are central to how AV deployment takes shape - and we are well placed to support that work across the Highlands and Islands.

Deployment decisions should reward not only technical readiness, but also evidence of local stakeholder support, clear community benefit, and credible plans for engagement and co-design.

We welcome further discussion with Government, industry and fellow regional partners on how we can work together to make that vision a reality.

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