

Report to Partnership Meeting 24 April 2026

CONSULTATION

HITRANS Response to Scottish Government Infrastructure Strategy 2027 – 2037 Consultation

Purpose of Report

To advise Members of the Scottish Government consultation on the draft *Infrastructure Strategy 2027–2037* and to seek approval of the proposed HITRANS response (attached as Appendix A).

Background

The Scottish Government has published a consultation on its draft *Infrastructure Strategy 2027–2037*, which will provide a 10-year framework to guide infrastructure planning, investment and delivery across Scotland.

The Strategy is intended to:

- Align infrastructure investment with long-term outcomes of net zero, economic growth and resilient places
- Be informed by a 30-year Needs Assessment
- Guide future Spending Reviews and annual budgets

The consultation also proposes:

- A strengthened investment hierarchy prioritising maintenance and reuse of assets
- A more explicit place-based approach to infrastructure decision-making
- Greater emphasis on private investment and cross-sector integration

Given the importance of infrastructure investment to the Highlands and Islands—particularly in relation to connectivity, decarbonisation and regional equity—it is appropriate that HITRANS submits a formal response. The closing date for responses to the consultation is 5 May 2026.

Key Issues for HITRANS

The draft HITRANS response (Appendix A) reflects the priorities set out in the HITRANS Regional Transport Strategy and highlights a number of key issues:

1. Regional Equity and Rural/Island Needs

While the Strategy recognises spatial variation, there is a risk that investment is disproportionately directed towards areas of population growth.

HITRANS emphasises the need for:

- Investment to support fragile, remote and island communities

- Recognition that infrastructure in these areas underpins population retention and access to services, not just growth

2. Connectivity as a Core Enabler

Transport and digital connectivity are fundamental to the Highlands and Islands economy.

The response stresses:

- The importance of lifeline ferry, aviation and road networks
- The role of digital connectivity in reducing travel demand and improving access
- The need to treat connectivity as a cross-cutting enabler, not simply a sector

3. Strengthening Regional Governance

The consultation does not fully reflect the role of Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs).

HITRANS proposes:

- Stronger recognition of RTPs in infrastructure planning and prioritisation
- Greater alignment between national, regional and local decision-making
- Development of regional infrastructure investment frameworks

4. Deliverability and Funding Certainty

Delivery of infrastructure in the HITRANS area is constrained by:

- Higher costs
- Limited supply chains
- Longer delivery timescales

The response highlights the need for:

- Multi-year funding certainty
- Improved alignment between strategy, appraisal and delivery processes
- Stronger emphasis on deliverability and resilience

5. Application of the Investment Hierarchy

HITRANS supports the investment hierarchy but notes:

- It must be applied earlier in the planning process
- It requires clearer integration with STAG and other appraisal frameworks
- It should recognise the limited scope for asset reuse in rural areas

6. Supporting Economic Growth and Net Zero

The response highlights infrastructure priorities critical to the region, including:

- Transport decarbonisation (EV, hydrogen, sustainable fuels)
- Ports and airports supporting energy transition
- Digital infrastructure
- Integration with housing and regional economic development

Consultation Response

A draft response has been prepared and is attached as Appendix A.

The response has been developed to:

- Reflect HITRANS Regional Transport Strategy priorities
- Align, where appropriate, with positions taken by other RTPs
- Emphasise issues specific to the Highlands and Islands

RISK REGISTER

Category	Impact	Comment
RTS Delivery Policy	Positive	The response supports delivery of the HITRANS Regional Transport Strategy and wider regional priorities.
	Positive	See RTS
Financial	Neutral	No direct financial implications for HITRANS. However the Strategy will influence future infrastructure funding decisions.
Equality	Positive	The response emphasises the importance of equitable access to infrastructure for rural and island communities.

Recommendation

Members are invited to:

1. Note the Scottish Government consultation on the Infrastructure Strategy 2027–2037
2. Consider the key issues for the Highlands and Islands as outlined in this report
3. Approve the draft HITRANS response attached as Appendix A, subject to any amendments agreed at the meeting.

Report by: Ranald Robertson
Designation: Partnership Director
Date: 14 April 2026
Background Paper: Appendix A – HITRANS Consultation Response

Appendix - HITRANS Response to Scottish Government Infrastructure Strategy 2027–2037 Consultation

Role of the Infrastructure Strategy

1. Do you agree with the scope and role of the Infrastructure Strategy?

HITRANS broadly agrees with the scope and role of the Strategy as a long-term, outcome-focused framework linking infrastructure investment to net zero, inclusive growth and resilient places. We are also supportive of the commitment to Regional equity in delivering the strategy but this commitment needs underpinned by the policies to ensure this outcome. There are many examples of where neighbouring countries have adopted policies and investment strategies that support regional competitiveness.

However, from a Highlands and Islands perspective, the Strategy requires a stronger recognition of geographic inequality and structural fragility. The consultation document acknowledges population change and spatial variation, but the approach risks prioritising areas of growth over those experiencing population decline, fragility and remoteness.

For the HITRANS region, infrastructure is not only about supporting growth—it is fundamentally about:

- Maintaining connectivity and access to services
- Supporting population retention and repopulation
- Ensuring economic viability of remote and island communities

A clearer articulation is needed that “equity of access” is as important as “efficiency of investment”, particularly in areas where per capita costs are higher but social and economic returns are critical.

Additionally, the Strategy should more explicitly recognise:

- The critical role of transport connectivity (including ferries, aviation and lifeline road networks) as enabling infrastructure
- The interdependency between digital and physical connectivity, particularly in reducing travel demand and improving service access in remote areas

2. Does the proposed framework support improved strategic planning and delivery?

HITRANS supports the proposed framework linking the 30-year Needs Assessment, 10-year Strategy, Spending Reviews and annual Budgets.

This structure has the potential to improve long-term planning and certainty, which is particularly important for:

- Major transport infrastructure (ports, ferries, airports)
- Decarbonisation programmes (EV charging, alternative fuels)
- Integrated regional transport systems

However, its effectiveness will depend on:

a) Strong multi-level governance

- Clear alignment between national, regional and local priorities
- Formal recognition of Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs) as key delivery and prioritisation bodies and Regional Transport Strategies as statutory planning documents

b) Funding certainty

- Multi-year funding envelopes are essential to deliver infrastructure in remote areas where lead times are long and supply chains constrained

c) Integration with appraisal processes

- The framework must be fully aligned with Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidance (STAG) and the Investment Hierarchy to ensure consistency between strategy and delivery

HITRANS recommends strengthening the framework by:

- Embedding regional investment programmes within the national pipeline
- Providing greater transparency on how regional priorities influence spending decisions

Infrastructure Governance Principles

3. Do elements of the infrastructure lifecycle need strengthening?

Yes. HITRANS considers that the infrastructure lifecycle should place greater emphasis on early-stage strategic alignment and collaboration.

In particular:

- The Investment Hierarchy should be applied at the earliest stages of option development, not only within business case preparation
- There should be a stronger requirement for cross-sector integration (transport, digital, energy, health) at the strategy and pre-appraisal stages
- Planning of infrastructure renewal should be prioritised on basis of resilience and impact of any failure. There should also not be an assumption of like for like replacement where infrastructure replacement/maintenance above a certain spend threshold.

For the HITRANS region, early collaboration is essential to:

- Identify multi-use infrastructure solutions (e.g. ports supporting transport, energy and economic development)
- Address high delivery costs and limited contractor capacity
- Ensure infrastructure solutions are scalable and appropriate to rural contexts

4. How could governance improve the impact of the investment hierarchy?

HITRANS supports the strengthening of the Investment Hierarchy but notes that its practical application remains inconsistent.

Improvements should include:

- Formal integration into STAG and other appraisal tools
 - Clear guidance on how hierarchy stages (maintain, repurpose, new build) are assessed and prioritised
- Regional prioritisation frameworks
 - RTPs should play a stronger role in identifying how hierarchy principles apply across regions
- Whole-system thinking
 - For example, investment in digital infrastructure may reduce demand for physical transport infrastructure

In rural and island areas, applying the hierarchy must also recognise:

- Limited existing assets to “repurpose”
- The need for minimum service thresholds rather than purely demand-driven investment

Infrastructure Themes and Enablers

5. Are the three outcomes the right ones?

HITRANS agrees that:

- Net zero and environmental sustainability
- Economic growth
- Resilient places

are appropriate high-level outcomes.

However, greater emphasis is required on:

- Addressing regional inequality and demographic decline as identified in the overarching vision of the recently published National Islands Plan.

- Ensuring a just transition that works for rural and island economies

For HITRANS, resilience must explicitly include:

- Transport resilience (e.g. ferries, trunk roads, air services)
- Supply chain resilience
- Climate adaptation for critical infrastructure

6. Are the proposed enablers sufficient?

The three enablers (public assets, place-making, private investment) are appropriate, but not sufficient on their own.

HITRANS recommends explicitly recognising:

- Public sector leadership and intervention
 - Essential in areas where private investment is not viable (e.g. ferries, air services)
- Connectivity (transport and digital) as a cross-cutting enabler
 - Particularly critical in remote and island regions
- Regional delivery capacity
 - Including skills, supply chains and institutional capability

7. How should cross-cutting priorities be embedded?

HITRANS supports stronger integration of:

- Transport
- Housing
- Economic development
- Energy infrastructure

This should be achieved through:

- Regional infrastructure planning frameworks
 - Aligning Regional Transport Strategies, Regional Spatial Strategies and economic plans
- Infrastructure-first approaches
 - Particularly for housing delivery in remote areas where infrastructure constraints are a barrier
- Joint governance structures
 - Bringing together national agencies, local authorities and RTPs

Delivery should remain:

- Strategic at national/regional level

- Implementation-focused at local level with the principles of Verity House agreement followed (to ensure accountability at the closest point to use that is considered appropriate).

8. Are there SFT Needs Assessment findings to integrate further?

HITRANS strongly supports the Needs Assessment emphasis on:

- Cross-sector integration
- Long-term planning
- Collaboration across public bodies

However, the Strategy should more clearly recognise:

- The role of Regional Transport Partnerships in delivering integrated infrastructure planning
- The importance of rural and island-specific challenges, including:
 - Fragile demand
 - High costs
 - Dependency on lifeline services

Place-Based Approach

9. Should investment be driven more by place?

HITRANS supports a place-based approach in principle.

However, there are risks if:

- Investment decisions are driven solely by local priorities without strategic coordination
- Resources are diverted disproportionately to areas of growth

A balanced approach is required, ensuring:

- Strategic national and regional priorities guide investment
- Local input informs design and delivery

10. Are the proposed principles appropriate?

The principles of:

- National spatial priorities
- Place partnerships

are appropriate.

However:

- Regional-level prioritisation is critical for infrastructure that operates across boundaries (e.g. transport networks)
- RTPs should be explicitly recognised as key partners in place-based delivery

11. How should communities be empowered?

HITRANS supports greater community involvement, particularly where:

- Infrastructure has direct local impacts
- Early engagement can shape better outcomes
- Accountability should be in place in a way that properly reflects the communities served by the assets, infrastructure or network.

However:

- Engagement must occur early in the process, not at the point of final proposals
- Mechanisms should be proportionate and inclusive, recognising capacity constraints in smaller communities

There is also a need to:

- Manage expectations where strategic infrastructure decisions cannot satisfy all local preferences
- Avoid delays to critical infrastructure delivery

12. Are current partnerships effective?

The current landscape provides a strong foundation, but improvements are needed.

In particular:

- The role of Regional Transport Partnerships is under-recognised
- Greater clarity is needed on how different partnerships (CPPs, REPs, RTPs) interact

HITRANS recommends:

- Strengthening the role of RTPs in infrastructure planning and prioritisation
- Improving alignment between:
 - Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs)
 - Regional Economic Partnerships (REPs)
 - Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs)

CPPs in particular may require:

- Expanded remit

- Additional skills and resources to engage effectively in infrastructure planning

Enabling Private Infrastructure

13. Are there additional sectors or opportunities?

HITRANS highlights the importance of:

- Transport decarbonisation infrastructure
 - EV charging
 - Hydrogen and alternative fuels
 - Port and airport infrastructure
- Digital connectivity
 - Critical for reducing travel demand and supporting remote economies
- Energy infrastructure
 - Supporting renewable generation and grid capacity in the Highlands and Islands
 - Enabling and supporting energy intensive industries to locate nearer to the source of power generation as has happened in some neighbouring european countries.
 - Supporting renewable generation and grid capacity in the Highlands and Islands

Attracting private investment in these sectors will require:

- Strong public sector leadership

Targeted interventions in areas of market failure

14. What does the economy need from infrastructure to 2037?

The Highlands and Islands economy requires:

a. Reliable and resilient infrastructure

- Lifeline ferry and air services
- Climate-resilient road networks
- Robust digital connectivity
- Resilient and future-proofed electricity grid infrastructure capable of supporting renewable energy generation and distribution

b. Certainty and deliverability

- Clear, stable policy and funding frameworks
- Streamlined planning and consenting processes

c. Integrated infrastructure systems

- Alignment between transport, housing, energy and digital networks

d. Support for population retention and growth

- Infrastructure that enables people to live and work in rural and island communities

Ultimately, infrastructure must provide:

- Confidence for investment
- Connectivity for people and businesses
- Resilience in the face of climate and demographic change

Closing Summary

HITRANS welcomes the development of a long-term Infrastructure Strategy and supports its overall direction. However, to be fully effective it must:

- Place regional equity and rural/island needs at its core
- Strengthen the role of Regional Transport Partnerships
- Ensure connectivity is recognised as a fundamental enabler
- Balance growth with the need to address decline and fragility

This will ensure the Strategy delivers for all parts of Scotland, including those where infrastructure is most critical to sustaining communities and enabling inclusive growth.