

HI HIGHLIGHTS

NEWSLETTER SUMMER 2026

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WELCOME

Welcome to the Summer 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/>

£2 BUS FARE CAP PILOT LAUNCHES

Monitoring and evaluation is continuing of the £2 bus fare cap with hopes of it extending beyond the pilot stage.

The year-long trial is helping make bus travel easier and more affordable, while encouraging greater use of public transport.

The pilot scheme covers the Highlands and Islands with the first phase introduced in Shetland on January 30, followed by the Western Isles on February 23 and Orkney on March 9, before being rolled out across Highland, Moray and Argyll and Bute on March 23.

The government is working with HITRANS to deliver the pilot in a £10 million investment.

It is aimed at significantly impacting rural and island areas where journeys can be longer and fares can be comparatively high.

Successful delivery of the pilot is important to support the case for wider roll out.



While any expansion beyond the 12-month pilot will depend on political agreement, any such consideration will be strengthened by a pilot that delivers real impact that can be evidenced.

Next steps include maximising public awareness and monitoring usage, revenue and behavioural impacts.

GIVE RAIL PASSENGERS BLANKETS TO KEEP WARM NEXT WINTER

ScotRail is to be asked to supply blankets to passengers travelling on the West Highland Line's Oban - Glasgow early morning service due to a lack of heating in carriages.

The partnership board has previously raised the 'unacceptable' conditions faced by rail users as they discussed delays to replacing rolling stock.

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

With replacements for outdated Class 156 trains not due until at least 2029, the board said blankets should be provided as an interim measure.

The issue is to be raised with the new Cabinet Secretary for Transport.

The board also heard how ongoing problems with the Jacobite steam train on the West Highland Line is having a significant impact on local businesses.

The train, famous for its role as the Hogwarts Express in the Harry Potter films, is operated by West Coast Railways (WCR) from Fort William to Mallaig.



WCR has been involved in a long-running dispute with the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) about the need to install central locking on its Mark 1 carriages to prevent passengers from opening doors when the train is moving.

In April, WCR said it is going to install Central Door Locking (CDL) systems on its entire fleet of Mark 1 carriages used on the mainline but warned it will take time to complete.

It said it is working with the ORR to finalise a timeline that balances the technical requirements of the installation with the goal of starting the 2026 Jacobite season.

However, there is growing concern about the impact that the delayed start is having on the West Coast economy, with reports of visitors cancelling accommodation bookings.

THIRD YEAR OF FUNDING ANNOUNCED FOR THE PEOPLE & PLACE PROGRAMME

HITRANS has received just under £2 million of funding from Transport Scotland for the People & Place Programme 2026/27. Entering its third year, this national programme encourages people to walk, wheel or cycle on short trips and use public transport for longer journeys.

Eight community groups in the Highlands, Moray, Western Isles and Argyll & Bute are sharing £340,320 to offer free or reduced-price bikes, cycle repair sessions and active travel sessions in primary schools across the region. In 2025/26, we were able to support ten community groups with £583,822. Transport Scotland have reduced The revenue budget of the People & Place Programme has been reduced by 60% in 2025/26, hence the reduced support available this year. Whilst this has been impactful on the scope of the People & Place Programme that HITRANS can

deliver, we look forward to continuing to support key delivery partners in the third year of this behaviour change scheme.

Other funds allocated include £310,000 to workplace and community cycle parking across the HITRANS region. Last year, we supported 26 projects to install cycle shelters, upgrade facilities and purchase pool bikes to support active journeys. £126,000 will be allocated to support the Access to Bikes initiative, which provides funding for non-standard cycles through the HI-BIKE Inclusive Cycle Membership.

NEW FUNDING TO HELP REMOVE TRANSPORT BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

A new stream of funding will help regional transport partnerships to improve access to employment.

Almost £10 million is being made available from the Scottish Government as part of the national Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan.

Complementary funds of around £9 million nationally is being directed through Local Employability Partnerships (LEPs) to support parental employability initiatives.



Across Scotland, around 2,000 parents and carers report that transport barriers prevent them from accessing training or securing employment due to affordability, accessibility and availability.

HITRANS receives an allocation of just over £1 million for 2026/27.

It will work with LEPs, DWP and Skills Development Scotland to address affordability, accessibility and availability issues and support access to employment, training and skills, further and higher education and health-related employment.

Target groups are low-income households, job seekers, young people, parents returning to work and rural communities.

Nine-month and annual evaluations will take place with hopes the funding will be repeated in future.



MANAGER TO OVERSEE HEALTH AND TRANSPORT ACTION PLAN

HITRANS is to help recruit a programme manager to help develop and support partners implement a Health and Transport Action Plan (HTAP) for the region.

The proposal focuses on improving islanders' access to healthcare services through coordinated regional action, practical interventions and strengthened governance.

A scoping review commissioned in late 2024 identified that a HTAP could add value in the region.

HITRANS then successfully bid for funding from the Scottish Government to establish the plan.

It has since re-engaged with health boards and councils to seek feedback on a preferred governance structure.

The programme manager will establish and administer a HTAP steering group and support the delivery of agreed actions.

Priorities are expected to include-

- Sharing knowledge between partners and improving joint working and decision making
- Raising awareness of important issues among local, regional and national decision makers
- Making the case for increased investment and delivering new initiatives.

The initial grant of £105,000 for this financial year will also help the partnership prepare and administer the action plan, enable delivery of key initiatives, support advocacy and case-building for strategic improvements.

ADDRESSING THE TRANSPORT IMPACTS OF RENEWABLES DEVELOPMENT

HITRANS is to appoint a consultant to study the impact of current and future renewables projects on the transport network in the region.

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

The Highlands and Islands Regional Economic Partnership estimated 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.

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.

The consultant will examine the impacts of consented, planned and proposed renewable energy projects on the region's transport network and recommend solutions to enable Net Zero targets to be fulfilled and to leave a legacy for future generations.

This assessment should give an understanding of capacity, capability, pinch-points and constraints on the local and strategic transport and logistics networks.

It will also identify investment in infrastructure improvements required to overcome these constraints on road, rail and ports, harbours and waterways, including indicative costs.

Infrastructure improvements should focus on strategic upgrades which are unlikely to be funded through planning obligations, so excluding site access requirements etc.

The study will also identify business opportunities for local transport and construction SMEs and a policy framework to establish a collaborative forum leading to cooperative use of networks.

In addition, it will explore policy mechanisms to encourage investment in the transport network.

The study will be overseen by a steering group comprising Transport Scotland, HITRANS, HIE and RHA.



TEN-YEAR LOW CARBON AVIATION STRATEGY

A new strategy has set out how cleaner and more reliable air services can take off in the Highlands and Islands over the next decade.

The Strategy for Future Aviation Technologies in the Highlands and Islands details the impact emerging technologies, including drones and electric and hydrogen aircraft, can have in improving connectivity and strengthening key industries.

It builds on the success of the Sustainable Aviation Test Environment (SATE) project which established the UK's first operationally based low-carbon aviation test centre in Orkney.

The strategy sets out a plan for new and more sustainable air travel options to be introduced and expanded across the region by 2035.

It demonstrates the region is well suited to act as a 'living laboratory' for low-carbon aviation, with existing airports, low congestion airspace and strong renewable energy resources.

But it also highlights critical gaps in infrastructure, workforce skills and regulation.

It proposes a phased roadmap combining public funding, private investment and regulatory collaboration to move from trials to routine commercial services and help improve resilience and economic growth, create jobs and reduce emissions.

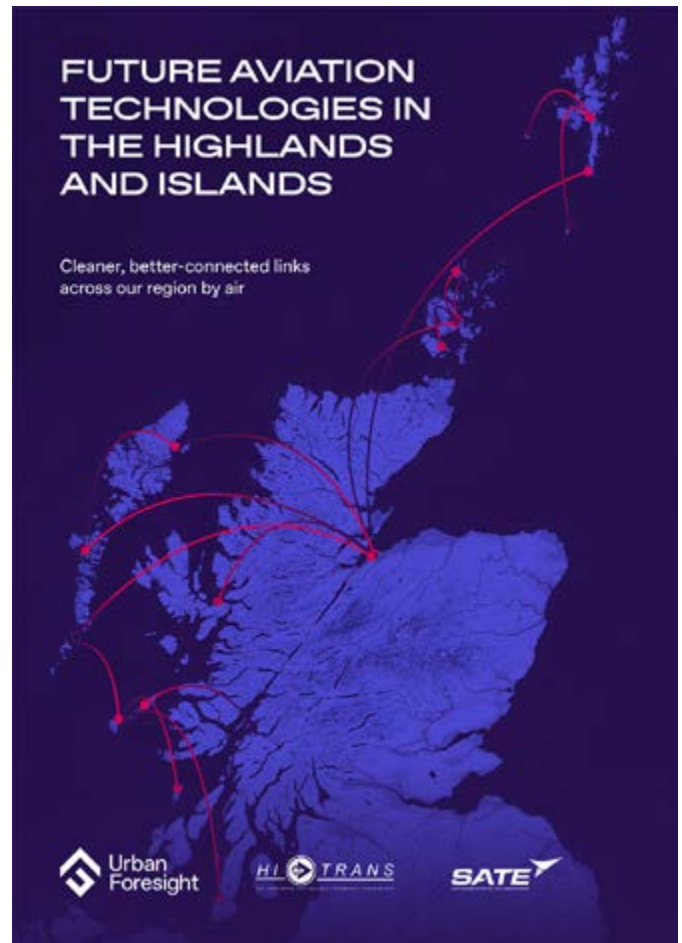
Airports like Sumburgh, Kirkwall and Stornoway serve tens of thousands of passengers every year. New types of aircraft could make travel and deliveries faster and cleaner.

Job creation and retaining populations

The deployment of electric, hybrid and hydrogen aircraft, along with supporting infrastructure, will create skilled roles in aviation operations, maintenance, energy integration and logistics.

Local workforce training in sustainable aviation technologies will build transferable skills applicable across renewables, aerospace and transport sectors.

In addition, improved connectivity can enhance access to employment, education and development of essential services.



This supports the retention of young people, establishing new opportunities for existing communities and enabling equitable regional growth.

Improvements to medical care

Rural and island communities in the Highlands and Islands can face challenges getting quick access to medical care.

New and sustainable types of aircraft could give NHS staff faster ways to respond to emergencies, urgent and routine care needs, and the ability to move medicines, equipment and samples between locations.

Faster transport can help medical teams collect and share vital information quickly, allowing them to make decisions sooner and respond more effectively to patients in need.

It can also reduce long-standing inequities in healthcare delivery, for people living in communities that are distant from health facilities.

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Over time, this could make healthcare across the Highlands and Islands more reliable, equitable and effective.

Faster movement of goods

New aviation technologies can transform the transport of goods - including seafood, aquaculture products and general freight - across the Highlands and Islands, where remote locations and dispersed ports often limit timely access to markets and critical supplies.

Improved air connectivity could be transformative in addressing demographic and economic challenges in the region which has a declining working-age population and a growing proportion of older residents.

Accessible transport influences young people's ability to take up education and employment opportunities, and poor transport links can drive out-migration and reduce the local labour pool, impacting businesses' ability to attract staff.

So where are we currently with the various technologies?

Drones

Drones are the most advanced of the new aviation technologies. They are already being used in parts of the UK for tasks such as medical deliveries, inspections and environmental monitoring.

In rural and island regions, they are particularly well suited to carrying small, time-critical items including medicines and test samples, flying short distances between fixed locations and operating in areas with low levels of other air traffic.

Drones are likely to be the first technology deployed at scale, especially for NHS logistics, inspections and island-to-island freight.

Work is already underway to make it safe for drones to fly beyond the pilot's sight, which will help make these services routine across the Highlands and Islands.

Aviation rules are still evolving and systems for managing drones safely alongside other aircraft need further development.

Community engagement is also essential to address concerns about noise and safety.

Electric and hybrid planes

These aircraft, which look similar to small planes but use batteries or a mix of electric and conventional power, are currently being tested and certified.

They are best suited to short passenger routes, small cargo services and lifeline and inter-island connections.

Because routes are short and airports already exist, the region is well placed to adopt these aircraft early, particularly on routes currently served by small planes.

To do so, aircraft certification must be completed by regulators and airports need charging infrastructure and upgraded power supplies, while training is needed on new systems.

Hydrogen aircraft

Hydrogen aviation is a medium-to-long-term opportunity, especially where the region's renewable energy resources can support local hydrogen production.

These planes offer longer range than fully electric aircraft and produce no carbon emissions at the point of use.

Several designs are currently being tested, but they are not yet commercially available.

Aircraft designs have still to complete testing and certification and safe hydrogen storage and refuelling systems would need to be installed at airports.

Costs also need to reduce before regular services are viable.

Electric vertical take-off and landing (eVTOL) aircraft

eVTOL aircraft are not an immediate priority but may play a role later if the technology proves safe, affordable and useful for rural and island communities.

They are still in the trial stage, but could eventually operate from very small sites.

Safety certification for passenger use is still needed, along with rules for airspace integration, infrastructure such as landing sites and charging facilities and pilot training.

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Airships

Airships are not a short-term solution for everyday passenger travel in the region as their capacity is in excess of demand.

But they could play a valuable medium-term role in freight, logistics, tourism and specialist operations.

Their ability to operate with minimal ground infrastructure and lower emissions makes them potentially useful for rural and island locations, island supply chains, and oversized cargo and niche tourism flights, if commercial services become viable and reliable.

Designs have been tested at full scale and manufacturers are now working towards certification and early commercial operations.

Seaglidors

Seaglidors are classified as boats, not aircraft, and travel just above the water using a mix of hydrofoils and ground-effect gliding.

They are not a short-term solution for everyday local commuting, as their capacity and operational costs may exceed current demand.

However, they could play a valuable medium-term role in coastal and island transport, logistics and tourism.

Their ability to operate with minimal port infrastructure, high speed and zero emissions make them potentially useful for connecting island and peninsular communities, supporting supply chains and offering premium or specialised passenger services if commercial operations become viable and reliable.

Full-scale designs have already been tested and companies are working on safety certification and early commercial operations.

While they are not yet in regular service in the UK, Seaglidors are closer to being used than many eVTOL aircraft or high-speed ferries for certain coastal and island transport routes.

Completion of safety certification for commercial operations is still needed, along with final investment and manufacturing scale-up and models for docking, charging and weather-dependent operations.

Several constraints must be addressed to enable the deployment of sustainable aviation in the region, including a lack of charging/refuelling facilities for electric and hydrogen aircraft, runway and navigation limitations at small airstrips.

MAKING THE CASE FOR AUTOMATED VEHICLES IN THE REGION

A successful test of a driverless vehicle in Orkney this year has strengthened the case for the technology to be used in the Highlands and Islands.

The Kirkwall AutoLink project in February saw an autonomous shuttle service linking key transport hubs in Kirkwall.

The project contributes to the UK Government's wider Connected and Automated Mobility (CAM) programme.

The test demonstrated operational feasibility in an island setting and raised awareness and understanding of autonomous mobility and how it can provide solutions.

HITRANS wants to see the Highlands and Islands prioritised in awarding more pilot permits to help improve accessibility in areas with limited or no public transport.

This could also support inclusion and access for older adults, disabled persons and those facing transport barriers.

It says key messages from the test include that autonomous vehicles (AVs) have clear potential in rural mobility contexts and the region is well placed to host the work.

It says early-stage demonstrators are critical in building public confidence and stakeholder support.

Next steps include preparing business cases, engaging with UK Government and industry partners on future opportunities and identifying potential funding for pilot schemes.

HITRANS has been a pioneer in testing the feasibility and value of connected and autonomous vehicles (CAVs).

It has already delivered two pilot routes, between the Inverness Airport Terminal and Inverness Airport Train Station, and Inverness College UHI Campus to the National Treatment Centre and Retail/Business Park.

NEW MAP POINTS THE WAY FOR ACTIVE TRAVEL IN STORNOWAY

A free active travel map launched in March to encourage more people to walk or cycle around Stornoway.

In all, 4,000 copies of the map have been produced to help residents consider more active ways to travel for their short journeys to work, school or for social and leisure visits.

Tourists to the area can also use them to navigate their way around the town by bike or foot.

HITRANS is making the maps available for the first time to promote the health, economic and environmental benefits from walking and cycling.

Copies have been sent to all households with Stornoway postcodes and they can also be collected from NHS Western Isles Health Centre, Third Sector Hebrides, Bespoke Bicycles or The Hub.



They are available on the HITRANS website [here](#)

The guides show key sites that are on walking or cycling routes in the area including- Lews Castle Grounds, Lews Castle Museum, Stornoway Ferry Terminal, Stornoway Golf Course, Bespoke Bicycles Repair Shop, Gallow's Hill, River Creed, Strawberry Hill, Lews Castle College, and Stornoway Pier.

It also shows how far people can walk or cycle in five or 10-minute journeys.



CONSULTATION HIGHLIGHTS NEED TO SUPPORT FRAGILE AREAS

HITRANS has stressed the need for a government strategy to recognise inequality and fragility facing the Highlands and Islands.

The Scottish Government is consulting on a draft infrastructure strategy 2027–2037, which will provide a 10-year framework on infrastructure planning, investment and delivery across the country.

It intends to align infrastructure investment with long-term outcomes of net zero, economic growth and resilient places, as well as guiding future spending reviews and annual budgets.

In its response, HITRANS says the strategy needs to recognise the region's geographic inequality and structural fragility.

It says while the consultation document acknowledges population change and spatial variation, 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, but about maintaining connectivity and access to services, encouraging population retention and repopulation and also ensuring economic viability of rural and island communities.

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

And it proposes stronger recognition of RTPs in infrastructure planning and prioritisation, along with greater alignment between national, regional and local decision-making and development of regional infrastructure investment frameworks.

At present, HITRANS argues, delivery of infrastructure in the region is constrained by higher costs, limited supply chains and longer delivery timescales.

There is therefore need for multi-year funding certainty, better alignment between strategy, appraisal and delivery processes and stronger emphasis on deliverability and resilience.

The response highlights infrastructure priorities critical to the region, including transport decarbonisation (EV, hydrogen, sustainable fuels), ports and airports supporting energy transition. digital infrastructure and integration with housing and regional economic development.

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WE HOPE YOU ENJOYED
the latest issue of our newsletter.



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