

Report to Partnership Meeting 11 September 2026

RESEARCH AND STRATEGY DELIVERY

Transport to Employment

PURPOSE OF REPORT

The purpose of this report is to advise members on progress since the April 2026 Partnership paper on the Access to Employment / Transport to Employment (T2E) programme, provided an update on the initial engagement/negotiation phase with Scottish Government and all RTPs.

BACKGROUND

The Transport to Employment programme aims to remove systemic transport barriers that prevent key child poverty family groups/parents from accessing jobs/training because of the following interlinked challenges:

- **availability** (ensuring the right services run at the right times and places),
- **accessibility** (making services physically, digitally and socially usable), and
- **affordability** (reducing the cost of travel so it does not block job search, training or sustained employment).

Primary programme aims are to:

- **Increase job starts** for priority households by removing transport obstacles to interviews and first employment opportunities.
- **Improve job retention** so that new starts are sustained to at least 26 weeks through combined travel offers and wraparound support.
- **Raise net household income** by designing interventions that account for benefit interactions and deliver real, lasting income gains.
- **Test and scale effective transport models** by piloting demand-responsive, employer-facing and active-travel solutions to identify and scale cost-effective approaches for regional roll-out.

HITRANS aims to deliver this by commissioning targeted, partnership led interventions such as demand responsive transport, employer linked shuttles, mobility credits, active travel offers and childcare linked travel solutions integrated with employability support and evaluated to deliver measurable outcomes and scalable models.

RESOURCING UPDATE

Since the April 2026 paper the programme has moved from design into active mobilisation. In August, Transport Scotland issued a variation to the original grant offer, providing an additional £91,629 RDEL for the Transport to Employment programme in 2026/27 for HITRANS. This increases HITRANS' 2026/27 resource allocation to £1,123,777, original allocation £1,032,148 plus the uplift and following the People and Place Programme funding precedent.

The funding is still 2026/27 focused only, albeit Scottish Government's Child Poverty team colleagues which is the source of the funds, have agreed to a "Q4+1" arrangement in principle but this is strictly limited to school-based / school-term projects and only to prioritise staff costs in the summer term. Any use of Q4+1 timescale must meet grant terms and be evidenced by RTP invoicing for committed work, spend must be evidenced as taking place before 31 March in line with the People & Place precedent.

The in-year uplift is welcome and provides useful additional resource to accelerate mobilisation and expand priority pilots, but it does not remove the programme's core risk of single-year funding certainty. Continued advocacy for multi-year funding is ongoing to secure operator commitments, enable longer-term staff appointments and maximise sustained job outcomes. Short-term mitigations such as fixed-term consultancy, exit/scale clauses, employer match funding and prioritising low-ongoing-subsidy pilots will be used while multi-year certainty is sought.

INTERVENTIONS IN PROGRESS

HITRANS has progressed baseline procurement scoping of personal travel planning (PTP) work with local authorities and continued to fund in 26/27 People and Place local delivery partners to deliver ongoing projects, these are included in submitted a draft project bundle list to Transport Scotland last month. The HITRANS draft package is organised around a set of delivery bundles designed to tackle availability, accessibility and affordability barriers for employment/training of parents:

- Priority elements include the M-Connect DRT integration in Moray,
- A regional Employer and Community Access Fund supporting employer shuttle pilots and community projects,
- A Hi-Bike employment and cycling training offer,
- Key Anchor (NHS/LA) employer travel audits and personalised travel planning,
- Community transport capacity research,
- Prepaid travel card infrastructure pilot,
- A HiTravel awareness and information campaign, and
- A dedicated employer liaison function.

This initial mobilisation has produced useful operational insights. Local authorities have identified candidate projects and service gaps through TIP (Transport Investment Plan) submissions to Scottish Government Child Poverty team for the parallel employability stream of funding for the T2E programme. Key anchor employers have identified for travel audits have signalled willingness to trial proposed solutions and initial modelling suggest that mobility credits could temporarily remove barriers to interviews and job starts where existing transport systems exist.

PROGRAMME RESOURCING

The Partnership Director is leading governance and mobilisation arrangements. CP1919+21 are providing short-term programme management to deliver commissioning, partner coordination and procurement support. George Eckton from CP1919+21 will provide senior strategic advice drawing on his RTP, Citizens Advice and COSLA experience and Stantec will deliver the agreed minimum dataset, the Month-9 interim review and the full annual evaluation for all 4 RTPs involved. All short-term appointments have been structured with clear deliverables, performance milestones and exit/handover clauses and have been procured in line with HITRANS standing orders.

Early mobilisation has produced useful operational insights. Local authorities have identified candidate projects and service gaps through TIP (Transport Investment Plan) submissions to Scottish Government Child Poverty team for the parallel employability stream of funding for the T2E programme.

KEY RISK AND MIGITATIONS

The most significant risk remains the absence of multi-year funding certainty, which affects operator confidence and limits sustainable staffing. Other risks such as low uptake, data-sharing and uncertainty around monitoring and evaluation criteria are being actively managed. Discussions with Transport Scotland continue regarding funding and monitoring requirements, evaluation criteria and what constitutes demonstrable success for the programme in Year 1. Clarifying these expectations is essential to ensure consistent reporting across RTPs, identifying appropriate interventions and alignment with national child poverty outcomes.

ESTABLISHMENT OF OPERATIONAL CHALLENGE GROUP

To move towards delivery, HITRANS proposed with constituent councils and LEPs to host an oversight challenge group to validate and prioritise bundles and projects for the initial years funding, confirm LEP delivery roles and referral pathways and agree M&E data flows. The expected outputs are a prioritised project list for the Challenge Group, an agreed data sharing approach, a procurement route map and a completed evidence pack to support a multi-year funding ask later this year.

The Regional Challenge Group was suggested by HITRANS as the commissioning mechanism for identifying, selecting and funding additional short, targeted Transport-to-Employment pilots across the region. It ensures consistency in purpose and evaluation while allowing each area to propose locally tailored solutions to transport barriers affecting job entry and sustainment. The Challenge Group invites councils, LEPs, employers, transport operators and community partners to propose evidence-based, rapid-mobilisation pilots that address specific transport barriers to employment. Each proposal will include a clear problem statement grounded in local data, a defined intervention package alongside evidence of employer engagement and LEP support and a mobilisation plan suitable for rapid deployment within the 2026/27 delivery year. This approach is intended to generate a regional menu of tested interventions ready for scale-up plus a shared evidence base on cost per sustained job, net-income change, and transport accessibility improvements. It also provides assurance to funders in a programme initiation year that as a process is in place to identify best value interventions.

PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLES

The initial meeting of Challenge Group in late July, suggested roles, funding principles and partnership arrangements. Setting out who leads strategic infrastructure and data systems, who delivers front-line participant support and how costs and responsibilities are shared to maximise impact and sustainability. These arrangements seek to prioritise co-commissioning and matched contributions where appropriate, with clear contractual safeguards, data-sharing protocols and performance milestones to protect public funds and enable rapid scale-up of successful pilots. The aim is to finalise agreement with Challenge Group members this month and set up a regular cadence of meetings, but the following roles, principles and partnership approach was agreed:

- **HITRANS.** Lead strategic coordination and invest in system-level infrastructure and tools that enable delivery across the region for example, prepaid ticketing systems, central data platforms for travel planning, and regional integration of booking and payment systems.
- **Local Employability Partnerships (LEPs) role.** Deliver front-line client support and services: travel planning and advice, hands-on transport access and training, and direct participant costs such as travel fares or driver's licence support.
- **Joint commissioning and co-investment.** Where local demand requires new or expanded routes, partners will adopt a flexible hybrid funding model to co-commission pilots. HITRANS will underwrite transport supply and infrastructure where appropriate, while LEPs and local partners contribute delivery capacity and client support.

- **Employer engagement.** Employers will be engaged to co-design shift and travel solutions, support employee onboarding, and where feasible provide match funding or in-kind contributions such as vehicle use, staff time, premises for shuttle and employer-facing pilots.

Taken together, these arrangements position HITRANS and its partners to move from mobilisation into delivery with a clear shared purpose, defined roles and a coherent commissioning framework. The next phase will focus on finalising priorities through the Challenge Group and launching targeted pilots that build the evidence base for a sustainable, multi-year Transport to Employment programme.

RISK REGISTER

RTS Delivery

Impact - Positive

Comment – This work directly supports the HITRANS Regional Transport Strategy by improving connectivity to jobs, training and services across rural and island communities. It advances RTS priorities on inclusive, accessible and sustainable transport and strengthens strategic partnerships.

Policy

Impact – Positive

Comment – This programme supports the development and advocacy of our RTS policy positions on transport poverty, particularly with regards to remote, rural and island provision for key family groups. The programme aligns with the National Transport Strategy (NTS2) and the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan, as well as recent Community Wealth Building national legislation

Financial

Impact – Positive

Budget line and value – Scottish Government Access to Employment Fund – £1,123,777

Comment – This represents a significant additional revenue funding stream supporting HITRANS and its partners. The funding has been incorporated into the HITRANS Business Plan and used to deliver targeted interventions improving access to employment.

Equality

Impact – Positive

Comment – The programme is targeted at reducing inequalities by focusing on Child Poverty Delivery Plan priority groups of households. If delivery is well targeted and monitored, the programme will improve equitable access to employment and training. However, there is a risk that poorly designed interventions or inadequate outreach could fail to reach the most disadvantaged cohorts and lack of certainty of multi-year funding could reduce confidence in priority groups to use and engage in the infrastructure/support funded by this programme.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Members are asked to:

1. Note the update on the Scottish Government's Access to Employment funding programme;

2. Note the further uplift and HITRANS' agreed funding of £1,123,777;
3. Endorse ongoing engagement with Transport Scotland, Scottish Government and Local Employability Partnerships to advocate for multi-year funding;
4. Support the development and delivery of the HITRANS Access to Employment challenge programme and governance as summarised in this report.
5. Note the establishment of appropriate project management arrangements for the Programme and recruitment of short-term support as agreed at the April 2026 Partnership board meeting.

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Date: 24 August 2026