



Report to Partnership Meeting 11 September 2026

Research and Strategy Delivery

Highlands and Islands Air Connectivity – Developing a Long-Term Strategic Approach

Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to update Members on recent developments affecting Highlands and Islands air connectivity and seek endorsement for HITRANS continuing to work with the Scottish Government, Transport Scotland, partner Councils, NHS Boards, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, elected representatives and other stakeholders to support the development of a long-term strategic approach to regional air connectivity.

The report does not seek to promote a predetermined model for the future delivery of Highlands and Islands air services. Rather, it seeks to position HITRANS as a constructive partner in helping develop an evidence-based, collaborative and long-term strategic approach to regional air connectivity.

Background

Recent reductions to scheduled air services between Inverness and Stornoway, Kirkwall and Sumburgh generated considerable concern across the Highlands and Islands. On 6 August 2026, the Scottish Government announced more than £1 million of additional funding to Highlands and Islands Airports Limited (HIAL) to enable the full restoration of these services from 26 October 2026.

While this intervention is welcome and limits the period of reduced connectivity, it does not remove the wider strategic issues highlighted by the service reductions. Transport Scotland has confirmed that it will now work with HIAL and industry stakeholders to consider next steps towards a sustainable, long-term solution for Highlands and Islands air services.

HITRANS has been actively engaged with constituent Councils, Transport Scotland, Highlands and Islands Airports Limited (HIAL), airline operators, NHS Boards and other stakeholders to understand both the immediate implications of these changes and the wider strategic issues they highlight.

This has included providing evidence to the Scottish Parliament's Transport Committee which sought to move the discussion beyond the immediate operational challenges to consider whether the current situation presents an opportunity to develop a longer-term strategic approach to Highlands and Islands air connectivity.

Whilst the recent service changes have acted as the catalyst for these discussions, officers believe the issues extend well beyond any individual route or operator. Rather, they present an opportunity to consider the future role of aviation within Scotland's wider transport system and how it can best support communities, public services and economic development over the coming decades.

Strategic Context

The Highlands and Islands are entering a period of unprecedented economic transformation. Research commissioned by the Highlands and Islands Regional Economic Partnership has identified over 250 transformational investment opportunities representing in excess of £100 billion of potential investment across renewable energy, offshore wind, hydrogen, ports, marine industries, seafood, construction, tourism, life sciences and the space sector. These developments are expected to create tens of thousands of construction and operational jobs and will play a central role in delivering Scotland's Just Transition.

Historically, regional aviation has primarily been viewed as enabling people living in island and remote communities to access opportunities elsewhere in Scotland. Increasingly, however, Scotland's future prosperity will also depend upon workers, businesses and investors travelling to the Highlands and Islands to develop, construct and operate nationally significant projects. Regional air connectivity therefore has a growing role not only in supporting island communities but in supporting Scotland's wider economic ambitions.

Alongside economic development, aviation remains fundamental to ensuring equitable access to healthcare, education, employment and public services for many communities throughout the region.

The National Transport Strategy recognises the challenge faced by many people living in remote and island communities who are currently unable to undertake affordable same-day return journeys to Scotland's principal economic centres. Similarly, the Convention of the Highlands and Islands has consistently recognised the importance of improving connectivity across the region.

The opportunity before Scotland is therefore not simply to respond to recent changes in air services, but to ask a more fundamental question:

- What level of air connectivity will Scotland require to support thriving communities, equitable public services and a growing Highlands and Islands economy over the next twenty years?

Developing a Long-Term Strategic Approach

Recent engagement has highlighted increasing recognition that Scotland has well-developed long-term strategies for roads, rail and ferries, yet regional aviation has largely evolved through commercial decisions supplemented where necessary by interventions such as the Air Discount Scheme and Public Service Obligations.

The recent Scottish Government intervention to restore the Inverness–Stornoway, Kirkwall and Sumburgh services further illustrates both the importance of these connections and the need to consider how essential regional air services can be placed on a more sustainable long-term footing.

Whilst these interventions have provided significant benefits, there remains an opportunity to consider whether a more strategic approach to regional air connectivity could deliver improved outcomes for communities, the economy and the public sector.

At this stage no predetermined model is being advanced.

Instead, officers believe there is merit in working collaboratively with partners to better understand:

- the current and future role of regional air connectivity;
- how connectivity supports healthcare, economic development and sustainable communities;
- the relationship between affordability, connectivity and demand;
- international approaches adopted in comparable countries and regions;
- the implications of future aircraft technologies and decarbonisation; and
- opportunities to improve connectivity whilst delivering value for money.

Emerging Themes

Whilst discussions remain at an early stage, a number of common themes have consistently emerged through engagement with partners.

These include:

- recognising Highlands and Islands air connectivity as strategically important to Scotland's future economic development;
- strengthening the role of aviation in supporting healthcare delivery and access to essential public services;
- developing a clearer understanding of the relationship between affordability, connectivity and passenger demand;
- considering regional air services as part of an integrated transport network alongside ferry, rail and bus services;
- learning from international best practice in countries with comparable geography including Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Faroe Islands and Greenland;
- improving understanding of the current public investment supporting Highlands and Islands aviation and how this contributes to wider public policy objectives; and
- ensuring future policy is informed by robust evidence and stakeholder engagement.

These themes align closely with the ambitions contained within the National Transport Strategy, the Regional Transport Strategy and wider work currently being undertaken across the Highlands and Islands.

Healthcare and Connectivity

Members will be aware that HITRANS is currently leading development of a Highlands and Islands Health and Transport Action Plan (HTAP) in partnership with NHS Highland, NHS Western Isles, NHS Orkney and NHS Shetland.

As part of this work, officers have begun convening the four Health Boards to develop a better understanding of patient, accompanying relative and staff movements that rely upon regional air and ferry services.

This work provides an opportunity to develop a much stronger evidence base regarding the relationship between transport connectivity and healthcare delivery and will help inform future consideration of regional air connectivity requirements.

Partnership Working

The development of any long-term strategic approach will require close collaboration across a wide range of organisations.

Accordingly, officers have been engaging with constituent Councils, Transport Scotland, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, NHS Boards, HIAL, airline operators and elected

representatives from across the Highlands and Islands to explore how this work might best be taken forward. This is consistent with Transport Scotland's stated intention, following the August funding announcement, to work with HIAL and industry stakeholders on the next steps towards a sustainable long-term solution.

The consistent message emerging from these discussions is that this should be a collaborative, evidence-led process focused on identifying long-term opportunities rather than responding solely to current operational issues.

Next Steps

Officers will continue engagement with key stakeholders to further develop the evidence base supporting a long-term strategic approach to Highlands and Islands air connectivity. This work will include consideration of:

- current and future passenger demand;
- healthcare requirements;
- regional economic growth;
- international best practice;
- existing public investment supporting regional aviation;
- future technologies; and
- opportunities to strengthen connectivity whilst delivering value for money.

As an initial step, and reflecting Transport Scotland's commitment to further stakeholder engagement on a sustainable long-term solution, it is anticipated that a stakeholder round table discussion will be convened bringing together organisations with an interest in Highlands and Islands air connectivity. The purpose of this initial engagement will be to identify the principal issues requiring further work, establish areas of common interest and help inform the development of a longer-term strategic approach.

The outcome of this work will be reported back to a future meeting of the Partnership Board.

Risk Register

RTS Delivery

Impact – Positive

Supports delivery of the Regional Transport Strategy by contributing towards improved regional connectivity and supporting sustainable economic growth, access to healthcare and reduced inequalities.

Policy

Impact – Positive

Supports development of evidence to inform future Scottish Government policy relating to Highlands and Islands air connectivity.

Financial

Impact – Neutral

This report has no direct financial implications. Future work will seek to understand how existing public investment supports regional air connectivity and identify opportunities to improve value for money. The recent provision of more than £1 million of additional Scottish Government funding to restore the Inverness – Stornoway, Kirkwall and Sumburgh services further demonstrates the public resources already being committed reactively to maintain regional connectivity and reinforces the case for considering how existing support might be deployed more strategically over the longer term.

Equality

Impact – Positive

Improved connectivity has the potential to reduce inequalities experienced by remote and island communities in accessing healthcare, employment, education and public services.

Climate Change

Impact – Neutral

Future work will consider opportunities presented by emerging low and zero emission aviation technologies alongside wider decarbonisation objectives.

Recommendation

Members are invited to:

1. Note the strategic importance of Highlands and Islands air connectivity to communities, public services and Scotland's future economic development.
2. Note the ongoing engagement being undertaken by officers with Scottish Government, Transport Scotland, partner Councils, NHS Boards, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, HIAL, airline operators and elected representatives.
3. Support the continued development of an evidence-based, collaborative and long-term strategic approach to Highlands and Islands air connectivity.
4. Note that officers expect the next phase of this work to include an initial stakeholder round table discussion to inform the development of a longer-term strategic approach.
5. Agree that a further report be presented to a future meeting of the Partnership Board as this work progresses.

Report by: Ranald Robertson

Designation: Partnership Director

Date: 12th August 2026