

Report to Partnership Meeting 11 September 2026

CONSULTATION

House of Commons Transport Committee's call for evidence on *Getting to Work – Transport Connectivity Enabling Young People to Access Jobs, Training and Apprenticeships*

PURPOSE OF REPORT

The purpose of this report is to present HITRANS' draft response to the House of Commons Transport Committee's call for evidence on *Getting to Work – Transport Connectivity Enabling Young People to Access Jobs, Training and Apprenticeships*, and to invite members to approve the submission, subject to any amendments agreed by the Partnership Board.

The consultation seeks evidence on how transport connectivity affects young people's access to employment, apprenticeships, college and training, with a particular focus on affordability, availability, reliability and integration with wider employability systems.

BACKGROUND

The call for evidence is live until 16 October 2026 examines the extent to which transport systems enable or constrain young people's access to work, training and apprenticeships. This is highly relevant to the Highlands and Islands, where transport availability, affordability and reliability are longstanding structural barriers to participation in employment and education.

<https://committees.parliament.uk/submission/3950/#/evidence/3950/call-for-evidence>

The Committee has asked for written evidence that addresses any of the following questions:

- a) What impact do the cost and availability of transport options have on young people's ability to find and stay in work;
- b) What cost and other practical barriers do young people without public transport options face in using cars for getting to work;
- c) How well are these transport barriers currently understood by national and local decision-makers, and what tools are available for understanding them;
- d) What flexibility, powers and funding do decision-makers have to shape transport services and networks to respond to this problem;
- e) What policies have proven to be effective in, or should be trialled for, improving young people's ability to get to work;
- f) Should policies be targeted, for example geographically, by age, or by other factors; and what specific issues arise in rural and other different kinds of areas;
- g) What role should employers and transport operators play in breaking down transport barriers;
- h) Do the actions in the Government's Better Connected strategy aimed at "[unlocking opportunities for everyone](#)" have the potential to improve young people's access to employment;
- i) How would transport systems look and operate differently if they were focused on connecting young people to employment.

DRAFT RESPONSE

HITRANS' have produced a draft submission, copy in Annex A, which draws on RTS Strategy and operational experience, evaluation evidence, international research, and learning from the Transport to Employment (T2E) programme and the £2 Regional Bus Fare Cap Pilot. It highlights the distinct circumstances of rural and island communities, the interaction between transport and digital access, and the need for multi-year funding certainty to support systemic interventions.

The submission also emphasises the concept of a transport penalty experienced by young people in rural and island Scotland, where dispersed labour markets, limited public transport options, high travel costs and misaligned shift patterns significantly restrict access to opportunities.

HITRANS' draft response sets out the following key messages:

1. Transport is a systemic barrier to employment for rural young people

Young people in rural and island communities face fewer transport options, longer distances, unreliable connections and higher costs relative to entry-level wages. These factors determine whether a job or training place is genuinely accessible.

2. Availability and affordability must be addressed together

A low fare is irrelevant if no service exists; an available service is inaccessible if its cost is prohibitive. Policy must treat availability, reliability and affordability as interdependent.

3. Shift patterns and rural employment structures require flexible transport

Early starts, late finishes, weekend work and dispersed workplaces mean traditional timetables often do not meet the needs of young workers.

4. Digital access is now a second infrastructure of participation

Hybrid learning, digital interviews and online induction mean digital exclusion compounds transport disadvantage. Transport and digital access must be designed and funded together.

5. Intersectional disadvantage intensifies transport barriers

Young people experiencing poverty, disability, caring responsibilities, minority ethnic status or rural isolation face multiple, compounding barriers that require targeted policy responses.

6. The UK has a rural evidence gap

Existing UK research focuses heavily on urban areas. HITRANS recommends a structured programme of rural evidence-building, including evaluation of rural transport-to-employment interventions.

7. Multi-year funding certainty is essential

Short-term grants undermine employability outcomes. Young people cannot commit to jobs or apprenticeships if transport support may end mid-course. Rural transport systems require multi-year commissioning cycles.

8. Employers have a critical role

Employers should share shift data, adjust shift times where possible, collaborate on shared transport, and consider contributions to recruitment-related travel costs to build local community growth and wealth.

9. Policy frameworks must recognise rural realities

Uniform national systems can produce unequal outcomes in rural and island areas. HITRANS recommends exploring statutory spatial exemptions and multi-year devolved revenue allocations for lifeline rural transport.

The submission highlights the distinctive circumstances of the Highlands and Islands, including:

- dispersed labour markets;
- ferry-dependent communities;
- limited childcare options interacting with transport availability;
- high unavoidable mileage;
- lower access to private vehicles among young people;
- limited digital connectivity in some areas.

Taken together, these factors illustrate the distinctive circumstances of the Highlands and Islands, where dispersed labour markets, ferry-dependent communities, limited childcare provision, high unavoidable mileage, lower access to private vehicles among young people, and variable digital connectivity combine to create a pronounced transport penalty. This penalty restricts access to employment, apprenticeships and training and constrains the labour market available to employers across the region.

MIND THE GAP

Universal national transport policies highlight a profound spatial equity gap by favouring high-density urban infrastructure over rural realities. Analysis of the Under-22 Free Bus Travel Scheme illustrates this imbalance. For example, urban cardholders in Edinburgh realise an average annual utility value of £350 per card with a 95% uptake, whereas young people in the Western Isles claim just £46 in value alongside a 50% uptake rate. This divide is not driven by a lack of local demand, but by structural barriers including low service frequency, misaligned timetables, ferry dependencies and long travel distances.

This structural disadvantage persists due to systemic weaknesses in governance and funding design. Mechanisms like the Fairer Scotland Duty often default to passive procedural compliance rather than serving as active levers for redistributive investment. Furthermore, rigid per-capita allocation models ignore the elevated per-mile operational costs of peripheral and island networks, creating policy incoherence that undermines wider national ambitions around youth retention, regional economic resilience, and equal access to training and work.

In practice, handing a rural young person a universal entitlement card without the underlying service network is like gifting them a brand-new car without the ignition key, it satisfies the formal requirement of transport but leaves them with zero practical mobility.

Opportunity cannot be measured solely by the presence of growth within a postcode. Opportunity must be reachable. Where transport and digital connectivity do not enable young people to access the places where work, training and apprenticeships occur, growth remains proximate but inaccessible. Addressing this structural reality is essential to ensuring that national policy delivers equitable outcomes for rural and island communities.

The Committee's inquiry provides an important opportunity to set out how transport connectivity shapes young people's participation in employment and skills pathways in rural and island Scotland. HITRANS' submission seeks to ensure that these realities are fully reflected in the Committee's deliberations and in any subsequent recommendations to the UK Government.

Endorsing this submission will ensure that HITRANS' evidence informs national decision-making and supports long-term improvements in connectivity, opportunity and inclusion for young people across the Highlands and Islands.

RISK REGISTER

RTS Delivery

Impact - Positive

Comment – The submission reinforces RTS priorities on inclusive, accessible and sustainable transport and strengthens HITRANS' advocacy role

Policy

Impact – Positive

Comment – The response supports national policy development and ensures rural and island perspectives are represented in UK parliamentary scrutiny

Financial

Impact – Neutral

Comment – No direct financial impact but recommendations emphasise the need for multi-year funding certainty for rural transport systems

Equality

Impact – Positive

Comment – The submission highlights intersectional disadvantage and advocates for targeted support for young people facing multiple barriers

RECOMMENDATIONS

Members are asked to:

1. Note the House of Commons Transport Committee's call for evidence.
2. Approve HITRANS' draft response, subject to any amendments agreed by members.
3. Delegate authority to the Chair and Partnership Director to finalise and submit the response on behalf of HITRANS.
4. Support continued engagement with UK Government, Scottish Government and regional partners to strengthen the rural evidence base and advocate for multi-year funding certainty.

Report by:	Ranald Robertson
Designation:	Partnership Director
Date:	21 August 2026
Background:	Appendix – Draft Response

HITRANS Submission to the House of Commons Transport Committee
Getting to Work – Transport Connectivity Enabling Young People to Access Jobs, Training and Apprenticeships

1. About HITRANS

The Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership (HITRANS) is the statutory Regional Transport Partnership covering Highland, Moray, Argyll and Bute, Na h-Eileanan Siar and Orkney Islands. We welcome the Committee's inquiry into how transport enables young people to access employment, apprenticeships, college and training. In our region, transport is not simply a means of travel. It is a core enabler of economic participation, social mobility and wellbeing, and increasingly, so is digital connectivity.

2. Key points

HITRANS would highlight the following overarching points to the Committee:

- 1. Transport is a significant barrier to employment and training for young people in rural and island communities.** The existence of a job, apprenticeship or training place is of limited value if an individual cannot reach it reliably and affordably.
- 2. Affordability and availability must be considered together.** Reducing fares is important, but a cheap fare cannot address a journey for which no suitable service exists. Conversely, an available service may remain inaccessible to a young person if its cost represents a disproportionate share of an entry-level wage.
- 3. Traditional public transport timetables frequently do not match modern patterns of employment.** Early starts, evening finishes, weekend working and changing shift patterns can make otherwise accessible workplaces impossible to reach without a car.
- 4. Policy should recognise the distinctive circumstances of rural and island communities.** Lower population density inevitably makes conventional scheduled public transport more difficult and expensive to provide. Demand Responsive Transport, community transport, active travel, shared mobility and employer-supported transport therefore all have an important role alongside conventional bus and rail services.
- 5. Transport and employability policy need to be designed together.** Transport support should be embedded within employability programmes rather than treated as an issue to be addressed only after somebody has secured a job or training place.
- 6. Digital access is now a second infrastructure of participation alongside transport.** Transport used to be the primary determinant of whether young people could reach education, training and employment. Today, digital access is equally fundamental for hybrid working/learning alongside transport barriers.
- 7. Intersectional disadvantage intensifies transport barriers for young people with protected characteristics or additional vulnerabilities.** Young people who experience poverty, disability, caring responsibilities, minority ethnic status, rural isolation or other protected characteristics face multiple and compounding barriers to accessing employment and training.

Young people are disproportionately affected by weaknesses in rural and island transport provision. They are less likely than established workers to have access to a private vehicle and are more likely to be entering employment at comparatively low wage levels. They may also need to travel significant distances to access further education, apprenticeships and specialist training.

These challenges are compounded by the geography of the Highlands and Islands. Employment opportunities are dispersed across rural communities and islands rather than concentrated around a dense public transport network of a large urban area hinterland.

3. Transport Penalty in Rural and Island Scotland

This creates what can effectively become a transport penalty for rural young people.

A young person may be qualified and motivated to take an opportunity but nevertheless unable to do so because:

- there is simply no service;
- the first bus arrives after their shift begins;
- the last bus departs before their shift ends;
- interchange between services makes the journey impractical or unreliable;
- the cost of regular travel is disproportionate to an apprentice/entry-level wage; or
- the workplace is located on an industrial estate, business park, tourism site or other location away from the established but limited rural public transport network.

These are not marginal transport inconveniences. They can determine whether an individual accepts a job, remains in employment or has to turn an opportunity down. They also affect employers. Across the Highlands and Islands, transport constraints can restrict the geographical labour market available to businesses and make recruitment and retention more difficult.

Young people across rural and island Scotland face some of the most severe transport barriers in the UK. These barriers determine whether a job, apprenticeship or training place is theoretically available or genuinely accessible. This submission brings together HITRANS' operational experience, international evidence on transport and employment, UK research on low-income neighbourhoods, Scottish evaluation evidence, and the rights-based argument for rural inclusion opportunities. The conclusion is clear. Transport is a systemic barrier at present but it's possible for it to be a systemic enabler of opportunity with investment and resourcing.

4. What the Evidence Shows

4.1 International evidence

Previous international review research surprisingly found a positive association between transport access and employment outcomes. The research concluded that car access significantly increases employment probability, that better public transport access improves employment outcomes when services are reliable and aligned with job locations and that shorter commute times increase employment probability, particularly for young people. They also noted that a larger evidence base is needed for rural areas which is directly relevant to HITRANS area.

4.2 UK evidence

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's (2018) study of low-income neighbourhoods found that public transport is often experienced as something that constrains rather than enables access to work. The study highlighted unreliable buses, high fares, complex journeys and the changing geography of employment as key barriers. It also showed that transport issues interact with childcare, insecure work and household circumstances. However, this research is almost entirely urban and does not examine in detail rural or island labour markets, leaving a major evidence gap.

4.3 Scottish evidence

Transport Scotland's Year 1 (2023) evaluation of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme found that free bus travel increased young people's autonomy, confidence and responsibility, supported mental health and wellbeing and opened up new education and work opportunities. The evaluation showed that cost barriers were significantly reduced, that young women reported feeling safer travelling at night, and that families experienced reduced stress and improved wellbeing. These findings demonstrate that transport access improves wellbeing, which in turn improves employability.

5. The Rural Evidence Gap

Despite stronger international evidence, there is very little UK evaluation of rural transport-to-employment interventions. Rural and island labour markets face unique challenges, including long distances, infrequent or unreliable services, ferry dependency, dispersed settlements, shift-based rural employment, limited childcare options and high travel costs relative to wages. These contexts are almost entirely absent from existing UK research. The HITRANS Transport to Employment (T2E) programme is one of the first attempts to in some way address this gap in a systemic programme manner albeit for context mainly aimed at families with young people.

6. Why Transport Access Matters for Wellbeing

Transport access affects wellbeing in ways that directly influence employability. Reliable and affordable travel reduces stress and anxiety. Confidence increases when young people can navigate new places and routines. Independence grows, particularly for those entering work for the first time. Isolation is reduced, especially in rural areas. Mental health improves, particularly post-Covid. Safety increases, especially for women and girls. Social networks strengthen, supporting job search and retention. Wellbeing is not a secondary benefit. It is a core enabler of employment, yet there is little focus upon this outcome in terms of monitoring and evaluation of transport or employability policy.

7. Intersectionality of Transport Disadvantage in Rural and Island Scotland

Transport disadvantage does not affect all young people equally. It interacts with poverty, disability, caring responsibilities, minority ethnic status, rural isolation and other protected characteristics to create deeper and more persistent barriers to employment, apprenticeships and training. These factors do not operate independently. They combine to produce intersectional disadvantage, where multiple forms of exclusion reinforce one another and significantly reduce a young person's ability to participate in education and work.

International evidence demonstrates that transport disadvantage disproportionately affects low-income groups and young people with additional vulnerabilities. They have found that car access and shorter commute times significantly increase employment probability, particularly for low-income households and welfare recipients. This means that young people who already face socioeconomic disadvantage are more likely to be harmed by transport barriers.

UK evidence reinforces this pattern. Previous research has found that transport barriers are most acute for people in low-income neighbourhoods, especially those with caring responsibilities, insecure work, health conditions or limited access to private vehicles. These factors often overlap, creating intersectional disadvantage that is more severe than any single barrier alone.

Scottish evidence shows similar effects. Transport Scotland's evaluation of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme found that free bus travel increased independence, confidence and wellbeing, but also highlighted that young people with disabilities, mental health conditions or safety concerns face additional barriers that require targeted support. These findings demonstrate that transport access improves wellbeing, but that wellbeing gains are unevenly distributed when structural disadvantage is present.

In rural and island Scotland, intersectional disadvantage is intensified by geography. A young person who is disabled, caring for siblings, living in poverty, or belonging to a minority ethnic group faces additional layers of exclusion when transport is infrequent, unreliable or unaffordable. Intersectional disadvantage therefore requires policy responses that are sensitive to multiple forms of vulnerability. Transport-to-employment interventions must be designed with an understanding of how poverty, disability, caring responsibilities, gender, ethnicity and rurality interact to shape access to opportunity. Without this intersectional approach, transport policy will continue to benefit those who are already closest to opportunity, while leaving behind those who face the greatest barriers.

8. Transport and Digital Access: Twin Infrastructures of Participation

Transport used to be the main infrastructure of participation. Today, digital access is equally fundamental. The principle remains the same: if someone cannot physically or digitally get to the college, the interview, the apprenticeship or the job, nothing else the system offers matters. This is not simply an operational challenge. It is a rights-based one. As the Scottish Human Rights Commission (2025) argues in its call to reimagine Scotland's digital strategy, digital inclusion must be a legal obligation, not a policy option.

In rural and island Scotland, physical and digital exclusion frequently reinforce one another. A young person may be motivated, qualified and ready to take up an opportunity but still unable to do so because the first bus arrives after their shift begins, the last bus leaves before their shift ends, there is no service, the online induction requires broadband they cannot access, the apprenticeship interview is digital-only, or the college course is hybrid but connectivity is unreliable. Transport and digital access must therefore be treated as joint infrastructures of employability, designed together, funded together and measured together.

9. Affordability

Affordability is central to improving access to employment. The £2 Regional Bus Fare Cap Pilot delivered by HITRANS and ZetTrans provides an opportunity to understand how simpler, lower fares affect travel behaviour and accessibility. However, particular consideration should be given to the transition into employment. Jobseekers must pay for interviews, induction and training before receiving their first wage, and young people entering work face several weeks of commuting costs before their first salary. HITRANS is developing an Access to Employment programme that includes time-limited Mobility Credits to cover interviews, training and the first weeks of employment. Government should consider embedding this type of transitional support systematically within employment and skills programmes but with long-term funding certainty to make infrastructure investment possible and fares at long-term affordable levels.

10. Demand Responsive and Community Transport

Conventional fixed-route bus services cannot economically meet every journey requirement across sparsely populated areas. Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) and community transport therefore have an increasingly important role. For young people, perceptions and awareness of these services can themselves become barriers. DRT should be viewed as part of a modern integrated rural mobility network, not a niche service. Digital booking (where digital connectivity and skills are present), integration with scheduled public transport, simple fares and effective marketing to younger users are all essential.

11. Active and Shared Mobility

Cycling and e-bikes can provide an important bridge between home, public transport and employment. HITRANS is exploring how HI-Bike hire scheme and other cycling interventions can support employment outcomes, including time-limited access for jobseekers, route planning and longer-term cycle loan arrangements. These measures will not replace public transport but can significantly extend the range of opportunities accessible without a private car.

12. Employers Have an Important Role

Transport barriers are not solely a matter for transport authorities. Employers benefit directly from interventions that expand their available labour market and improve retention. They should be encouraged to share anonymised workforce and shift-pattern information, adjust shift times to align with existing public transport, contribute to dedicated or shared transport, support employee travel costs during recruitment and induction, collaborate with neighbouring employers on business parks, and engage with transport authorities before new employment sites open. Transport accessibility should also be a requirement in planning for major employment developments and should be considered in terms of social value requirements of public procurement.

13. Joining Transport and Employability Policy

Transport should be considered much earlier in the employability journey. The principle is simple, there is little value in supporting someone towards an opportunity without establishing whether they can get there. Transport accessibility should become a routine element of employability assessment and support. This type of planning and system pathway redesign requires certainty, there is little point in embedding a process for a grant funded calendar year when the job or training is over a longer period.

Short-term funding creates a false assumption that transport support is only needed temporarily, and that once a young person enters employment, they will quickly acquire the financial means to purchase or operate a private vehicle. This assumption is not supported by evidence. Young people entering work in rural and island Scotland typically begin on low wages, face high living costs, and often work in sectors with insecure hours, seasonal patterns or variable shifts. They do not have the disposable income required to purchase, insure, fuel or maintain a private vehicle, nor do they have the financial stability to commit to car ownership.

Short-term transport support therefore undermines the very outcomes it is intended to achieve. When young people cannot rely on transport continuing beyond the first few weeks of employment, they are less likely to accept job offers, less likely to sustain employment, and less able to commit to multi-year apprenticeships or college courses. Transport Scotland's evaluation of the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme demonstrates that consistent, ongoing access is what enables independence, confidence, wellbeing and participation. These benefits do not emerge from short-term or uncertain provision.

In rural and island areas, transport systems require long-term commissioning cycles, multi-year contracts and stable investment. One-year grants cannot support ferry alignment, Demand Responsive Transport development, employer-supported transport or active travel infrastructure. Short-term certainty reduces the efficacy of individuals in making commitments to new jobs or training, because they cannot be confident that the transport enabling their participation will remain in place.

15. Recommendations for Further Work

Strengthen the Rural Evidence Base

HITRANS recommends that the Committee support a programme of further work to strengthen the evidence base on transport and digital accessibility for young people in rural and island communities. This should include structured primary data collection, combining quantitative metrics and qualitative case studies, and a formal evaluation of rural transport-to-employment interventions similar in structure to the Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme evaluation.

Integrate Transport Within Employability and Skills Systems

The Committee should encourage stronger integration between transport, employability and digital policy. Transport accessibility should be embedded within employability assessments, and transport authorities, employers and skills agencies should collaborate on workforce travel audits and shift-pattern mapping. Improved data integration across transport, employment, education and digital systems is essential to identify gaps between communities and opportunities.

Provide Multi-Year Funding Certainty and Reflect Rurality

HITRANS recommends that the Committee recognise that systemic interventions cannot be delivered effectively through short-term or annual grant cycles especially in rural areas. Transport authorities, colleges, employers and young people require multi-year certainty to plan services, design programmes and commit to opportunities. Government should therefore provide multi-year funding aligned with the duration of typical apprenticeships and training pathways.

Address Intersectional Disadvantage Explicitly

The Committee should explicitly recognise the intersectional nature of transport disadvantage. Young people experiencing poverty, disability, caring responsibilities, minority ethnic status, rural isolation or other protected characteristics face multiple and compounding barriers. Future transport-to-employment interventions must be designed to address these intersecting forms of disadvantage through targeted data collection and tailored funding models.

Correct the False Assumption of Private Modal Shift

The Committee should recognise that short-term funding creates a false assumption that young people will quickly acquire the disposable income required to shift from supported transport to private modes. Evidence shows this is unrealistic in rural and island Scotland. Transport support must therefore be sustained long enough for young people to stabilise in employment.

16. Conclusion

For young people across the Highlands and Islands, transport can be the difference between an opportunity being theoretically available and genuinely accessible. The policy objective should be clear: a young person's ability to take up a job, apprenticeship or training opportunity should not depend on whether they or their family can provide access to a car, nor on whether they can afford or access a digital connection. Achieving this in rural and island communities requires affordable fares, targeted support during the transition into work, services designed around actual employment patterns, greater use of DRT and community transport, active and shared mobility, employer participation, rights-based digital inclusion and much closer integration between transport and employability policy.

The actions set out in the UK Government's Better Connected strategy have the potential to improve young people's access to employment but their impact will depend on how effectively they are implemented in rural and island areas and within devolved policy areas. The strategy's recognition that an inclusive transport network must include taxis and private hire vehicles, community transport operators, coach companies and demand responsive transport providers is welcome. These modes already fill critical gaps in rural networks and their formal integration into statutory systems beyond just "transport plans" could strengthen systemic access to employment, apprenticeships and training for young people who rely on tailored or flexible transport options.

The strategy's emphasis on coaches is particularly relevant to rural and island Scotland. Coaches provide essential links between towns, cities, airports and education settings, and they often serve destinations that are not connected by rail. The expectation that local authorities should recognise the role of coach services and plan appropriate provision for them could improve connectivity for young people travelling to colleges, training centres and workplaces. This is especially important in regions where rail coverage is limited and where coach services provide the only viable long-distance public transport option.

The development of a measure to identify where poor transport connectivity and affordability most affect access to employment, education, healthcare and key services is a constructive step. If designed well, such a measure could help highlight rural and island areas where transport disadvantage is most acute. The commitment to improve the evidence base in areas where existing evidence is limited is particularly important, given the lack of UK evaluation of rural transport-to-employment interventions. Any proposed transport poverty measure and the opportunity mission toolkit could support more consistent, evidence-based decision-making and help local authorities demonstrate the social value of transport interventions.

However, the potential benefits of the Better Connected strategy will only be realised if its actions are accompanied by multi-year funding certainty. Short-term or annual grant funding creates a false assumption that young people will quickly acquire the disposable income required to shift from supported transport to private modes of travel. This assumption is not supported by evidence. Young people entering work in rural and island Scotland typically begin on low wages, face high

living costs and often work in sectors characterised by insecure hours, seasonal patterns or variable shifts. They do not have the financial stability required to purchase, insure, fuel or maintain a private vehicle. Short-term transport support therefore undermines the very outcomes it is intended to achieve, because young people cannot commit to jobs or training if the transport enabling their participation may end mid-course or job probation period.

The strategy's ambitions will also need to be aligned with an intersectional understanding of disadvantage. Young people who experience poverty, disability, caring responsibilities, minority ethnic status, rural isolation or other protected characteristics face multiple and compounding barriers to accessing employment and training. These barriers interact with transport disadvantage and digital exclusion to create deeper and more persistent exclusion. The Better Connected strategy will only unlock opportunities for everyone if its actions are designed to address these intersecting forms of disadvantage.

In summary, the Better Connected strategy contains several actions that could improve young people's access to employment, particularly through better integration of flexible transport modes, stronger recognition of coach services, improved licensing arrangements, and enhanced evidence-based planning. However, these actions will only deliver meaningful benefits in rural and island Scotland if they are accompanied by multi-year funding certainty, explicit consideration of intersectional disadvantage, and a commitment to integrating transport ambition with funding.

National transport initiatives, such as the Scottish Under-22 Free Bus Travel Scheme delivered via the National Entitlement Card, are designed as universal public benefits. However, uniform implementation across diverse geographies generates stark inequalities in substantive outcomes. Where high service density allows urban cardholders to realize significant financial utility, rural and island cardholders face severe constraints due to sparse timetables, limited network coverage, and multi-modal dependencies. To ensure public investments deliver equivalent public value to all citizens, national entitlement frameworks must shift from measuring formal eligibility to evaluating practical access value.

An analysis of the Under-22 scheme highlights this spatial equity gap in practice. Young people in urban centres such as Edinburgh realise an average annual value of approximately £350 per cardholder with around 95% uptake, whereas in the Western Isles, the average realized value drops to £46 per cardholder with roughly 50% uptake. This disparity stems from structural network realities rather than a lack of demand specifically low service density, misaligned timetables, ferry dependencies and long travel distances.

Current governance frameworks and policy impact tools consistently fail to compel redistributive interventions. While mechanisms like the Fairer Scotland Duty (Part 1 of Equality Act 2010) aim to address socio-economic disadvantage, they often function in practice as procedural compliance exercises rather than active drivers of equitable scheme design. Furthermore, uniform per-capita funding formulas fail to account for the higher operational costs per passenger-mile inherent in low-density networks. This rural transport penalty creates policy incoherence, directly conflicting with national ambitions around youth retention, regional economic resilience, and equal access to training, education, and employment.

To address these systemic flaws, transport legislation and equality frameworks must be strengthened by introducing a statutory place-sensitive equity requirement that forces public bodies to evaluate spatial inequality and adjust national schemes prior to rollout. Furthermore, authorities should transition from standard uptake metrics to "practical access value" standards that measure real-world utility delivered per citizen, alongside implementing rural-weighted funding formulas that account for low service density and multi-modal travel complexities.

The idea of Statutory Spatial Exemptions under the Internal Market Act, so that explicit legal carve-outs within the legislation exempting rural, island, and low-density lifeline transport services from mutual recognition and non-discrimination rules. This would allow decision-makers to specify local service conditions, fleet standards, and social mandates without risking legal challenge from cross-border operators especially if aligned with Directly Devolved, Multi-Year Revenue Allocations. Enabling a shift away from short-term competitive grant bidding toward long-term, ring-fenced revenue funding devolved directly to rural and island regional transport bodies. Multi-year operational certainty is essential for supporting low-volume routes that serve young workers and learners

In conclusion,

HITRANS would welcome the opportunity to provide further evidence to the Committee and share learning from the £2 Regional Bus Fare Cap Pilot and the ongoing delivery of our Access to Employment programme.

We are committed to supporting the Committee in building a stronger rural evidence base and in shaping policy solutions that reflect the realities of dispersed labour markets, the need for multi-year certainty, and the importance of designing policy frameworks that recognise that uniform systems, while treating all places equally, can produce unequal outcomes for rural and island communities.

Ultimately, young people are not enabled to rise to the level of their goals because they are constrained by the level of the systems around them. A transport and digital system designed for urban uniformity will continue to produce unequal outcomes in rural and island Scotland. A UK wide system designed for rural realities will unlock the opportunities that already exist but remain out of reach for young people in rural and island areas.

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