

Report to Partnership Meeting 11 September 2026

RESEARCH AND STRATEGY DELIVERY

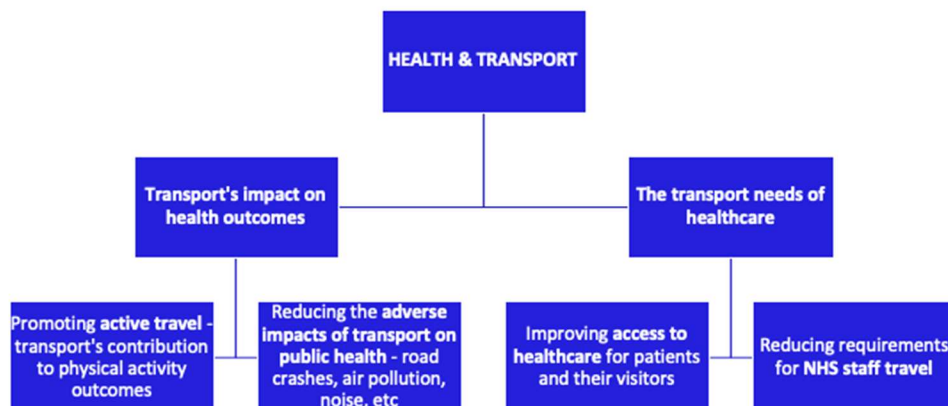
Health and Transport Action Plans Update

Purpose of Report

To provide an update on the Highlands and Islands Health and Transport Action Plan

Background

Reports to previous Partnership meetings have outlined recent work undertaken by HITRANS and partners to address some of the shared challenges and opportunities facing the health and transport sectors within the region.



Following a successful workshop with local authorities and health boards last year, HITRANS worked with partners to identify the necessary resource to establish and deliver a Health and Transport Action Plan for the region.

Subsequently, the commitment below was included within the final Implementation Route Map for National Islands Plan 2026 <https://shorturl.at/JO1ky>:

By early 2026, we will provide funding to HITRANS to develop a Health and Transport Action Plan (HTAP) for the Highlands and Islands, including demand assessments and structured engagement between transport providers and Health Boards

Following the adoption of the final National Islands Plan by the Scottish Parliament, HITRANS received confirmation of funding support for 2025/26. The commitment is being jointly funded with contributions from Transport Scotland, Scottish Government's Health Directorate and the

National Islands Plan. This funding has enabled the recruitment of a Project Manager with responsibility for overseeing the development and implementation of a Health and Transport Action Plan for the Highlands and Islands including the Shetland Islands Council, ZetTrans and NHS Shetland.

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

Progress Update

HITRANS have now appointed a Project Manager who will take up their post on 14th September. Once they are in post the intention is to convene the first meeting of the HTAP Steering Group in October.

In parallel, HITRANS are currently undertaking work to better understand current and future demand for staff and patient travel between health boards. This work was prompted by the recent announcement by Loganair to significantly reduce its services connecting Inverness and Stornoway and Sumburgh/Kirkwall. The withdrawn services are expected to be reinstated from October 2026 following confirmation of funding support from the Scottish Government to HIAL however, the impact of their withdrawal in July highlighted the reliance on these services for enabling patients and their escorts to access specialist healthcare facilities like Raigmore Hospital.

NHS Western Isles highlighted that at least 90% of patients and staff booked by the health board rely on the morning flight from Stornoway to Inverness. In 2025, that amounted to 1,364 patient journeys each way between Stornoway and Inverness, including escorts, with 75% relating to outpatient appointments designed as same-day returns. The reduction in service meant that a day return would no longer be an option from Stornoway with the reductions to service to Sumburgh and Kirkwall already meaning that day returns no longer possible for several years.

This work will provide a better understanding of the full costs to the public purse in providing these essential services and inform the parallel work on Highlands and Islands Air Connectivity and the implementation of sub national planning within the NHS.

Accessibility of BN Islander Aircraft

Following initial representations by a local MSP on behalf of constituents in Summer 2024 - Local, Regional and National partners involved in the aviation sector have been working together to identify options to improve accessibility for Persons with Reduced Mobility (PRMs) on a number of inter-island PSOs operated using the Britten Norman Islander aircraft.

Currently all inter-island PSO services within Argyll and Bute, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands Council areas are operated using the 9-seater Islander aircraft.

These PSOs provide lifeline connectivity between 16 airports and airstrips on different islands. The services are increasingly used for health-related trips and enable island residents to access healthcare either at the main hospital serving these island groups but also then on to mainland healthcare facilities providing specialist care in larger hospitals on the Scottish mainland including Inverness, Glasgow and Aberdeen. With demand increasing from an aging demographic, it is imperative that a solution is found to enable as many PRMs to access the aircraft and utilise the air services.

Initial work by the two operators of these PSO services (Loganair and Airtask) did not identify any existing products on the market or in use by other operators of the Islander elsewhere that could be readily deployed or adapted. As a result, a steering group of local, regional and national partners was established to help identify the scope and scale of the challenge and potential solutions.

In parallel, Loganair, in partnership with the Transport Research Institute at Napier University and Aurigo, collaborated within the HEART programme - a UKRI funded 'Future Flyer' project – to develop a prototype lifting device.

Following the completion of this work HITRANS, Napier University and Aurigo developed a proposal for a 6month project to refine the prototype solution developed within the HEART project through further design iteration and user testing to final costed design ready for manufacture. This proposal was submitted to Transport Scotland for consideration in autumn 2025. To date Transport Scotland, while supportive of the proposal, have not been able to identify the necessary funding to undertake the final design and manufacture of the lifting device. HITRANS and the project partners are currently exploring alternative funding opportunities to progress the work. It is also proposed that HITRANS invite the new Cabinet Secretary for Transport to a demonstration of the lifting device to help raise awareness of the issue.

Recommendations

Members are invited to:

1. Note the report.
2. Agree that HITRANS continues to work with project partners Napier University and Aurigo to explore funding opportunities to progress the prototype lifting device for the BN Islander to final design and manufacture.
3. Agree that HITRANS Chair writes to Cabinet Secretary inviting them to a demonstration of the prototype lifting device.

RISK REGISTER

RTS Delivery

Impact – Positive

Comment: Establishing an HTAP is a key action within the RTS Delivery Plan. Progressing governance discussions while also delivering early actions demonstrates momentum and commitment.

Policy

Impact – Positive

Comment: Supports national priorities in the Transport to Health Delivery Plan and National Transport Strategy, and strengthens local partnership working across health and transport.

Financial

Impact –Positive

Comment: Members previously approved funding to support the initial HTAP scoping and workshop that informed the subsequent funding application under the National Islands Plan. HITRANS has received a grant offer of £105,000 for 2026/2027 to enable the recruitment of a HTAP Programme Manager and a small working budget to support the initial work of the partnership.

Equality

Impact – Positive

Comment: HTAP development directly supports improved access to healthcare for communities most disadvantaged by geography, age, and inequality of provision.

Report by: Neil MacRae
Designation: Senior Partnership Manager
Date: 2nd September 2026

