ALL THE LATEST INFORMATION AND NEWS FROM

HI TRANS
Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership

HI·LIGHTS

NEWSLETTER AUTUMN 2026

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WELCOME

Welcome to the Autumn 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*

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HITRANS MAKES IT FOUR IN A ROW AT NATIONAL TRANSPORT AWARDS

HITRANS has been recognised nationally for the fourth consecutive year for helping to make travel in the region more affordable, sustainable and integrated.

The partnership was again highly commended in the John Prescott Regional Transport Authority of the Year category at the prestigious UK-wide Transport Times National Transport Awards after being shortlisted alongside transport authorities across the country.

The commendation recognises what a relatively small organisation can achieve through partnership working in a region where transport is essential to accessing employment, education, healthcare and everyday services.

Recent achievements, highlighted elsewhere in the newsletter, include the regional £2 bus fare cap pilot, which it delivered with ZetTrans and Transport Scotland and participating operators earlier this year.

Early evidence shows the cap is reducing travel costs and stimulating additional use of public transport.



HITRANS' Transport Scotland-funded People and Place programme, supporting walking, cycling, wheeling and sustainable travel, reached more than 26,000 participants in 2025-26.

In addition, the partnership is involved in two new sustainable aviation projects after securing new funding.

This comes from its leadership of the Sustainable Aviation Test Environment (SATE) programme, which established the UK's first operational low-carbon aviation test centre at Kirkwall Airport.

Project SEAN, the Scottish Electric Aviation Network, has secured £1.5 million, and the SATE Hydrogen Roadmap, was awarded £190,081.

HITRANS' INCLUSIVE CYCLING SCHEME SHORTLISTED AT SCOTTISH TRANSPORT AWARDS

A project helping people with mobility and accessibility needs get involved in cycling was shortlisted for a major national award in the summer.

The HI-BIKE Inclusive Cycling Membership scheme, run by HITRANS and funded by Transport Scotland's People and Place Programme,was shortlisted in the excellence in transport accessibility category of the Scottish Transport Awards.

Launched as a pilot in 2024, the scheme enables people living in Fort William or Inverness to receive a non-standard or adapted bike to keep at home and use exclusively for up to a year.

To date, the scheme has 20 members who for £25 per month can access cycles suited to their needs, including electric trikes and handcycles in multiple models.



Each cycle is chosen to suit the individual needs of the member to ensure safe and comfortable use.

Suitable candidates are referred by one of the scheme's partners - Shopmobility Inverness, Lochaber Environmental Group or Spinal Injuries Scotland.

Members have reported how they feel better physically, mentally and socially through enjoying greater independence travelling on their own or when joining family and friends on days out.

NEED FOR LONG-TERM VISION FOR AIR SERVICES

HITRANS is working with partners to try to develop a long-term strategic approach to regional air connectivity following recent concerns over services.



Earlier this year, reductions were announced to scheduled air services between Inverness and Stornoway, Kirkwall and Sumburgh.

In August the Scottish Government announced more than £1 million of additional funding to enable the full restoration of these services from October.

The intervention was welcomed, but did not remove wider strategic issues highlighted by the initial reductions.

HITRANS is actively engaged with councils, Transport Scotland, HIAL, airline operators, NHS boards and other stakeholders to understand 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 is considering whether the current situation presents an opportunity to develop a longer-term strategic approach to Highlands and Islands air connectivity.

It is also a chance to look at how aviation can best support communities, public services and economic development over the coming decades.

While no predetermined model is being advanced at the moment, areas being looked at include how connectivity supports healthcare, economic development and sustainable communities, the relationship between affordability, connectivity and demand and approaches taken by other countries and regions.

As a first step, a round table discussion with partners is being considered to look at areas of common interest to help inform the development of a longer-term strategic approach.

HELPING MORE PEOPLE BENEFIT FROM SAFE AND SUSTAINABLE ACTIVE TRAVEL

A series of locally-led projects across the Highlands and Islands is encouraging thousands of people to walk, wheel and cycle more safely in their communities.

Schemes including primary school cycle training, refurbishing old bikes, workplace cycle fleets and commuter journey planning are supporting active travel in many areas.

The projects are making a real difference in many rural and island communities by providing health, environmental and economic benefits and the greater use of green travel.

They also helping address the affordability, availability and accessibility of rural transport.

Supported through the Scottish Government-funded People and Place Programme and Transport to Employment funds, new awards totalling more than £560,000 are helping 12 projects- five each in Argyll and Bute and Highland, and once each in Moray and the Western Isles.

The funds are managed by HITRANS and distributed via Transport Scotland.

An evaluation report showed the 2025-26 People and Place Programme had more than 26,000 participants from pre-school age to 65+ (up from 14,000 participants in 2024-25).

Highlights include:

- 15.2 FTE posts were supported across 11 delivery partners.
- New or upgraded infrastructure delivered, including cycle parking facilities, adapted bikes, traffic radar sensors, in 59 locations (30 locations in 2024-25).



- 7,713 primary school pupils engaged
- 14 workplaces funded through Workplace Active Travel Grant
- 451 personalised commuter plans for three workplaces
- Engagement with over 1,700 employees (8,000 in 2024-25).
- 1,783 bikes checked and repaired
- 353 bikes refurbished and re-homed either free or at low-cost to children and adults (130 in 2024-25).
- 12 projects funded through community cycle parking programme
- 7 Inclusive Cycling members loaned a non-standard cycle suited to their needs
- 4,446 hours of volunteer time donated to the programme

The supported projects are:

Argyll and Bute

- Adventure Oban
- Argyll Countryside Trust
- Dunoon Community Development Trust
- Keeping it Local Campbeltown
- Positive Pedals

Highland

- Clach Cycle CIC, Inverness
- SPIN Project, Strathspey
- Flip of the Coin, Alness
- Velo City, Inverness
- Fort William Bike Shed

Moray

- Outfit Moray
- Western Isles
- Volunteering Hebrides Embark

ACTIVE TRAVEL UPDATE

We are now delivering our 2026-27 People and Place programme following an award of £2.04M from Transport Scotland.

This year saw a 48% reduction in our revenue grant, amounting to almost £500,000 less than last year, leaving just £400,537 for the entire programme.

To help absorb the drop, the revenue/capital balance of staff posts working across the programme had to be re-profiled.

Some of our local delivery partner activity was reduced and all non-essential revenue activities were cancelled.

Our capital allocation remains the same at £1.64 million. We have been able to continue supporting all our existing local delivery partners by asking them to refocus some of their activity to make it eligible under the new Transport to Employment allocation.

Active Workplaces Grants totalling £107,000 were made to six employers across the region, covering nine sites.



A total of £215,626 has been awarded in Cycle Parking Grants and the Access to Bikes Fund of £126,000 is almost fully committed.

This includes grants to organisations to improve access to cycling, and our own Inclusive Cycling Membership who are loaned a cycle suitable for their particular needs.

We are working with eight local delivery partners across the region, delivering active travel activities tailored to their local area.

The Fort William Wayfinding system was installed in July and officially launched in September.

The development of an in-house digital travel tracker scheme, Go For It, has progressed well and is due to launch later in the year. It will enable us to collect data on journeys to school and how they change as the programme progresses or as infrastructure is installed or improved.

HITRANS has worked closely with our partner local authorities to co-design the tracker, which will enable the gathering of data from all primary schools in the region on how pupils travel to school, and to promote more active journeys.

In October Transport Scotland confirmed funding through the Active Travel Infrastructure Fund (ATIF) of up to £1.3M.

This includes the Skye Cycle Way project to create a traffic-free route from the Skye Bridge to Broadford; design consultant Sweco has been appointed to complete Stage 4 Technical Design for Phase 1 of the route from Kyleakin roundabout to Breakish. HITRANS continue to work closely with Broadford and Strath Community Company on this project.

Feasibility for the Lochbroom Links cycle route connecting settlements along the A835 between Ardmair and Braemore Junction will be progressed, in partnership with Lochbroom & Ullapool Community Trust.

The Oban Interchange project will be progressed through Stage 4 design in preparation for a construction bid to ATIF next year.

HITRANS will work with Comhairle nan Eilean Siar to design improvements to active travel in and around Lochmaddy, which were identified in the settlement's Active Travel Masterplan.

NEW PROJECT MANAGER TO OVERSEE HEALTH AND TRANSPORT ACTION PLAN

Action to improve access to healthcare in the Highlands and Islands has been stepped up with a new appointment.

Struan Charters has been chosen as project manager to oversee a health and transport action plan (HTAP) for the region. He took up the post on September 14.

Struan is helping coordinate efforts to tackle challenges and priorities in rural and islands areas and make the case for more investment in new initiatives.

A major early focus will be working with health boards to better understand the travel needs of patients and staff and how these will be affected by recent service changes, as well as those reliant on other key air and ferry routes.

This work was prompted by Loganair's recent announcement to significantly reduce its services connecting Inverness and Stornoway and Sumburgh/Kirkwall.

The withdrawn services were reinstated from October 2026 following funding support from the Scottish Government, but the impact of their withdrawal in July underlined 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 decrease in service to Sumburgh and Kirkwall already meaning that day returns were 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.

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

HITRANS then successfully bid for funding from the Scottish Governments National Islands Plan and Transport Scotland to establish the plan.

A consultation with health boards and councils identified the need for better joint working and knowledge sharing among partners.

An initial grant of £105,000 helped prepare and administer the action plan and help build the case for strategic improvements.

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HITRANS TO CONTINUE TO PRESS FOR INVESTMENT IN HIGHLAND RAIL SERVICES

A renewed long-term case for rail investment across the Highlands and Islands is set out in HITRANS' rail development strategy.

Route and Branch outlines a vision for a decarbonised, resilient and integrated rail network for the region that supports communities, strengthens the economy, improves connectivity and contributes to a fair and healthy net-zero future.

Its objectives are to improve inclusive access, accelerate decarbonisation, promote sustainable growth, transform service quality and integration, and support healthy and thriving communities.

The strategy highlights rail's importance as a lifeline for many communities in the region which has a dispersed and ageing population with high car dependency.

It also faces increasing pressure on transport systems from tourism, second-home travel and renewable energy development.

Rail services provide vital connections to Inverness and other service centres, a strategic link to the Central Belt and London and a sustainable transport option for tourism and freight.

It may also become increasingly relevant to the delivery of major renewable energy projects, which could create significant new demand for freight movement of materials, equipment and workers.

Rail demand in the HITRANS area has been resilient compared to the rest of Scotland and the UK.

Station usage in the region recovered to 101% of pre-COVID levels by 2024/25, compared with 86% across Scotland.

However, recovery is uneven. The West Highland Line has shown particularly strong growth, driven by tourism and local demand and the Highland Main Line and Aberdeen–Inverness have also recovered above pre-pandemic levels.

However, the Far North Line and Kyle of Lochalsh Line remain below 2018/19 usage, reflecting highly seasonal use. weaker commuter recovery and wider service and performance issues.

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Competition is also becoming more intense from coach and air, with coach services now more frequent with lower fares, including the £2 bus fare cap scheme.

The strategy highlights four main challenges for rail in the HITRANS region:

- service quality and competitiveness remain constrained by long journey times, uneven frequencies and poor timetable integration.
- network resilience has deteriorated, with increased delays due to worsening weather, ageing rolling stock and operational vulnerability in rural networks.
- infrastructure and fleet are ageing. Much of the region relies on older rolling stock, including fleets expected to remain in service well into the 2030s.
- affordability and accessibility remain barriers. Bus concessionary schemes make coach travel much cheaper for many users, while a number of stations on the network have limited access for those with mobility needs.



Route and Branch calls for a shift from incremental change to a more coordinated transformation programme.

Recommendations include a proactive rolling stock strategy based on a dedicated, standardised fleet and the progressive use of battery electric traction supported by discontinuous electrification which offers the best balance of decarbonisation, journey time savings, service quality improvement and affordability relative to full electrification.

A Highlands Management Unit is recommended to strengthen regional influence over rail planning and service quality while keeping ScotRail as operator.

This is intended to ensure that local priorities, including resilience, connectivity and branding, are better reflected in decision-making.

Proposed measures include:

- improving interchange at Inverness
- enhancing Aberdeen–Inverness frequencies and journey times
- introducing an hourly service to Invergordon with better Far North connectivity
- strengthening summer capacity on the Kyle line
- moving toward hourly Highland Main Line services with sub-three-hour journeys
- expanding West Highland Line services, and improving ferry-rail integration.

It also prioritises accessibility improvements at busy stations such as Nairn, Kingussie and Aviemore, platform upgrades to support level boarding, a review of fare policy in light of bus concession and fare cap schemes, and continued development of potential new stations including Inverness East, Evanton, Faslane, Torlundy and Carrs Corner.

The strategy says with new opportunities to align rail investment with renewable energy growth, it supports development of freight terminals in the Far North, reuse of Needlefield Yard for additional intermodal traffic, and exploration of parcel distribution by rail to rural areas.

The Fort William Integrated Transport Plan and the longer term Inverness Station Masterplan are also identified as major opportunities.

PROGRESS ON EV CHARGING NETWORK

Work is progressing on expanding and strengthening the regional electric vehicle (EV) charging network.

In January 2022, Transport Scotland announced a restructure of the EV infrastructure funding model, requiring councils to leverage in private sector funding to deliver infrastructure to meet demand and encourage further car users to switch to EVs.



The new proposed structure allows local authorities to access £30 million and aims to leverage in a further £30 million of private sector investment.

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Orkney Islands Council, Shetland Islands Council and Argyll and Bute Council were awarded £3 million last year to develop a combined EV infrastructure strategy for the region.

Phase 1 of the project has already seen 118 of 123 chargers moved from ChargePlace Scotland, with the remainder in progress.

Also, 36 outdated chargers have been replaced, 22 of them now with contactless payment, and the installation of three new chargers, two in Tarbert and one in Castlebay, has begun.

The business case for Phase 2 aims to develop a commercially investible EV charging network that secures affordable clean energy.

It concludes that private sector investment in public EV charging infrastructure across the North West Scotland region is not currently commercially viable due to relatively low utilisation levels, higher installation and operating costs, as well as the challenges associated with serving remote rural and island communities.

Forecast modelling suggests that the point at which public EV charging infrastructure becomes commercially attractive to private investors in the region is around 2029 to 2035.

The aim of attracting private investment has therefore been re-framed to development of a network that is investable in the medium to long term, following the EVIF-funded period.

As well as delivering infrastructure, the project aims to improve maintenance arrangements, explore future operating models, monitor commercial viability and support wider transport decarbonisation objectives.

It also seeks to capitalise on opportunities arising from the region's significant renewable energy resources and improve understanding on how EV charging infrastructure could help a future local energy economy.

Phase 2 proposals between 2027 and 2030 include:

- Testing the market for commercial interest and ongoing monitoring of commercial viability
- Installation of additional charge points
- Work with fleet owners on possible sharing of public EV charging for mutual financial sustainability.
- Identifying alternative approaches to funding or investing in EV charging

This could impact plans beyond 2030 including a regional, cross-sector transport and energy forum to maximise economic opportunity.

HITRANS SECURES NEW FUNDING FOR PIONEERING SUSTAINABLE AVIATION PROJECTS

Two new sustainable aviation projects have begun after new funding was awarded.

The Zero Emission Flight (ZEF) Demonstrator awards are funded by the Department for Transport and delivered through Innovate UK to support the development of zero-emission aircraft and infrastructure.

It follows the UK's Future Flight Challenge, under which HITRANS delivered the Sustainable Aviation Test Environment (SATE) project, establishing the UK's first operational low-carbon aviation test centre at Kirkwall Airport, and linked projects that ended in April.

After leading the SATE programme, HITRANS secured involvement in two new projects, the SATE Hydrogen Roadmap and Project SEAN (Scottish Electric Aviation Network).



A consortium led by Urban Foresight, working with HITRANS, EA Maven, Cormorant Seaplanes and Hybrid Air Vehicles, received £190,081 to deliver the SATE Hydrogen Roadmap. HITRANS' award is £50,400.

The 18-month feasibility study will outline how and where hydrogen-powered aircraft could be used on regional routes across the Highlands and Islands, supporting Scotland's ambition to decarbonise regional aviation by 2040.

Work includes a hydrogen aviation roadmap for the region, a prioritised shortlist of commercially viable routes, demonstrator route recommendations, airport hydrogen refuelling infrastructure plans and quantified commercial, environmental and socioeconomic benefits.

HITRANS will lead exploitation, stakeholder engagement and communications and will co-own the roadmap results, building on its experience from the SATE project.

The roadmap is designed to close the loop to market adoption, with an approach intended to be replicable across other remote and rural regions of the UK.

SATE is a partner in Project SEAN, a new initiative aimed at demonstrating how electric aircraft could support sustainable regional air services across the Highlands and Islands.

Led by Bristow Helicopters Ltd., Project SEAN has secured £1.5 million from the Department for Transport. HITRANS' award totals £63,395.

The project will deliver a three-month programme of demonstration flights using BETA Technologies' all-electric ALIA CTOL (CX300) aircraft. Operating from a hub at Inverness Airport, the aircraft will fly to selected regional airports across the Highlands and Islands, including Wick John O'Groats Airport.

The project will also install electric aircraft charging at Inverness Airport, creating the ground infrastructure needed to support zero-emission flight operations, and will gather operational data on aircraft performance, charging systems and airport readiness to inform the future rollout of electric aviation across the UK.

Alongside this, HITRANS has published its Regional Sustainable Aviation Strategy, setting out a ten-year roadmap for the Highlands and Islands to become the UK's leading region for sustainable aviation.

This shows how emerging technologies, including drones and small electric or hybrid aircraft in the near term, and hydrogen aircraft, airships and seagliders in the medium- to long-term, can improve connectivity for remote communities, support NHS logistics and help key industries.



SUCCESS OF £2 BUS FARE CAP PILOT

Early evidence from the £2 bus cap pilot introduced in the Highlands and Islands this year shows it is reducing travel costs and stimulating additional use of public transport.

Figures from HITRANS show more than one million journeys had been made by this summer.

The pilot scheme started 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.

Data from Highland Council's in-house bus network indicates a substantial increase in passengers paying the £2 fare when compared with the equivalent months in 2025.

In April 2026 numbers rose to 5,727 (compared to 1,631 in April 2025). Figures for May this year were 6,388 (2,026 in May 2025), in June 6,586 (1,698) and July 7,820 (2,605).

The council introduced seven new routes during the period, meaning the increases cannot be attributed solely to the fare cap.

However, the scale of the increase is significant and provides strong early local evidence that the combination of a simple fare and lower maximum price is helping to stimulate demand.

The pilot is seen as a way of significantly impacting rural and island areas where journeys can be longer to access employment, education, basic retail and other everyday services.

The £2 cap can therefore directly address part of the higher cost of living faced by rural households by reducing the financial penalty associated with distance.

Statistics from bus operators also show early indications of increased bus use among fare-paying passengers of around 10-15%, including the working-age market.

The pilot also directly supports HITRANS' Regional Transport Strategy objectives around reducing inequalities, supporting inclusive economic growth and improving access to opportunity.

We will continue to provide local evidence to support data gathering over the remainder of the pilot as it is considered for other areas.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSPORT TO SCOTLAND'S ECONOMY

HITRANS believes public service reform in Scotland should recognise the wider economic and social value created by transport.

The partnership has responded to the Scottish Government's public service reform plans aimed at improving efficiency, prevention, collaboration and simplification of public service delivery.

It suggests more regional collaboration rather than budget cuts to make services more effective and efficient.

Regional transport partnerships (RTPs) already provide an existing mechanism for collaboration. Building on established governance arrangements, rather than creating new structures, offers opportunities to improve efficiency whilst maintaining or improving service quality.

If efficiencies are achieved primarily through budget reductions, there is a risk that costs are transferred elsewhere within the public sector through reduced accessibility, poorer connectivity and increased demand for other services.

HITRANS' response highlights its public transport information shared service, provided across five council areas, as a good example of collaboration.

A similar approach has been taken through delivery of the Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Fund programme on behalf of councils.

Regional programme management allows specialist technical, procurement and project-management capacity to be developed once and deployed across several local authority areas.

This removes the need to establish and resource multiple delivery arrangements, reduces duplication in programme administration and helps provide a more consistent approach to procurement, delivery and engagement with the market.

HITRANS says these examples demonstrate that regional shared-service models can generate efficiencies, not through reducing staff numbers but by concentrating specialist capacity at the scale where it can be used most effectively.



The emerging Health and Transport Action Plan for the Highlands and Islands offers another opportunity to improve coordination and efficiency of service delivery across to complex sectors.

The response also highlights that single-year funding is a major obstacle to efficient service delivery.

This limits the ability of delivery organisations to plan strategically, develop interventions with partners and commit responsibly to services or infrastructure where delivery extends beyond a single financial year.

It argues that with multi-year funding for its Transport to Employment funding, HITRANS and its partners could take a more proactive focused approach to identifying gaps in the transport network that prevent people from accessing employment and develop targeted interventions.

HITRANS will continue to engage with Scottish Government, Transport Scotland, COSLA, partner councils, other RTPs and wider public-sector partners to identify opportunities where transport can contribute to more effective and efficient public service delivery.

This will include continued work on shared services and regional collaboration, together with engagement on the future funding and governance of transport programmes.

A wider discussion between RTPS is also underway on the contribution that strengthened regional transport governance could make to public service reform.

ISLANDS PASSPORT DELIVERS 'TANGIBLE ECONOMIC BENEFITS'

The Scottish Islands Passport has generated an estimated £1.12 million in additional visitor spend.

And an economic impact report based on a user survey predicts the app will support about £1.25 million in additional annual visitor expenditure by 2030.

The report says the passport has established itself as an effective island marketing and visitor engagement tool, delivering measurable economic benefits to the 72 islands included, while continuing to attract a rapidly growing user base.

It delivers tangible economic benefits, encouraging visitors to discover more of Scotland's islands, supports local businesses and creates a scalable platform capable of delivering increasing returns as users increase.

Since its launch in 2022, the app has experienced sustained growth, with average annual growth of 33.5% over the last two full years (2023–2025), demonstrating increasing awareness, engagement and value.

Responses from 219 users showed they were predominantly leisure visitors (96%), with 94% spending money with local island businesses during their visit.

Visitors stayed for an average of 7-8 nights, while 89% visited more than one island, indicating that the app encourages longer stays and wider dispersal across island destinations.

The passport reached more than 71,405 downloads and 430,642 unique sessions by the end of July – up from 51,000 downloads and 318,000 sessions for July 2025.

A total of 81,093 stamps has been collected for the 72 islands covered by the app, with 52,064 people using the manual unlock option.

New funding opportunities are currently being explored, along with support for promoting the app on social media and websites.



YOUNG PEOPLE FACING TRANSPORT BARRIERS IN RURAL AREAS

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

HITRANS says young people in rural and island communities face fewer transport options, longer distances, unreliable connections and higher costs relative to entry-level wages.

It sets out its thinking in a 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.

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.

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.

It says availability and affordability must be addressed together and policy must treat availability, reliability and affordability as interdependent.

Shift patterns and rural employment structures require flexible transport as traditional timetables often do not meet the needs of young workers.

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



The response says existing UK research focuses heavily on urban areas and recommends a structured programme of rural evidence-building, including evaluation of rural transport-to-employment interventions.

It calls for multi-year funding certainty for transport systems as young people cannot commit to jobs or apprenticeships if transport support may end mid-course.

It also suggests employers should collaborate on shared transport and consider contributions to recruitment-related travel costs.

In addition, HITRANS recommends exploring statutory spatial exemptions and multi-year devolved revenue allocations for lifeline rural transport.

Recommended further work includes:

- strengthening the evidence base on transport and digital accessibility for young people in rural and island communities
- stronger integration between transport, employability and digital policy
- provide multi-year funding certainty to plan services
- recognise the intersectional nature of transport disadvantage.
- sustain transport support long enough for young people to stabilise in employment.

HITRANS would welcome the opportunity to provide further evidence to the committee and share information from the £2 regional bus fare cap pilot and the ongoing delivery of the Access to Employment programme.

HI-BIKE BRINGS GREENER, HEALTHIER TRAVEL TO ELGIN

The HI-BIKE scheme has expanded into Elgin, helping more people make greener and healthier journeys.

Bikes are now available at six stations in the town as part of the ever-growing programme.

The Elgin models have additional features compared to those already operating in Inverness and Fort William where they are used regularly by local commuters and visitors.

HI-BIKE, managed by HITRANS, is a convenient and easy-to-use scheme offering social, environmental and health benefits.

It is supported by the Scottish Government funded People and Place Programme to increase walking, wheeling and cycling and public transport for everyday journeys.

The e-bike share scheme has been established in Inverness and Fort William for a number of years providing a cheap and flexible alternative to the car for short journeys, while reducing traffic congestion and air pollution.





Last year users made a total of 33,838 trips using the power-assisted bikes, with 71,175 miles covered in the area throughout the year.

The most popular locations to travel to and from included Inverness Railway Station and Fort William Travel Centre, highlighting the importance of convenient onward travel.

Bike stations in Elgin are situated at Plainstones, Cooper Park, Railway Station, Glen Moray Drive, Thornhill Road, Pinefield and UHI Moray College.

Future stations include the leisure centre and Dr Grey's hospital.

Bikes can be unlocked using a mobile app and a QR code on the bike's central tube which also has other information including, speed, route distance and level of battery charge.

Cyclists can use the bikes at any time for station-to station travel within a GPS-protected area, with the ability to stop in between with a handy wheel lock.

A single ride costs £3 for the first 30 minutes, while a day pass s available for £8.

A three-hour Explorer ticket costs £10, while monthly membership is £15 and annual membership £110.

Monthly student memberships will be available in Elgin.

Customer support is available Monday-Sunday from 8am-8pm.

CONSULTANTS APPOINTED FOR *HITRANS*FORMERS STUDY

A new study will capture the potential transport impacts of a series of green energy projects in the Highlands and Islands



HITRANS has appointed consultants Pell Frischmann to examine how consented, planned and proposed renewables schemes will affect the local and strategic transport networks.

It will result in recommendations on solutions to enable Net Zero targets to be fulfilled, and to leave a legacy for future generations.

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

A recent report from the Highlands and Islands Regional Economic Partnership highlighted 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.

Objectives of the study include providing a one-stop-shop database on transport and renewables.

This will consider the likely timing of developments, origin and destination of materials required, an understanding of capacity, capability, pinch-points and constraints on transport networks.

It will also need to identify infrastructure improvements required to overcome constraints on road, rail, and ports, harbours and waterways, and business opportunities for local transport and construction firms.

Work has already included discussions with developers and Caledonian Canal and port teams on pumped storage hydro logistics.

HI·LIGHTS

WE HOPE YOU ENJOYED
the latest issue of our newsletter.

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