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HITRANS
THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS TRANSPORT PARTNERSHIP

Report to Partnership Meeting 6 November 2026

Route and Branch

HITRANS Rail Development Strategy

Purpose of Report

To update members on the development of the HITRANS Rail Development Strategy and proposed consultation on the draft.

Background

Route and Branch sets out a renewed long-term case for rail investment across the Highlands and Islands in a context shaped by post-pandemic travel change, rail industry restructuring, public ownership of ScotRail and Caledonian Sleeper, and the need to decarbonise transport. The strategy updates the earlier Room for Growth programme and argues that HITRANS should continue to play a proactive role in shaping the future of the regional rail network to support the community and sustainable growth.

The strategy is closely aligned with wider regional and national policy. It reflects the aims of the HITRANS Regional Transport Strategy, Highlands and Islands Regional Economic Strategy, National Transport Strategy 2 and Scotland's climate policy framework. Across these policy documents, rail is positioned as a key enabler of inclusive growth, net zero transition, regional resilience, and social inclusion, particularly for rural, remote and island communities.

The strategy's vision is to deliver a decarbonised, resilient and integrated rail network for the Highlands and Islands 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.

Draft Strategy and Consultation

A copy of the draft HITRANS Rail Development Strategy is attached as an appendix to this report. Subject to Members approval, the draft will be sent to the following organisations for consultation:

- Local Authority partners

- HITCOG
- Network Rail
- ScotRail
- LNER
- Calmac
- Rail Freight Group
- Transport Scotland
- HIE
- Nestrans
- SPT
- Tactran
- National Parks
- Chambers of Commerce/BIDs
- Community Rail Partnerships
- Rail User Groups

We are proposing to invite consultees to answer a short survey that will also be published on the HITRANS website to enable responses from other organisations and individuals. The consultation will run for four weeks. A final draft of the Strategy incorporating any updates or revisions will then be taken to the next Partnership meeting in February 2027.

RTS Delivery

Impact – HITRANS RTS strategic fit, economy, Net Zero, transport investment

Policy

Impact – NZ 2045 decarbonisation, transport efficiency, mode shift, integration

Financial

Impact – The study is fully funded.

Recommendation

Members are invited to:

1. note the report
2. provide comment on the draft HITRANS Rail Development Strategy
3. approve the proposed public and stakeholder consultation of the HITRANS Rail Develoopment Strategy.

Report by: Frank Roach
Designation: Advisor to HITRANS

Date: 2 November 2026