Item:
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Report to Partnership Meeting 6 November 2026

PARTNERSHIP

Scottish Affairs Committee - Fixed Links Inquiry

Purpose of Report

To advise the Partnership of the findings and recommendations of the House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee inquiry into fixed link connectivity in Scotland's islands, following evidence provided by HITRANS, and to identify matters relevant to the Partnership's ongoing work. The Committee's Second Report of Session 2026–27 (HC 167) is attached at Appendix A.

Background

The Scottish Affairs Committee launched its inquiry in late 2025 to consider the potential benefits and trade-offs of fixed links, including bridges and tunnels, and the possible role of the UK Government in supporting schemes in Scotland, notwithstanding devolved transport responsibilities. Its examination focused particularly on proposals in Shetland and the Western Isles, with reference to experience in Skye and the Faroe Islands.

The Committee received written evidence from HITRANS (CISFL0009), Highlands and Islands Enterprise and other stakeholders. The Partnership Director gave oral evidence on 17 June 2026 alongside representatives of Highlands and Islands Enterprise and ZetTrans.

The report was published on 16 October 2026.

Key Findings of the Committee

The Committee concludes that fixed links can improve reliability, access to services, employment opportunities and the long-term viability of island communities, with potential benefits for population retention and local economies. It recognises, however, that such schemes are costly, can create additional demands on roads and services and may raise concerns about centralisation and island identity.

The Committee is clear that fixed links will be viable only on a limited number of shorter crossings. Most island communities will remain dependent on ferries, and consideration of fixed links must not distract from the urgent need to improve ferry reliability and resilience.

Decisions about individual schemes should be led by the affected communities. The Committee does not endorse specific projects, although it considers the developed proposals in Shetland worthy of serious consideration.

The Committee recommends that the UK Government engage actively with community-supported proposals and give serious consideration to financial or other assistance. It argues that appraisal must properly recognise social and cultural benefits, including where conventional economic returns alone do not justify investment.

HITRANS Evidence to Inquiry

The report cites HITRANS' written evidence in highlighting that fixed links could reduce accessibility for people without access to a car unless suitable public transport is developed alongside them, particularly where ferry services are withdrawn or altered (paragraph 30).

It directly references the Partnership Director's oral evidence that existing fixed links at North Ford and South Ford in Uist had not undermined the tradition, culture or sense of community in the islands (paragraph 31).

The report recognises the HITRANS-led Sustainable Aviation Test Environment (SATE) project as an example of UK Government support for transport innovation in the Highlands and Islands, drawing on evidence from Highlands and Islands Enterprise (paragraph 40).

In considering possible UK Government support for future schemes, paragraph 55 refers to innovation in low-emission vessels and fixed-link engineering and collaboration with Regional Transport Partnerships and local authorities. Its accompanying footnote cites HITRANS written evidence.

Implications for the Partnership

The findings support an integrated approach to island connectivity, with consideration of fixed links alongside the continued need for reliable ferry services, appropriate public transport provision and investment in connecting infrastructure. This is particularly relevant to the Sound of Harris and Sound of Barra corridors and the wider Western Isles transport network.

The report's emphasis on social value, access to healthcare, education and employment, community resilience and population retention is consistent with the objectives of the Regional Transport Strategy 2025–2045. These factors should be reflected in future appraisal and engagement on island connectivity options.

The Committee's position on UK Government participation may offer opportunities for wider collaboration and funding discussions where proposals have strategic economic, social or innovation benefits. Any future consideration of particular schemes must remain evidence-led and subject to appropriate community engagement and appraisal.

Next Steps

Officers will take account of the Committee's conclusions in continuing engagement with Transport Scotland, island local authorities, partner Regional Transport Partnerships and other stakeholders on ferry resilience, fixed-link proposals and wider connectivity investment.

The Partnership will be kept informed of any material developments arising from the Committee's recommendations and the responses of the UK and Scottish Governments.

Risk Register

<u>Policy/RTS delivery</u>
The findings are relevant to the delivery of the Regional Transport Strategy, particularly reducing inequalities and supporting inclusive economic growth and community wellbeing. The principal strategic risk is that investment in one mode or crossing is considered in isolation from the resilience and accessibility of the wider transport network.

Financial
There are no direct financial commitments arising from noting this report. Any future scheme development or funding proposal would require separate consideration.

Equality and accessibility
The need to protect access for non-car users is a key consideration in any fixed-link appraisal.

Recommendation

The Partnership is invited to:

1) note the Scottish Affairs Committee report and its conclusions and recommendations;
2) note the references to HITRANS' evidence and its relevance to the Regional Transport Strategy; and
3) endorse continued officer engagement with relevant governments and partners on the implications for island connectivity.

Report by: Ranald Robertson
Designation: Partnership Director
Date: 20 October 2026
Background papers: HITRANS written evidence CISFL0009; Scottish Affairs Committee, Fixed link connectivity in Scotland's islands, HC 167.
Appendix A: Scottish Affairs Committee, Fixed link connectivity in Scotland's islands (HC 167), full report.