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HITRANS
THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS TRANSPORT PARTNERSHIP

Report to Partnership Meeting 5th November 2026

Research and Strategy Delivery

Regional Transport Strategy: 1st Delivery Plan / Regional Bus Strategy

Purpose of Report

This report provides an update on progress to implement the 1st Delivery Plan for the Regional Transport Strategy (RTS) 2025-2045.

HITRANS Regional Transport Strategy: 1st Delivery Plan

HITRANS updated Regional Transport Strategy was adopted by Partnership Members following confirmation of Ministerial approval on 13th May 2025.

To guide the implementation of the RTS, a first Delivery Plan was prepared. The purpose of the Delivery Plan is to set out a series of actions including an ongoing programme of physical and non-physical interventions that will support delivery against the objectives defined in the RTS 2025-2045.

The first Delivery Plan covering the period 2025-2027 was approved at the Partnership meeting in September 2025. The Delivery Plan will be reviewed and updated throughout the lifetime of the strategy as part of the ongoing monitoring process. It was agreed that the review should coincide with each Scottish Local Authority Election cycle providing an opportunity to reset or realign priorities to the changing political, social, environmental and economic landscape.

The table provides an update on progress against each of the priority actions identified on adoption of the first Delivery Plan 2025-2027.

Key Action	Delivery Plan Actions	Progress to date
Active and Sustainable Travel		
We will continue to make the case to Transport Scotland for addressing the imbalance in funding support for rural bus services and the extension of the National Concessionary Travel scheme for local card holders to access specific rail, ferry and air services where they are the only mode of public transport	16, 20 & 80	Utilised paper on Rural Bus Service Support & Funding to influence policy debate Successful application to pilot £2 fare cap in partnership with ZetTrans. Fare cap introduced initially in Shetland Islands in Jan 26. Roll out to Orkney and Western Isles in February 26 and then Highland, Moray and Argyll and Bute in March 2026. Full review of impacts still to be undertaken by Transport Scotland but early evidence has highlighted significant increases in patronage at a time when the increased fuel prices have increased the cost of transport. HITRANS will develop a Regional Bus Strategy to advocate for the policy measure that address the imbalance of funding provided through some existing national funding support mechanisms such as the National Concessionary Travel Scheme.
In partnership with local authorities and transport operators, we will develop a Regional Bus Strategy. This will explore opportunities provided by the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 and will include consideration of the role of Community Transport. It will also consider opportunities to improve the integration and provision of information and ticketing	16, 20, 28 & 80	Draft scope and budget approved by Partnership. Procurement of consultancy support paused following confirmation of inclusion in £2 fare cap pilot on account of resource implications and potential impact on local services. *See proposal to recommence strategy development at end of this table
Update the Regional Active Travel Strategy to reflect the adopted RTS and set out strategic priorities for supporting more to travel actively in the Highlands and Islands	1	Draft strategy taken to November 2026 Partnership Meeting for approval ahead of public and stakeholder consultation
Build on the early success of the Regional People and Place Behaviour Change Programme in partnership with local authorities and anchor community organisations	2 & 13	2026-27 is 3rd year of Programme which is now well established across the region, with 8 Local Delivery Partners and three annual grant programmes. A 48% reduction to our RDEL allocation in 26/27 meant we were unable to expand our Delivery Partner activity in Year 3 as planned. Annual reports highlight impact of the Programme, with 26,000 participants across all age groups in Year 2 and new / upgraded infrastructure (eg. cycle parking) in 59 locations across the

		region. Over 7,000 primary school pupils were engaged, 14 workplaces received grants, more than 1,700 bikes were checked and repaired in communities and schools, and 353 bikes were refurbished & rehomed either free or low-cost to children and adults.
Expand HI-Bike e-bike share scheme within Inverness, Fort William and into Elgin		Hi-Bike was launched in Elgin in September 2026. HITRANS are working in partnership with Cairngorms National Park to install a 4 bike dock scheme in Aviemore.
Integrated Transport		
Lead the development of an Integrated Transport Plan for Fort William		Work on the development of an Integrated Transport Plan for Fort William is nearing completion – December 2026
Work with local and national partners to improve transport integration between modes at points of key interchange including Inverness, Oban and Fort William.	27	HITRANS commissioned work in partnership with The Highland Council in Inverness and Fort William. £460,000 has been awarded to the Highland Council to implement improvements to the Bus Station and Middle St in 26/27 following a successful application to Transport Scotlands Bus Investment Fund HITRANS has been awarded funding to complete design of improvements to Interchange between Ferry terminal and Rail Station by January 2026 with a view to applying to the Active Travel Infrastructure Fund for construction in 2026 -27
Continue to support the expansion of our Moove Flexi app for new DRT services across our region		Moove Flexi and M.connect app has now been rolled out on services in 4 out 5 of HITRANS partner council areas with evidence indicating that the app has helped support uptake in those services. However, further work is required to increase the number of services on which it is deployed. HITRANS will seek to identify funding to support the extension of the contract supporting Moove Flexi and M.connect and work with partner councils and operators to increase the number of services it is deployed.
Establish a Highlands and Islands Health and Transport Action Plan building on recent collaboration and progress made in the Western Isles and elsewhere with the region	15	HITRANS proposal to establish an HTAP was identified as a commitment in the updated National Islands Plan and received £105,000 in funding in 2026-27 to enable the recruitment of a Project Manager in September 26. The first meeting of the HTAP Steering Group takes place on November 12th 2026.

Expand and maintain provision of online and wayside public transport information in partnership with local authorities and operators	30 & 40	Ongoing - No. of stops at which HITRANS produce wayside information continues to increase. Bus Investment Funding has also enabled some partner Councils to purchase new or updated digital real-time displays. Traveline Scotland has developed a new stop specific QR code which is being rolled out as wayside information is updated. This enables passengers to pull up live departure information for that stop with their smartphone. The Highland Council has been able to employ two officers to assist with the maintenance of bus shelters and erecting wayside information that HITRANS public transport information officer produces.
Strategic Road and Rail Networks		
Advocate for the early completion of committed strategic transport projects including A9 dualling, A83 at Rest and Be Thankful and A96 dualling between Inverness and Auldearn and bypasses of Elgin and Keith.	59	HITRANS continues to advocate for completion of these key priorities. HITRANS welcomes the progress being made on dualling of A9 including the recent announcement of intention to award the main construction contract for the Pitlochry to Killiecrankie section. A83 - HITRANS has recently written to the Cabinet Secretary highlighting the concerns of local businesses and residents from the impact of the plan to implement a convoy system for 4 years during the construction of the medium-term solution at the Rest and Be Thankful. The Cabinet Secretary confirmed that he will carefully consider this feedback, alongside the views of Taskforce members and the responses received through the public consultation process, before reaching a decision on the medium-term solution A96 – The Scottish Government has reaffirmed its commitment to fully dual the A96 between Inverness and Aberdeen but says it will proceed in phases because of ongoing fiscal constraints. Under the proposed phased timetable, construction on the A9/A96 Inshes to Smithton link road could start in 2028/29 and work on the Nairn Bypass in 2029/30, subject to business case approval and confirmation of funding beyond the current capital spending review. The government also expects to begin advanced works on the

		Seafield to Balloch section during the spending review period, with subsequent work to connect Balloch to the Nairn Bypass
We will develop a HITRANS Rail Strategy to identify priorities for our improving rail access and services for our region and partnership priorities for feasibility and business case work to support this investment	22-26	HITRANS draft Rail Strategy prepared for Partnership Meeting on 5th November 2026 prior to publishing for public and stakeholder consultation. Aim is for adoption of final strategy by February 2027.
Lead work to migrate all public local authority owned EV chargers in Argyll and Bute, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands onto a new back office and replace those that are out of date by mid 2026.	70 & 71	Migration complete. Number of chargers in Orkney are no longer supported with spare parts so may need replacing or upgraded before being made live.
Finalise an EV charging network expansion strategy for Argyll and Bute and the Northern and Western Isles that seeks to attract private investment, and procure it.	70 & 71	Strategy finalised and approved by Transport Scotland and all partner Councils. Private investment is no longer a condition of funding but a longer term aim to work towards. Procurement is likely to be split with ABC and the islands separating for new infrastructure but collaborating on longer term outcomes.
Aviation and Ferry		
Expand the Sustainable Aviation Test Environment (SATE) across the Highlands & Islands with different demonstration activities across the region, with the overall aim to integrate sustainable aviation within the overall transport mix	48, 56 & 67	HITRANS has secured involvement in two DfT projects – Project SEAN and the SATE Hydrogen Roadmap. Project SEAN advances our work in electric aviation through a demonstration flight programme planned for 2027 with the BETA Alia aircraft, using Inverness Airport as the hub. The SATE Hydrogen Roadmap will produce the UK's first region-specific roadmap for hydrogen aviation. To advance our work in sustainable freight activities, bids have been made to the Island Centre for Net Zero and Inverness Highland City Region Deal. These bids have been successful at the proposal stage and are going through the Business Case phase with Scottish & UK Govts. We have also joined a Horizon Europe bid to further our work in sustainable aviation.
Support local and national vessel and harbour renewal programmes seeking improved efficiency in operation	42-46	Provided £1.56m in funding to ABC to support delivery of the local ferry improvement programmes for Jura and Luing. Participated in Small Vessels Replacement Plan reference group Engage with Tri-partite of Transport Scotland, Cal Mac and CMAL on wider strategy and vessel replacement.

Support The Highland Council in developing the business case and procuring an improved PSO contract serving Wick airport	49 & 50	The Highland Council has been successful in securing funding to enable the renewal of the PSO contract serving Wick Airport for an initial 12months. The new contract includes provision for service to Aberdeen and Glasgow. HITRANS has recently been working with Transport Scotland and ZetTrans to review the current funding support for Air Services in the Highlands and Islands.
Partnership activity under Regional Transport Strategy		
Continue to make the case for multi-year funding to enable local and regional partners to develop and deliver ambitious projects and programmes that can support sustainable economic growth and deliver against other national outcomes		Ongoing. HITRANS and partner Councils continue to make representations to Scottish and UK Ministers and Transport Scotland of the challenges and constraints posed by annual funding settlements or challenge funds that impact on the delivery of key National, Regional and Local transport priorities including funding for Active Travel and Bus Infrastructure.
Continue to advocate that Boards of organisations under Ministerial control that deliver transport services ensure affected communities are properly represented.		Ongoing under RTS delivery through relevant consultation responses.
Building on the success of the regional model adopted for the Active Travel People and Place programme, advocate for the devolution of other core transport delivery funds		Ongoing. HITRANS continues to make the case for the devolution of core delivery funds including Active Travel and Bus Infrastructure and will continue to advocate for this approach through the review and consultation on Public Service Reform
Advocate for the creation of Regional Transport Investment Fund administered by RTP's with allocations linked to Regional Economic Strategies and spatial priorities.		Ongoing as part of the Public Service Reform process.

***Regional Bus Strategy**

Members approved a draft scope and budget at February 2026 Partnership meeting. The key deliverables and outputs are listed below.

- Establish a shared **regional vision** for the role of bus and coach services in supporting inclusive, sustainable mobility.
- Embed the **principle of *Decent / Minimum Mobility*** as a benchmark for policy and investment.
- Identify **passenger priorities** including affordability, reliability, accessibility, and integration.
- Develop a **delivery plan** outlining short-, medium-, and long-term actions.
- Inform regional and national **policy and funding** decisions.
- Support **advocacy** for fair investment and improved governance arrangements.
- Explore innovative **operational models**, including demand-responsive and community-based approaches.

Key Outputs**:**

- Regional Bus Strategy and supporting evidence base.
- Regional Delivery Plan with costed, prioritised actions.
- Collaborative framework between **HITRANS, Local Authorities, Operators, and Transport Scotland**.

Procurement of consultancy support was paused following confirmation of HITRANS inclusion in £2 fare cap pilot on account of the anticipated resource implications in supporting to implement and promote the pilot and also to provide an opportunity to understand the potential impact of the fare cap on local services. Following the successful introduction of the fare cap, its subsequent roll out to Strathclyde and the First Ministers recent announcements to extend it to North East Scotland by April 2027 and nationally by 2031 but also a commitment that by the end of this parliament to bring the bus network back into public control through franchising and regulation.

It is recommended that work to develop the Regional Transport Strategy should recommence ensuring that the scope considers in depth the implications of these recent announcements.

Risk Register

RTS Delivery
Impact - Positive

Comment:
The Delivery Plan will be updated every 5 years or council term and sets out the actions that HITRANS and partner organisations will undertake to support the implementation of the Regional Transport Strategy.

Policy
Impact - Positive

Comment:
This work helps set new policies and objectives for HITRANS that are relevant to the policy and governance framework within which the Partnership currently sits.

Financial
Impact – Positive

Budget line and value – Funding for undertaking actions of the first Delivery Plan will be identified in future Business Plans and through the wider work of the Partnership which will be reported to members at Partnership meetings.

Equality
Impact – Positive

Comment:
Updating the Regional Transport Strategy has offered an opportunity to comprehensively review both transport and wider inequalities across the region. Parallel Impact Assessments including Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), Equalities Impact Assessment Report (EqIA) and an Island Communities Impact Assessment (ICIA) have been undertaken to inform each stage in the development of the RTS.

Recommendation
Members are invited to:

1. Note the report
2. Note the progress made against key actions set out in the first Delivery Plan 2025-2027.
3. Approve that officers recommence work to develop the HITRANS Regional Bus Strategy incorporating within the scope work to understand both the implications for the HITRANS area of the extension of the bus fare cap and the First Ministers commitment to bring the bus network back into public control through franchising and regulation by the end of the current parliament.

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