

## HITRANS HIGHLIGHTS

### Summer Newsletter 2020

#### Welcome

Welcome to the Summer edition in 2020 of **HITRANS HIGHLIGHTS**, our newsletter which keeps you informed about the work of the Regional Transport Partnership and records the main outcomes of our recent Board meeting on Friday 24 April, 2020. Due to the restrictions imposed on travel and meetings by the Covid-19 Pandemic, our meeting was conducted by video conference. Technology has also allowed us to liaise with our partner organisations and maintain progress on delivering our significant work programme. More detailed information about our work is available on our website: [www.hitrans.org.uk](http://www.hitrans.org.uk) and Twitter [@HITRANS\\_RTP](https://twitter.com/HITRANS_RTP)

#### Fixed Link at Corran Narrows is confirmed as a viable option

Construction of a bridge or tunnel across the Corran Narrows in West Lochaber - replacing the long-established ferry service - is a viable proposition from an engineering, planning and economic perspective. This is the conclusion of a high level feasibility study jointly funded by HITRANS, The Highland Council and Highlands and Islands Enterprise.

We believe the fixed link would dramatically improve connectivity between Nether Lochaber and Ardgour, on the Ardnamurchan Peninsula, and provide improved access to services and employment opportunities for those living in Ardnamurchan, Morvern and Mull. At the same time, it would reduce travel time and remove the need for travellers to pay ferry charges.

Members of the HITRANS Board have been assured there are no 'showstopper' issues preventing the construction of a fixed link. Significantly, the costs of a fixed link are not out of step with a continued ferry service, particularly when set against the range of benefits of a fixed link.

In the study conducted by transport consultants, Stantec, a total of 72 scenarios were examined including an option for a tunnel to the south of the ferry route; as well as routes for bridging the narrows. These were set against the costs of enhancing the existing ferry provision.



Images showing the 5 route corridors considered for a fixed link and a visualisation of one of the potential bridge options

Three options for a fixed link remain on the table, namely the tunnel option; a bridge to be constructed along the existing ferry route and a bridge to be constructed along a central corridor, to the south of the ferry route.

Estimated construction costs of delivering this lifeline connection range from between £42m - £50m for the lowest cost bridge option through to £66m - £108million for a tunnel option. These estimates are beyond the resources of The Highland Council, who run the ferry service, and therefore Transport Scotland is to be approached to support the funding of the project, given its strategic importance to the Scottish economy and to meet the goals of the new National Transport Strategy.

In moving the project forward, the project partners believe there would be significant benefit in developing a single, umbrella Strategic Business Case considering the comparative merits of ferry and fixed link-based solutions. Project partners have shared the study with the team in Transport Scotland overseeing the Strategic Transport Projects Review for the Highlands and Islands area, highlighting the strong case for the proposal to be given all-inclusive consideration.

### **Creating an integrated transport interchange at Inverness**

Board members were given an update of developments towards the creation of an integrated transport interchange at Inverness, involving the bus and rail stations, noting with particular interest that Network Rail had purchased the Royal Mail sorting office and Car Park; TX Maxx/Sports Direct and the TK Maxx Car Park as well as Highland Rail House (the north side of Station Square).

A Steering Group comprising Network Rail, Transport Scotland, HITRANS and The Highland Council will be set up to consider the formation of a working group to progress the integration project and delivery of an associated stakeholder consultation exercise.

The area to be studied will encompass the lands bounded by Rose Street, Academy Street, Station Lane, and the railway estate bounded by Millburn Road, Harbour Road, Longman Road. The emphasis will be on low/no carbon transport, and aim to include electric/non-diesel trains, electric and hydrogen buses, electric taxis with induction charging, pedestrian and cycling including e-bike facilities, fuelling for hydrogen vehicles, freight interchange and rail maintenance facilities. Personal car parking should be limited. Retail and commercial development would be required to ensure adequate funding

## **Security of lifeline air services**

A priority of the HITRANS Board is to provide a compelling argument to the Scottish Government to secure lifeline air services, threatened even more by the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Funding has been allocated in our 2020/21 Business Plan to help support work to address concerns around the reduced frequency and resulting impact on a number of key routes - or in the case of Wick to Edinburgh route the termination of the service itself. In light of recent events, HITRANS officers will seek early engagement with HIAL and Transport Scotland to ensure that support for local outcomes are prioritised in responding to the crises facing the aviation industry.



Given that Transport Scotland is currently undertaking the second Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR2) to inform the Scottish Government's transport investment programme over the next 20 years (2022 – 2042), we are determined to ensure that appropriate funding is allocated to our lifeline air services. Our goal is to increase competitive transport access to key domestic and international markets, by reducing costs and improving journey time reliability for business and commercial transport.

***We would like to see the facilitation of a viable working day to or from Scotland's main cities, by passenger transport adopted as a policy by the Scottish Government.***

## **Pressing the case for major investment on Inverness – Perth rail service**

A study by consultants, Systra is recommending that HITRANS enlist a Task Force of key stakeholders to press the case for long overdue investment in the Inverness – Perth rail service to provide for a more attractive, faster and sustainable service and one that can compete with road travel on the A9, which is in line for a £3 billion upgrade. The Task Force would develop a comprehensive cross-industry consensus, based on local needs to address journey time and connectivity issues that previous investments have not resolved.

The study notes that a significant number of investment and service enhancement promises over the last decade have not been delivered. Average journey times between Inverness and Edinburgh and Glasgow have not improved significantly since 2006, when an intended sub 3-hour journey time from Inverness to Glasgow and Edinburgh was announced in the "Scotland's Railways" report, and later the Strategic

Transport Projects Review. Similarly, services between Inverness and Perth have increased in frequency but have not achieved the 2-hour timing proposed as the average journey time in the 2011 Initial Industry Plan.

Transformational station investments have also remained elusive, with promised investments at Inverness and Perth yet to be delivered. Without these promised improvements, the necessary modal shift from road to rail, the opportunity to decarbonise Scotland's transport network and the wider economic benefits that enhanced rail connectivity will bring to communities along the HML will continue to be out of reach.

In order to deliver these committed investments a number of possible interventions have been identified by the consultants that would deliver the aspirational 2 hours 45 minutes journey time between Inverness and the Central Belt as soon as possible.

### **HITRANS involvement in European funded projects.**

HITRANS is currently involved in eight European projects, with a budget of £4,102,230. This includes Horizon 2020, Interreg North Sea Region (NSR) and Interreg VA Cross Border Programme. Since the last Partnership Board meeting in February, we have now recruited a Business Support Assistant, Rachael MacKenzie, to support our involvement in EU projects and help with the administration and preparation of financial claims. We are also recruiting for three further staff members – a FASTER Project Officer and Business Support Assistant, and a MaaS Project Officer to support our work in Stronger Combined.

As a result of Covid-19, the majority of our European project activities will be delayed or suspended. We are hopeful that extensions will be granted for our European projects; however, at present we do not know for certain or for what duration. We are in the process of compiling risk assessments for each project activity to measure what impacts Covid-19 might have on deliverables, particularly for projects involving pilots of new technologies and shared mobility initiatives where a delay is inevitable. We are also exploring ways our European projects might be able to assist supporting communities through this time. For example, the Sleat passenger transport pilot, funded through the MOVE project, has cancelled passenger trips but instead is delivering goods to those in need around the community. Also, all three bike shops involved in our e-bike pilot projects at Aviemore, Grantown-on-Spey and Fort William have made their e-bikes available for free to key workers as a means of transport.

### **Active Travel update and Inverness E-bike share scheme**

Members were updated about the implementation of an E-bike share scheme for Inverness. Since the Partnership meeting, officers have appointed a company called Bewegen to install, operate and maintain the scheme over the next 3 years. Initially, there will be three bike hub charging stations, to be located at Inverness Station,

Inverness Campus, and Raigmore Hospital, featuring a total of 30 bikes. There may also be an opportunity to set up “virtual” hubs at other sites, where bikes can be left

but not charged. The aim of the project is to enable the last mile of a journey to be made by bike on trips where the longest part of the journey is by public or other transport and replace car journeys with cycling for short journeys in town and provide access to an ebike where ownership / storage is problematic.

Meanwhile, Edinburgh-based consultant, Arup, has been appointed to work on the Active Travel Masterplan Updates for Wick and Thurso, which will span two financial years. Arup have some innovative ideas for remote working and if necessary remote engagement, so are able to continue work on this project.

### **Fort William, Aviemore and Grantown pilot new E-bike hire project**

Residents in Fort William, Aviemore and Grantown are taking advantage of the chance to hire electric bikes to improve their fitness, mobility and ability to get about their rural communities more easily in a pilot scheme promoted by HITRANS. During the restrictions of the Covid-19 Lockdown, they are proving popular with key workers.

We have worked in partnership with three local businesses who have volunteered to deliver the pilots as part of European-funded research projects. There are 6 bikes in each of the participating shops for local residents and tourists to hire and try out a different way of getting around or simply getting fitter. These outlets are: - Basecamp Bikes, Grantown on Spey; Mike's Bikes, Aviemore; Nevis Cycles, Fort William.

The e-bike scheme has been funded by Scottish Government's e-bike grant scheme delivered by Energy Saving Trust and Paths for All have provided marketing funding support to promote the EU Interreg and Horizon 2020 pilot projects.

### **Board express concern at review of National Cycle Network**

Board members have expressed their concerns at the implications of a review of the National Cycle Network which will see the removal or reclassification of almost all of the NCN within the HITRANS area. As a matter of urgency, officers have been instructed to engage with Sustrans, who manage the NCN, and Transport Scotland to minimise the impact of the proposed changes such as a potentially significant negative impact on cycle tourism and associated wider economic benefits derived from this within the HITRANS area.

The NCN in Scotland is currently a network of walking and cycling routes covering the whole country from the Borders to the Shetland Isles. It runs through Scotland's two National Parks and connects all of Scotland's seven major cities. It carries 104million trips a year spread equally by people travelling by foot or bike.



Sustrans' vision for the Network is to shape a network of traffic free paths that can be used by a sensible 12-year-old travelling alone. Sustrans receives funding from Transport Scotland for the development and improvement of NCN routes in Scotland.

Following a UK-wide assessment of the quality of the Network in 2018, a total of 38.4% of the NCN in Scotland is set to be reclassified or removed from NCN routes during 2020. Of this 37.2% (976.2 miles) will be reclassified and promoted as part of dedicated named routes which make use of the Network but don't run wholly on the Network. A further 1.02% (20.2miles) will be removed from the Network and will cease to be promoted.

All five numbered NCN routes in the HITRANS area - NCN1, NCN7, NCN75, NCN78 and NCN780 - will be affected, as well as the Regional Cycle Network Routes.

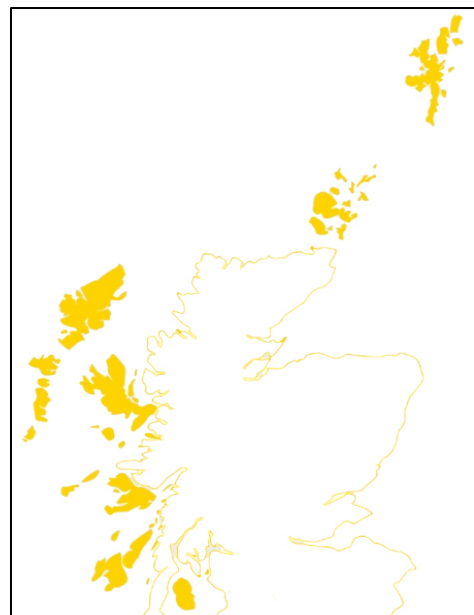
### **Progress being made on the Scottish Islands Passport Scheme**

The joint project managers tasked with delivering the Scottish Islands Passport Scheme promoting the attractions of Scotland's 80 accessible and inhabited islands are making excellent progress, Board members heard at their recent meeting. Sarah Compton-Bishop linked up from her home on the island of Jura to provide an update on the work she and co-project manager Kirsten Gow are achieving to deliver the scheme.

Their remit over the next 18 months is to launch and market the scheme, which has attracted funding from the EU Leader Programme and is also backed by the Scottish Government and Zetrans.

Sarah and Kirsten are based at the Service Point in Craighouse, Jura's main settlement, but, once the Covid-19 restrictions are lifted, will spend time again visiting other island communities throughout Scotland to discuss and identify the most effective ways on each island of encouraging more visitors to experience the treasures of island life. They are designing both a physical and online Passport for visitors to use on their travels and developing a website and app to point tourists to the various island communities.

The work undertaken during their 18-month contract will be overseen by a project steering group consisting of several key stakeholders including those who have shown their commitment to the project by providing the match funding to support the proposal, which is a Programme for Government commitment.





## **HITRANS welcome Spaces for People funding success**

HITRANS welcomes the successful application from Highland Council and NHS Highland to the Scottish Government's Spaces for People fund. The £750,000 will support the delivery of rapid active travel interventions across Highland. The proposals include footpath widening, temporary bike lanes and other works that seek to ensure people can walk, wheel and cycle safely on essential journeys and taking daily exercise.

By delivering safe active travel connections across settlements to link major healthcare facilities and other destinations, the proposals aim to maximise opportunities for social distancing. Importantly they will also provide a necessary springboard for town and city centre recovery and regeneration as lockdown measures are eased and places need to be adapted to be safe for work, business and leisure.

HITRANS officers are working with Highland Council on the detail of interventions for towns across the region, while details for the Inverness proposals are available on the Council's consultation portal. <https://consult.highland.gov.uk/kse/>

**Next meeting:** Our next meeting is scheduled for 11<sup>th</sup> September in Inveraray, Argyll and Bute. Though the format of the meeting will depend on the most relevant guidance for Covid-19.