

06 May 2020

Tel: 01463 719002

Dear NPF4 team,

[info@hitrans.org.uk](mailto:info@hitrans.org.uk)  
[www.hitrans.org.uk](http://www.hitrans.org.uk)

## **National Planning Framework 4 Call for Ideas**

HITRANS welcomes the opportunity to input to the National Planning Framework 4 Call for Ideas.

Our response highlights a number of strategic projects needed to improve the connectivity within and to our region. This connectivity is vital to supporting inclusive growth within the Highlands and Islands and realising the areas economic potential. With the right investment we can develop a more resilient regional economy while still enabling the transition to a low carbon economy and transport sector in the process.

Our response also highlights a number of other key priorities for NPF4. These include the need for NPF4 to:

- Improve integration of transport delivery by increasing devolution of decision making, budget and resourcing of strategic transport governance and operation to a regional and / or local level
- Ensure that NPF4 is properly island and remote rural proofed
- Reduce the need for longer trips by investing in provision of local service networks
- Investment in lifeline transport links and services that enables transition to net zero ambition through support for regional opportunities to exploit alternative fuel sources and
- Ensure transport links to / from each regional centre permit a business day of 0900 – 1700 to / from the key urban centres of Scotland.

A draft of our consultation response was discussed at HITRANS Partnership Meeting on 24<sup>th</sup> April and this final version, which is attached as an appendix, incorporates the comments received by our Members.

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The Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership (HITRANS) is the statutory regional transport partnership covering Eilean Siar (Western Isles), Orkney, Highland, Moray and most of the Argyll and Bute area (Helensburgh and Lomond is covered by SPT). HITRANS works with Councils, the Scottish Government, Transport Scotland, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, transport operators and other stakeholders to improve transport services and infrastructure in the north of Scotland and on routes to the Highlands and Islands.

Yours sincerely,

Ranald Robertson  
HITRANS Director

## **Appendix A - HITRANS response to National Planning Framework 4 Call for Ideas**

### **Priorities for HITRANS Area**

The overarching ambition and priorities which the Scottish Government sets out for NPF4 are welcome including the following; *fuller regional coverage and improved alignment with wider programmes and strategies, including on infrastructure and economic investment; need to align with the outcomes in the National Performance Framework; respond to the shift to inclusive growth; improve health and well-being for the people of Scotland, improve equalities; provide a spatial planning response to the Global climate emergency; and provide a renewed focus on rural development including rural repopulation.*

In responding, HITRANS are keen to highlight several of the key themes and priorities which the Partnership has advanced in updating our Regional Transport Strategy and also proposed through recent responses to consultations such as the National Transport Strategy and Infrastructure Commission for Scotland. These include;

- Seeking increased devolution of decision making, budget and resourcing of strategic transport governance and operation to a regional and / or local level (please see reference to recent report to HITRANS Partnership Meeting 6<sup>th</sup> February 2020 outlining how this can support improved outcomes in the Transport context - [https://hitrans.org.uk/Documents/Item\\_6 - Local Governance Review..pdf](https://hitrans.org.uk/Documents/Item_6_-_Local_Governance_Review..pdf))

In responding to the challenges and impact of Covid-19, NPF4 provides an excellent opportunity to strengthen local networks and supply chains, and put our economy on a more sustainable base. With more fundamental recognition of transport as a derived demand when planning the things that everyone needs – food, transport, heat, power, health & social care, childcare, digital connectivity, social connection, services, houses should lead us to developing more resilient communities where demand can be met more locally wherever possible. There is strong evidence from other EU countries demonstrating the benefits of devolving significant elements of transport planning and delivery from the national level to more regional and local levels of government.

- The National Planning Framework offers an excellent opportunity to demonstrate benefits of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018. The recently published Key Findings Report for the Infrastructure Commission of Scotland fails to make any meaningful reference to islands outwith the context of energy supply. However, there is an opportunity to address this by island and remote rural proofing NPF4. This could be achieved through the development of ambitious Low Carbon Island Connectivity Plans which seek to ensure that digital, energy and transport connectivity within and to our islands is coordinated to deliver an effective response to the climate emergency whilst also tackling rural depopulation, development and Inclusive Growth.

It should be highlighted that depopulation is something which affects many of the remote, rural mainland areas of the HITRANS area as much as islands. NPF4

needs to identify how it can support inclusive growth in areas such as Caithness, Sutherland, Wester Ross, West Lochaber and Kintyre.

In assessing the case for investing in strategic new transport infrastructure in the region, the recently published National Transport Strategy and supporting Strategic Transport Projects Review recognise the important objective of *'Increasing competitive transport access to key domestic and international markets, by reducing costs and improving journey time reliability for business and commercial transport, with an additional focus on facilitating a viable working day in the Central Belt, by public transport'* (STPR2- Highlands and Islands Case for Change report, March 2020). The ambition for affordable day returns to / from Scotlands cities to / from our regional centres that enable a business day of 0900 to 1700 has also been endorsed by the Convention of the Highlands and Islands <https://bit.ly/3f1NxYp>

To achieve this HITRANS believes NPF4 needs to reflect the prioritisation of multi modal investment in the strategic transport corridors on which all freight, wider business and visitors into and from our region depends. Due to the sparse transport network many of these routes and services provide lifeline connectivity to the communities they serve and investment is primarily needed not for capacity but to improve safety, resilience and the delivery of core services including health.

By embedding hydrogen, electric and Connected and Autonomous Vehicle (CAV) infrastructure and services at the heart of these improvements we can ensure that the improved connectivity that the region's economy needs can also be achieved through low carbon solutions.

Strategic transport corridor investment for NPF4:

- Completion of A9 dualling and upgrade of Highland Mainline (an STPR1 commitment) including electrification, reduced journey times, increased service frequency and freight opportunities (please see link to recently commissioned report by Systra which highlights the current inadequacies and poor performance of the route between Inverness and Perth and onto Glasgow and Edinburgh [https://hitrans.org.uk/Documents/Item\\_10\\_-\\_HML\\_Unfazed.pdf](https://hitrans.org.uk/Documents/Item_10_-_HML_Unfazed.pdf))
- Completion of A96 dualling and improvements to Aberdeen – Inverness rail line including opening of Inverness Airport Station and associated park and ride which were both commitments in STPR1
- Upgrade of A82 which serves as a lifeline route to much of the West Highlands and Islands with priority given to Tarbet – Inverarnan (Transport Scotland, DMRB Stage 3) and the section through Fort William (AECOM, Case for Change, 2019 and subsequent work).
- Investment in the West Highland and Far North Lines as reflected in the recent working groups established to address current performance issues and increase frequency of services on these lines for freight and passengers.
- The delivery of a number of other location specific strategic transport schemes would also greatly benefit from recognition in NPF4. These include – Realignment of A83 through the Rest and Be Thankful, an alternative route for the A890 at Stromeferry, a fixed link or upgraded ferry service across the Corran Narrows and junction upgrades at locations with poor safety records including several on the A9 north of Inverness.
- The new National Planning Framework can help promote the adoption of an integrated approach to improving Active Travel in the region through support for investment in prioritised stepchange infrastructure in and around urban settlements while also upgrading and expanding the strategic active travel network

in the Highlands and Islands that will deliver improved local sustainable travel choices. This will also capitalise on the huge opportunity for the region to be at the forefront of significant growth in the cycle tourism sector. This requires existing sections of the National Cycle Network to be fit for purpose and for the establishment of a suitable Route to the Isles as identified in the Regional Transport Strategy (2018/19).

- While HITRANS obviously advocate the need for investment in transport infrastructure and services per se, it would be of particular benefit for NPF4 to ensure that the region's busiest transport interchanges remain fit for purpose and able to offer a suitable gateway into and from the region for the growing numbers using them. This requires investment and delivery of masterplans at Inverness Airport, Bus and Rail Stations and a multi modal interchange in Oban (Various supporting documentation available on request). HITRANS will continue to work with both local and national partners to advance ambitious projects at these locations which form important placemaking as well as transport projects.
- The Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund has enabled welcome investment at a number of high profile attractions which have been impacted by the recent significant growth in visitor numbers. However, an integrated approach to managing tourism growth is required to ensure that there is less dependence on the private car than at present and the areas wider transport infrastructure is brought up to a suitable standard. HITRANS Regional Transport Strategy identifies the availability of three return public transport journeys from every community to its regional centre as a core objective. Delivery of this basic level of service which enables people without access to the private car to access employment, education, health and leisure facilities within their communities will also encourage visitors to use more sustainable forms of transport when travelling in the region.
- HITRANS are currently working with both Local Authorities, suppliers and Transport Scotland to implement our Regional Electric Vehicle Strategy. There is now an impressive number of demonstrator electric vehicle public transport projects underway in the Highlands and Islands. However, there is a role for NPF4 to help ensure that the delivery of Electric vehicles and supporting infrastructure is integrated across the public sector and all aspects of the economy.
- HITRANS welcomes the recent Programme for Government commitment to make the Highlands and Islands the world's first net zero aviation region. We are working with local partners including HIAL and local authorities to both secure lifeline air services to our island and remote mainland communities, and also implement trials of electric planes in the next couple of years. Continued Scottish and UK government support for these trials is crucial to achieving the net-zero ambition and has the potential to transform the economics as well as the de-carbonisation of domestic aviation. This is vital in the HITRANS area where air services often offer the only means of delivering competitive connectivity to areas currently served by scheduled flights as well as those where routes are under threat such as Wick or required as in Skye.
- Given our dependence on maritime transport for intra-regional connectivity and for extra-regional trade, port development is of great importance. We must look to optimise our port and harbour infrastructure where appropriate, building on the region's successful oil and gas activity and food/drink and forestry sectors, and move towards decarbonisation. A number of positive STAG appraisals have recently been undertaken considering improvements required at piers and harbours within the HITRANS area and progressing this investment is essential for the region to fully capitalise on its maritime assets.
- Orkney Islands are currently at the national forefront in utilising renewable forms of energy to enable low carbon transport solutions but also other sectors including

clean hydrogen as an alternative fuel source and are the first area in Scotland to adopt a Hydrogen Strategy (2019) setting out their ambitions. Current projects include the use of hydrogen to reduce fuel consumption of strategic ferry services and are in the process of developing a hydrogen ferry (HySeasIII) to operate on internal services to their outer islands. Other areas including the Western Isles are looking to exploit the potential of Hydrogen within their communities.

HITRANS are currently developing the business case for piloting either electric or hydrogen alternatives to diesel for local rail services in the Highlands (<https://hitrans.org.uk/Corporate/Research/Rail>) which will fit well with Government's 2035 Rail Decarbonisation Plan. HITRANS are also working with various local, national and EU partners to implement Connected and Autonomous Vehicle pilots in the Highlands and Islands through an Eu Inter Reg project PAVE for which we are the Lead partner

NPF4 can assist this transition to low carbon in the transport sector by helping to develop and support innovative pilots that would otherwise be difficult for any single local authority or other public body to advance.