

Agenda Item	7
Report No	ECI/16/26

The Highland Council

Committee: Economy and Infrastructure

Date: 28 May 2026

Report Title: Public Transport Strategy

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 This report proposes a Public Transport Strategy for the years 2026-2036, to enhance and take forward public and community transport aspects of the Local Transport Strategy Delivery Plan which was agreed by the Committee on 12 February 2026. It is written in the context of a shrinking commercially operated local bus network in Highland (despite growth in the long-distance bus market), steep rises in public and school transport contract prices in recent years, ongoing work to develop a Bus Service Improvement Partnership, the successful introduction and development of Highland Council Buses and the Council's purchase of D&E Coaches.

1.2 The proposed strategy is intended to promote growth in public transport attractiveness and usage through five strategy pillars:-

1. access and inclusion for people in all communities;
2. integrated network and interchanges, including interchange between modes;
3. more direct and reliable bus routes;
4. fairer, simpler fares, including £2 fares cap pilot; and
5. decarbonisation of the fleet and climate change mitigation

It also outlines approaches to future procurement of contracted public and school transport services and further development of Council-delivered services. In doing this, the emphasis is on the design of routes, specification of services and prioritisation between competing demands, rather than on the entities which would operate these services.

1.3 The strategy includes the Council's ongoing support for community transport, and actions being developed by the inter-agency Community Transport Working Group which was set up in August 2025 to expand the role of community transport, including inter-agency collaboration.

- 1.4 The strategy also takes account of the work done with HiTrans and bus operators towards the proposed Bus Service Improvement Partnership (BSIP) and includes infrastructure proposals to support integration between public transport and active travel.
- 1.5 Actions to promote access and inclusion include review of bus and ferry service contract specifications prior to retendering, involvement with local transport forums, further development of community transport provision, extension of free travel for people aged under 22 to ferry routes within Highland, and fuller utilisation of vehicles required for additional needs school transport or patient transport to provide off-peak demand-responsive transport for people with mobility difficulties, involving co-ordination with NHS Highland where opportunities are identified.
- 1.6 Other actions to support increased public transport use include working within the proposed BSIP to encourage more direct bus services, developing public transport information and introducing a transport network map to include all operators, and improving the public transport infrastructure, ranging from bus stops to mobility hubs.
- 1.7 Where current contract costs are high, it is expected that these can be reduced by further expansion of the in-house bus service, but tendering for new contracts will remain an essential element of transport provision.
- 1.8 For future contracts it is proposed that plans to use zero-emission vehicles would be part of the tender evaluation. Highland Council Buses are also moving progressively towards zero-emission vehicles.
- 1.9 Several of the actions in the strategy involve additional cost. The intention is that revenue costs would be largely met through reductions in the cost of supported routes, but capital costs for larger projects would be dependent on funding streams from Transport Scotland. At present it is not possible to predict the scale of either costs or savings for many of these elements.
- 1.10 The strategy is designed to support the Council's aim of being Ambitious, Sustainable and Connected. It is ambitious in the scope of improvement envisaged, supports sustainability of the network, and promotes connectivity of communities.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:-
 - i. **Approve** the draft Public Transport Strategy attached within Appendix 2, for consultation;
 - ii. **Note** that within the overall draft strategy, work is proceeding to develop sub-strategies for community transport and public transport information;
 - iii. **Agree** that bids for community transport grants for the three years commencing in April 2027 be invited, and recommendations for award made to the Committee in November 2026; and
 - iv. **Agree** that a timescale for public and school transport contract renewal is developed, with existing contracts being extended in some areas where achievable, to create a more phased renewal programme.

3 Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** – Implementation of the strategy will have resource implications, although based on previous experience these can be largely funded from reductions in future costs of supported bus services. However, it is recognised that the strategy will need to operate within current (and future) budget envelopes, subject to any further funding sources which can be secured.

Further expansion of the Council-delivered bus services is seen as an essential action to mitigate future escalation of contract costs. Introduction of new community transport services will also provide more cost-effective alternatives to some smaller school transport routes, with the additional benefit of increasing availability of off-peak transport in their areas.

Areas where costs are anticipated for specific elements of the strategy include:-

- bringing the cleaning and maintenance of bus shelters up to a desired standard;
- support for increased number of community transport operations;
- provision of new and replacement bus shelters (capital cost);
- other infrastructure provision (e.g., mobility hubs and bus lanes); and
- development of transport publicity on Council website.

Actual costs would be calculated, and funding sources identified, as implementation of the strategy is progressed.

- 3.2 **Legal** – The strategy is based on existing legislation (Transport Act 1985 and Transport (Scotland) Act 2019) and existing Local Transport Strategy commitments. There are no direct implications from this report.

The Council has a duty under the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 to provide free transport or travel assistance for pupils living more than 2 miles (if aged under 8) or 3 miles (if older) from school, if attending their catchment area school. Public and school transport provision are integrated where feasible.

- 3.3 **Risk** – There are risks of future tender prices for both public and school transport contracts being higher than anticipated, reducing the financial scope for implementation of the strategy. Fuel price volatility is a particular risk for both in-house operation and external contract prices, at least until the majority of the fleet is electric-powered.

Larger infrastructure projects, such as provision of bus lanes and mobility hubs, have been dependent on funding streams from Transport Scotland. Recent funding streams have only been announced for a year at a time, and sometimes during the financial year, restricting the ability to make longer-term plans.

Availability of bus drivers, and both paid and volunteer drivers for community transport, is a further risk, to be mitigated by provision and facilitation of training.

- 3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – None arising from this report.

3.5 **Gaelic** – Improved transport provision will help to sustain viable communities in the areas where there are higher proportions of Gaelic speakers.

4 Impacts

4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children’s Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.

4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.

4.3 Integrated Impact Assessment - Summary

4.3.1 An Integrated Impact Assessment screening was undertaken on 15 April 2026. The conclusions have been subject to the relevant Manager Review and Approval.

4.3.2 The Screening process has concluded that there are potential positive impacts in a number of areas, as the strategy includes consideration of the needs of younger and older people, and appropriate types and levels of service in rural areas. It also includes a commitment to progress towards zero-emission vehicles. It was concluded that a full Integrated Impact Assessment is not required. Members are asked to consider the summary in **Appendix 1** to support the decision-making process.

4.3.3

Impact Assessment Area	Conclusion of Screening / Full Assessment
Equalities	Potential positive impact on age (young and old people) and disability
Poverty and socio-economic	Potential positive impact
Human rights	No impact
Children’s rights and wellbeing	Possible positive impact
Data protection	No impact
Island and mainland rural communities	Potential positive impact
Climate change	Potential positive impact

5 Background and current position

5.1 Bus operations are governed by the Transport Act 1985 and later legislation, most significantly the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019.

5.2 The 1985 Act introduced the current system whereby any licensed bus operator can decide on their routes and timetables, provided that they register them with the Traffic Commissioner and inform the local authority (originally at the same time; now 28 days before registering). These are known as “commercial services” as the operators take the commercial risk. The Act also empowers local authorities to award contracts for services which would not otherwise be provided; these must also be registered with the Traffic Commissioner.

- 5.3 The 2019 Act set up a process for creating Bus Service Improvement Partnerships (BSIPs) and area franchises; these are described below. It also empowers local transport authorities to operate bus services under a Public Service Operator's Licence.
- 5.4 In Highland, most of the long-distance bus routes, the main inter-urban bus routes around the Inverness and Inner Moray Firth area, and some Inverness city routes, are operated commercially. In the last year there have been reductions in frequency on some city routes and withdrawal of other routes. There have also been reductions, although to a lesser extent, on the Inverness – Nairn corridor.
- 5.5 In contrast, long-distance routes have seen growth in services, with new operators emerging and not only competing with established services but also covering a wider daily timespan and introducing new journey options.
- 5.6 Almost all other routes operate under contracts awarded by the Council or are provided by the in-house bus service. In total the Council has 50 contracts for fixed-route public services and 10 for demand-responsive services. Highland Council Buses operate a further 18 public routes.
- 5.7 Public and school transport contracts are integrated wherever possible, but the Council also has around 450 contracts (ranging from double-deckers to saloon cars) specifically for home-to-school transport.
- 5.8 The Council also has contracts for three public ferry services and two ferries to provide home to school transport. These provide lifeline links to remote communities with no road connection or avoid long road journeys.
- 5.9 There has been a long-term trend for the larger bus operators gaining higher proportions of the Council's public transport contracts, and some smaller operators retiring or ceasing to trade. There have been very low levels of competition at tendering and significant increases in contract costs. This has been countered by the establishment of the in-house bus service, especially around the Inner Moray Firth. However, several small operators continue to operate scheduled or demand-responsive contracts, mostly in the more sparsely populated parts of Highland, and contract price increases in these areas have been much less severe.
- 5.10 From its beginning in January 2023, the in-house bus service has expanded, taking on both public and school transport routes which were formerly operated under high-cost contracts, and since 2025 has stepped in to replace withdrawn commercial routes in Inverness city.
- 5.11 In February 2025, the Council purchased D&E Coaches Ltd. D&E operate 27 school transport contracts and three public service contracts, as well as a significant volume of private hire work. So far, the company has continued to operate as an independent operator.
- 5.12 Changing travel to work patterns have affected local bus service patronage. Increased working from home has reduced the traditional peak demand, but developments such as those expected from the Green Freeport are likely to generate demand to new employment locations.

- 5.13 For many years the Council has supported a range of community transport projects, usually with three-year grants. This activity is now expanding, with a Community Transport Working Group having been set up, involving NHS Highland as well as community transport operators, to foster inter-agency collaboration and bring efficiencies, as well as better supporting the community transport sector.

6 Policy context: Local Transport Strategy

- 6.1 The Committee approved the Local Transport Strategy on 13 February 2025 and agreed a delivery plan for it on 12 February 2026. Many aspects of the Delivery Plan relate to public transport. This report is written in that context and builds on it by outlining further potential development in the public transport function.
- 6.2 The Local Transport Strategy has four overarching objectives; the one that relates most to public transport is “to improve public, community and shared transport options that meet different user needs across the Highland geography.”
- 6.3 As Members are aware, the Delivery Plan contains a wide range of policies and actions. Those relating to public transport cover infrastructure, public needs, demographics, service provision and standards, accessibility, service integration, affordability, and contributions towards reducing congestion and carbon emissions.

7 Policy context: BSIP

- 7.1 The Council is working with partners (HiTRANS and bus operators) to develop a Bus Service Improvement Partnership (BSIP), initially covering the areas around Inverness and Fort William. It is intended to bring a report on this to the Committee in August to seek approval for public consultation. The processes required to make a BSIP, including operator participation and public consultation, are set out in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019.
- 7.2 The draft BSIP agreement has the purpose of improving bus services through increasing frequency, quality of buses and creating simpler ticketing systems. It includes three objectives:-
1. improve the operational performance of bus services;
 2. improve the bus service offer within the Highland BSIP; and
 3. improve the passenger experience for bus users within the Highland BSIP
- 7.3 Within the scheme areas, the BSIP would specify:-
- service and route standards (responsibility of operators);
 - facilities to be provided or maintained (Council responsibility, supported by Transport Scotland funding as far as possible); and
 - measures (other actions to support the objectives, by both operators and the Council).

By these means the BSIP would aim to reverse the decline in bus use and improve public confidence in the services.

- 7.4 Any significant improvement to journey times is dependent on infrastructure investment such as creation of bus lanes at key locations. The Council continues to work with Transport Scotland to secure funding and deliver projects.
- 7.5 Measures may include actions such as improved publicity and multi-operator ticketing, as well as other actions such as a review of car parking charges, to give a comparative advantage to public transport where there is traffic congestion.
- 7.6 Franchise agreements, which are also enabled by the 2019 Act, are considered to be most applicable to larger urban areas where there are competing commercial bus services. There are significant legal steps to be taken before making a franchise agreement. Therefore it is not recommended that Highland Council pursues the franchising option at present.

8 Draft Public Transport Strategy

- 8.1 To develop the public transport aspects of the LTS Delivery Plan, support the BSIP plan when approved, and guide future procurement and service specification, a draft Public Transport Strategy for the period 2026-2036 is proposed. This is detailed within **Appendix 2**. Unlike the initial BSIP Schemes which are in preparation for the Inverness & Inner Moray Firth area and Lochaber, it is written to apply to the whole Council area. It therefore takes account of the diversity of settlement types, population density, employment patterns and existence and feasibility of public transport provision within the Highland area and includes other modes as well as the bus.
- 8.2 Under the LTS objective “to improve public, community and shared transport options that meet different user needs across the Highland geography”, five strategy pillars can be identified:-
1. access and inclusion for people in all communities;
 2. integrated network and interchanges, including interchange between modes;
 3. more direct and reliable bus routes;
 4. fairer, simpler fares, including £2 fares cap pilot; and
 5. decarbonisation of the fleet and climate change mitigation

These are reflected in relevant sections of the draft strategy.

- 8.3 The Strategy will guide and support:-

- negotiation with operators regarding commercial routes;
- future specification of contracted and in-house bus routes;
- prioritisation of potential supported bus routes (including in-house) within the available budget;
- development of community transport;
- the BSIP arrangements;
- infrastructure: design, provision and maintenance of bus shelters, and larger infrastructure projects such as mobility hubs and bus lanes;
- improved information provision on website and at stops; and
- fares and ticketing arrangements

- 8.4 The draft strategy confirms that both the in-house bus service and external contracts will have continuing roles in providing socially necessary transport, and that the Council-delivered service is an effective means of controlling overall costs and thus enabling a fuller network. Although it does not set out a specific timescale, it envisages a move to a more rolling programme of contract renewals, on an area basis.
- 8.5 The Strategy takes account of organisational factors including the BSIP partnership, the structure of the Council-owned bus operations, partnership working with HiTRANS and NHS, and involvement in local transport forums.
- 8.6 The Highland Poverty and Equality Commission's interim report, presented to the Council on 11 December 2025, recognised transport and access to essential services as critical challenges. The actions considered, including further development of community transport, more co-ordination of public sector vehicle deployment, and enhancing patient transport provision through joint working with NHS, are consistent with the strategy aims here.
- 8.7 Although the focus of the Strategy is public transport, the need for continued integration with home-to-school transport is recognised in it.

9 Access and inclusion for people in all communities

- 9.1 Provision of public and community transport supports inclusion in society of people who may be disadvantaged by spatial, economic or health factors. Supporting access and inclusion involves not only the design and operation of bus services but also the availability and format of information about them, and infrastructure standards, especially bus stops and shelters.
- 9.2 A key policy in the LTS Delivery Plan is P2.1: "Bus service operations will be underpinned by a clear understanding of existing needs and service provision." An action on the Council to support this policy is "we will contribute to the development of a public transport level of service framework based on settlement type" (to be led by HiTRANS, with a target date of 2027).
- 9.3 It is vital that supported bus services (contracted and in-house) are aligned as far as possible to passenger needs. Ongoing analysis of data and engagement with communities will help to ensure this, within budget constraints.
- 9.4 The Council's bus contracts, in-house services and community transport grants are intended to fill the gaps in the commercial network as effectively as possible, but resource constraints – availability of vehicles and drivers as well as budgetary limitations – make prioritisation inevitable. Desires from communities for improved bus services almost always exceed what can be provided within the available budgets. Pending completion of the framework referenced in paragraph 9.2, the strategy lists the key needs of access to employment and essential services, where there are no commercial alternatives, as priority needs to be considered when funding services. This approach leaves room for flexibility in the light of local circumstances, including experience of usage. It does not define which services should be provided in-house and which should be awarded as external contracts, as this is a matter to be judged according to costs and logistical considerations when assessing each route.

- 9.5 The Council's ferry contracts provide essential access and inclusion for some remote communities, and the strategy confirms continuation of these.
- 9.6 The Council's Sustainable Tourism Strategy recognises the significance of public transport for tourism and commits to a focus on developing and maintaining an affordable, reliable and convenient transport network. As well as contributing towards sustainable tourism, this can support the viability of the transport network for local users by increasing the patronage overall.
- 9.7 Availability of route and timetable information is as fundamental to increasing public transport use as the services themselves. Investment in these should pay dividends by supporting the sustainability of services. Within the overall strategy it is intended to develop a public transport information strategy. Enhanced public transport information on the Council's website, including a network map and links to operators' timetables, would be a valuable addition to the information provided.
- 9.8 There are opportunities to develop transport services using accessible and adaptable minibuses which, at different times during the working day, could provide ASN school transport routes, patient transport or social care transport, dial-a-bus services for people with mobility difficulties, and/or scheduled journeys for areas away from regular routes. Collaboration with NHS as described above would support this. These services could be operated through in-house provision, agreements with community transport groups, or contract awards covering the range of purposes.

10 Integrated network and interchanges

- 10.1 This pillar covers from simple bus stops and shelters to mobility hubs, multi-modal interchanges and timetable co-ordination. Good quality infrastructure is another vital element in improving public transport.
- 10.2 Bus shelters can be seen as the "shop window" of the bus network. Clean and well-maintained shelters give a favourable first impression. Design and maintenance of shelters should therefore be an essential element of the Council's BSIP commitments as well as of the wider strategy.
- 10.3 The Council has over 700 bus shelters of varying ages and conditions. The strategy sets out an asset management-based approach to cleaning, repair and renewal of the shelter stock, and proposes, subject to funding, to commission a design which is more robust and enables easier repair.
- 10.4 Currently Transport Scotland have a Bus Infrastructure Fund (BIF) which is distributed annually. In 2025-26 this comprised Tier 1 which was paid to Councils automatically, based on a measure of transport poverty, and Tier 2 which was negotiated to support ongoing projects originally developed under the former Bus Partnership Fund. At the time of writing, details of the BIF for 2026-27 are awaited.
- 10.5 Investment in infrastructure by the Council, including use of future funding streams from Transport Scotland such as the current Bus Infrastructure Fund, will be a critical element of supporting increased bus travel.

- 10.6 Public consultation was held between February and April 2026 on plans for a new multi-modal transport interchange in Inverness, including relocation of the bus station and easing transfer between bus and train. The results of the consultation will inform the next steps of that project.
- 10.7 Connectivity between buses and train, ferry and air services aids longer distance travel and is a topic of interest to local transport forums. Bus contract timetables are designed to include connections at key locations, but this may be enhanced in future specifications. Regarding commercial services, the Council will seek to improve connections as part of the BSIP.

11 More direct and reliable bus routes

- 11.1 Scope to develop more direct routes exists primarily in urban areas and on inter-urban corridors. Journey times by bus are inevitably slower than by car where, as in virtually all of Highland, they share the same road space. This can be alleviated by dedicated infrastructure such as bus lanes.
- 11.2 Funding from Transport Scotland enabled the building of the Raigmore bus gate and adaptation of traffic lights to enable bus priorities at 20 junctions. Design work has been done on larger projects including the scope for bus lanes in Millburn Road, and potential mobility hub sites.
- 11.3 In Fort William, two bus links have been designed to bring recent areas of housing development, and the new Belford Hospital site, into efficient bus routes.
- 11.4 Infrastructure developments such as these are a key tool in enabling faster bus routes. They also aid reliability by reducing the susceptibility of bus services to traffic delays. The LTS Delivery Plan includes an action to continue to bid for funding for such developments, and this is reflected in the strategy.
- 11.5 Where services are operated commercially, the operators decide on the routes to be used. Part of their commercial decision involves striking a balance between directness, giving faster end-to-end journey times, and diversion to serve more communities along the route. There is some evidence that directness can attract more passengers than are lost by omitting some areas from the route, but changes of this sort could result in a funding pressure to support local services for bypassed areas. The longer-term aim would be to grow usage so that both types of service become viable, or that routes can be replanned to make more effective use of resources. The BSIP may be a means of progressing this type of development.

12 Fairer, simpler fares

- 12.1 If bus services are to be accessible, they should be affordable. Reasonable fare levels matter, both to ease travel for people on low incomes and to encourage modal shift from private transport. Bus fares have often been seen as uncompetitive when compared with car travel.
- 12.2 Transport Scotland have chosen the HiTRANS and ZETRANS areas for a year-long pilot of a maximum £2 fare for single bus journeys; in Highland this will run until March 2027. Any future fare structure will depend on the outcome of the pilot, but the strategy includes the principle that fares should be affordable and not complex. One objective is to set up multi-operator fare schemes, for day tickets and longer periods.

- 12.3 On contracted journeys, if Transport Scotland do not continue the £2 (or similar) fare cap after the pilot period, it is recommended that the Council retains a distance-related maximum fare scale as a condition of contract.
- 12.4 Transport Scotland also fund free bus travel for Scottish residents aged under 22 and over 60, and other people with disabilities. When free bus travel for older people and those with disabilities was introduced in 2006, the Council extended this provision to ferries within the Highland area and across the Sound of Mull for eligible Highland residents, as for some communities the ferry performs the purpose of a local bus service elsewhere. It is proposed that the Council should make similar provision for Highland residents aged under 22. The cost of this is estimated to be around £65,000 to £70,000 per year.
- 12.5 Most community transport operations are not registered bus services so not eligible for the £2 fare pilot. "Pay what you can" arrangements have been made in some of these, such as Wheels in Nairnshire, so that users who wish to contribute to the costs can do so, while keeping the service affordable for all. It is planned to extend this to more community transport groups.

13 Decarbonisation of the fleet

- 13.1 The Council is committed to progressively decarbonising the in-house fleet. Highland Council Buses have taken delivery of one electric coach, with an electric double decker being built, both funded through Transport Scotland's SCOTZEB programme. They have also made a successful bid to the programme for a further 10 electric buses for 2027. Three existing buses have been converted to run on hydrotreated vegetable oil (HVO), with positive results for fuel economy as well as emissions.
- 13.2 It is intended that part of the quality assessment in the next round of tendering for public and school transport should include a score for use of zero-emission vehicles. This would give some preference to their use when awarding contracts, and would enable the cost of this, compared to conventional vehicles, to be measured. The aim is that all new vehicles operating on contracts would be zero-emission by 2035.
- 13.3 Through encouraging modal shift, public transport provision supports emission reductions compared to car use, especially as more of the fleet becomes zero-emission. The Scottish Government has set a national target of a 20% reduction in car mileage by 2030; while the greatest progress towards this would be expected to be in larger urban areas, improved public transport should assist Highland in contributing towards this target.

14 Developing Community Transport

- 14.1 The Council currently supports 29 community transport (CT) groups, financially and with operational advice, and is committed to further development of this sector. Council vehicles have been provided to nine community transport groups to support them with their activities, including provision of home to school transport in some cases. Within the overall strategy, a community transport strategy is being developed.

- 14.2 A Community Transport Working Group, involving NHS Highland, HiTRANS, CT providers and Council Members and officers, was set up in 2025 and is exploring areas for collaborative working, including new ways of meeting patients' transport needs.
- 14.3 Building on previous work done with groups in Gairloch and Applecross, agreement has recently been reached with Communities in Motion Community Transport (CIMCT), based in Culbokie, to operate an Additional Support Needs (ASN) school transport route with a vehicle provided by the Council; this commenced in April 2026 and has reduced the cost of that ASN transport route by £12,000. Outwith the times of the school journeys, this vehicle is expanding the group's capacity to provide community transport within their area and to medical appointments in Inverness. Similar opportunities for development are being sought elsewhere.
- 14.4 Grants to CT groups are normally awarded for three years, the current grants having been approved by the Committee in November 2024. This process works well but does not enable grant awards to new groups which come into being during the three-year cycle, to support new community transport developments in their areas. It is hoped that as further initiatives are developed such as that with CIMCT as described above, this would release some funding to be made available for such needs.

15 Future procurement

- 15.1 In Caithness, Lochaber and Skye, public and school bus contracts are due to expire in April 2027. Small vehicle school transport contracts in these areas expire in April 2028. There is an option to extend contracts by up to two years (or one year for buses in Caithness) if current contractors agree.
- 15.2 In the rest of Highland, most public and school transport contracts (for all vehicle types) expire in April 2028, but with an option to extend by up to two years, as above.
- 15.3 Monthly records of passenger numbers and fare revenue are routinely collected, and records are examined in more depth when routes are being assessed or changes considered. Prior to tendering for replacement contracts, routes are reviewed to establish their continuing usefulness, and possible alternatives designed as options. These alternatives – which would be relevant to some but not all routes – may be for increased or reduced services, or alternative means of provision such as through a community transport project. By these means it is hoped that the public transport budget can be used more effectively to increase the overall provision of bus services and associated facilities. It is intended that option drafts would be made available for public consultation.
- 15.4 Prior to tendering, conditions of contract will also be updated and reviewed to build in actions to encourage increased use, as described in the draft strategy.
- 15.5 The draft strategy sets out a process, but not a timescale, for contract renewals. To enable more effective preparation of specifications in each area, as well as spreading financial risk of increased prices, it is proposed that retendering should move to more of a rolling programme. This would require using the contract extension option in some areas. It is recommended that this should be considered as procurement plans are progressed.

15.6 Future contract specifications would be written to reflect changing needs and priorities and to take advantage, where feasible, of the potential for inter-agency working methods such as described in paragraph 9.8. As at present, public transport and school transport needs will be combined where feasible, as this aids efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

Date: 27 April 2026

Author: David Summers, Principal Transport Officer (Strategy)

Background Papers: Highland Local Transport Strategy 2025-2035
Local Transport Strategy Delivery Plan Report – 12 Feb 26

Appendices: Appendix 1 – Integrated Impact Assessment
Appendix 2 – Draft Public Transport Strategy

Integrated Impact Assessment Screening

About proposal

What does this proposal relate to? Strategy

Proposal name: Public transport strategy

High level summary of the proposal: Strategy and actions to develop the public and community transport aspects of the agreed Local Transport Strategy, and to inform future provision of bus services, community transport support and related infrastructure.

Who may be affected by the proposal? All Highland residents, and visitors using public transport

Start date of proposal: 05/01/2026

End date of proposal: 01/07/2026

Does this proposal result in a change or impact to one or more Council service? Yes

Which Council services will be impacted by this proposal? Place

Does this relate to an existing proposal? No

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Sign off date: 2026-04-20

Equalities, poverty, and human rights

Protected characteristics

Select what impact the proposal will have on the following protected characteristics:

Sex: No impact

Age: Positive

Disability: Positive

Religion or belief: No impact

Race: No impact

Sexual orientation: No impact

Gender reassignment: No impact

Pregnancy and maternity: No impact

Marriage and civil partnership: No impact

Protected characteristics impact details: Sets guidance for transport provision, which will particularly benefit people who are unable to drive and/or have limited access to existing transport. Potentially anyone in the population could benefit, but especially young people, pensioners and those with disabilities.

Poverty and socio-economic

What impact is the proposal likely to have on the following?

Prospects and opportunities: Positive

Places: Positive

Financial: Positive

Poverty and socio-economic impact details: Access to employment and further education are to be factors in deciding where to support transport provision. Fragility of areas, including poverty and rurality will be key considerations. Subject to the outcome of Transport Scotland's current £2 fares cap pilot, a maximum fare scale is proposed for routes under Council control, and the existence of adequate transport can reduce the need for households to incur the cost of owning or running a car (e.g. not requiring a second car, or reduced mileage).

Human rights

Which of the below human rights will be affected by this proposal? No human rights will be affected

What impact do you consider this proposal to have on the human rights of people? No impact

Human rights impact details: Does not affect any of these human rights as defined. Transport

provision is non-discriminatory.

Equalities, poverty and human rights screening assessment

What impact do you think there will be to equalities, poverty and human rights? No impact

Is a Full Impact Assessment required? No

Children's rights and wellbeing

What likely impact will the proposal have on children and young people? Possible indirect benefit under Article 15 (freedom of association) by enabling greater accessibility to meet friends, especially in rural areas.

Possible indirect benefit under Article 23 (children with a disability) by increasing provision of wheelchair-accessible or other suitable transport.

Which of the below children's rights will be affected by the proposal? Other children's rights will be affected

Explain how the children's rights selected above will be affected: As described above.

Children's rights and wellbeing screening assessment

What impact do you think there will be to children's rights and wellbeing? Positive impact

Is a Full Impact Assessment required? No

Data protection

Will your proposal involve processing personal data? No

Data protection screening assessment

What change will there be to the way personal data is processed? No personal data will be processed

Is a Full Impact Assessment required? No

Island and mainland rural communities

Does your proposal impact island and mainland rural communities? Yes

Could people in island and mainland rural communities be affected differently? Yes

How could the impact differ? Frequency and hours of transport will inevitably be less in island or rural than in more urban areas, but the strategy includes setting a level of service framework based on settlement type. The nature of provision may also be different, e.g. demand-responsive rather than fixed-timetabled, which enables more flexibility in rural areas. The aim is that transport

provision should be suited to the needs of the area as far as practicable.

Have any negative impacts been identified? No

Island and mainland rural communities screening assessment

What impact do you think there will be to island and mainland rural communities?

Significant differences

Is a Full Impact Assessment required? No

Climate change

Does the proposal involve activities that could impact on greenhouse gas emissions (CO₂e)? Yes

Does the proposal have the potential to affect the environment, wildlife or biodiversity? No

Does the proposal have the potential to influence resilience to extreme weather or changing climate? No

Provide information regarding your selection above: Proposal supports provision of public transport which has the potential to reduce the need for private transport. It also includes progressive moves towards zero-carbon fleets within the Council and in contract specifications.

Climate change screening assessment

Have you identified potential impact for any of the areas above or marked any as not known? Yes

Is a Full Impact Assessment required? No

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

DRAFT PUBLIC TRANSPORT STRATEGY

Scope

This strategy is designed to take forward actions in the Council's Local Transport Strategy which relate to public transport (bus, ferry, rail and air) and community transport, over the period 2026-2036, and to outline approaches to specification of the Council's public transport contracts and in-house operations. It also refers to commercially operated buses, and train and ferry services funded by Transport Scotland.

Home to school transport provision is a statutory Council function. There is strong integration between the Council's public and school transport contracts, and this strategy recognises that inter-relationship, but does not address specific home to school transport issues, as they come under the Council's home to school transport policy.

Context

The legal framework

Public transport in Scotland (as in most of the rest of the UK) operates under the Transport Act 1985. Although various changes have been made to the legislation since 1985, it remains the case that:

- Bus operators may register any route and timetable that they choose, to be operated on a commercial basis (i.e. without funding from the local authority);
- Local transport authorities may award contracts for any additional services which would not otherwise be provided.

The most significant changes to the legislation come from the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, which allows local transport authorities to operate bus services under the same licensing regime as private sector operators. That Act also enables:

- Bus Service Improvement Partnerships (BSIPs) between authorities and operators, to include facilities provided by the authority, standards to be met by the operators, and other measures to support bus use;
- Franchise agreements, whereby the authority gives an operator exclusive right to provide bus services within a defined area, and sets standards for these services.

Highland Council policies

In February 2025 The Highland Council's Economy and Infrastructure Committee agreed a Local Transport Strategy (LTS), which is published at <https://www.highland.gov.uk/roads-transport-parking/local-transport-strategy> In February 2026 the Committee agreed a LTS Delivery Plan. This strategy amplifies aspects of the Delivery Plan which relate to public transport.

The Council, HiTRANS and bus operators are developing a BSIP Scheme for two areas: Inverness & Inner Moray Firth, and Lochaber. Although the BSIP is not yet implemented, this strategy takes account of the proposed BSIP.

Franchise agreements are considered to be most applicable to larger urban areas where there are competing commercial bus services. There are significant legal steps to be taken before making a franchise agreement. Therefore this is not a power which Highland Council is currently planning to use.

Since January 2023 the Council has operated an in-house bus service, Highland Council Buses, and it is expected that this will continue to grow where there are economic benefits in doing so. In 2025 the Council acquired D&E Coaches Ltd.

The Council has a statutory duty to provide home to school transport for pupils living more than 2 miles from school (if aged under 8 years) or more than 3 miles from school (if aged 8 or older); this applies to pupils attending their catchment area school. The school transport policy is under review, but the current version is published at <https://www.highland.gov.uk/downloads/download/37/school-transport-policy>

The current position: commercial bus services

Commercial services in Highland fall broadly into three categories: long-distance, inter-urban within the more densely populated part of the area, and city services in Inverness.

Long-distance routes connect Inverness with Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Oban, and within the Highland Council area, Ullapool (for the Stornoway ferry), Thurso/Scrabster, and Fort William. There are also long-distance routes connecting Skye and Fort William with Edinburgh and Glasgow. Recently there has been growth in provision in this sector, with increased frequencies as well as new entrants to the market, resulting in competition on several routes. Citylink, Stagecoach, Ember and Flixbus all provide long-distance services.

The shorter inter-urban commercial routes are all operated by Stagecoach. They are predominantly around the Inner Moray Firth and focussed on Inverness, providing connections from Dornoch, Tain, Invergordon, Dingwall, Cromarty and surrounding areas. There are local buses linking Nairn with Inverness in addition to the long-distance routes which pass through Nairn. Although timetable changes are made periodically, the level of service on these routes has remained relatively stable.

Urban routes are all within Inverness, including Culloden, Balloch and until July 2025 Milton of Leys. Recently some services to Culloden have been extended to Ardersier and Croy, replacing separate services which these villages previously had. In recent years, commercial services have been reduced in frequency and then withdrawn from parts of Inverness, notably the southern sector of the city, including Milton of Leys, Slackbuie, Lochardil and Ness Castle, as well as Dalneigh. Frequencies on some remaining routes have also been reduced. New services have been introduced by Highland Council Buses to replace the most significant of these withdrawals, to

ensure that each part of the city has at least an hourly service through most of the day.

The current position: bus contracts

As much of the land area of Highland is not covered by commercial bus routes, the Council has contracts for public transport services throughout most of its area. Currently there are 50 contracts for fixed-route services, and a further 10 for demand-responsive services. In addition to these, Highland Council Buses operate 18 public routes. As far as practicable, public and school transport contracts are integrated, which supports cost-effectiveness and efficient use of vehicles.

The public service contracts vary greatly in nature. They range from an urban service in Fort William to once-weekly buses designed to provide shopping opportunities for remote areas. In between these are regular hourly or two-hourly services between smaller settlements (e.g. Grantown-Aviemore and Kinlochleven-Fort William), connections from villages to towns on main bus routes (e.g. Balintore-Tain and Dunvegan-Portree) and longer but less frequent routes from remoter villages such as Durness, Lochinver and Kilchoan.

Most of the demand-responsive transport contracts are in remoter rural areas, generally the catchment areas of villages, to provide local transport for everyday needs where scheduled buses would not be effective. These use minibuses or private hire cars, and are available for booking in defined areas and time periods.

Contracts are typically awarded for five years, but contract periods and contract renewal dates are currently being reviewed.

The Council also provides grants to community transport operators for a range of different schemes across the Highland area. Currently 29 groups receive grants, and work is being developed to enhance this sector.

The current position: Highland Council Buses

Since January 2023, some public routes have been operated by the Council in-house. Initially these replaced contracts in the Inverness area when they expired; the operation has since grown to take over other routes where the contract costs were high, and to replace some commercial services which were withdrawn. Apart from one in Caithness, all routes remain within 30 miles of Inverness.

The current position: ferries

Although many ferry routes are funded by Transport Scotland and operated by Caledonian MacBrayne, the Council operates the Corran Ferry and has contracts for three public ferry services and two further ferries to provide home to school transport. The Mallaig – Inverie – Tarbet ferry is a lifeline link to the Knoydart peninsula, which although on the mainland has no road access; the others avoid long road journeys around Loch Eil or the Cromarty Firth. The school transport ferries provide for weekly travel from the Small Isles to Mallaig and the isolated

Scoraig peninsula to Badluarach for onward travel by road to Ullapool; pupils stay in hostels through the week.

On the north coast, ferries between the mainland and Orkney are either funded by Transport Scotland (Scrabster – Stromness) or privately operated (Gills Bay – St Margaret’s Hope, and the summer-only passenger ferry between John o’Groats and Burwick).

The current position: other transport modes

Transport Scotland are responsible for the ScotRail franchise and the Caledonian Sleeper operation. The daily LNER train between Inverness and London is operated by a government-owned company under the UK Government’s Department for Transport.

Air services to and from Inverness are operated commercially. There is a Public Service Obligation (PSO) arrangement for flights between Wick and Aberdeen.

The current position: public transport infrastructure

The Highland Council is responsible for the provision of bus stops and shelters; there are around 2850 marked bus stops and around 700 bus shelters across the area. The Council also has two short bus lanes in Inverness (at Eastgate and Bank Street), a dedicated bus link at Foundry Way (for exiting from Inverness Bus Station), a bridge for active travel and bus services linking the Retail and Business Park with the UHI Campus, and has implemented adaptive bus priority at 20 traffic light-controlled junctions. The Council has also been involved in implementing the bus gate at Raigmore, which is part of the NHS Highland property. The land and stances at Inverness Bus Station are owned by the Council but leased to Stagecoach who operate it; Stagecoach own the building.

The Council owns and operates 11 harbours and several smaller piers and jetties; those which are used by ferry services are Uig, Corran, Ardgour, Eigg, Muck, Rum, Inverie, Fort William and Camusnagaul.

Purpose and Objectives

A key objective of the Local Transport Strategy is “to improve public, community and shared transport options that meet different user needs across the Highland geography.” The purpose of this public transport strategy is to develop actions agreed in the LTS delivery plan, and to set priorities for future provision of public transport where not provided commercially (whether through awarding contracts or the in-house bus service) and for support of community transport. It sets a framework for a sustainable, inclusive and integrated public transport system that will encourage increased mobility and usage and reduce transport deprivation, and in the more urban areas, reduce the impact of traffic on the environment.

Five Strategy pillars

1. *Access and inclusion (for rural, remote and island communities, and anyone with mobility impairments)*

The Council wishes to ensure that transport is available to give reasonable access to key destinations and services. This includes:

- Connections between rural areas and their nearest main village, normally by community transport or other demand-responsive transport;
- Connections between villages and their nearest main town, either by community transport / demand-responsive transport or a scheduled service;
- Connections between towns (and their surrounding areas) and Inverness, normally by scheduled bus (with other connections from rural areas where required);
- Internal transport within towns where walking distances would be difficult for some residents, normally by community transport or other demand-responsive transport;
- Internal transport within Inverness, normally by scheduled buses, but supplemented by some demand-responsive transport.

2. *Integrated network and multi-modal interchanges (including rail, ferry, air)*

Where feasible, services and infrastructure will be designed to support:

- Suitably timed connections between main routes (including train, coach and ferry) and local routes, where significant for through journeys
- Access to scheduled services (e.g. provision of mobility hubs with bike parking, car parking and electric vehicle charging, and demand-responsive feeder services)
- Availability of through ticketing.

3. *Reliable buses and more direct routes*

Through BSIP schemes it is intended to develop more bus priority schemes in urban areas, to enable faster and more reliable journey times, and to grow the proportion of travel made by bus. Larger schemes requiring capital investment are likely to be dependent on funding from Transport Scotland. Growth in usage would also support development of more direct routes in urban and peri-urban areas, giving a further incentive to use buses.

4. *Fairer, simpler fares*

Affordability of bus services is important, both to ease travel for people on low incomes and to encourage modal shift from private transport. Bus fares have often been seen as uncompetitive when compared with car travel.

The Council will study with great interest the impact of Transport Scotland's recently introduced £2 fare cap pilot, which is in place until March 2027.

The Council will promote multi-journey and multi-operator fares where these give an advantage over single fares.

Subject to the outcome of the £2 fare cap pilot, as part of the proposed BSIP the Council will explore with operators the scope to retain better value fares.

5. *Decarbonisation of the fleet*

Highland Council Buses already have one electric coach, and an electric double decker is being built, both funded through Transport Scotland's SCOTZEB

programme. Successful bids have been made for a further 10 electric buses for 2027. Three existing buses have been converted to run on hydrotreated vegetable oil (HVO), with positive results for fuel economy as well as emissions. The Council is committed to further decarbonisation of the fleet.

The Council will also work with operators to utilise ScotZEB funding to accelerate implementation of zero-emission buses and the depot infrastructure required for them.

These five pillars will apply across Highland, but the way they are implemented will be fitted to local circumstances and needs.

Passenger needs

Passenger needs are diverse, and include access to employment, education, shopping, medical and other essential services, and social and leisure activities. Accessibility to these services clearly varies between urban, rural and remote parts of Highland, and personal mobility varies between demographic groups. There is a perception – largely true – that existing public and community transport provision, especially in the more rural areas, is more geared to the needs of older than younger people, although several routes are showing strong usage of the free under-22 travel scheme.

Some of these needs are met by commercial services. Others require Council financing. Where Council support is required, this can be done through contracts with private sector operators (for fixed route or demand-responsive services), grants to community transport providers, or in-house provision. The most appropriate method in each case depends on circumstances, nature and volume of use, and cost.

Buses of 23 seats or more are legally required to be wheelchair accessible. Despite this, some people with mobility difficulties can be isolated, even in urban areas where there are reasonably frequent bus services, as they may not be able to make their way from their home to the bus stop. Therefore there is a social need for demand-responsive, flexibly routed transport in urban as well as rural areas.

The needs of tourists as well as local residents should be considered. Tourism supports the Highland economy, especially in rural areas, but relatively few tourists travel by public transport. Although passenger figures on bus contracts in Skye show a marked peak in the tourist season, this is not widely reflected on our contracts elsewhere. Promoting tourism by public transport should increase usage and supports the Council's Sustainable Tourism Strategy.

The Council's Passenger Transport team engages with operators, communities and local transport forums regarding transport needs and possible adjustments to services, and this influences design of contract specifications and support of community transport projects. They are also informed by Area Place Plans, Community Partnership Plans and the Local Development Plan.

The Council's bus service contracts and community transport grants are intended to fill the gaps in the commercial network as effectively as possible, but resource

constraints – primarily budget, but also availability of vehicles and drivers – mean that prioritisation is necessary.

A key policy in the LTS Delivery Plan is P2.1: “Bus service operations will be underpinned by a clear understanding of existing needs and service provision.” Under this, LTS Priority Action 40 states “We will contribute to the development of a public transport level of service framework based on settlement type. This framework will establish how an appropriate and more equitable level of connectivity will be defined across the region.” HITRANS will lead on this action, as part of their Regional Transport Strategy work, with an outcome planned for 2027. Pending the completion of this work, the actions below under “Future service specification and tendering – procurement and provision” lists key factors which will be considered when allocating funding for bus services.

Strategy actions

Key actions are listed below to support the five strategy pillars identified. Further actions, and more detail, will be developed as part of the implementation of the overall Local Transport Strategy Delivery Plan.

Development of the network

The Council wishes to encourage greater public transport use, whether on commercial, contract or in-house bus services, or on trains or ferries. The Council also recognises the importance of community transport as part of the overall transport provision – this is a sector which can often meet needs which are not met by conventional services – and will continue to support and develop this sector.

Increased public and community transport use supports inclusion in society of people who could be disadvantaged by economic or health factors, and it supports emission reductions compared to car use, especially as more of the fleet becomes zero-emission. Increased use also makes public services more sustainable, helping to maintain commercial service profitability and increasing the contribution of fares to the overall cost of tendered services.

Accessibility can be increased through innovative design of service packages and use of vehicles (usually minibuses) where seats can be folded up or the layout easily rearranged between journeys to create wheelchair spaces. Through further integration with home to school transport provision, and collaboration with NHS, such vehicles could, at different times during the working day, provide school transport routes for Additional Support needs, patient transport or social care transport, dial-a-bus services for people with mobility difficulties, and/or scheduled journeys for areas away from regular routes.

Encouraging greater public transport use includes not only developing the services themselves but also provision of infrastructure and information.

General

- Continue to develop BSIP Schemes in Inverness & Inner Moray Firth and in Lochaber

- Monitor the impact of Transport Scotland's £2 fare cap pilot.
- Include free travel for Highland residents aged under 22 on ferry services, on the same basis as already provided for those aged over 60 or with disabilities.
- Work with partners including NHS Highland and HITRANS to improve transport options for accessing health appointments.
- Work with local transport forums where they exist, to improve understanding of local needs and encourage community feedback.

Commercial bus services

- Within the BSIP, work with operators to identify potential network improvements, with reference to the level of service framework when completed.
- Encourage connectivity with train, ferry and air services where this supports through journeys, including early departures and late arrivals.

Contracted and in-house bus services

- Use data required under the contract to monitor bus service performance and usage, and identify where travel patterns or needs may be changing.
- Publicise the public.transport@highland.gov.uk email address for public comments and feedback on bus services.
- Subject to the outcome of Transport Scotland's £2 fare cap pilot, retain a mileage-related maximum fare scale in our Conditions of Contract.

Community transport

A community transport strategy is being developed. Elements identified of this include:

- Invite applications from community groups for community transport grants in 2026 and future funding cycles, and make Service Level Agreements with successful applicants.
- Aim to broaden the range, scope and geographical coverage of community transport provision, including both urban and rural areas.
- Support community transport, or other demand-responsive transport services, in providing transport for people with limited mobility within towns.
- Maintain 3-year community transport funding cycles, and explore possibility of awarding grants to new community transport groups within the 3-year period.
- Use the Community Transport Association's Social Value Toolkit, and support CT groups in using it, to better evaluate the benefit of the services proposed or provided.
- Continue to seek opportunities for community transport operators to provide home-to-school transport, where this can support their broader community transport provision and/or reduce the cost of home-to-school transport routes.
- Develop inter-agency collaboration, including with NHS Highland, to support community transport operators in meeting needs in their communities.
- Support the use of community transport to enable access to longer distance scheduled public transport in addition to its local functions.
- Provide Council vehicles for use by community transport groups where this can be shown to be an effective means of support.
- Extend "pay what you can" arrangements which exist in some CT groups, to support both affordability for users and sustainability of the services.
- Support driver training to address lack of qualified minibuss drivers.

Infrastructure

Bus shelters can be seen as the “shop window” of the bus network. Poor condition or unkempt bus shelters are a deterrent to travel, whereas well maintained shelters give a favourable first impression. Design and maintenance of shelters are therefore an essential part of the strategy.

The LTS Delivery Plan commits the Council to provision of fit for purpose infrastructure and includes an action: “Public transport projects will be subject to an asset management approach, ensuring maintenance and replacement strategies are in place for any ageing infrastructure such as bus shelters as well as bus priority infrastructure such as signage and road markings.”

The Plan recognises the dependence of infrastructure developments on the availability of funding, and includes actions to pursue funding options including bids to Transport Scotland.

- Use an asset database to sustain and manage a regular cleaning and maintenance programme for bus shelters.
- Subject to funding, commission a bus shelter design with greater robustness and ease of repair, to be used where new or replacement shelters are needed.
- Wherever feasible, bus shelters and stops will be designed to aid accessibility for bus users with limited mobility.
- Within the BSIP, and subject to funding, continue to develop bus priority facilities such as bus lanes and traffic light priorities where they would enable faster bus journey times.
- Subject to funding, develop mobility hubs at locations identified through the BSIP.
- Develop mini-hubs for car/bus/active travel interchange near junctions on key bus routes, to improve access from rural areas.
- Continue to work with HiTRANS on the feasibility of a relocated bus station and multi-modal interchange in Inverness.

Information

Availability of route and timetable information is critical to increasing bus use. People who do not use public transport regularly tend to have low awareness of what services exist. Operators publish their own timetables, but potential passengers, especially visitors, may not know who operates in a particular area. The Traveline Scotland website and phone line provide multi-modal journey information, but are most useful for people who know where and when they want to travel.

- In partnership with HiTRANS, a transport information strategy will be developed.
- Continue to promote the Traveline Scotland journey planner and phone line on all public transport publicity.
- Develop the Council website to include a public transport network map and improve network information.
- Ensure that schoolday and school holiday dates are clearly shown in the public transport section of the Council’s website, and as far as practicable on other timetable publicity.

Future service specification and tendering

Actions in this section relate equally to design and specification of tendered public transport services and to routes operated by the Council's in-house bus service.

Contact specifications will be based on an understanding of the needs in the communities served and knowledge of current usage. Key needs to be considered include access to employment, essential services and further/higher education, and connections with longer-distance routes, but it is recognised that the nature and relative importance of these will vary between communities.

- Develop an area-based rolling programme of contract renewals.
- Tenders will normally be invited for 5-year contract periods, adjusted if necessary to maintain consistent expiry dates across each area.
- Where practicable, maintain integration between public and school transport provision.
- Develop service packages using adaptable vehicles, to meet a wider range of needs through greater integration.
- Cater for tourist potential where this can support the ability of the service to meet local needs.
- When complete, apply the level of service framework based on settlement type.
- Include a quality score for adoption of zero-emission buses in tender evaluation.
- Continue to support the Council's ferry service contracts and the Corran Ferry.
- Contracts will not normally make specific provision for travel to/from school from outwith the school catchment area, unless this can be done at no net cost or the transport also meets other recognised needs.

Tenders received will be reviewed for value for money and for the justification for each route (including the types of needs met, effectiveness of provision and compliance with strategy).