Agenda Item	**6**
Report No	**BIER/32/26**

The Highland Council

Committee: **Black Isle and Easter Ross**

Date: **9 November 2026**

Report Title: **Community Transport in the Black Isle and Easter Ross: Current Provision and Future Opportunities**

Report By: **Assistant Chief Executive - Place**

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 This report provides an overview of Community Transport provision within the Black Isle and Easter Ross area, summarising current services, key providers, local challenges and opportunities, and the role Community Transport plays in supporting accessibility and social inclusion.

1.2 Further, this report also identifies areas where there may be opportunities for innovation, development and partnership working with Community Transport organisations. Recognising that Community Transport is strategically central to delivery of transport solutions – rather than peripheral – is a key shift in thinking that supports realising this potential.

2 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to **note and provide** any feedback on:-

i. The current transport landscape – including Community Transport provision – in the Black Isle and Easter Ross areas;
ii. Opportunities for further development, both in the context of localised needs and overarching strategic approaches;
iii. The approach of repurposing funds from underperforming journeys/contracts where this resource can be better applied to Community Transport provision;
iv. Grant award recommendations for Community Transport organisations across Highland are being presented at Economy and Infrastructure Committee on 12 November for the period of April 2027-March 2030.

3 Implications

3.1 **Resource** – There are no resource implications arising directly from this report.

3.2 **Legal** – There are no legal implications arising from this report.

3.3 **Risk** – Community Transport services provide essential connectivity for many communities and individuals in the Black Isle and Easter Ross and across Highland, enabling access to healthcare, employment, education, shopping and social opportunities. Gaps in this provision can have profound negative impacts on individuals and the broader community.

3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – There are no direct Health and Safety implications arising from the recommendations contained within this report. Community Transport operators remain responsible for complying with all relevant transport safety, vehicle maintenance and operational requirements. Where Community Transport organisations operate Highland Council owned or leased vehicles, they are also required to comply with relevant Highland Council policies and procedures.

3.5 **Gaelic** – There are no Gaelic implications arising from this report.

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 This is a monitoring or update report and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

5 Current Community Transport Landscape

5.1 Across Highland, transport networks are characterised by a mix of commercial bus services, contracted bus services (often built around statutory home-to-school transport), and – importantly, and central to this report – Community Transport. Historically, Community Transport arises organically and is community-led, in response to identified community needs. Highland Council has long recognised how integral Community Transport is and has provided grant support, which provides revenue funding to support initiatives. While representing a relatively small proportion of overall transport expenditure, Community Transport delivers a disproportionately significant benefit in supporting accessibility, independence and social inclusion.

Within the context of the Public and School Transport budget, support for Community Transport represents less than 2% of the overall annual budget of ca £32m. This overarching budget, particularly home-to-school transport and most especially ASN transport, is strained. The team are continually exploring ways to deliver services as efficiently and cost-effectively as possible while delivering both statutory and lifeline services. Investment in Community Transport can lead to cost reductions elsewhere, and cost avoidance which extends beyond the team's budget, with reduced pressures on interagency social care and health budgets across Highland.

5.2 Each area has different levels of Community Transport provision which is determined directly by the presence within communities to identify unmet transport needs and form an organisation around those needs. Communities in Motion CT (CiMCT) emerged from the Ferintosh Community Council and has redefined transport provision in the Black Isle, forging a path alongside partnership with Highland Council and HITRANS to reimagine approaches that work. The opportunity here arose from the retreat of the Black Isle Community Car Scheme which, in the past, was a valuable lifeline service for individuals struggling with connections. The development of CiMCT was enabled by the alignment of community need, available leadership, volunteer commitment and partnership opportunities. CiMCT began by operating the Wee Bus, a demand-responsive service initially focused on connecting Culbokie-area residents to onward connections at Tore. Since then, CiMCT have taken on additional community work, alongside a home-to-school transport contract. They continue to show both a willingness to work with Highland Council in identifying and addressing needs and also supporting other Community Transport organisations by sharing their experiences and lessons learned.

5.3 Easter Ross presents a challenging, expansive landscape where Community Transport organisations are at various stages of development. Community Support & Information, Ross-Shire are a long-established Community Transport organisation who have moved more towards community initiatives, such as their Dingwall-based community hub. This has meant that there is a broad need for further development of Community Transport across Easter Ross. The interest and commitment to finding these solutions is evidenced by regular Easter Ross Transport Forum meetings, some of which focus specifically on Community Transport, recognising how central this provision is to overall connectivity. The next steps will be implementation of the next round of Community Transport grant awards for 2027-2030, and translating this interest into sustainable Community Transport initiatives.

6 Future Opportunities

6.1 Fundamentally, future development of Community Transport in both the Black Isle and Easter Ross can be informed by experience gained locally and elsewhere across Highland and beyond. Highland benefits from a diverse range of Community Transport organisations which have evolved in response to local needs, available resources and community priorities. Among these, CiMCT provides a valuable example of how community-led transport solutions can develop over time, and through its partnership with Highland Council is well placed to share lessons learned, including both successful approaches and challenges encountered in different contexts and communities. CiMCT demonstrates what can be achieved when a community has the right combination of local leadership, volunteers, capacity, organisational capability, and support. However, those ingredients may not be present everywhere, particularly in communities experiencing higher levels of deprivation. Successful replication may require additional intervention and support rather than simply expecting communities to reproduce the model independently.

6.2 Therefore, it is important to recognise that the areas experiencing the greatest levels of transport disadvantage are not always those best placed to develop community-led solutions independently. Communities facing deprivation often have significant transport needs, but may lack the organisational capacity, volunteer base, resources or local networks required to establish and sustain Community Transport initiatives. As a result, those areas with the strongest need may be least able to develop solutions without additional support.

This presents an opportunity for Highland Council to play a broader enabling role. In addition to grant funding and partnership working, the Council can support communities through the provision of guidance, practical assistance and capacity-building support, helping to identify resources and opportunities that might otherwise remain inaccessible. Such an approach can help address gaps in provision and support the development of sustainable Community Transport solutions in areas where unmet need persists.

6.3 In Evanton, almost £30,000 of developer contributions has been secured to support the development of Community Transport within the local area. While a number of organisations and individuals have expressed an initial interest in exploring opportunities, this has not yet translated into the establishment of a specific project or service. Nevertheless, there remains a commitment to ensuring that these funds are utilised for their intended purpose of supporting Community Transport provision within the community.

When considering Community Transport grant funding alongside available developer contributions, these funding streams have the potential to provide a more diversified and sustainable funding framework, strengthening the ability of Community Transport organisations to deliver services and develop over the longer term.

Developer contribution funding has also provided support to the operation of CiMCT, illustrating how targeted investment can complement other funding sources and contribute to the sustainability of established Community Transport organisations.

In recent years, when advising on transport-related mitigation and support measures associated with new developments, Highland Council has increasingly sought to incorporate Community Transport considerations alongside more traditional measures such as public transport enhancements and infrastructure improvements. This reflects a growing recognition of the role Community Transport can play in meeting local transport needs and supporting wider accessibility objectives.

6.4 As part of ongoing network reviews, opportunities have been identified to better align transport resources with actual patterns of demand. One such example is an underutilised early morning school holiday journey operating under Contract 405 (Cromarty - Dingwall), which represents an annual cost of approximately £6,100. Highland Council's In-House Buses have agreed that this funding can instead be redirected towards Community Transport provision.

This approach provides a useful model for future consideration. Where conventional scheduled services are operating with consistently low passenger numbers, there may be opportunities to reallocate resources towards more flexible Community Transport solutions that are better suited to local travel needs. Rather than viewing this as a reduction in transport provision, it represents an opportunity to deliver transport in different ways, using approaches that are more responsive, adaptable and proportionate to demand.

Community Transport can offer a level of flexibility that is often difficult to achieve through traditional fixed-route bus operations, particularly in rural areas where travel patterns may be dispersed or irregular. As network reviews continue, there may be further opportunities to consider how existing resources can be utilised most effectively to support accessibility and connectivity within local communities.

Importantly, this is not a reflection of reduced need. The transport requirements of affected communities remain significant, but the most appropriate method of meeting those needs may not always be through the operation of a large scheduled bus service. In some circumstances, smaller-scale, more flexible and demand-responsive Community Transport solutions may provide a more effective and sustainable means of delivering accessibility and connectivity.

7 Conclusion

7.1 Community Transport in the Black Isle and Easter Ross is best understood not as a single service but as a network of locally developed responses to differing community needs. The diversity of provision reflects the diversity of the communities served, with organisations evolving over time in response to local circumstances, volunteer capacity, and transport gaps. Maintaining and strengthening this ecosystem will be important in supporting accessibility, independence and community resilience across the area. As transport needs continue to evolve, Community Transport will remain an important component of a resilient and sustainable transport network across the Black Isle and Easter Ross.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive – Place

Date: 20 October 2026

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Background Papers: None

Appendices: None