

02 July 2026

Willie Rennie MSP
Convener
Transport Committee
The Scottish Parliament
EDINBURGH
EH99 1SP

Dear Convener,

Loganair: Proposed Schedule Changes

Thank you for your letter of 26 June following the Transport Committee's evidence session on the proposed changes to scheduled air services between Inverness and the Northern and Western Isles. I welcome the Committee's interest in this issue and particularly its recognition that these services are not simply commercial air routes but provide essential connectivity for many of Scotland's island communities.

The recent timetable changes have highlighted concerns that extend well beyond the immediate loss of particular flights. They have exposed the absence of a clear strategic framework for the future of regional air connectivity in Scotland and reinforced the need to consider aviation as an integral part of Scotland's national transport infrastructure.

The Committee also noted evidence suggesting a wider decline in transport connectivity affecting island communities. I share that concern. Air services cannot be considered in isolation. The resilience of island connectivity depends upon aviation, ferries, roads and rail working together as an integrated transport system. It is therefore important that any future work on aviation is developed alongside the wider ambitions of the Islands Connectivity Plan and Scotland's National Transport Strategy.

Contingency Planning

The proposed timetable changes have understandably prompted discussion amongst local authorities and regional partners regarding contingency arrangements should further reductions in service occur from October 2026 onwards.

At present, no formal contingency plans have been developed by HITRANS or our constituent councils for the replacement of specific commercial services. Our immediate priority has instead been to engage constructively with Loganair, Transport Scotland, HIAL, local authorities, NHS Boards and other stakeholders in seeking to maintain existing connectivity wherever possible.

Should services be permanently withdrawn, a range of potential interventions would inevitably require consideration. These could include revised Public Service Obligation (PSO) arrangements, alternative commercial delivery models, support for new market entrants, improved integration with ferry and surface transport services, and targeted support where critical healthcare or public service connectivity is placed at risk.

However, our strong view is that contingency planning should not simply focus on responding to individual route withdrawals. Instead, Scotland should take this opportunity to consider the future Highlands and Islands air network as an integrated system, recognising that connectivity

requirements extend across healthcare, economic development, education, tourism, public services and community sustainability.

In support of this broader approach, HITRANS is currently leading the development of a Highlands and Islands Health and Transport Action Plan (HTAP) in partnership with NHS Highland, NHS Western Isles, NHS Orkney and NHS Shetland. As part of this work we have begun convening the four Health Boards to develop a better understanding of the scale of patient, accompanying relative and staff movements that rely upon regional air and ferry services. We believe this evidence will be invaluable in informing future decisions on transport connectivity and ensuring that essential healthcare requirements are fully reflected in any long-term strategy for regional air services.

A Strategic Approach to Highlands and Islands Air Connectivity

The recent service changes have reinforced a point that HITRANS has been making for many years: Scotland has well-developed strategic frameworks for roads, rail and ferries, yet regional aviation has largely evolved through individual commercial decisions, supplemented where necessary by Public Service Obligations and the Air Discount Scheme.

Whilst these measures have each played an important role, there remains no overarching strategy defining the level of air connectivity that island and remote communities should reasonably expect or the wider contribution that aviation should make to Scotland's economy and public services.

There is also little integration in planning of PSO where they are secured by different organisations and where services operate on a commercial basis. One example of this was when the internal Western Isles PSO was awarded to a new operator the connection between Stornoway and Inverness was broken by a change to the time of the Stornoway to Inverness departure breaking the connection from Benbecula to Inverness (via the Stornoway flight) that had previously existed and was an important connection for health related travel. The Stornoway to Inverness morning flight is of course the flight now being withdrawn but the broken connection with the flight from Benbecula underlines changes to service that also led to a reduction in the number of passengers travelling due to removing a service to a key market to and from Uist (Benbecula Airport) particularly for health related travel. Any consideration of reduced demand on the route between Stornoway and Inverness needs to recognise the impact of commercial decisions on scheduling alongside factors such as fare levels rather than place too high an emphasis on changes to travel behaviour post pandemic.

HITRANS believes there is now a strong case for the Scottish Government to bring together the principal stakeholders involved in Highlands and Islands aviation to develop a long-term strategic vision for regional air connectivity. Such a forum should include Transport Scotland, Highlands and Islands Airports Limited, the Regional Transport Partnerships, local authorities, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, NHS Boards, airline operators and other relevant partners.

The purpose should not be to respond solely to individual timetable changes, but rather to develop a shared long-term vision for regional air connectivity that considers community connectivity, healthcare, economic development, tourism, technological innovation, decarbonisation and future funding in the round.

Islands Connectivity Plan

In response to the Committee's second question, HITRANS believes there is considerable scope to strengthen the aviation element of the Islands Connectivity Plan.

Whilst recognising that the Plan was deliberately developed around common principles across all transport modes, aviation now requires a more detailed strategic framework comparable to those developed for other parts of Scotland's transport network.

In particular, future work should consider:

- establishing an appropriate stakeholder forum capable of developing a long-term strategic vision for Highlands and Islands air connectivity and advising Scottish Ministers on its future development;
- establishing minimum standards of connectivity for island communities, including affordable opportunities for same-day return travel where appropriate for business, healthcare and public services;
- ensuring aviation is fully integrated into wider transport planning alongside ferry, rail and bus services;
- recognising the critical role aviation plays in enabling equitable access to healthcare and other essential public services;
- developing a clearer understanding of current public investment in regional aviation, including the Air Discount Scheme, Public Service Obligations, airport funding and wider public sector travel expenditure;
- considering international best practice from comparable countries including Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Faroe Islands and Greenland; and
- ensuring future policy reflects both community aspirations and Scotland's wider economic ambitions.

Supporting Scotland's Economic Future

The Highlands and Islands is entering a period of unprecedented economic transformation.

Research commissioned by the Highlands and Islands Regional Economic Partnership has identified more than 250 transformational investment opportunities representing over £100 billion of potential investment across renewable energy, offshore wind, hydrogen, ports, marine industries, life sciences, tourism and other strategic sectors. These developments are expected to create tens of thousands of construction and long-term operational jobs.

These opportunities are not simply important to the Highlands and Islands—they are fundamental to Scotland's future prosperity and to delivering Scotland's Just Transition to a net zero economy.

Historically, regional aviation has primarily been viewed as enabling island communities to access opportunities elsewhere in Scotland. Increasingly, however, Scotland will depend upon workers, businesses and investors travelling to the Highlands and Islands to construct, commission and operate nationally significant developments. Regional air connectivity should therefore be recognised not simply as a transport service for peripheral communities, but as nationally significant infrastructure supporting Scotland's future economic prosperity. Indeed the National Transport Strategy already recognises the challenge facing many remote and island communities in accessing Scotland's cities for business and public services, while the Convention of the Highlands and Islands has supported the ambition that island residents should be able to undertake affordable same-day return travel to Scotland's cities.

Evidence on Demand, Affordability and Network Planning

As part of developing a long-term strategy for Highlands and Islands air connectivity, it will be important that policy is informed by robust evidence on the relationship between fares, demand and connectivity.

Previous experience suggests that where significantly lower fares have been available, substantial increases in passenger demand have followed. During the period of direct airline competition on a number of Highlands and Islands routes in 2017/18, passenger volumes increased markedly compared with the previous year. For example:

- Aberdeen–Kirkwall passenger numbers increased by **37.5%** between September 2017 and February 2018 compared with the same period the previous year.
- Glasgow–Stornoway passenger numbers increased by **33.4%** over the same period.
- Services between Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow and Sumburgh recorded passenger growth of **27.3%** between September 2017 and January 2018.

Whilst direct competition inevitably resulted in additional aircraft capacity and proved commercially challenging for both operators, these figures nevertheless demonstrate that demand for Highlands and Islands air travel is responsive to price and that more affordable fares can stimulate significant growth in passenger numbers.

It is also noteworthy that this growth was achieved during the shoulder and winter seasons and appears to have been driven predominantly by increased local demand. Had similar levels of affordability and connectivity been available throughout the peak summer period, it is reasonable to expect that overall annual growth may have been greater still, improving aircraft utilisation and allowing fixed operating costs to be spread across a larger passenger base.

This raises a wider policy question that merits consideration.

Increasingly, transport policy recognises that public transport should be planned and funded as integrated networks rather than as collections of individual commercially self-contained routes. This principle underpins the successful introduction of bus franchising in a number of English city regions and is now being advocated within Strathclyde. The rationale is straightforward: stronger corridors help support those which are less commercially attractive but socially and economically essential, allowing the network as a whole to deliver better connectivity, higher patronage and greater public value than would be achieved if every route were required to stand on its own commercial merits.

HITRANS believes there is a compelling case for considering whether the same principle should be applied to Highlands and Islands aviation.

At present, aviation in rural and island Scotland is still largely considered on a route-by-route basis. Yet the public policy objectives are remarkably similar to those underpinning bus franchising: enabling access to employment, healthcare, education and economic opportunity, supporting sustainable communities and promoting inclusive economic growth.

If we accept that integrated network planning is the appropriate model for delivering bus services in our urban regions, there is a legitimate question as to why the same principle should not also be considered for regional aviation, where the social and economic case for intervention is arguably even stronger and where there are often no realistic transport alternatives.

A future strategic review of Highlands and Islands air connectivity should therefore consider not simply the commercial performance of individual routes, but whether an integrated regional air network—with stronger services supporting those that are socially necessary but less commercially viable—could deliver better outcomes for communities, operators and the public purse alike.

Conclusion

HITRANS welcomes the Committee's interest in these issues.

The current challenges provide an opportunity not simply to address individual timetable changes but to establish a longer-term strategic approach to regional air connectivity that places connectivity at the heart of Scotland's economic development, healthcare delivery and territorial cohesion.

In our view, the next step should be for the Scottish Government to bring together the key stakeholders in Highlands and Islands aviation to develop a shared long-term vision for the future of the network. Given the importance of aviation to Scotland's island communities and wider economy, we believe such an exercise should be led by the Scottish Government or Transport Scotland to ensure that it commands the authority necessary to bring together all relevant partners and translate its recommendations into national policy. Such an exercise should be evidence-led, informed by international best practice and developed in partnership with the communities, public bodies and operators who depend upon it.

HITRANS would welcome the opportunity to contribute to such work and would also be pleased to assist the Committee in any future inquiry into the longer-term future of Highlands and Islands air connectivity.

Yours sincerely,

Ranald Robertson
Partnership Director
Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership (HITRANS)