

Shetland's Transport

This is part of a [Series of Papers](#) providing information on Shetland's strategic challenges.

This paper provides information about Shetland's current transport network and context; the current strategic constraints and challenges faced; the impact of this on life in Shetland, particularly as a driver for inequalities; followed by what the current and emerging responses are to the challenges. It covers external transport connections, inter-island transport, the public bus and road network, and active travel. It uses local data, research, knowledge and consultations, alongside regional and national data, where available. It has been produced by a group of local experts.ⁱ

Transport **creates opportunity in Shetland**. It is essential to population sustainability, economic prosperity, access to housing, healthcare, education and other forms of participation in daily life. Whilst Shetland benefits from an **extensive and comparatively well-connected transport network**, geographic remoteness, island geography, ageing infrastructure, affordability pressures, workforce challenges and demographic change create **significant barriers for many residents and communities**. These barriers are not experienced equally, resulting in transport related inequalities affecting island communities, lower income households, and other individuals and families.

This Paper sets out the data and evidence of the situation and challenges, alongside the efforts being made by local organisations, in partnership with regional and national players.

1. Shetland's Transport Network

Transport plays a **fundamental role in connecting Shetland's dispersed communities, supporting economic activity and maintaining links within the islands and with mainland Scotland**. Shetland's transport network comprises roads, ferries, air services, buses and an increasing number of active travel routes, serving 15 inhabited islands and connecting Shetland to Scotland and beyond.ⁱⁱ

The **scale of internal transport provision is extensive**. In 2025, nine inhabited islands were served by **inter-island ferries** which carried 762,054 passengers and 397,005 vehicles, averaging 2,088 passenger journeys and 1,088 vehicle movements each day.ⁱⁱⁱ Shetland's internal ferry network carries more than twice as many passengers as Orkney's and around 3.3 times as many vehicles.^{iv} Despite accounting for only around 0.4% of Scotland's population, Shetland's internal ferries account for approximately 7.7% of all Scottish ferry passenger journeys.^v **Inter-island air services** are also provided to Fair Isle and Foula. Internal air services from Tingwall carried 2,768 passengers during 2025, providing connectivity that cannot be replicated by road or ferry.^{vi}

The **road network forms the backbone** of the transport system. It comprises approximately 1,052 kilometres of carriageway and reflects substantial investment made during the oil era, resulting in a comparatively extensive and well-connected road network for an island area.^{vii}

Public transport provides an important part of the overall network. In 2025, Shetland's 12 public bus routes carried 460,902 passengers, equivalent to approximately 1,263 passenger journeys per day.^{viii}

Reliance on private transport is comparatively high. In 2024 there were 17,868 licensed vehicles registered in Shetland, including approximately 15,670 private and light goods vehicles.^{ix} This equates to around 0.68 private or light goods vehicles per resident, compared with approximately 0.49 across Scotland.^x

EV Charging Infrastructure. Shetland has 314 licensed plug-in vehicles, representing 2% of vehicle stock, below the Scottish average of 3.4%.^{xi} Shetland has 35 EV public EV charging stations in 2025/26, providing 85 charge points.^{xii}

External connectivity is provided through both air and ferry services. In 2024 NorthLink services directly serving Shetland carried 166,009 passengers, 30,553 cars and 383,457 commercial vehicle lane metres.^{xiii} During 2024/25, 308,320 passengers travelled through Sumburgh Airport.^{xiv} Unlike many Scottish island groups, where ferry travel dominates, Shetland's distance from mainland Scotland means that air and ferry services operate as complementary forms of external connectivity.^{xv}

Freight movements are essential to Shetland's economy. In 2025, Sumburgh handled 190 tonnes of air freight, whilst Lerwick Harbour handled 911,440 tonnes of goods and Scalloway Harbour handled 12,307 tonnes.^{xvi} Key sectors including fisheries, aquaculture, agriculture, energy and tourism depend upon reliable transport connections^{xvii}, particularly where products are time sensitive and supply chains depend upon dependable access to processing, freight and export markets. Emerging sectors such as renewable energy and space similarly rely on resilient transport infrastructure.



Approximately 13% of Shetland's population lives on islands served by local ferry and air services. The evolution of employment opportunities and communities means there is a **significant need for more frequent journeys for many**,^{xviii} meaning connectivity can be difficult and costly to provide, with people and businesses experiencing a measurable connectivity disadvantage.^{xix}

Looking ahead, **demographic change** is likely to increase pressure on the transport network. An ageing population, changing travel patterns and a declining working age population may increase demand for access to healthcare and essential services whilst creating challenges in recruiting and retaining the workforce required to operate and maintain transport services.^{xx}

Transport infrastructure **also influences future patterns of development across Shetland**. It affects settlement patterns, the location, scale and phasing of future housing and economic development, freight and logistics infrastructure, active travel networks, and the long-term sustainability of communities.

2. Shetland's Strategic Transport Constraints and Challenges

Shetland's transport network operates within a challenging environment characterised by island geography, dispersed settlements, long travel distances and exposure to severe weather. Although the network provides extensive connectivity, a range of strategic constraints affect its affordability, resilience, capacity and long-term sustainability.^{xxi}

2.1 External Connectivity

External ferry and air services are essential for access to mainland Scotland. The most consistently identified challenge is **affordability**. Recent survey evidence found that:

- 84% of respondents identified air fares as a major barrier to travel;
- 90% identified short notice air fares as a major barrier;
- 70% identified the cost of travelling as a family as a major barrier to air travel; and
- 74% identified ferry vehicle costs and 79% identified ferry cabin costs as major barriers.^{xxii}

Travel to mainland Scotland remains more expensive for Shetland residents than for residents of any other Scottish island group, even after existing concessionary schemes are taken into account.^{xxiii} These costs contribute to Shetland's higher overall cost of living^{xxiv} and create challenges when accessing opportunities on the Scottish Mainland. This is one of the most pressing issues raised by young people in Shetland.^{xxv}

Capacity constraints are also significant. Residents report difficulties securing flights at preferred times, vehicle spaces and sole use cabins, particularly during peak travel periods. Around 68% of respondents identified cabin availability as a major barrier, whilst almost half of ferry users indicated they would only travel if both a vehicle space and cabin were available.^{xxvi} Anecdotally, people report waiting months at peak times to be able to get both, whilst it can be difficult for sports groups to get away to the mainland to compete in competitions and attend other events and can miss opportunities.^{xxvii}

Challenges also exist in **integrating local and external transport services**, such as public transport links to Sumburgh Airport^{xxviii} and the need for some inter-island residents to travel to Mainland Shetland the day before an onward flight.^{xxix} The same issues affect **freight and supply chains**. Reliable transport is critical for many key sectors, particularly where products are time sensitive and dependent upon dependable onward connections to international markets.^{xxx}

2.2 Inter-Island Connectivity

The most significant challenge facing the inter-island network is the **age and condition of the ferry fleet and associated infrastructure**. Developed largely during the 1970s and 1980s, the fleet supported a high degree of social and economic integration across the islands, but it increasingly struggles to meet modern expectations and need. The fleet has an average age of over 30 years, several vessels are more than 40 years old, and there is only one reserve vessel. This **reduces resilience and limits flexibility** when vessels require maintenance or experience breakdowns.^{xxxi}

Inter-island air services are also provided to Fair Isle and Foula, delivered using two Britten-Norman Islander aircraft owned by Shetland Islands Council. The current pattern of service reflects the conclusions of the Inter-Island Air Services Business Case completed in February 2020. That work supported an increase in rotations to Fair Isle and Foula, while the previously suspended services to Out Skerries and Papa Stour were formally discontinued.^{xxxii}



Workforce sustainability is an increasing challenge. Declining island populations,^{xxxiii} a shrinking working age population and competition from other sectors have made recruitment and retention of qualified ferry crew increasingly difficult.^{xxxiv} In 2024 and 2025, 404 sailings on Yell Sound did not go ahead due to crewing issues, whilst Bluemull Sound had 200 cancelled sailings.^{xxxv}

Reliability remains a major concern for communities.^{xxxvi} Consultation consistently identifies ferry reliability as a significant issue, with approximately one third of island residents reporting that current ferry service limitations reduce the amount of travel they are willing or able to undertake.^{xxxvii} With high volumes of time sensitive seafood freight originating from Yell, ferry disruption can directly compromise supply chains and employment too - implications that extend to developing sectors such as space and renewable energy.

Financial sustainability is also a significant challenge. The costs of maintaining and operating the network continue to rise and substantial investment will be required just to maintain existing service levels and replace current ageing infrastructure. That is the case before consideration of any service enhancements or fixed link options.^{xxxviii} The inter-island ferry service cost in 2025/26 is £24,546,000, funded by the Scottish Government. The inter-island air service cost £2,589,000.

Capacity constraints are evident on several internal routes, with growing demand for both vehicle and freight transport. Survey evidence found that more than half of ferry users identified reliable vehicle capacity as a major barrier to travel.^{xxxix}

For young people, transport improvements are repeatedly stated as being the way to increase the number of young people living in the North Isles.^{xi}

2.3 Shetland's Road Network

Overall, the road network remains in good condition and satisfaction levels are generally high.^{xii} However, several routes face increasing pressures associated with **ageing infrastructure, changing traffic patterns, larger vehicles** and climate related impacts.^{xiii} Some strategic routes, particularly those supporting aquaculture activity in areas such as Cullivoe and Mid Yell, experience significant volumes of heavy goods traffic.^{xiii}

Climate change presents additional challenges. Increased rainfall, flooding, coastal erosion and landslips have the potential to damage infrastructure, disrupt travel and increase maintenance costs.^{xiv} Dynamic Coast research identifies substantial part of Scotland's coastline as being vulnerable to coastal change by the end of the century, while SEPA has highlighted increasing flood risk associated with Climate Change. Given the extent of Shetland's coastal road network and infrastructure, adaptation and resilience measures are likely to become increasingly important.^{xlv} The estimated gross replacement value of Shetland's road assets exceeds £1 billion.^{xlvi}

Despite these pressures, road safety has improved significantly over the last two decades, with reductions in fatal, serious and slight injuries.^{xlvii}

Despite the growth in electric vehicle uptake in Shetland, the HITRANS EV Infrastructure Fund Business Case concluded that **attracting private investment in island charging networks remains challenging** due to low utilisation rates, high installation and maintenance costs and remote operating environments, meaning public sector intervention continues to play a significant role in the delivery of charging infrastructure.^{xlviii}

2.4 Public Bus Network

The bus network is an important transport option for many residents, but it faces challenges in meeting the needs of all users. For young people, in particular, there is a heavy reliance on an integrated network to access learning, employment and leisure activities.^{xlix}

The most frequently identified issues relate to **frequency, operating hours and service coverage**. Survey evidence found that 70% of respondents identified service frequency as a major barrier, whilst 52% highlighted the timing of final services and 45% highlighted destination coverage.ⁱ

The Bus Network Review identified concerns regarding low frequency services, limited evening provision, shorter operating days and limited Sunday services in some areas. **Integration** between bus services and other transport modes was also identified as an issue.ⁱⁱ This Review led to network changes, including additional services in the evenings and at weekends, including Sundays, and increased connections with other services and modes.ⁱⁱⁱ

The network faces increasing operational pressures, including **workforce sustainability**, rising labour costs, vehicle maintenance costs and supply chain challenges affecting vehicles and parts. On a practical level it is no longer



possible to take a bus driving test in Shetland.^{liii} Delivering services across a dispersed population also creates **continuing financial pressures**, currently costing the Council £4mn / year, with some routes requiring significant subsidy, with relatively low passenger numbers.^{liv}

2.5 Active Travel

Active travel forms an important part of Shetland's transport system but faces particular challenges arising from geography and settlement patterns. **Long travel distances, dispersed communities and challenging weather** conditions mean that walking, wheeling and cycling are often more practical within settlements than between them.

Infrastructure barriers identified by residents include gaps in footways and cycle routes, poor lighting, speeding traffic and limited separation from traffic. **Accessibility challenges** can be particularly significant for older people and disabled users.^{lv} Potential future transport options, including fixed links, would also need to consider the needs of non-motorised users and explore opportunities for active travel connections across the islands.^{lvi}

3. Inequalities and Wider Impacts

Transport is **closely connected to many of the opportunities and challenges facing Shetland**. Access to reliable, affordable and accessible transport influences where people choose to live, whether businesses can grow, how easily people can access housing and services, and the extent to which individuals can participate in community life. Transport also shapes future patterns of development and land use across Shetland, influencing settlement strategy, housing and employment locations, and future transport infrastructure developments.^{lvii}

Whilst transport affects all residents, **the impacts of transport barriers are not experienced equally**. Transport barriers can reflect wider issues of geography, affordability, accessibility and service availability, creating inequalities in access to opportunity, services and participation. As highlighted by Shetland's Regional Transport Strategy, addressing barriers that constrain access to transport or impose unreasonable costs on travel is fundamental to reducing isolation, improving equality of opportunity and supporting sustainable communities.

3.1 Geographic Inequalities, Population and Community Sustainability

Geography is perhaps the most significant determinant of transport inequality in Shetland. Whilst residents across Shetland face some degree of transport challenge, **island communities can experience additional barriers** associated with the need to travel by ferry or air to access employment, healthcare, education and services.^{lviii}

The UK Parliament Scottish Affairs Committee Inquiry *Connectivity in Scotland: Fixed Links* concluded that **connectivity is fundamental to the sustainability of island communities** and influences decisions about where people choose to live, work and invest. The islands included within the Inter-island Transport Connectivity Programme have experienced an estimated population decline of around 24% over the past four decades, which compares to a 5% increase in mainland Shetland, highlighting the long-term pressures facing some communities.^{lix} In the Inter-island Transport Connectivity Programme survey, around 70% of former island residents indicated that ferry services were a factor in their decision to leave their island community.^{lx}

Transport connectivity can directly influence **decisions about whether people remain within, return to, or move to Shetland**^{lxi}. Consultation with young people highlighted concerns that transport limitations may influence decisions to remain away following further or higher education.^{lxii} At a community level, improved transport connectivity, alongside other enabling infrastructure and services, could support population retention and growth in communities such as Yell, Unst and Whalsay.^{lxiii}

Geographic inequalities are not limited to island communities. Employment, public services, retail activity and many leisure opportunities are concentrated in Lerwick. Approximately 53% of full-time equivalent employment is located in Lerwick, with almost two thirds of jobs located within Lerwick, Scalloway and Tingwall. This creates a requirement for many residents to travel significant distances to access employment and services.^{lxiv}

3.2 Affordability, Cost of Living and Access to Opportunity

Transport is one of the factors contributing to Shetland's higher cost of living.^{lxv} The Regional Transport Strategy describes a degree of "**forced car ownership**", reflecting the reality that access to employment, services and opportunities often requires the use of a private vehicle.^{lxvi} Census data demonstrates how a significantly higher percentage of Shetlanders drive to work than the Scottish average (58.3% compared to 45.9%).^{lxvii}

Around 45% of households have access to two or more vehicles, whilst approximately 900 vehicles are registered for every 1,000 residents.^{lxviii} Those who can afford to own and operate one or more vehicles generally experience



fewer transport barriers. Others may be compelled to own a vehicle despite significant financial pressure, reducing income available for other essential goods and services. Those unable to afford a vehicle may face reduced access to employment, services and social opportunities, often relying on taxis or informal lift sharing arrangements.^{lxxix}

Consultation evidence **consistently identifies affordability as one of the most significant barriers to travel.**^{lxxx}

The Shetland Car Club provides flexible, pay-as-you-go access to vehicles across Shetland, helping residents, businesses and community groups reduce the costs of car ownership while improving transport accessibility and supporting lower carbon travel.^{lxxxi} Car clubs provide an accessible entry point for residents to use electric vehicles, reducing the barrier of high upfront purchase costs.

More generally though, the **transition to electric vehicles also raises issues of affordability** and fairness. Households without access to off-street parking may be more reliant on public charging, which is typically more expensive than domestic charging tariffs.

3.3 Differential Impacts on Population Groups

Different population groups experience transport barriers in different ways.

Older people have identified concerns about the increasing use of digital systems and the importance of reliable ferry and bus services to access healthcare appointments and other essential services.^{lxxxi}

Young people report transport barriers affecting access to education, training, employment, leisure activities and social opportunities. Consultation also highlighted concerns about the accessibility, inclusiveness and perceived safety in some situations. Shetland Youth Voice engagement found that many young people in rural and island areas remain reliant on others for lifts, reducing independence and influencing decisions around employment, training and social participation.^{lxxxiii}

Disabled people have identified a **range of overlapping transport barriers** affecting both independent travel and access to opportunities. Challenges include bus and bus stop accessibility, service reliability, access to information and the availability of support when travelling. Participants also highlighted reliance on carers, family members and taxis when transport networks do not adequately meet their needs.^{lxxxiv}

Limited availability of accessible taxis and gaps in specialist accessibility awareness or dementia related training have also been identified locally.^{lxxxv} Improving transport accessibility is recognised as a strategic priority within ZetTrans' Equality Outcomes and Mainstreaming Report.^{lxxxvi}

Some transport challenges are **experienced disproportionately by women**, particularly in relation to personal safety and access to evening public transport.^{lxxxvii} Caring responsibilities can also create additional pressures where transport services are structured around conventional commuting patterns and do not fully reflect the travel needs of those working in sectors such as care and hospitality.^{lxxxviii}

Access to transport increasingly depends on access to information. Barriers to information can become barriers to travel. Despite the availability of public transport services, some residents remain unaware of available options, routes or timetables.^{lxxxix} Concerns regarding digital exclusion have been particularly identified by older people, highlighting the continuing importance of accessible non digital information channels.^{lxxx}

3.4 Economy, Housing and Labour Market Impacts

Much of Shetland's **economic activity depends upon the movement of people, goods and services** both within Shetland and beyond.

Within Shetland's constrained labour market, transport plays an important role in **connecting people to employment** opportunities and increasing the effective labour market available to employers.^{lxxxi} Poor transport and digital connectivity can restrict labour mobility and reduce access to employment opportunities.

Visitor numbers and tourism activity also depend heavily on the affordability, capacity and quality of external transport connections. Regional Transport Strategy stakeholder engagement identified transport costs and capacity constraints as factors affecting tourism growth and visitor experience. Conversely, growth in tourism can create additional pressure on transport networks and capacity, affecting residents and communities.^{lxxxii}

Transport also influences housing and development. Reliable connections affect where people are willing to live and where employers can recruit from.^{lxxxiii} Improved connectivity can widen housing choices and support access to employment without requiring relocation, whilst poor connectivity can restrict both. Transport costs also contribute



to higher construction costs through the movement of materials, contractors and specialist services, affecting the viability of housing development, particularly within island communities.^{lxxxiv}

3.5 Health, Wellbeing and Access to Services

Transport is a **critical enabler of access to healthcare**, particularly for residents of island communities where specialist services may not be available locally. Concerns have been expressed regarding transport reliability, accessibility and connections when attending healthcare appointments, highlighting the stress and uncertainty that transport disruption can create.^{lxxxv}

Transport also **affects participation in community life**. Transport barriers can restrict opportunities to visit family and friends, access shopping and services, take part in cultural and sporting activities, and engage in community events.^{lxxxvi} These barriers can contribute to feelings of social isolation and loneliness, particularly for people who already face other disadvantages or vulnerabilities.^{lxxxvii}

At the same time, transport can contribute positively to health and wellbeing through active travel. Walking, wheeling and cycling support physical activity, can improve health outcomes and may reduce reliance on car travel where suitable infrastructure and opportunities exist.^{lxxxviii}

4. Current and Emerging Responses

Significant work is underway across Shetland to address transport challenges and improve connectivity, accessibility and resilience. These activities range from long-term strategic programmes focused on inter-island transport connectivity to more targeted interventions relating to public transport, active travel, EV charging, accessibility and equalities. Whilst some of these more focused improvements are within our control, the delivery of many of the major transport improvements will depend on access to external funding, including potentially from Scottish and UK Government.

These interventions are intended to support wider strategic objectives relating to population sustainability, economic development, accessibility, community resilience and the transition to net zero. The scale of investment required, combined with demographic, financial and geographic constraints, means that many of the most significant interventions will be delivered over the longer term.^{lxxxix}

4.1 Regional Transport Strategy

The Regional Transport Strategy (RTS) provides the overarching strategic framework for transport planning in Shetland to 2042. The vision is for Shetland's transport networks to support social and economic prosperity, provide equitable access to opportunities, contribute to healthy and active lives, develop sustainable communities and support net zero ambitions.

The RTS identifies a series of strategic objectives which seek to:

- Reduce barriers and unreasonable costs associated with travel
- Improve accessibility and connectivity
- Encourage walking, wheeling and cycling
- Improve sustainable transport options
- Support affordable and accessible public transport
- Improve inter-island and external connectivity
- Enhance transport resilience and integration
- Support transport decarbonisation.

4.2 Inter-Island Connectivity Programme

The Inter-Island Transport Connectivity Programme (IITCP) is Shetland's current strategic response to inter-island transport challenges. The programme was established to consider the long-term future of connectivity between mainland Shetland and all island communities, excluding Fair Isle. Fair Isle will have a new ferry and associated infrastructure by November 2026, through the £45.4m Fair Isle Ferry and Infrastructure Replacement Project.^{xc}

The IITC programme considered a range of options including continued ferry provision, ferry improvements and fixed links, concluding that a substantial investment will be required regardless of the long-term solution pursued. Shetland Islands Council considered the Programme Outline Business Case for the IITC in June 2026, deciding on preferred options for each island route.^{xcii}



The final stage in the current IITC programme is the preparation of the draft Implementation Route Map, which is designed to support planning for long-term solutions and the sequence of those priority projects, all subject to funding becoming available. **The Scottish Government have just committed £23million for pre-construction work on the first tunnel project.**^{xcii} The potential implications of these developments in relation to public service reform will also need further exploration.

4.3 Inter-Island Air Service

The service provided to Fair Isle and Foula is contracted to AirTask. In 2026, ZetTrans introduced a pilot Family and Friends concessionary fare for these flights, enabling nominated friends and relatives of island residents to access the reduced islander fare. The scheme was developed to reduce barriers to maintaining family and community connections with the islands and comes after many years of feedback from the island communities.^{xciii}

4.4 Public Transport Network Review

A comprehensive review of Shetland's public bus network was concluded earlier this year; this engaged with a wide range of stakeholders, including young people. It informed the specification of future bus service contracts from August 2026 onwards. There have been some small changes to the level of evening and weekend services, but scope to make changes is constrained by budgetary pressures.^{xciv}

From January 2022 the Scottish Government introduced free bus travel nationally for U22s^{xcv} and they selected Shetland as the first area for the Regional Bus Fare Cap Pilot, introducing a maximum £2 single fare from 30 January 2026, before a phased rollout across other Highlands and Islands regions.

In an effort to improve knowledge and accessibility of services, a travel information website and app with journey planning bus tracking capabilities and Real Time Passenger Information at bus stops is being developed. It will be available later this financial year.^{xcvi} Looking ahead, emerging technologies may create further opportunities to improve the user experience and better integrate transport services through initiatives such as integrated ticketing, Mobility as a Service (MaaS) and, potentially, autonomous vehicle technologies.

4.5 Active Travel

Improving opportunities for walking, wheeling and cycling is set out in the RTS and supported by the Active Travel Strategy. In recent years, 24 Settlement Audits have been undertaken across Shetland to identify barriers and opportunities for active travel, with over 400 recommendations for improvement. The Council is working with others to develop a practical prioritised programme, although significant investment will be required from Transport Scotland. Active travel behaviour change initiatives have been underway for 2-3 years.^{xcvii}

4.6 External Connectivity

In June 2026, Loganair announced that the Sumburgh–Kirkwall–Inverness route would be reduced to weekend only services from 19 July 2026, due to rising operating costs and ongoing losses.^{xcviii} This example highlights the vulnerability of Shetland to outside factors and decision making. On 6 August 2026, the Scottish Government announced £1.06 million of funding to support the reinstatement of this route, alongside Inverness to Stornoway.^{xcix}

ZetTrans has provided evidence to Transport Scotland's consultation to inform the next round of contract renewal for Shetland's external ferry link to Orkney and Aberdeen. However, it is likely that significant change will only come with new ferries. In the meantime, Transport Scotland is working on the 'Freight Flex' development but this is not likely to be operational until about 2030.^c

4.7 Decarbonisation and New Technologies

National and local policy place increasing emphasis on reducing transport related emissions whilst maintaining accessibility and connectivity. Shetland's approach is to ensure that the transition to net zero, and linked national policy and initiatives, reflects its island geography and does not inadvertently increase transport inequalities.

Plans are in place to scope out what Shetland's strategic approach needs to be, within the next two years.^{ci} Some of this work will be explored as part of the delivery of the IITC Implementation Route Map and associated projects.

The transition to electric vehicles will require significant investment not only in charging infrastructure, but also in the electricity distribution network. Whilst Shetland is progressing major energy infrastructure projects through the HVDC interconnector and associated grid upgrades, local distribution constraints remain. Future electrification of private vehicles, public transport, freight transport and potential ferry services will depend upon sufficient network capacity and resilience, as well as significant investment.



Emerging concepts such as rural transport hubs or mobility hubs could provide greater integration between bus services, active travel routes, car club vehicles, electric vehicle charging and other shared transport solutions. Such approaches may offer opportunities to improve accessibility while making more efficient use of resources across dispersed communities.

Careful consideration will be required to ensure that the transition to lower-carbon transport does not unintentionally exacerbate existing inequalities. Whilst some households may be well placed to transition to electric vehicles and benefit from home charging, others may face barriers relating to upfront vehicle costs, access to charging infrastructure or the lack of off-street parking. A just transition will therefore require solutions that work for all communities and household types.

Appendix: Current Strategic Document References to Transport Interventions

A Copilot search across Shetland's key strategic document summaries showed the following in relation to transport (both external and internal to Shetland), both challenges and solutions, and **the strategic importance of transport connectivity to Shetland's sustainability, population, economy, health and communities.**

Directly focused on transport

- **Shetland's Regional Transport Strategy 2018–2028:** Explicitly recognises transport as essential to supporting Shetland's economy, communities and environment. Priorities include affordability and reliability of lifeline services, access to health, education and employment, public transport integration, active travel, carbon reduction and maintaining connectivity both within Shetland and to mainland Scotland.

Significant transport references

- **Shetland Local Development Plan:** Dedicated transport policy theme: transport infrastructure as key requirement for sustainable development, community growth, economic development, housing delivery and access to services.
- **Shetland Islands Council Corporate Plan 2021–2026:** The Plan's ambitions around population balance, economic growth, community sustainability and attracting people to live, work and study in Shetland all depend upon effective physical and digital connectivity.
- **VisitScotland Shetland Tourism Strategy 2024–2026:** Identifies transport capacity and connectivity as critical infrastructure supporting sustainable tourism growth, visitor experience and year-round economic activity.
- **Shetland Climate Change Strategy 2023–2027:** Supports the development of sustainable, lower carbon transport solutions and recognises transport's role in achieving net zero and climate resilience objectives.

References linking transport to population and communities

- **Shetland Partnership Plan 2018–2028:** Although transport is not a standalone priority, objectives relating to thriving communities, participation, tackling inequality and making Shetland an attractive place to live, study and invest depend on people being able to access services, opportunities and one another.
- **Community Learning & Development Plan 2024–2027:** Transport is an important enabling factor in ensuring access to learning, community activity and local decision making, particularly in remote and island communities.
- **Active Shetland Strategy 2018–2023:** Explicitly references active travel infrastructure as part of supporting physical activity, wellbeing, participation and healthy communities.

References linking transport to health and wellbeing

- **Health & Social Care Strategic Plan 2025–2028:** Emphasises fair and accessible services, reducing inequalities and providing support in the setting that best meets people's needs. These ambitions rely heavily on effective transport and connectivity across Shetland's dispersed communities.
- **NHS Shetland Strategic Plan 2024–2029:** Focuses on improving access to healthcare, reducing inequalities and supporting healthy communities. Accessibility and connectivity are recognised as important enablers of equitable service provision.
- **Scottish Ambulance Service Strategy 2030:** Specifically references tailored service models for remote, rural and island communities, highlighting the importance of transport and connectivity to emergency and planned healthcare provision.

References linking transport to economic development

HIE Strategy 2023–2028: Supports resilient rural communities, economic growth, workforce attraction and retention, and place-based development. Connectivity is recognised regionally as a key factor in enabling economic resilience and growth across island.



End Notes

- ⁱ Chief Executive, Director of Development and Infrastructure Services, Executive Manager – Housing, Team Leader – Business Support, Policy Officer – Housing, Community Planning Team (Shetland Islands Council), Chief Executive (Hjaltland Housing Association)
- ⁱⁱ ZetTrans. (n.d.) *Shetland Transport Strategy 2022–2042 Development*. Available at: <https://www.zettrans.org.uk/about/shetland-transport-strategy-2022-2042> (Accessed: September 2026)
- ⁱⁱⁱ Averaged across the year
- ^{iv} Transport Scotland reports that in 2024, Shetland Islands Council ferries carried 749,000 passengers and 381,000 vehicles compared to Orkney Ferries carrying 360,000 passengers and 114,000 vehicles.
- ^v In 2024, Scotland had 9.7million passenger journeys in 2024 across all ferry routes
- ^{vi} Shetland Islands Council (2025) *Shetland in Statistics: Transport*. Available at: <https://www.shetland.gov.uk/shetland-statistics/transport-4> (Accessed: August 2026)
- ^{vii} Shetland Islands Council (2019) *Strategic Outline Programme: Shetland's Strategic Road Network*. Lerwick: Shetland Islands Council.
- ^{viii} Shetland Islands Council (2025) *Shetland in Statistics: Transport*. Available at: <https://www.shetland.gov.uk/shetland-statistics/transport-4> (Accessed: August 2026)
- ^{ix} Shetland Islands Council (2025) *Shetland in Statistics 2025: Transport*. Available at: <https://www.shetland.gov.uk/shetland-statistics/transport-4> (Accessed: August 2026)
- ^x Transport Scotland (2024) *Scottish Transport Statistics 2024: Chapter 1 Road Transport Vehicles*. Available at: <https://www.transport.gov.scot/publication/scottish-transport-statistics-2024/chapter-1-road-transport-vehicles/> (Accessed: August 2026)
- ^{xi} HITRANS (2026) Business Case Proposal for the Use of Public EV Infrastructure Funds in North and West Scotland (Board Paper R18). Inverness: HITRANS available at: <https://hitrans.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/09/Item-11-App.-A-HITRANS-Bus-Case.pdf> (Accessed: September 2026).
- ^{xii} Shetland Islands Council (2026) *Shetland in Statistics: Energy*. Available at: <https://www.shetland.gov.uk/shetland-statistics/energy> (Accessed: September 2026).
- ^{xiii} NorthLink Ferries (2025) *Annual Carryings (1 January 2024 to 31 December 2024)*. Available at: <https://www.northlinkferries.co.uk/about-us/statistics/> (Accessed: August 2026).
- Of the 166,009 passenger journeys on routes directly serving Shetland: 144,595 for Aberdeen/Lerwick and 21,414 for Kirkwall/Lerwick). Of the 30,553 cars: 26,426 for Aberdeen/Lerwick and 4,127 for Kirkwall/Lerwick) and 167 coaches (116 and 51 respectively).
- ^{xiv} Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd (2025) *Highland and Islands report steady air passenger figures for 2024–25*. Available at: <https://www.hial.co.uk/news/article/204/highland-and-islands-report-steady-air-passenger-figures-for-2024-25-> (Accessed: August 2026)
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Young Scot's recent evaluation, across Scotland shows that:

- 91% of survey respondents said the scheme increased access to work, education and leisure, and 85% of survey respondents reported a very positive or positive impact on their or their family's daily costs.

- Free bus travel helped improve young people's independence, confidence, financial stability and ability to access opportunities.

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