

What is CBR's strategy for securing a Borders Railway extension and how might it be delivered?

By Nick Bethune, CBR Secretary

THE following article appeared in CBR's June 2019 newsletter has been adapted from a speech delivered at Stow Town Hall on 5th January 2019 to an event marking the 50th Anniversary of the closure of the Waverley Route. The occasion was organised by David Spaven to launch his new book 'Border Union Dream' - an account of the ill-fated 1969-72 attempt to reopen the line under private ownership.

MANY people share CBR's belief that there is a case to be made for extending the Borders Railway south from Tweedbank to Hawick and on to Carlisle. However, there are others who are sceptical about the idea of any extension at all and others who see a case for reaching Hawick, but not for going further.

So a key question is why should we want to lobby for these things?

Firstly, Hawick remains as an isolated centre of population that will struggle to revive its fortunes without significant improvements in transport infrastructure. Secondly, if the Borders region as a whole is to fulfil its potential – as a location for inward investment – in tourism – and to attract new residents – it will need better links from the South.

Although it isn't a panacea for all ills, CBR believes that a Borders Railway through-route is the single initiative best-placed to address all these needs.

But if we want to see the line extended, why not treat Hawick as the initial goal, which would be cheaper and perhaps easier to justify in the short term?

This is a matter to which CBR has given very careful consideration. Whilst acknowledging that there are valid arguments for an incremental approach, our conclusion, is that a campaign to focused solely on reconnecting Hawick risks becoming lost amongst the many other competing and worthy demands for public investment.

Great though Hawick's need is, it is but one of many towns across the Scotland – and indeed the UK – that seek reconnection to the rail network.

We think that the case for Hawick becomes stronger if it is seen as part of a wider strategic vision for a through route with benefits for the whole region and beyond. Only this breadth of vision can elevate the proposal from one of merely local concern, to something that can capture the imagination of politicians and officials at the highest levels of government.

But, a project on this scale can only succeed if it is taken forward on the broadest possible basis. It can't be the exclusive policy of one party or administration – vulnerable to changes in the political landscape. That is why CBR's approach has been to build a cross-border and cross-party consensus around the issue at all levels of government, national and local.

Of course, if an extension only as far as Hawick were to be approved, it would be welcomed by CBR but we should not limit our ambitions at this stage before the scenarios have been properly examined in a feasibility study.

Another point concerns the existing Borders Railway. Given its limited capacity and the shortcomings of some of its infrastructure, surely these things need to be tackled first before considering any extension?

In fact, it is already a key part of CBR's work that we continue to lobby for improvements to the existing Borders Railway, including better rolling stock and infrastructure upgrades to cut delays.

But this isn't an 'either/or' situation; it's 'both/and'.

It's true that upgrades to the existing line need to come before any line extension, but the reality of the timescales needed to deliver an extension mean that even for it to happen within 10 years – in my view the most optimistic scenario – requires initial feasibility work to happen in the next few years.

That means we need to be making the case to politicians now – hence extension being the headline policy of CBR, and why we've launched our ONWARD TO CARLISLE fundraiser.

Our message seems to be getting through. We are fortunate that both the Borderlands Growth Deal and the South of Scotland Enterprise Partnership are being established at the present time – the rail link concept is increasingly seen as underpinning many of the policy objectives for these initiatives – and we must take advantage of the one-off

opportunity that they present.

Knowing that SBC have pushed very hard for it, and that all the relevant MPs and MSPs are in support, funding for a feasibility now seems assured, subject to wrangling over the delivery mechanism between Westminster and Holyrood. A favourable feasibility study outcome would then open the way for the proposals to be adopted into the Scottish Government's Strategic Transport Projects programme.

In my view, a realistic timescale for reopening might then see a 'project development stage' – business case, engineering design, etc – in the first half of the 2020s; and then a 'project delivery stage' – land assembly and construction – in the second half of the decade.

Just as with the Borders Railway to Tweedbank, the limitations of forecasting methodology may well result in rather underwhelming benefit-to-cost ratios but that doesn't mean 'game over' for extending the line.

Forecasting methods allow for a basic return-on-investment comparison between alternative proposals but lack qualitative discrimination based on other measures of value.

That the existing Borders Railway's actual usage has significantly exceeded forecasts and generated many other positive outcomes, shows that such analysis can be justifiably given less weight in some investment decisions. Indeed, this approach is now accepted in the latest Department for Transport policy concerning rail reopenings.

Addressing the transport provision deficit of the Borders in relation to other comparable regions; reducing the imbalance of economic development between urban and rural areas; this is where politics comes in. These are issues that can only be tackled with political vision and judgement.

In my view, such considerations, harnessed with the considerable political capital has already been invested by politicians of all parties, represent the best hope of seeing further rail development in the Borders.