

Extension to Hawick and Carlisle: how and when will it be delivered?

By Nick Bethune, CBR Secretary

THE following article appeared in CBR's June 2018 newsletter.

THE long-awaited first draft of the Borders Transport Corridors study was finally published on 19th April 2018. The report was commissioned by the Scottish Government's agency, Transport Scotland, and carried out by consultants Jacobs UK Ltd. There had been fears amongst campaigners – fuelled by leaks and rumours – that the study would find against any further examination of CBR's principal aim: extension of the Borders Railway from Tweedbank to Hawick and Carlisle. Thankfully, these anxieties have proved unfounded, with creation of a through-route to the South amongst the twenty-one road, rail and other transport options to be studied in more detail.

So what does this all mean for CBR and how do we respond to the 'stop blethering and just get on with it' comment; one that frequently crops up on our social media timeline and other online forums?

It's still not clear, but recent developments are helping to provide an answer. There are several different government initiatives now seemingly in our favour, but these need drawing together. What is needed is a 'route map' (I hesitate to use the phrase 'road map') so we can begin to explain how the railway can be delivered – and when.

Firstly, there is the Scottish Government's Borders Transport Corridors study referred to above. This is the starting point for everything and without it recommending further study of the rail-extension proposals our job would be much harder. Let's remember that we only have rail options in this study because CBR and our political supporters applied intensive lobbying pressure leading to a commitment in the Scottish Government's Borders Railway 'Blueprint' investment programme. The resulting 'Jacob's Report' is essentially a scoping study designed to identify projects to go forward into the next Strategic Transport Projects Review. If successful at this stage the Scottish Government can then decide to make it a priority infrastructure project for the next five years.

But the scheme cannot be a Scotland-only initiative given that at least 14 route-miles and its primary destination will be in England. A partnership with English authorities is needed to take the proposal forward as a single project. Various initiatives could be harnessed to do this, and the Borderlands Regional Growth Deal is perhaps the leading candidate. In many ways it is well suited to the purpose as it will be a partnership between the UK and Scottish governments and local authorities on both sides of the border. An initial Borderlands deal could include funds to pay for work on a joint feasibility study and business case.

The project will also need an official promoter, which will 'own' it and take responsibility for steering it through the development process. The official promoter could be a consortium of local councils, or a special purpose company set up by both governments. The negotiations around the Borderlands deal might be one way of establishing these arrangements, but there may be other ways to do it. If the official promoter can produce a favourable feasibility study and business case the project could then receive further funding for the main development stage. Potential sources include central government transport budgets, local enterprise agency funds, and regional transport agencies.

The development stage would be likely to tie-in with Network Rail's Control Period 6 (2019-24) funding round. Outputs at this stage would be detailed engineering designs and costings, using their standard 'GRIP' process. This would hopefully then lead to final business case approval, opening the way to the delivery stage during Control Period 7 (2024-29). Funding for the delivery stage could come through a

Borderlands 2 growth deal and other sources, for example central government funds for housing growth and general economic development. A realistic estimate then is that trains could be running through Hawick to Carlisle by 2030, but only if crucial further steps are taken to keep the project on course over the next couple of years.

There's no getting away from the fact that it's a drawn-out and at times bureaucratic process. This is understandably frustrating for those of us who already see the enormous potential of the project. But we must also remember that ours is just one among many competing bids for public funds. So if we want to continue to be taken seriously and take our case to the next level, showing that we understand the process and are willing to engage with it is a good place to start.