

COWAL FIXED LINK WORKING GROUP

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08/08/2016

To: Argyll & Bute Councillors

Cc: Brendan O'Hara MP
Michael Russell MSP
Jackie Baillie MSP
Scottish & Local Press

Subj: Cowal Fixed Link

Dear Councillor

You may already know of the activities of the Cowal Fixed Link Working Group. This group was established a couple of years ago, comprising local councillors, community councillors and business people, and with the support of our local MSP Michael Russell. The impetus came from the Argyll & Bute Economic Forum held in October 2014 of which I am sure you are aware and which dramatically quantified the poor economic and population outlook for this region of the County.

The Group are well aware that any fixed link from Cowal to the Central Belt is a long term project that would need driving at a national level, and that there are many short and medium term activities that can and should be taking place now to try and stem the economic decline. However, a fixed link is seen by our Group as the one project that could transform the fortunes of this area for future generations. We are aware that Cowal and South Argyll are not the only rural areas in Scotland with economic problems, but uniquely placed as we are, on the edge of a major urban centre, the opportunity posed by such a link should be grasped.

The Group has looked at a number of route options and is conscious that this will be a significant capital project. However, we also believe that there will be a significant economic impact to the local, county and broader national economy if the project goes ahead. We are in discussion with the Fraser of Allander Institute at Strathclyde University to create an economic model of this impact. Within that, for example, we expect a major boost to tourism as the fixed link will provide a convenient and reliable way to access this spectacular section of the Loch Lomond & Trossachs National Park.

Cowal Fixed Link Working Group

The Group is also pleased that the idea of taking the fixed link project to the next step is supported by both the Argyll & Bute Economic Forum Report from February 2016 and the HIE Argyll and Bute Transport Connectivity and Economy Report from June 2016.

I attach a letter received recently from Cllr David Parker, Leader of Borders Council, which outlines in summary the challenges that the Borders Railway project faced and the approaches they took. He also makes it clear that the economic benefits they are now experiencing far outweigh the expectations they had. Two clear tipping points can be learned from that experience:

1. Early support from the local Council and politicians
2. Completion of the feasibility study which puts numbers and costs on all aspects of the project.

We are at Stage 1 – we need Council support to move forward. Supporting this long term project at this stage does not mean any less focus on pressing short term issues, but provides a firm base that will, in truth, take many years to deliver. The Borders Railway project was at this stage in the late 90s, and did not go live until 2015.

We expect that the full Argyll & Bute Council will be asked to take a position on this project in the next few months. We can only repeat the conclusion of the motion approved by the Bute & Cowal Area Committee at their meeting on 7 June:

Agrees to recommend to the Council that Argyll & Bute Council participates with all other relevant partners in future discussions to assist with the delivery of what is clearly a national project.

We remain available to provide more information on route options and the potential economic benefits either by phone (above) or by e-mail or in person. However, most importantly, we request your support. All great achievements start with small steps and you can help with that first small step just now.

Yours faithfully



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E-Mail: DParker@scotborders.gov.uk
Date: 3 August 2016

Dear David

Re: The Cowal Fixed Link

Thanks for your recent telephone call where you described the plans of the Cowal Fixed Link Working Group to pursue the idea of a fixed rail and / or road link from Cowal to the Central Belt and I am happy to provide you with some of the key lessons we learned during the Borders Railway campaign. As you know, the Borders Railway opened in September 2015 and that the resulting traffic has exceeded our most optimistic expectations. We see growth in commuting, business travel, student demand and tourism. To take one example, we see that local businesses are growing as they are finding it easier to recruit.

Some key points:

1. Do not make the mistake of viewing the project as transport project – it is an economic development / economic re-generation undertaking with the additional focus of addressing and resolving the twin demographic issues of a declining population and an increasingly aging one. We were able to persuade Government of this, and the responsibility moved from Transport Scotland to the Economic Development Team.
2. The involvement of and commitment by the Borders Council and the leadership given by selected councillors was crucial. Officer time was made available and this was instrumental in bringing communities on board and in the setting up of Community groups such as the Borders Railway Campaign.
3. The Council was able, with community support, to lead the Parliamentary process. I am glad to hear that your local MSP and MP one of your list MSPs are already on-board – that eliminates one of the hurdles we had to address.

David McKenzie
2 August 2016

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4. The support of the Council, together with parliamentary and community support, enabled accessing the funds for the feasibility study which was probably the second key factor, after Council support, in getting eventual approval for the project to proceed.

Although the Borders Railway was a re-opening of a previous line, and your project is a new link, I see many similarities. These projects are not just intended to knock a few minutes off a journey, but to create a new environment where economic activity can flourish. Another parallel is that you are on the edge of major city, but existing transport links are difficult. You will encounter opposition – it costs too much, it will never happen, etc. We even had a new political party established to oppose our project and they had some electoral success. Needless to say, when I meet these people now, they tend to be somewhat shamefaced and apologetic.

I wish you all success – let me know if I can assist further.

Kind regards

Yours sincerely



David Parker
Leader, Scottish Borders Council