



for sustainable transport

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Keith Brown MSP  
Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment & Cities  
The Scottish Government  
St Andrew's House  
Regent Road  
Edinburgh  
EH1 3DG

Wednesday 9 December 2015

Dear Cabinet Secretary,

### **Borders Railway and Highland Main Line**

When we met with you on 28 March 2013 we discussed a number of aspects of the Borders Railway. We assured you of our full support and our wish to see the railway go on to be a great success. We did however raise with you our concerns about the cutbacks to the infrastructure specification for the line and our belief that the passenger projections were far too low.

We followed these points up in communications with your staff at Transport Scotland. Particular points we have made include the risks to efficient running of the service posed by the cutbacks in infrastructure and we urged that Portobello Junction with the ECML be upgraded if no change was to be made to the proposed infrastructure on the new railway. We further questioned the patronage projections which in comparison to other stations on the network appeared to be far too low.

Throughout this period we have stressed that in our view these deficiencies in the specification for the railway posed a serious threat to the efficient running of the railway. We highlighted that if our concerns proved to be correct then there would be criticism in the media aimed at Scottish Ministers and Transport Scotland. Indeed before the railway opened there was criticism of the apparent weak business case – whereas had more accurate passenger projections been used the business case would have been much stronger and a more robust infrastructure could have been provided from the outset.

Clearly 'we are where we are' and no-one wants to see passenger numbers depressed by a sub-optimal service offering. I am therefore writing to ask what plans are in hand to improve the performance of the railway and to provide for a railway that meets the aspirations of passengers.

Linked to this I wish to raise with you the transport links proposed between the Scottish cities. We are well aware of and fully support the Government's objective set out in Scotland's Third National Planning Framework: "*We want to make rail travel between Scotland's cities quicker than by car, and to complete the electrification of the railway lines between the cities.*"

However, this objective will not be achieved without a much more balanced approach in investment in transport infrastructure connecting the cities. I would like an assurance that works currently underway on the dualling of the A9 allow for future double tracking and electrification of the Highland Main Line. Further I would ask what steps are being taken to progress these two projects in parallel and so deliver these upgrades in a more cost-efficient manner.

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Finally, in terms of passenger projections for new rail schemes, it is clear that the actual passenger numbers on the new Borders Railway are well in excess of those in the business case – especially those at the new railway stations in the Borders. This is not an isolated instance as other rail re-openings have performed well in excess of the projected passenger figures and this must now call into question the methodology being used to assess patronage for new rail schemes. It appears to us that there are many parallels between the rural aspects of the Borders Railway and the proposed re-opening of the Buchan Line – in both instances they offer new connections to major cities from rural areas for residents who have for two generations not been able to use the train for such journeys.

I would therefore ask what steps are being taken to improve the methodology being used to assess the future patronage of new rail schemes to ensure that business cases are much more robustly based.

Yours sincerely,



Colin Howden  
Director, Transform Scotland