

Time for Action to Widen Transport Network Coverage and Ownership

Railways have been much in the news recently with the opening of the Borders railway coming hard on the heels of a debate about the merits of upgrading of the Glasgow to Edinburgh railway and the start of a new ScotRail franchise. Should the rail network be extended further and how much should be electrified? What about the coverage of other networks?

Who can answer these questions and deliver affordable solutions for them? Who will own Scotland's transport future?

The Borders Rail scheme was a triumph for the campaigners who had made the case for the new link. Too often the transport debate concentrates on locations with congestion, since these places already have a strong demand for travel. It is much riskier to change network coverage than to follow current demand. Cautious politicians often take on the safe choice, but bigger risks reap larger rewards and the opening is a reward for all involved.

The debate about the Borders Railway has brought into focus the difficult balance between meeting current demand and spreading transport benefits to new communities. Critics of the Borders railway investment highlighted the high public funding cost compared with the use being expected. Supporters countered that Scotland's annual rail subsidy to existing lines is also large, as it is across Europe, and it was unfair to exclude the Borders from that benefit. CILT members reflect both perspectives in our debates, but what seems to matter most is that we all work together now to make the best of the opportunities available.

Particularly when some people appear to be benefitting more than others, we need transparency about who benefits from transport investment. Worryingly, the evidence about the distribution of transport spending in Scotland is limited. Governments have a duty to represent the whole population and ensure a fair distribution of resources. However, successive studies in many countries have shown that transport spending is often regressive, and there is widespread distrust about fat cats getting fatter. Following the money in transport investment often shows that the largest beneficiaries are the richest in society.

Given the lack of transparency about who benefits from transport spending, some argue that more social ownership of transport networks and services is needed. The railway is currently largely in public ownership with Network Rail managing the track on behalf of the taxpayer, and the government agency Transport Scotland contracting the services. However people don't seem to feel that this public stake in the railway secures their social interests. With large sums of money involved it is important that the biggest beneficiaries are the people and organisations that put the most into running the railway. There is actually very little evidence that rail is any worse than any other industry in the way value is distributed to the staff and companies delivering services. Nevertheless, public accountability would be better served with better procurement and greater openness to build trust that public money is being wisely spent.

The huge windfall gains from transport investment are not generally captured by the transport sector at all. Transport has a relatively large lobby industry and this is sometimes a front for those seeking windfall benefits if government can be persuaded to spend public money in ways that help particular organisations or individuals. For example, landowners can make very large land value gains when new roads and railways are built near their land. More could be done to capture these benefits for the taxpayer.

Community involvement in stations has been one of the big success stories of Scotland's railway in recent years, with local communities setting up shops, offices and flower displays to ensure local people own their railway where it connects with their communities. Community rail campaigner Paul Salvesson described the new Borders railway as a 'blank canvas' for the community.

Rail network coverage attracts the greatest public debate, but viewed from a social perspective gaps in network coverage are perhaps even more acute in our walking, bus and cycling networks. Simply following and responding to demand from anonymous users of these networks is far too impersonal for the 21st century. The development of physical, social, and business networks affects not just how and when people travel, but the value they gain from travel.

Public concern about the lack of social leadership is growing, including its expression through the debate about social ownership of railway, buses and ferries. In many parts of Europe, social ownership is managed by elected representatives and their agencies, but this is only one model of social ownership. More diversified social and business networks can also enable social ownership, with communities contributing to more locally managed solutions. Both perspectives are well represented amongst CILT members, so there is unanimity that social involvement in transport can improve.

There are thousands of hard working people in Scottish transport, many of them CILT members, and it is in all of our interests to ensure that profits are distributed amongst those that help to deliver Scottish transport. No existing public body or social enterprise currently has the capability to run the trains, and the largest state owned company currently involved in the industry, Network Rail, does not seem to have a flatter wage structure across the organisation than its private sector counterparts.

One reason why successive governments have ducked key debates about network coverage and followed demand, is that they fear their social leadership role in transport – "the bed of nails" - but if government will not lead then who can? Common ownership is best served by creating a user centric transport system, taking account of the potential for people to access opportunities, enabling all in society to achieve their goals.

Supporters of the Borders Rail scheme such as transport campaigner David Spaven described the many lost opportunities to build flexibility into the scheme enable the social and economic benefits to be exploited. Rectifying some of these gaps could now be very expensive. The social leadership to build the railway came from the community. If the community can now build the social and business networks to complement the new physical assets, then they will demonstrate the value of transport networks covering more people and places.

If the people of Scotland can take ownership of their transport systems more generally through their involvement, use, and participation in delivering services, then the networks will thrive and grow. What people want is quite simple; good value for money and a fair distribution of opportunities and resources in the way that public funds are spent. That way all people engage with and benefit from their transport networks. More transparent systems that enable effective ownership of transport solutions by Scotland's people would therefore benefit everyone.

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